

A SELECTION OF ESSAYS BY



VIRGINIA WOOLF

(1882-1941)

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PROFESSIONS FOR WOMEN¹

When your secretary invited me to come here, she told me that your Society is concerned with the employment of women and she suggested that I might tell you something about my own professional experiences. It is true I am a woman; it is true I am employed; but what professional experiences have I had? It is difficult to say. My profession is literature; and in that profession there are fewer experiences for women than in any other, with the exception of the stage—fewer, I mean, that are peculiar to women. For the road was cut many years ago—by Fanny Burney, by Aphra Behn, by Harriet Martineau, by Jane Austen, by George Eliot²—many famous women, and many more unknown and forgotten, have been before me, making the path smooth, and regulating my steps. Thus, when I came to write, there were very few material obstacles in my way. Writing was a reputable and harmless occupation. The family peace was not broken by the scratching of a pen. No demand was made upon the family purse. For ten and sixpence one can buy paper enough to write all the plays of Shakespeare—if one has a mind that way. Pianos and models, Paris, Vienna and Berlin, masters and mistresses, are not needed by a writer. The cheapness of writing paper is, of course, the reason why women have succeeded as writers before they have succeeded in the other professions.

But to tell you my story—it is a simple one. You have only got to figure to yourselves a girl in a bedroom with a pen in her hand. She had only to move that pen from left to right—from ten o'clock to one. Then it occurred to her to do what is simple and cheap enough after all—to slip a few of those pages into an envelope, fix a penny stamp in the corner, and drop the envelope into the red box at the corner. It was thus that I became a journalist; and my effort was rewarded on the first day of the following month—a very glorious day it was for me—by a letter from an editor containing a cheque for one pound ten shillings and sixpence³. But to show you how little I deserve to be called a professional woman, how little I know of the struggles and difficulties of such

¹ A condensed version of a speech Woolf delivered at the National Society for Women's Service on Jan 21, 1931, published posthumously by her husband, Leonard, in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*.

² Frances Burney (1752-1840), British novelist, diarist, and playwright most known for her satire and journals of 18th-century life; Aphra Behn (1640-1689), the first female professional writer of literature in Britain, a playwright and author of the precursor of the romantic novel; Harriet Martineau (1802-1876), British social theorist, essayist, and lecturer; Jane Austen (1775-1817), British romance novelist and literary descendant of Aphra Behn; George Eliot (1819-1880), pen name of Mary Anne Evans, British novelist, journalist, and translator.

³ In 1904, at the age of 22, Woolf began writing reviews for the *Guardian*; in 1905 she started reviewing in the *Times Literary Supplement* and continued writing for that journal for many years. Adjusted for inflation and rate of exchange Woolf's 1904 payment would be worth about \$831 US today.

lives, I have to admit that instead of spending that sum upon bread and butter, rent, shoes and stockings, or butcher's bills, I went out and bought a cat—a beautiful cat, a Persian cat, which very soon involved me in bitter disputes with my neighbours.

What could be easier than to write articles and to buy Persian cats with the profits? But wait a moment. Articles have to be about something. Mine, I seem to remember, was about a novel by a famous man. And while I was writing this review, I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, *The Angel in the House*.⁴ It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her. You who come of a younger and happier generation may not have heard of her—you may not know what I mean by the Angel in the House. I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace. In those days—the last of Queen Victoria—every house had its Angel. And when I came to write I encountered her with the very first words. The shadow of her wings fell on my page; I heard the rustling of her skirts in the room. Directly, that is to say, I took my pen in my hand to review that novel by a famous man, she slipped behind me and whispered: “My dear, you are a young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure.” And she made as if to guide my pen. I now record the one act for which I take some credit to myself, though the credit rightly belongs to some excellent ancestors of mine who left me a certain sum of money—shall we say five hundred pounds a year⁵?—so that it was not necessary for me to depend solely on charm for my living. I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-

⁴ *The Angel in the House* is a long narrative and lyric poem of four sections composed by Coventry Patmore (1823-1896) over a period of years spanning 1856-1862 fictionalizing Patmore's courtship and marriage to his wife, Emily, whom the poet believed to be the ideal wife. Patmore's poem was immensely popular, and his ideas both reflected and promulgated Victorian values regarding womanhood and motherhood. Woolf's ties to Patmore's ideas were close to home: her grandmother—Julia Stephen's mother—was a friend of Coventry Patmore when he was young.

⁵ Adjusted for inflation and rate of exchange, Woolf's 1904 annual income of £500 would be worth about \$176,000 US today.

defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. For, as I found, directly I put pen to paper, you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex. And all these questions, according to the Angel of the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate, they must—to put it bluntly—tell lies if they are to succeed. Thus, whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her. She died hard. Her fictitious nature was of great assistance to her. It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality. She was always creeping back when I thought I had despatched her. Though I flatter myself that I killed her in the end, the struggle was severe; it took much time that had better have been spent upon learning Greek grammar; or in roaming the world in search of adventures. But it was a real experience; it was an experience that was bound to befall all women writers at that time. Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer.

But to continue my story. The Angel was dead; what then remained? You may say that what remained was a simple and common object—a young woman in a bedroom with an inkpot. In other words, now that she had rid herself of falsehood, that young woman had only to be herself. Ah, but what is “herself”? I mean, what is a woman? I assure you, I do not know. I do not believe that you know. I do not believe that anybody can know until she has expressed herself in all the arts and professions open to human skill. That indeed is one of the reasons why I have come here out of respect for you, who are in process of showing us by your experiments what a woman is, who are in process of providing us, by your failures and successes, with that extremely important piece of information.

But to continue the story of my professional experiences. I made one pound ten and six by my first review; and I bought a Persian cat with the proceeds. Then I grew ambitious. A Persian cat is all very well, I said; but a Persian cat is not enough. I must have a motor car. And it was thus that I became a novelist—for it is a very strange thing that people will give you a motor car if you will tell them a story. It is a still stranger thing that there is nothing so delightful in the world as telling stories. It is far pleasanter than writing reviews of famous novels. And yet, if I am to obey your secretary and tell you my professional experiences as a novelist, I must tell you about a very strange experience that befell me as a novelist. And to understand it you must try first to imagine a novelist's state of mind. I hope I am not giving away professional secrets if I say that a novelist's chief desire is to be as unconscious as possible. He has to induce in himself a state of perpetual lethargy. He wants life to proceed with the utmost quiet and regularity. He wants to see the same faces, to read the same books, to do the same things day

after day, month after month, while he is writing, so that nothing may break the illusion in which he is living—so that nothing may disturb or disquiet the mysterious nosings about, feelings round, darts, dashes and sudden discoveries of that very shy and illusive spirit, the imagination. I suspect that this state is the same both for men and women. Be that as it may, I want you to imagine me writing a novel in a state of trance. I want you to figure to yourselves a girl sitting with a pen in her hand, which for minutes, and indeed for hours, she never dips into the inkpot. The image that comes to my mind when I think of this girl is the image of a fisherman lying sunk in dreams on the verge of a deep lake with a rod held out over the water. She was letting her imagination sweep unchecked round every rock and cranny of the world that lies submerged in the depths of our unconscious being. Now came the experience, the experience that I believe to be far commoner with women writers than with men. The line raced through the girl's fingers. Her imagination had rushed away. It had sought the pools, the depths, the dark places where the largest fish slumber. And then there was a smash. There was an explosion. There was foam and confusion. The imagination had dashed itself against something hard. The girl was roused from her dream. She was indeed in a state of the most acute and difficult distress. To speak without figure she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked. The consciousness of—what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her artist's state of unconsciousness. She could write no more. The trance was over. Her imagination could work no longer. This I believe to be a very common experience with women writers—they are impeded by the extreme conventionality of the other sex. For though men sensibly allow themselves great freedom in these respects, I doubt that they realize or can control the extreme severity with which they condemn such freedom in women.

These then were two very genuine experiences of my own. These were two of the adventures of my professional life. The first—killing the Angel in the House—I think I solved. She died. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet. The obstacles against her are still immensely powerful—and yet they are very difficult to define. Outwardly, what is simpler than to write books? Outwardly, what obstacles are there for a woman rather than for a man? Inwardly, I think, the case is very different; she has still many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome. Indeed it will be a long time still, I think, before a woman can sit down to write a book without finding a phantom to be slain, a rock to be dashed against. And if this is so in literature, the freest of all professions for women, how is it in the new professions which you are now for the first time entering?

Those are the questions that I should like, had I time, to ask you. And indeed, if I have laid stress upon these professional experiences of mine, it is because I believe that they are, though in different forms, yours also. Even when the path is nominally open—when there is nothing to prevent a woman from being a doctor, a lawyer, a civil servant—there are many phantoms and obstacles, as I believe, looming in her way. To discuss and define them is I think of great value and importance; for thus only can the labour be shared, the difficulties be solved. But besides this, it is necessary also to discuss the ends and the aims for which we are fighting, for which we are doing battle with these formidable obstacles. Those aims cannot be taken for granted; they must be perpetually questioned and examined. The whole position, as I see it—here in this hall surrounded by women practising for the first time in history I know not how many different professions—is one of extraordinary interest and importance. You have won rooms of your own in the house hitherto exclusively owned by men. You are able, though not without great labour and effort, to pay the rent. You are earning your five hundred pounds a year. But this freedom is only a beginning—the room is your own, but it is still bare. It has to be furnished; it has to be decorated; it has to be shared. How are you going to furnish it, how are you going to decorate it? With whom are you going to share it, and upon what terms? These, I think are questions of the utmost importance and interest. For the first time in history you are able to ask them; for the first time you are able to decide for yourselves what the answers should be. Willingly would I stay and discuss those questions and answers—but not to-night. My time is up; and I must cease.

STREET HAUNTING: A LONDON ADVENTURE⁶

No one perhaps has ever felt passionately towards a lead pencil. But there are circumstances in which it can become supremely desirable to possess one; moments when we are set upon having an object, an excuse for walking half across London between tea and dinner. As the foxhunter hunts in order to preserve the breed of foxes, and the golfer plays in order that open spaces may be preserved from the builders, so when the desire comes upon us to go street rambling the pencil does for a pretext, and getting up we say: "Really I must buy a pencil," as if under cover of this excuse we could indulge safely in the greatest pleasure of town life in winter—rambling the streets of London.

The hour should be the evening and the season winter, for in winter the champagne brightness of the air and the sociability of the streets are grateful. We are not then taunted as in the summer by the longing for shade and

⁶ Written in 1930 and published posthumously by her husband, Leonard, in 1942 in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*.

solitude and sweet airs from the hayfields. The evening hour, too, gives us the irresponsibility which darkness and lamplight bestow. We are no longer quite ourselves. As we step out of the house on a fine evening between four and six, we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican⁷ army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one's own room. For there we sit surrounded by objects which perpetually express the oddity of our own temperaments and enforce the memories of our own experience. That bowl on the mantelpiece, for instance, was bought at Mantua on a windy day. We were leaving the shop when the sinister old woman plucked at our skirts and said she would find herself starving one of these days, but, "Take it!" she cried, and thrust the blue and white china bowl into our hands as if she never wanted to be reminded of her quixotic⁸ generosity. So, guiltily, but suspecting nevertheless how badly we had been fleeced, we carried it back to the little hotel where, in the middle of the night, the innkeeper quarreled so violently with his wife that we all leant out into the courtyard to look, and saw the vines laced about among the pillars and the stars white in the sky. The moment was stabilized, stamped like a coin indelibly among a million that slipped by imperceptibly. There, too, was the melancholy Englishman, who rose among the coffee cups and the little iron tables and revealed the secrets of his soul—as travellers do. All this—Italy, the windy morning, the vines laced about the pillars, the Englishman and the secrets of his soul—rise up in a cloud from the china bowl on the mantelpiece. And there, as our eyes fall to the floor, is that brown stain on the carpet. Mr. Lloyd George made that. "The man's a devil!" said Mr. Cummings, putting the kettle down with which he was about to fill the teapot so that it burnt a brown ring on the carpet.

But when the door shuts on us, all that vanishes. The shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkles and roughnesses a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye. How beautiful a street is in winter! It is at once revealed and obscured. Here vaguely one can trace symmetrical straight avenues of doors and windows; here under the lamps are floating islands of pale light through which pass quickly bright men and women, who, for all their poverty and shabbiness, wear a certain look of unreality, an air of triumph, as if they had given life the slip, so that life, deceived of her prey, blunders on without them. But, after all, we are only gliding smoothly on the surface. The eye is not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure. It floats us smoothly down a stream;

⁷ Republican: here, belonging to or characteristic of a republic, a form of government in which the affairs of state are a public matter—rather than the private concern of an aristocracy—and public offices are appointed or elected, as opposed to inherited.

⁸ Quixotic: exceedingly idealistic; unrealistic and impractical, alluding to Miguel de Cervantes' fictional idealist, Don Quixote de la Mancha.

resting, pausing, the brain sleeps perhaps as it looks.

How beautiful a London street is then, with its islands of light, and its long groves of darkness, and on one side of it perhaps some tree-sprinkled, grass-grown space where night is folding herself to sleep naturally and, as one passes the iron railing, one hears those little cracklings and stirrings of leaf and twig which seem to suppose the silence of fields all round them, an owl hooting, and far away the rattle of a train in the valley. But this is London, we are reminded; high among the bare trees are hung oblong frames of reddish yellow light—windows; there are points of brilliance burning steadily like low stars—lamps; this empty ground, which holds the country in it and its peace, is only a London square, set about by offices and houses where at this hour fierce lights burn over maps, over documents, over desks where clerks sit turning with wetted forefinger the files of endless correspondences; or more suffusedly the firelight wavers and the lamplight falls upon the privacy of some drawing-room, its easy chairs, its papers, its china, its inlaid table, and the figure of a woman, accurately measuring out the precise number of spoons of tea which—. She looks at the door as if she heard a ring downstairs and somebody asking, is she in?

But here we must stop peremptorily⁹. We are in danger of digging deeper than the eye approves; we are impeding our passage down the smooth stream by catching at some branch or root. At any moment, the sleeping army may stir itself and wake in us a thousand violins and trumpets in response; the army of human beings may rouse itself and assert all its oddities and sufferings and sordidities¹⁰. Let us dally a little longer, be content still with surfaces only—the glossy brilliance of the motor omnibuses; the carnal¹¹ splendour of the butchers' shops with their yellow flanks and purple steaks; the blue and red bunches of flowers burning so bravely through the plate glass of the florists' windows.

For the eye has this strange property: it rests only on beauty; like a butterfly it seeks colour and basks in warmth. On a winter's night like this, when nature has been at pains to polish and preen herself, it brings back the prettiest trophies, breaks off little lumps of emerald and coral as if the whole earth were made of precious stone. The thing it cannot do (one is speaking of the average unprofessional eye) is to compose these trophies in such a way as to bring out the more obscure angles and relationships. Hence after a prolonged diet of this simple, sugary fare, of beauty pure and uncomposed, we become conscious of satiety¹². We halt at the door of the boot shop and make

⁹ Peremptorily: in a manner insisting on immediate attention or obedience, especially in a brusque or imperious way, or in a manner not open to appeal or challenge; final.

¹⁰ Sordidities: things that are dirty, squalid, or morally degrading.

¹¹ Carnal: relating to physical, esp. sexual, needs and activities.

¹² Satiety: the quality or state of being fed or gratified to or beyond capacity.

some little excuse, which has nothing to do with the real reason, for folding up the bright paraphernalia of the streets and withdrawing to some duskier chamber of the being where we may ask, as we raise our left foot obediently upon the stand: "What, then, is it like to be a dwarf?"

She came in escorted by two women who, being of normal size, looked like benevolent giants beside her. Smiling at the shop girls, they seemed to be disclaiming any lot in her deformity and assuring her of their protection. She wore the peevish¹³ yet apologetic expression usual on the faces of the deformed. She needed their kindness, yet she resented it. But when the shop girl had been summoned and the giantesses, smiling indulgently, had asked for shoes for "this lady" and the girl had pushed the little stand in front of her, the dwarf stuck her foot out with an impetuosity¹⁴ which seemed to claim all our attention. Look at that! Look at that! she seemed to demand of us all, as she thrust her foot out, for behold it was the shapely, perfectly proportioned foot of a well-grown woman. It was arched; it was aristocratic. Her whole manner changed as she looked at it resting on the stand. She looked soothed and satisfied. Her manner became full of self-confidence. She sent for shoe after shoe; she tried on pair after pair. She got up and pirouetted before a glass which reflected the foot only in yellow shoes, in fawn shoes, in shoes of lizard skin. She raised her little skirts and displayed her little legs. She was thinking that, after all, feet are the most important part of the whole person; women, she said to herself, have been loved for their feet alone. Seeing nothing but her feet, she imagined perhaps that the rest of her body was of a piece with those beautiful feet. She was shabbily dressed, but she was ready to lavish any money upon her shoes. And as this was the only occasion upon which she was not afraid of being looked at but positively craved attention, she was ready to use any device to prolong the choosing and fitting. Look at my feet, she seemed to be saying, as she took a step this way and then a step that way. The shop girl good-humouredly must have said something flattering, for suddenly her face lit up in ecstasy. But, after all, the giantesses, benevolent though they were, had their own affairs to see to; she must make up her mind; she must decide which to choose. At length, the pair was chosen and, as she walked out between her guardians, with the parcel swinging from her finger, the ecstasy faded, knowledge returned, the old peevishness, the old apology came back, and by the time she had reached the street again she had become a dwarf only.

But she had changed the mood; she had called into being an atmosphere which, as we followed her out into the street, seemed actually to create the humped, the twisted, the deformed. Two bearded men, brothers, apparently, stone-blind, supporting themselves by resting a hand on the head of a small boy between them, marched down the street. On they came with the

unyielding yet tremulous tread of the blind, which seems to lend to their approach something of the terror and inevitability of the fate that has overtaken them. As they passed, holding straight on, the little convoy seemed to cleave asunder the passers-by with the momentum of its silence, its directness, its disaster. Indeed, the dwarf had started a hobbling grotesque dance to which everybody in the street now conformed: the stout lady tightly swathed in shiny sealskin; the feeble-minded boy sucking the silver knob of his stick; the old man squatted on a doorstep as if, suddenly overcome by the absurdity of the human spectacle, he had sat down to look at it—all joined in the hobble and tap of the dwarf's dance.

In what crevices and crannies, one might ask, did they lodge, this maimed company of the halt and the blind? Here, perhaps, in the top rooms of these narrow old houses between Holborn and Soho, where people have such queer names, and pursue so many curious trades, are gold beaters, accordion pleaters, cover buttons, or support life, with even greater fantasticality, upon a traffic in cups without saucers, china umbrella handles, and highly-coloured pictures of martyred saints. There they lodge, and it seems as if the lady in the sealskin jacket must find life tolerable, passing the time of day with the accordion pleater, or the man who covers buttons; life which is so fantastic cannot be altogether tragic. They do not grudge us, we are musing, our prosperity; when, suddenly, turning the corner, we come upon a bearded Jew, wild, hunger-bitten, glaring out of his misery; or pass the humped body of an old woman flung abandoned on the step of a public building with a cloak over her like the hasty covering thrown over a dead horse or donkey. At such sights the nerves of the spine seem to stand erect; a sudden flare is brandished¹⁵ in our eyes; a question is asked which is never answered. Often enough these derelicts choose to lie not a stone's throw from theatres, within hearing of barrel organs, almost, as night draws on, within touch of the sequined cloaks and bright legs of diners and dancers. They lie close to those shop windows where commerce offers to a world of old women laid on doorsteps, of blind men, of hobbling dwarfs, sofas which are supported by the gilt necks of proud swans; tables inlaid with baskets of many coloured fruit; sideboards paved with green marble the better to support the weight of boars' heads; and carpets so softened with age that their carnations have almost vanished in a pale green sea.

Passing, glimpsing, everything seems accidentally but miraculously sprinkled with beauty, as if the tide of trade which deposits its burden so punctually and prosaically upon the shores of Oxford Street had this night cast up nothing but treasure. With no thought of buying, the eye is sportive and generous; it creates; it adorns; it enhances. Standing out in the street, one may

¹³ Peevish: easily irritated, especially by unimportant things.

¹⁴ Impetuosity: rash impulsiveness.

¹⁵ Brandished: waved about or flourished (something, esp. a weapon) as a threat or in anger or excitement.

build up all the chambers of an imaginary house and furnish them at one's will with sofa, table, carpet. That rug will do for the hall. That alabaster¹⁶ bowl shall stand on a carved table in the window. Our merrymaking shall be reflected in that thick round mirror. But, having built and furnished the house, one is happily under no obligation to possess it; one can dismantle it in the twinkling of an eye, and build and furnish another house with other chairs and other glasses. Or let us indulge ourselves at the antique jewellers, among the trays of rings and the hanging necklaces. Let us choose those pearls, for example, and then imagine how, if we put them on, life would be changed. It becomes instantly between two and three in the morning; the lamps are burning very white in the deserted streets of Mayfair¹⁷. Only motor-cars are abroad at this hour, and one has a sense of emptiness, of airiness, of secluded gaiety. Wearing pearls, wearing silk, one steps out on to a balcony which overlooks the gardens of sleeping Mayfair. There are a few lights in the bedrooms of great peers returned from Court, of silk-stockinged footmen, of dowagers who have pressed the hands of statesmen. A cat creeps along the garden wall. Love-making is going on sibilantly¹⁸, seductively in the darker places of the room behind thick green curtains. Strolling sedately as if he were promenading a terrace beneath which the shires and counties of England lie sun-bathed, the aged Prime Minister recounts to Lady So-and-So with the curls and the emeralds the true history of some great crisis in the affairs of the land. We seem to be riding on the top of the highest mast of the tallest ship; and yet at the same time we know that nothing of this sort matters; love is not proved thus, nor great achievements completed thus; so that we sport with the moment and preen our feathers in it lightly, as we stand on the balcony watching the moonlit cat creep along Princess Mary's garden wall.

But what could be more absurd? It is, in fact, on the stroke of six; it is a winter's evening; we are walking to the Strand to buy a pencil. How, then, are we also on a balcony, wearing pearls in June? What could be more absurd? Yet it is nature's folly, not ours. When she set about her chief masterpiece, the making of man, she should have thought of one thing only. Instead, turning her head, looking over her shoulder, into each one of us she let creep instincts and desires which are utterly at variance with his main being, so that we are streaked, variegated, all of a mixture; the colours have run. Is the true self this which stands on the pavement in January, or that which bends over the balcony in June? Am I here, or am I there? Or is the true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is

only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves? Circumstances compel unity; for convenience sake a man must be a whole. The good citizen when he opens his door in the evening must be banker, golfer, husband, father; not a nomad wandering the desert, a mystic staring at the sky, a debauchee¹⁹ in the slums of San Francisco, a soldier heading a revolution, a pariah²⁰ howling with scepticism and solitude. When he opens his door, he must run his fingers through his hair and put his umbrella in the stand like the rest.

But here, none too soon, are the second-hand bookshops. Here we find anchorage in these thwarting currents of being; here we balance ourselves after the splendours and miseries of the streets. The very sight of the bookseller's wife with her foot on the fender, sitting beside a good coal fire, screened from the door, is sobering and cheerful. She is never reading, or only the newspaper; her talk, when it leaves bookselling, which it does so gladly, is about hats; she likes a hat to be practical, she says, as well as pretty. O no, they don't live at the shop; they live in Brixton; she must have a bit of green to look at. In summer a jar of flowers grown in her own garden is stood on the top of some dusty pile to enliven the shop. Books are everywhere; and always the same sense of adventure fills us. Second-hand books are wild books, homeless books; they have come together in vast flocks of variegated²¹ feather, and have a charm which the domesticated volumes of the library lack. Besides, in this random miscellaneous company we may rub against some complete stranger who will, with luck, turn into the best friend we have in the world. There is always a hope, as we reach down some grayish-white book from an upper shelf, directed by its air of shabbiness and desertion, of meeting here with a man who set out on horseback over a hundred years ago to explore the woollen market in the Midlands and Wales; an unknown traveller, who stayed at inns, drank his pint, noted pretty girls and serious customs, wrote it all down stiffly, laboriously for sheer love of it (the book was published at his own expense); was infinitely prosy, busy, and matter-of-fact, and so let flow in without his knowing it the very scent of hollyhocks and the hay together with such a portrait of himself as gives him forever a seat in the warm corner of the mind's inglenook²². One may buy him for eighteen pence now. He is marked three and sixpence, but the bookseller's wife, seeing how shabby the covers are and how long the book has stood there since it was bought at some sale of a gentleman's library in Suffolk, will let it go at that.

Thus, glancing round the bookshop, we make other such sudden capricious²³ friendships with the unknown and the vanished whose only

¹⁶ Alabaster: a dense translucent, white or tinted fine-grained mineral stone.

¹⁷ Mayfair is a well-to-do district in London. Now primarily a commercial district of exclusive shops and luxury hotels, its many former homes have been converted into offices for major corporations' headquarters, embassies, and businesses. Mayfair is one of the most expensive areas in London and the world.

¹⁸ Sibilantly: of, characterized by, or producing a hissing sound, like that of the /s/ or /sh/.

¹⁹ Debauchee: a person who habitually indulges in debauchery or dissipation; a libertine.

²⁰ Pariah: a social outcast.

²¹ Variegated: having streaks, marks, or patches of a different color or colors; varicolored.

²² Inglenook: a nook or corner beside an open fireplace.

²³ Capricious: Characterized by or subject to whim; impulsive and unpredictable.

record is, for example, this little book of poems, so fairly printed, so finely engraved, too, with a portrait of the author. For he was a poet and drowned untimely, and his verse, mild as it is and formal and sententious²⁴, sends forth still a frail fluty sound like that of a piano organ played in some back street resignedly by an old Italian organ-grinder in a corduroy jacket. There are travellers, too, row upon row of them, still testifying, indomitable spinsters that they were, to the discomforts that they endured and the sunsets they admired in Greece when Queen Victoria was a girl. A tour in Cornwall with a visit to the tin mines was thought worthy of voluminous record. People went slowly up the Rhine and did portraits of each other in Indian ink, sitting reading on deck beside a coil of rope; they measured the pyramids; were lost to civilization for years; converted negroes in pestilential swamps. This packing up and going off, exploring deserts and catching fevers, settling in India for a lifetime, penetrating even to China and then returning to lead a parochial²⁵ life at Edmonton, tumbles and tosses upon the dusty floor like an uneasy sea, so restless the English are, with the waves at their very door. The waters of travel and adventure seem to break upon little islands of serious effort and lifelong industry stood in jagged column upon the floor. In these piles of puce-bound volumes²⁶ with gilt monograms on the back, thoughtful clergymen expound the gospels; scholars are to be heard with their hammers and their chisels chipping clear the ancient texts of Euripides and Aeschylus²⁷. Thinking, annotating, expounding goes on at a prodigious²⁸ rate all around us and over everything, like a punctual, everlasting tide, washes the ancient sea of fiction. Innumerable volumes tell how Arthur loved Laura and they were separated and they were unhappy and then they met and they were happy ever after, as was the way when Victoria ruled these islands.

The number of books in the world is infinite, and one is forced to glimpse and nod and move on after a moment of talk, a flash of understanding, as, in the street outside, one catches a word in passing and from a chance phrase fabricates a lifetime. It is about a woman called Kate that they are talking, how “I said to her quite straight last night . . . if you don’t think I’m worth a penny stamp, I said . . .” But who Kate is, and to what crisis in their friendship that penny stamp refers, we shall never know; for Kate sinks under the warmth of their volubility²⁹; and here, at the street corner, another page of the volume of life is laid open by the sight of two men consulting under the lamp-post. They are spelling out the latest wire from Newmarket in the stop press news. Do

they think, then, that fortune will ever convert their rags into fur and broadcloth, sling them with watch-chains, and plant diamond pins where there is now a ragged open shirt? But the main stream of walkers at this hour sweeps too fast to let us ask such questions. They are wrapt, in this short passage from work to home, in some narcotic dream, now that they are free from the desk, and have the fresh air on their cheeks. They put on those bright clothes which they must hang up and lock the key upon all the rest of the day, and are great cricketers, famous actresses, soldiers who have saved their country at the hour of need. Dreaming, gesticulating, often muttering a few words aloud, they sweep over the Strand and across Waterloo Bridge whence they will be slung in long rattling trains, to some prim little villa in Barnes or Surbiton where the sight of the clock in the hall and the smell of the supper in the basement puncture the dream.

But we are come to the Strand now, and as we hesitate on the curb, a little rod about the length of one’s finger begins to lay its bar across the velocity and abundance of life. “Really I must—really I must”—that is it. Without investigating the demand, the mind cringes to the accustomed tyrant. One must, one always must, do something or other; it is not allowed one simply to enjoy oneself. Was it not for this reason that, some time ago, we fabricated the excuse, and invented the necessity of buying something? But what was it? Ah, we remember, it was a pencil. Let us go then and buy this pencil. But just as we are turning to obey the command, another self disputes the right of the tyrant to insist. The usual conflict comes about. Spread out behind the rod of duty we see the whole breadth of the river Thames — wide, mournful, peaceful. And we see it through the eyes of somebody who is leaning over the Embankment on a summer evening, without a care in the world. Let us put off buying the pencil; let us go in search of this person—and soon it becomes apparent that this person is ourselves. For if we could stand there where we stood six months ago, should we not be again as we were then—calm, aloof, content? Let us try then. But the river is rougher and greyer than we remembered. The tide is running out to sea. It brings down with it a tug and two barges, whose load of straw is tightly bound down beneath tarpaulin covers. There is, too, close by us, a couple leaning over the balustrade with the curious lack of self-consciousness lovers have, as if the importance of the affair they are engaged on claims without question the indulgence of the human race. The sights we see and the sounds we hear now have none of the quality of the past; nor have we any share in the serenity of the person who, six months ago, stood precisely where we stand now. His is the happiness of death; ours the insecurity of life. He has no future; the future is even now invading our peace. It is only when we look at the past and take from it the element of uncertainty that we can enjoy perfect peace. As it is, we must turn, we must cross the Strand again, we must find a shop where, even at this hour, they will be ready to sell us a pencil.

²⁴ Sententious: given to quoting aphorisms and adages, tersely phrased statements of a truth or an opinion.

²⁵ Parochial: having a limited or narrow outlook or scope; narrow-minded.

²⁶ Puce-bound volumes: books bound in leather or fabric that is a deep red to dark grayish purple.

²⁷ Euripides (c. 480-408 BCE) and Aeschylus (c. 525-c. 455 BCE) were two of the three great tragedians of Athens, the third being Sophocles.

²⁸ Prodigious: remarkably or impressively great in extent, size, or degree.

²⁹ Volubility: marked by a ready flow of speech; fluent.

It is always an adventure to enter a new room for the lives and characters of its owners have distilled their atmosphere into it, and directly we enter it we breast some new wave of emotion. Here, without a doubt, in the stationer's shop people had been quarrelling. Their anger shot through the air. They both stopped; the old woman—they were husband and wife evidently—retired to a back room; the old man whose rounded forehead and globular eyes would have looked well on the frontispiece of some Elizabethan folio, stayed to serve us. "A pencil, a pencil," he repeated, "certainly, certainly." He spoke with the distraction yet effusiveness of one whose emotions have been roused and checked in full flood. He began opening box after box and shutting them again. He said that it was very difficult to find things when they kept so many different articles. He launched into a story about some legal gentleman who had got into deep waters owing to the conduct of his wife. He had known him for years; he had been connected with the Temple for half a century, he said, as if he wished his wife in the back room to overhear him. He upset a box of rubber bands. At last, exasperated by his incompetence, he pushed the swing door open and called out roughly: "Where d'you keep the pencils?" as if his wife had hidden them. The old lady came in. Looking at nobody, she put her hand with a fine air of righteous severity upon the right box. There were pencils. How then could he do without her? Was she not indispensable to him? In order to keep them there, standing side by side in forced neutrality, one had to be particular in one's choice of pencils; this was too soft, that too hard. They stood silently looking on. The longer they stood there, the calmer they grew; their heat was going down, their anger disappearing. Now, without a word said on either side, the quarrel was made up. The old man, who would not have disgraced Ben Jonson's³⁰ title-page, reached the box back to its proper place, bowed profoundly his good-night to us, and they disappeared. She would get out her sewing; he would read his newspaper; the canary would scatter them impartially with seed. The quarrel was over.

In these minutes in which a ghost has been sought for, a quarrel composed, and a pencil bought, the streets had become completely empty. Life had withdrawn to the top floor, and lamps were lit. The pavement was dry and hard; the road was of hammered silver. Walking home through the desolation one could tell oneself the story of the dwarf, of the blind men, of the party in the Mayfair mansion, of the quarrel in the stationer's shop. Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others. One could become a washerwoman, a publican, a street singer. And what greater delight and wonder can there be than to leave the straight lines of personality and deviate into those footpaths that lead beneath brambles and thick tree trunks into the

³⁰ Ben Jonson (1572-1637) was a poet, playwright, and literary critic and contemporary of Shakespeare.

heart of the forest where live those wild beasts, our fellow men?

That is true: to escape is the greatest of pleasures; street haunting in winter the greatest of adventures. Still as we approach our own doorstep again, it is comforting to feel the old possessions, the old prejudices, fold us round; and the self, which has been blown about at so many street corners, which has battered like a moth at the flame of so many inaccessible lanterns, sheltered and enclosed. Here again is the usual door; here the chair turned as we left it and the china bowl and the brown ring on the carpet. And here—let us examine it tenderly, let us touch it with reverence—is the only spoil we have retrieved from all the treasures of the city, a lead pencil.

TALLAND HOUSE³¹

Father on one of his walking tours, it must have been in 1881, I think—discovered St Ives. He must have stayed there, and seen Talland House to let. He must have seen the town almost as it had been in the sixteenth century, without hotels, or villas; and the Bay as it had been since time began. It was the first year, I think, that the line was made from St Erth to St Ives—before that, St Ives was eight miles from a railway. Munching his sandwiches up at Tregenna perhaps, he must have been impressed, in his silent way, by the beauty of the Bay; and thought: this might do for our summer holiday, and worked out with his usual caution ways and means. I was to be born in the following January; and, though they wished to limit their family, and did what they could to prevent me, he must have known that they were not successful in the steps they took; Adrian was born a year after me (1883)—again, in spite of precautions. It proves the ease and amplitude of those days that a man to whom money was an obsession thought it feasible to take a house on the very toenail, as he called it, of England, so that every summer he would be faced with the expense of moving family, nurses, servants from one end of England to the other. Yet he did it. They rented the house from the Great Western Railway Company. The distance did prove in one way a drawback; for we could only go there in the summer. Our country thus was canalised³² into two or at most into three months of the year. The other months were spent entirely in London. Yet in retrospect nothing that we had as children made as much difference, was quite so important to us, as our summers in Cornwall. The country was intensified, after the months in London to go away to Cornwall; to have our own house; our own garden; to have the Bay; the sea;

³¹ Excerpt from Woolf's journal entry dated Sep. 22, 1940, published posthumously by her husband, Leonard, in *A Sketch of the Past*. Talland House is the residence the Stephen family rented in St Ives, Cornwall, where they spent summers until the death of Julia Stephen. This is the setting of Woolf's most autobiographical novel, *To the Lighthouse*, which helped pioneer the stream-of-consciousness literary style.

³² Canalised: diverted into channels; or given a certain direction to or provided a certain outlet for.

the moors; Clodgy; Halestown Bog; Carbis Bay; Lelant; Trevail; Zennor; the Gurnard's Head; to hear the waves breaking that first night behind the yellow blind; to dig in the sand; to go sailing in a fishing boat; to scrabble over the rocks and see the red and yellow anemones³³ flourishing their antennae; or stuck like blobs of jelly to the rock; now and then to find a small fish flapping in a pool; to pick up cowries³⁴; to look over the grammar in the dining room and see the lights changing on the bay; the leaves of the escallonia grey or bright green; to go down to the town and buy a penny box of tintacks³⁵ or a pocketknife; to prowl about Lanham's—Mrs Lanham wore false curls shaking round her head; the servants said Mr Lanham had married her 'through an advertisement'; to smell all the fishy smells in the steep little streets; and see the innumerable cats with their fishbones in their mouths; and the women on the raised steps outside their houses pouring pails of dirty water down the gutters; every day to have a great dish of Cornish cream skinned with a yellow skin; and plenty of brown sugar to eat with blackberries . . . I could fill pages remembering one thing after another. All together made the summer at St Ives the best beginning to life conceivable. When they took Talland House, my father and mother gave us—me at any rate—what has been perennial, invaluable. Suppose I had only Surrey, or Sussex, or the Isle of Wight to think about when I think of my childhood.

The town was then much as it must have been in the sixteenth century, unknown, unvisited, a scramble of granite houses crusting the slope in the hollow under the Island. It must have been built for shelter; for a few fishermen, when Cornwall was more remote from England than Spain or Africa is now. It was a steep little town. Many houses had a flight of steps, with a railing leading to the door. The walls were thick blocks of granite built to stand the sea storms. They were splashed with a wash the colour of Cornish cream; and their roughness was like the clot of cream. There was nothing mellow about them; no red brick; no soft thatch. The eighteenth century had left no mark upon St Ives, as it has so definitely upon every southern village. It might have been built yesterday; or in the time of the Conqueror³⁶. It had no architecture; no arrangement. The market place was a jagged cobbled open place; the Church was on one side; built of granite, ageless, like the houses; the fish market stood beside it. There was no grass in front of it. It stood flush to the market place. There were no carved doors,

³³ Anemone: marine animal having a columnar body and one or more circles of tentacles surrounding the mouth. It attaches itself to rocks and is often found in tide pools.

³⁴ Cowries: the shells of sea snails (also called cowries). The shells are usually egg-shaped, except that they are rather flat on the underside from which the snail projects.

³⁵ Tintacks: short nails made of tin-plated iron.

³⁶ William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, invaded Britain with his French army and defeated British King Harold in 1066, beginning 300 years of French-speaking rule.

large windows, no lintels³⁷; no moss; no comely professional houses. It was a windy, noisy, fishy, vociferous³⁸, narrow-streeted town; the colour of a mussel or limpet³⁹; like a bunch of rough shell fish clustered on a grey wall together.

Our house, Talland House, was just beyond the town, on the hill. For whom the Great Western Railway had built it, I do not know. It must have been in the forties, or fifties; a square house, like a child's drawing of a house; remarkable only for its flat roof, and the crisscrossed railing that ran round the roof; again, like something a child draws. It stood in a garden that ran downhill; and had formed itself into separate gardens, surrounded by thick escallonia⁴⁰ hedges, whose leaves, pressed, gave out a very sweet smell. It had so many angles cut off, and lawns surrounded, that each had a name; there was the coffee garden; the Fountain—a basin with a funnel that dripped, hedged in with damp evergreens; the cricket lawn; the Love Corner, under the greenhouse, where the purple jackmanii⁴¹ grew—where Leo Maxse proposed to Kitty Lushington (I thought I heard Paddy talking to his son, Thoby⁴² said, overhearing the proposal). Then there was the kitchen garden; the strawberry beds; the pond where Willy Fisher sailed the little steamers he made with a paddle worked by an elastic band; and the big tree. All these different, cut off places were contained in that one garden of not more than two or three acres. One entered by a large wooden gate, the sound of whose latch clicking was one of the familiar sounds; up the carriage drive one went, under the steep wall of rock, sprinkled with the fleshy leaves of the mesembryanthemums⁴³; and then came to the Lookout place, between the clumps of pampas grass. The Lookout place was a grassy mound, that jutted⁴⁴ out over the high garden wall. There we were often sent to stand to look for the fall of the signal. When the signal fell it was time to start for the station to meet the train. It was the train that brought Mr Lowell, Mr Gibbs, the Stillmans, the Lushingtons, the Symonds. But it was a grown-up affair—receiving friends. We never had friends to stay with us. Nor did we want them. "Us four" were completely self-sufficient. Once when a child called Elsie was brought by Mrs Westlake to play with us I "broomed her round the garden". I remember scuffling her like a drift of dead leaves in front of me.

³⁷ Lintel: a horizontal structural member, such as a beam or stone, that spans an architectural opening, as between the uprights of a door or window or between two columns or piers.

³⁸ Vociferous: crying out noisily; clamorous.

³⁹ Limpet: any of various marine gastropods with a low conical shell open beneath, often browsing on rocks at the shoreline and adhering when disturbed.

⁴⁰ Escallonia: an evergreen shrub with white or red flowers, cultivated for ornament.

⁴¹ Jackmanii: purple clematis, a climbing vine.

⁴² Thoby Stephen (1880–1906), the elder of the two Stephen brothers, nicknamed "the Goth." Although his academic accomplishments promised a successful career, he contracted typhoid at the age of 26 while vacationing in Greece and died soon afterwards.

⁴³ Mesembryanthemums: a plant with thick, fleshy leaves and often showy flowers.

⁴⁴ Jutted: extended beyond the main body or line; projected; protruded (often followed by out).

From the Lookout place one had then, a perfectly open view across the Bay. (Mr Symonds said that the Bay reminded him of the Bay of Naples.) It was a large Bay, many curved, edged with a slip of sand, with green sand hills behind; and the curves flowed in and out to the two black rocks at one end of which stood the black and white tower of the Lighthouse; and at the other end, Hayle river made a blue vein across the sand, and stakes, on which always a gull sat, marked the channel into Hayle Harbour. This great flowing basin of water was always changing in colour; it was deep blue; emerald green; purple and then stormy grey and white crested. There was a great coming and going of ships across the bay. Most usually, it was a Haines steamer, with a red or white band round the funnel, going to Cardiff for coal. In rough weather, sometimes one would wake to find the whole bay full of ships, that had come in overnight for shelter—little tramp steamers mostly, with a dip in the middle. But sometimes a big ship would be anchored there; once a battle ship; once a great sailing ship; once a famous white yacht. Then every morning the clumsy luggers⁴⁵ went out, deep sea fishing; and in the evening there was the mackerel⁴⁶ fleet, its lights dancing up and down; and the fleet returning, rounding the headland and suddenly dropping their sails. We would stand with mother on the Lookout place watching them.

Every year, about the first week in September, we would cry, “The pilchard⁴⁷ boats are out!” There they were being hauled down the beach, where they lay one behind the other all the rest of the year. Horses were struggling to draw them over the beach. They were anchored near the shore, and looked like long black shoes, for each had a hood for the watchman at one end, and a great coil of net—seines they were called—at the other. The tarring of the pilchard boats was a regular occupation; and made the beach always smell slightly of tar. There they lay week after week, and were still lying when we left in October waiting for the Huer⁴⁸ who sat at his telescope up in the white shelter on Carbis Bay point to sight a shoal. He sat there looking for a purple stain of pilchards to come into the bay and beside him was a great horn of some kind. Year after year the boats lay in the bay. The seines where never shot. The fishermen grumbled that the steam trawlers at Newlyn (perhaps) had disturbed the pilchards; and driven them out to sea. Once, though, as we sat at lessons we heard the Huer’s cry—a long high clear hoot of sound. Then fishermen rowed out to the boats. We stopped lessons. The seines were shot. A dotted circle of corks floated here and there over the dark net beneath. But the pilchards passed out of the bay that time; and the seines were drawn in again. (It was in 1905, when we four took lodging at Carbis Bay that the pilchards came. We rowed out early in the morning. The

sea spurted and spat and bubbled with silver. A stranger in the next boat shoveled armfuls of that bubbling mass into our boat. “Like some fresh fish for breakfast?” he said—everyone was excited and jubilant; and boat after boat was weighed down to the water line with fish. And we went down to the harbor and saw them packed. I wrote a description of it, and sent it to some paper; which rejected it. But Thoby told Nessa, who told me, that he thought I might be a bit of a genius.) All the years were at St Ives the pilchards never came into the bay; and the pilchard boats lay there, anchored, waiting; and we used to swim out and hang onto the edge, and see the old man lying in his brown tarpaulin tent, keeping watch. The waiting pilchard boats was [sic] a sight that made father pish and pshaw at table. He had a curious sympathy for the poverty of the fisher people: a respect for fishermen, like his respect for Alpine guides. And mother, of course, got to know them in their houses; and went about, “doing good” as Stella wished to have said it on her tombstone; she visited, helped, and started her nursing society. After her death it became the Julia Prinsep Stephen Nursing Association; Meredith⁴⁹ and the Symonds and Stillmans contributed to it; and Ka Arnold-Forster⁵⁰ told me not so long ago that it still exists.

Every year, in August, the Regatta⁵¹ took place in the bay. We watched the Judges’ boat take its station, with lines of little flags hung from mast to mast. The St Ives notables went on board. A band played. Wafts of music came across the water. All the little boats came out of the harbor. Then a gun was fired, and the races began. Off went the boats—the luggers, the pleasure boats, the rowing boats; racing round the different courses that were marked by flags round the bay. And while they raced, the swimmers got ready in a line on the Regatta boat for their races. The gun fired; they plunged and we could see the little heads bobbing and the arms flashing and heard the people shouting as one swimmer gained on another. One year our charming curly headed young postman (I remember the brown linen bag in which he carried letters) should have won; but he explained to Amy later, “I let the other chap win, because it was his last chance.”

It was a very gay sight, with the flags flying, the guns firing, the boats sailing, and the swimmers plunging or being hauled back on board. A crowd of St Ives people gathered to watch in the Malakoff, that octagonal space at the end of the Terrace which had been built, presumably, in the Crimean War⁵²

⁴⁹ George Meredith (1828-1909), British novelist and poet of the Victorian Era and one of many writers Woolf’s mother, Julia, met as a child.

⁵⁰ Ka Arnold-Forster (1887-1938), née Katherine Laird Cox, a “Neo-Pagan,” Fabian, and Newnhamite who was involved in a rather stormy love affair with the British war poet Rupert Brooke, whom Irish poet W. B. Yeats called “the handsomest man in England.”

⁵¹ Regatta: a series of boat races, usually among boats that are rowed or sailed.

⁵² Crimean War (1853-1856) was a conflict between the Russian Empire and an alliance including the French Empire, the British Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the Kingdom of Sardinia over territories in the declining Ottoman Empire (a territory including modern-day Turkey).

⁴⁵ Luggers: small sailing fishing boats traditional in France, Britain, and Scotland.

⁴⁶ Mackerel: a fish of the North Atlantic, having wavy cross markings on the back.

⁴⁷ Pilchard: another name for the sardine, a small, oily fish of the herring family.

⁴⁸ Huer: one who cries out or gives an alarm. (From Middle French *huer*, “to hoot.”)

and was the only attempt that the town made at ornament. St Ives had no pleasure pier, no parade, only this angular gravelly patch of ground, set with a few stone seats upon which retired fishermen in their blue jerseys smoked and gossiped. The Regatta day remains in my mind, with its distant music, its little strings of flags, the boats sailing, and the people dotted on the sand, like a French picture.

In those days St Ives, save for ourselves and casual wandering painters, had no summer visitors. Its customs were its own customs; its festivals its own too. There was the August Regatta. Then once in every twelve years or so⁵³, old men and women over seventy danced round Knills Monument—a granite steeple in a clearing—and the couple who danced the longest were given a shilling? half a crown?—by the Mayor—Dr Nicholls, on that occasion, who wore a long fur trimmed cloak. St Ives had a relic, but a relic in use, of the past—Charlie Pearce, the town crier. Now and again he shuffled along the front swinging a muffin bell and crying, “Oyez, Oyez, Oyez⁵⁴.” What he went on to say, I do not know, save that on one occasion, when a visitor at Talland House lost a brooch⁵⁵, she had it cried by Charlie Pearce. He was blind, or nearly; with a long wasted face, grey eyes, like the eyes of a fish that has been boiled, and he wore a battered top hat, a frock coat tightly buttoned round his angular body, and he shuffled oddly from side to side as he went swinging his bell, and crying “Oyez, Oyez, Oyez.” We knew him, as we knew so many of the town characters, through the servants, in particular through Sophie, who had many friends among them. We knew all the tradespeople, who came up the drive to the kitchen door, carrying their parcels—Alice Curnow, with the washing in a great basket; Mrs Adams the fisherwoman, who brought fish in another basket—the lobsters still alive, still blue, hobbling about in the basket. The lobster would be set on the kitchen table, and the great claw would open and shut and pinch one. Can I be remembering a fact when I think I remember a long thick fish wriggling on a hook in the larder, and that Gerald beat it to death with a broom handle?

The kitchen, Sophie’s kitchen, for she was dominant over all the other “denizens of the kitchen” as we called them in the *Hyde Park Gate News*⁵⁶, was directly beneath our night nursery. At dinner time we would let down a basket on a string, and dangle it over the kitchen window. If she were in a good temper, the basket would be drawn in, laden with something from the

grown-ups’ dinner and pushed swaying out again. If she was in “one of her tempers,” the basket was sharply jerked, the string cut, and we [were] left holding the dangling string. I can remember the sensation of the heavy basket, and the light string.

Every afternoon we “went for a walk.” Later these walks became a penance⁵⁷. Father must have one of us to go out with him, Mother insisted. Too much obsessed with his health, with his pleasures, she was too willing, as I think now, to sacrifice to him. It was thus that she left us the legacy of his dependence, which after her death became so harsh an imposition. It would have [been] better for our relationship if she had left him to fend for himself. But for many years she made a fetish of his health; and so—leaving the effect upon us out of the reckoning—she wore herself out and died at forty-nine; while he lived on, and found it very difficult, so healthy was he, to die of cancer at the age of seventy-two. But, though I slip in, still venting an old grievance, that parenthesis, St Ives gave us all the same that “pure delight” which is before my eyes at this very moment. The lemon-colored leaves on the elm tree; the apples in the orchard; the murmur and rustle of the leaves makes me pause here, and think how many other than human forces are always at work on us. While I write this the light glows; an apple becomes a vivid green; I respond all through me; but how? Then a little owl [chatters]⁵⁸ under my window. Again, I respond. Figuratively I could snapshot what I mean by some image; I am a porous vessel afloat on sensation; a sensitive plate exposed to invisible rays; and so on. Or I fumble with some vague idea about a third voice; I speak to Leonard; Leonard speaks to me; we both hear a third voice. Instead of labouring all the morning to analyse what I mean, to discover whether I mean anything real, whether I make up or tell the truth when I see myself taking the breath of these voices in my sails and tacking⁵⁹ this way and that through daily life as I yield to them, I note only the existence of this influence; suspect it to be of great importance; cannot find how to check its power on other people—does Louie feel it? Does Percy? Which of the people watching the incendiary bomb extinguished on the hill last night⁶⁰ would understand what I mean if they read this?—I erect a finger post⁶¹ here, to mark a vein I will some time try to work out; and return to the surface; that is St Ives.

⁵⁷ Penance: an act of self-abasement, mortification, or devotion performed to show sorrow or repentance for sin.

⁵⁸ A line has been drawn through “chatters” and an indecipherable word has been penciled in. [Editor’s note.]

⁵⁹ Tacking: a sailing term for making a zigzag pattern to make use of cross winds to sail generally forward.

⁶⁰ Note that Woolf wrote this journal entry in the middle of World War II, when German bombers leveled much of London.

⁶¹ Erect a finger post: i.e., make a mental note of this.

⁵³ This ceremony takes place every five, not every twelve, years. [Editor’s note.]

⁵⁴ “Oyez, Oyez, Oyez” is a traditional interjection said three times to preface announcements, a tradition dating back to Norman rule of Britain and means, in French, “Hear ye.” This interjection is still used in Britain and the United States to introduce the opening of a court of law.

⁵⁵ Brooch: a decorative jewelry item designed to be attached to garments, often to hold them closed or to attach one garment to another.

⁵⁶ *Hyde Park Gate News*: a household newspaper written, edited, and printed by the Stephens children. The family’s London home was at 22 Hyde Park Gate.

The regular Sunday walk was to Trick Robin or, as father liked to call it, Tren Crom. From the top, one could see the two seas; St Michael's Mount on one side; the Lighthouse on the other. Like all Cornish hills, it was scattered with blocks of granite; said some of them to be old tombs and altars; in some, holes were driven, as if for gate posts. Others were piled up rocks. The Loggan rock⁶² was on top of Tren Crom; we would set it rocking; and be told that perhaps the hollow in the rough lichened surface was for the victim's blood. But father, with his severe love of truth, disbelieved it; he said, in his opinion, this was no genuine Loggan rock; but the natural disposition of ordinary rocks. Little paths led up the hill, between heather and ling⁶³; and our knees were pricked by the gorse—the blazing yellow gorse⁶⁴ with its sweet nutty smell. Another walk, a short children's walk, was to Fairyland, as we called that solitary wood, with a broad wall circling it. We walked on the wall, and looked down into a forest of oak trees, and great ferns higher than our heads. It smelt of oak apples; it was dark, damp, silent, mysterious. A longer, and adventurous walk was to Halestown Bog. Again father corrected us; Helston Bog we called it; the real name was Halestown. In that bog we sprang from hag to hag; and the hags squelched and we plunged up to the knee in the brown bog water. There the Osmunda grew; and the rare maidenhair fern⁶⁵. Better than these walks, a treat announced perhaps once a fortnight, was an afternoon sailing. We would hire a lugger; the fisherman went with us. But once Thoby was allowed to steer us home. "Show them you can bring her in, my boy," father said, with his usual trust and pride in Thoby. And Thoby took the fisherman's place; and steered; flushed and with his blue eyes very blue, and his mouth set, he sat there bringing us round the point, into harbor, without letting the sail flag. One day the sea was full of pale jelly fish, like lamps, with streaming hair; but they stung you if you touched them. Sometimes lines would be handed us; baited by gobbets cut from fish; and the line thrilled in one's fingers as the boat tossed and shot through the water; and then—how can I convey the excitement?—there was a little leaping tug; then another; up one hauled; up through the water at length came the white twisting fish; and was slapped on the floor. There it lay flapping this way and that in an inch or two of water.

Once, after we had hung about, tacking, and hauling in gurnard after gurnard⁶⁶, dab after dab⁶⁷, father said to me: "Next time if you are going to fish

⁶² Loggan rock: a large balanced stone, from the Cornish *log*, meaning "to rock." The most famous Loggan rock is near the village of Treen in Cornwall, England.

⁶³ Heather and ling: low-growing shrubs with small white, pink, purple, or red. They are generally found in uncultivated areas.

⁶⁴ Gorse: a spiny yellow-flowered European shrub of the legume family.

⁶⁵ Maidenhair fern: a fern having delicate fan-shaped fronds with small pale-green leaflets.

⁶⁶ Gurnard: a fish with large, fanlike pectoral fins and a large armored head. It is also called Sea Robin because when it swims its outspread pectoral fins open and close, resembling a robin's wings flapping.

I shan't come; I don't like to see fish caught but you can go if you like." It was a perfect lesson. It was not a rebuke; not a forbidding; simply a statement of his own feeling, about which I could think and decide for myself. Though my passion for the thrill and the tug had been perhaps the most acute I then knew, his words slowly extinguished it; leaving no grudge, I ceased to wish to catch fish. But from the memory of my own passion I am still able to construct an idea of the sporting passion. It is one of those invaluable seeds, from which, since it is impossible to have every experience fully, one can grow something that represents other people's experiences. Often one has to make do with seeds; the germs of what might have been, had one's life been different. I pigeonhole 'fishing' thus with other momentary glimpses; like those rapid glances, for example, that I cast into basements when I walk London streets.

Oak apples, ferns with clusters of seeds on their backs, the regatta, Charlie Pearce, the click of the garden gate, the ants swarming on the hot front door step; buying tintacks; sailing; the smell of Halestown Bog; splits with Cornish cream for tea in the farm house at Treveil; the floor of the sea changing colour at lessons; old Mr Wolstenholme in his beehive chair; the spotted elm leaves on the lawn; the rooks cawing as they passed over the house in the early morning; the escallonia leaves showing their grey undersides; the arc in the air, like the pip of an orange, when the powder magazine at Hayle blew up; the boom of the buoy—those for some reason come uppermost at the moment in my mind thinking of St Ives—an incongruous⁶⁸ miscellaneous catalogue, little corks that mark a sunken net.

And to pull that net, leaving its contents unsorted, to shore, by way of making an end where there is no such thing, I add: for two or three years before mother's death (1892-3-4, that is) ominous hints reached the nursery that the grown ups talked of leaving St Ives. The distance had become a drawback; by that time George and Gerald⁶⁹ had work in London. Expense, Thoby's school, Adrian's school, became more urgent. And then just opposite the Lookout place a great square oatmeal coloured hotel appeared when we came down in July. My mother said, with her dramatic gestures, that the view was spoilt; that St Ives would be ruined. For all these reasons, then, a house agent's board appeared one October in our garden; and as it needed repainting, I was allowed to fill in some of the letters—This House to Let—from a pot of paint. The joy of painting mingled with the dread of leaving. But for a summer or two no tenant came. The danger, we hoped, was averted. And then in the spring of 1895 mother died. Father instantly decided that he

⁶⁷ Dab: a fish similar in appearance to both the plaice and the flounder. Like them, both its eyes are on the right-hand side of its body. The upper surface is usually pale with scattered darker blotches and speckles and orange pectoral fins.

⁶⁸ Incongruous: out of keeping or place; inappropriate; unbecoming. Inconsistent.

⁶⁹ George and Gerald Duckworth, elder half-brothers to the Stephen children through their mother's first marriage.

wished never to see St Ives again. And perhaps a month later Gerald went down alone; settled the sale of our lease to some other people called Millie Dow, and St Ives vanished for ever.

ON A FAITHFUL FRIEND⁷⁰

There is some impertinence as well as some foolhardiness in the way in which we buy animals for so much gold and silver and call them ours. One cannot help wondering what the silent critic on the hearthrug thinks of our strange conventions—the mystic Persian⁷¹, whose ancestors were worshipped as gods whilst we, their masters and mistresses, groveled in caves and painted our bodies blue⁷². She has a vast heritage of experience, which seems to brood in her eyes, too solemn and too subtle for expression; she smiles, I often think, at our late-born civilisation, and remembers the rise and fall of dynasties. There is something, too, profane in the familiarity, half contemptuous, with which we treat our animals. We deliberately transplant a little bit of simple wild life, and make it grow up beside ours, which is neither simple nor wild. You may often see in a dog's eyes a sudden look of the primitive animal, as though he were once more a wild dog hunting in the solitary places of his youth. How have we the impertinence to make these wild creatures forego their nature for ours, which at best they can but imitate? It is one of the refined sins of civilisation, for we know not what wild spirit we are taking from its purer atmosphere, or who it is—Pan, or Nymph, or Dryad⁷³—that we have trained to beg for a lump of sugar at tea.

I do not think that in domesticating our lost friend Shag we were guilty of any such crime; he was essentially a sociable dog, who had his near counterpart in the human world. I can see him smoking a cigar at the bow window of his club, his legs extended comfortably, whilst he discusses the latest news on the Stock Exchange with a companion. His best friend could not claim for him any romantic or mysterious animal nature, but that made him all the better company for mere human beings. He came to us, however, with a pedigree that had all the elements of romance in it; he, when, in horror at his price, his would-be purchaser pointed to his collie head and collie body,

but terribly Skye-terrier⁷⁴ legs—he, we were assured, was no less a dog than the original Skye—a chieftain of the same importance as the O'Brien or the O'Connor Don⁷⁵ in human aristocracy. The whole of the Skye-terrier tribe—who, that is, inherited the paternal characteristics—had somehow been swept from the earth; Shag, the sole scion⁷⁶ of pure Skye blood, remained in an obscure Norfolk village, the property of a low-born blacksmith, who, however, cherished the utmost loyalty for his person, and pressed the claims of his royal birth with such success that we had the honour of buying him for a very substantial sum. He was too great a gentleman to take part in the plebeian⁷⁷ work of killing rats for which he was originally needed, but he certainly added, we felt, to the respectability of the family. He seldom went for a walk without punishing the impertinence of middle-class dogs who neglected the homage due to his rank, and we had to enclose the royal jaws in a muzzle long after that restriction was legally unnecessary. As he advanced in middle life he became certainly rather autocratic, not only with his own kind, but with us, his masters and mistresses; such a title though was absurd where Shag was concerned, so we called ourselves his uncles and aunts. The solitary occasion when he found it necessary to inflict marks of his displeasure on human flesh was once when a visitor rashly tried to treat him as an ordinary pet-dog and tempted him with sugar and called him “out of his name”⁷⁸ by the contemptible lap-dog title of “Fido.” Then Shag, with characteristic independence, refused the sugar and took a satisfactory mouthful of calf instead. But when he felt that he was treated with due respect he was the most faithful of friends. He was not demonstrative; but failing eyesight did not blind him to his master's face, and in his deafness he could still hear his master's voice.

The evil spirit of Shag's life was introduced into the family in the person of an attractive young sheep-dog puppy—who, though of authentic breed, was unhappily without a tail—a fact which Shag could not help remarking with satisfaction. We deluded ourselves into the thought that the young dog might take the place of the son of Shag's old age, and for a time they lived happily together. But Shag had ever been contemptuous of social graces and had relied for his place in our hearts upon his sterling qualities of honesty and independence; the puppy, however, was a young gentleman of most engaging manners, and, though we tried to be fair, Shag could not help feeling that the

⁷⁰ First published in *Guardian*, January 18, 1905.

⁷¹ Persian: a long-haired breed of cat characterized by its round face and shortened muzzle. The ancient Egyptians worshipped the cat goddess Bast, a deity embodying protection, fertility, and motherhood.

⁷² Painting our bodies blue: the ancient Greek historian Polybius described *Gaesatae*, mercenary Celtic warriors who combated Roman invaders naked, their bodies painted blue, a war tactic intended to instill fear in their opponents. Their shields were small, however, so the *Gaesatae* were defenseless against Roman javelins and were thus easily defeated.

⁷³ Dryad: in Greek mythology, a tree nymph, specifically the spirit of an oak tree (*drys*, in Greek).

⁷⁴ Skye-terrier legs: a collie is a medium-sized dog with long hair and long legs, while Skye terriers are even longer-haired, but with long and low bodies and very short legs. Thus, Shag is a very unusual—and likely odd-looking—mix.

⁷⁵ O'Brien or O'Connor Don: heads of aristocratic Scottish clans from which most Scottish kings were descended.

⁷⁶ Scion: a descendant, especially of a wealthy, aristocratic, or wealthy family.

⁷⁷ Plebeian: pertaining to the common people.

⁷⁸ To be called “out of one's name” is to be insulted or to be referred to by an insult in place of one's name.

young dog got most of our attention. I can see him now, as in a kind of blundering and shamefaced way he lifted one stiff old paw and gave it me to shake, which was one of the young dog's most successful tricks. It almost brought the tears to my eyes. I could not help thinking, though I smiled, of old King Lear. But Shag was too old to acquire new graces; no second place should be his, and he determined that the matter should be decided by force. So after some weeks of growing tension the battle was fought; they went for each other with white teeth gleaming—Shag was the aggressor—and rolled round and round on the grass, locked in each other's grip. When at last we got them apart, blood was running, hair was flying, and both dogs bore scars. Peace after that was impossible; they had but to see each other to growl and stiffen; the question was—Who was the conqueror? Who was to stay and who was to go? The decision we came to was base, unjust, and yet, perhaps, excusable. The old dog has had his day, we said, he must give place to the new generation. So old Shag was deposed, and sent to a kind of dignified dower-house⁷⁹ at Parson's-green, and the young dog reigned in his stead. Year after year passed, and we never saw the old friend who had known us in the days of our youth; but in the summer holidays he revisited the house in our absence with the caretaker. And so time went on till this last year, which, though we did not know it, was to be the last year of his life. Then, one winter's night, at a time of great sickness and anxiety, a dog was heard barking repeatedly, with the bark of a dog who waits to be let in, outside our kitchen-door. It was many years since that bark had been heard, and only one person in the kitchen was able to recognise it now. She opened the door, and in walked Shag, now almost quite blind and stone deaf, as he had walked in many times before, and, looking neither right nor left went to his old corner by the fireside, where he curled up and fell asleep without a sound. If the usurper saw him he slunk guiltily away, for Shag was past fighting for his rights any more. We shall never know—it is one of the many things that we can never know—what strange wave of memory or sympathetic instinct it was that drew Shag from the house where he had lodged for years to seek again the familiar doorstep of his master's home. And it befell that Shag was the last of the family to live in the old house, for it was in crossing the road which leads to the gardens where he was taken for his first walks as a puppy, and bit all the other dogs and frightened all the babies in their perambulators⁸⁰, that he met his death. The blind, deaf dog neither saw nor heard a hansom⁸¹; and the wheel went over him and ended instantly a life which could not have been happily prolonged. It was better for him to die thus out among the wheels and the horses than to end in a lethal-chamber or be poisoned in a stable-yard.

⁷⁹ Dower-house: a moderately large house available for use by the widow—the dowager—of the estate-owner once his heir moves into the principal house.

⁸⁰ Perambulators: baby carriages

⁸¹ Hansom: a kind of horse-drawn carriage designed and patented in 1834 by Joseph Hansom, an architect from York, England.

So we say farewell to a dear and faithful friend, whose virtues we remember—and dogs have few faults.

22 HYDE PARK GATE⁸²

As I have said the drawing room at Hyde Park Gate was divided by black folding doors picked out with thin lines of raspberry red. We were still much under the influence of Titian⁸³. Mounds of plush, Watts' portraits⁸⁴, busts shrined in crimson velvet, enriched by the gloom of a room naturally dark and thinly shaded in summer by showers of Virginia Creeper⁸⁵.

But it is of the folding doors that I wish to speak. How could family life have been carried on without them? As soon dispense with water-closets or bathrooms as with folding doors in a family of nine men and women, one of whom into the bargain was an idiot⁸⁶. Suddenly there would be a crisis—a servant dismissed, a lover rejected, pass books opened, or poor Mrs Tyndall who had lately poisoned her husband by mistake come for consolation. On one side of the door Cousin Adeline, Duchess of Bedford, perhaps would be on her knees—the Duke had died tragically at Woburn⁸⁷; Mrs Dolmetsch would be telling how she had found her husband in bed with the parlour-maid or Lisa Stillman would be sobbing that Walter Headlam had chalked her nose with a billiard cue, “which,” she cried, “is what comes of smoking a pipe before gentlemen”—and my mother had much ado⁸⁸ to persuade her that life had still to be faced, and the flower of virginity was still unplucked in spite of a chalk mark on the nose.

⁸² 22 Hyde Park Gate is the address of Woolf's childhood home, from which she and her sister, Vanessa, moved to Bloomsbury after the death of their father. Although Woolf did not supply the date of this memoir, she must have read it to the Memoir Club sometime between March 1920 and May 25, 1921 because Woolf reported in a May 26, 1921 diary entry that her friend the noted economist Manard Keynes remarked, “The best thing you ever did... was your Memoir on George. You should pretend to write about real people and make it all up.” Responding to Keynes' praise, Woolf added, “I was dashed of course (and Oh dear what nonsense—for if George is my climax then I'm a mere scribbler.)”

⁸³ Titian: English name for the Venetian painter Tiziano Vecelli (c. 1488-1576), whose skill in his lifetime was rivaled only by that of Raphael and Michelangelo. Most of his paintings and frescos are portraits or scenes depicting military, mythological, or Christian themes.

⁸⁴ George Frederic Watts (1817-1904) was a popular British Symbolist painter and sculptor and one of the many writers and artists introduced to Woolf's mother, Julia, when she was young.

⁸⁵ Virginia Creeper: a climbing vine that can grow up to 50 feet in length.

⁸⁶ The first wife of Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, Minnie Thackeray (1840-1875), daughter of the satirist William Thackeray, and they had one daughter: Laura Makepeace Stephen, who was declared mentally disabled and lived with the family until she was institutionalised in 1891.

⁸⁷ Woburn Abbey, near the village of Woburn, Bedfordshire, England, is a manor house and family seat of the Duke of Bedford.

⁸⁸ Had much ado: had to go to a lot of bother or trouble. The phrasing alludes to the title of Shakespeare's play *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Though dark and agitated on one side, the other side of the door, especially on Sunday afternoons, was cheerful enough. There round the oval tea table with its pink china shell full of spice buns would be found old General Beadle, talking of the Indian Mutiny; or Mr Haldane, or Sir Frederick Pollock—talking of all things under the sun; or old C. B. Clarke, whose name is given to three excessively rare Himalayan ferns; and Professor Wolstenholme, capable, if you interrupted him, of spouting two columns of tea not unmixed with sultanas⁸⁹ through his nostrils; after which he would relapse into a drowsy ursine torpor⁹⁰, the result of eating too much opium to which he had been driven by the unkindness of his wife and the untimely death of his son Oliver who was eaten, somewhere off the coast of Coromandel⁹¹, by a shark. These gentlemen came and came again; and they were often reinforced by Mr Frederick Gibbs, sometime tutor to the Prince of Wales, whose imperturbable common sense and fund of information about the colonies in general and Canada in particular were a perpetual irritation to my father who used to wonder whether a brain fever at college in the year 1863 had not something to do with it. These old gentlemen were generally to be found, eating very slowly, staying very late and making themselves agreeable at Christmas-time with curious presents of Indian silver work, and hand bags made from the skin of the ornithorhynchus⁹²—as I seem to remember.

The tea table however was also fertilized by a ravishing stream of female beauty—the three Miss Lushingtons, the three Miss Stillmans, and the three Miss Montgomeries—all triplets, all ravishing, but of the nine the paragon for wit, grace, charm and distinction was undoubtedly the lovely Kitty Lushington—now Mrs Leo Maxse⁹³. (Their engagement under the jackmanii in the Love Corner at St Ives was my first introduction to the passion of love.)⁹⁴ At the time I speak of she was in the process of disengaging herself from Lord Morpeth, and had, I suspect, to explain her motives to my mother, a martinet⁹⁵ in such matters, for first promising to marry a man and then breaking it off. My mother believed that all men required an infinity of care. She laid all the blame, I feel sure, upon Kitty. At any rate I have a picture of her as she issued from the secret side of the folding doors bearing on her delicate pink cheeks two perfectly formed pear-shaped crystal tears. The neither fell nor in the least dimmed the lustre of her eyes. She at once became the life and soul of the tea table—perhaps Leo Maxse was there—perhaps Ronny Norman,

perhaps Esmé Howard—perhaps Arthur Studd⁹⁶, for the gentlemen were not all old, or all professors by any means—and when my father groaned beneath his breath but very audibly, “Oh, Gibbs, what a bore you are!” it was Kitty whom my mother instantly threw into the breach. “Kitty wants to tell you how much she loved your lecture,” my mother would cry, and Kitty still with the tears on her cheeks would improvise with the utmost gallantry some compliment or opinion which pacified my father who was extremely sensitive to female charm and largely depended upon female praise. Repenting of his irritation he would press poor Gibbs warmly by the hand and beg him to come again soon—which needless to say, poor Gibbs did.

And then there would come dancing into the room rubbing his hands, wrinkling his forehead, the most remarkable figure, as I sometimes think, that our household contained. I have alluded to a grisly relic of another age which we used to disinter from the nursery wardrobe—Herbert Duckworth’s wig. (Herbert Duckworth had been a barrister⁹⁷.) Herbert Duckworth’s son—George Herbert—was by no means grisly. His hair curled naturally in dark crisp ringlets; he was six foot high; he had been in the Eton Eleven⁹⁸; he was now cramming at Scoones’ in the hope of passing the Foreign Office examination. When Miss Willett of Brighton saw him “throwing off his ulster⁹⁹” in the middle of her drawing room she was moved to write an Ode comparing George Duckworth to the Hermes of Praxiteles¹⁰⁰—which Ode my mother kept in her writing table drawer, along with a little Italian medal that George had won for saving a peasant from drowning. Miss Willett was reminded of the Hermes; but if you looked at him closely you noticed that one of his ears was pointed; and the other round; you also noticed that though he had the curls of a God and the ears of a faun¹⁰¹ he had unmistakably the eyes of a pig. So strange a compound can seldom have existed. And in the days I

⁹⁶ Ronald Norman (1873-1973) became a banker, administrator, and politician and eventually Chairman of the BBC; Esmé Howard, 1st Baron Howard of Penrith (1863-1939), became Britain’s most powerful diplomat of the 20th century and was British Ambassador to the United States from 1924 to 1930; Arthur Studd (1863-1919) inherited an immense fortune from his horse-breeding and horse-racing father, studied art, and became a famous painter.

⁹⁷ Sir Herbert Duckworth (1833-1870) was a barrister—a lawyer specializing in courtroom advocacy, drafting legal pleadings and giving expert legal opinions—and the first husband of Julia Prince Jackson, mother of Virginia, Vanessa, Thoby, and Adrian through her second marriage to Sir Leslie Stephen. Thus, Herbert Duckworth’s son George (1868-1934) was Stephen children’s half-brother.

⁹⁸ Eton Eleven: the cricket team of Eton College.

⁹⁹ Ulster: a long loose overcoat of Irish origin made of heavy material.

¹⁰⁰ Hermes of Praxiteles: an ancient Greek sculpture of Hermes, the messenger god, and the infant Dionysus, the god of crops, wine, and revelry. The sculpture was discovered in 1877 in the ruins of the Temple of Hera at Olympia.

¹⁰¹ Faun: a rustic forest deity of Greek and Roman mythology generally depicted as having human appearance from its horned head to its waist but with the legs of a goat. Fauns are often associated with enchanted woods and the Greek god Pan and his satyrs.

⁸⁹ Sultanas: a variety of seedless grape, generally yellow, usually consumed as raisins.

⁹⁰ Ursine torpor: bear-like sluggishness and inactivity.

⁹¹ Coast of Coromandel: the southeast coast that covers nearly half of the Indian subcontinent.

⁹² Ornithorhynchus: scientific name for the duck-billed platypus.

⁹³ Kitty (Katherine) Lushington-Maxse (1816-1891), British aristocrat generally regarded by literary scholars to be the model for Clarissa Dalloway in Woolf’s 1925 novel *Mrs. Dalloway*.

⁹⁴ The Love Corner at Talland House is described in the diary excerpt entitled “Talland House” in this packet.

⁹⁵ Martinet: a person who stresses a rigid adherence to the details of forms and methods.

speak of, God, faun and pig were all in all alive, all in opposition, and in their conflicts producing the most astonishing eruptions.

To begin with the God—well, he was only a plaster cast perhaps of Miss Willett’s Hermes, but I cannot deny the benign figure of George Duckworth teaching his small half-brothers and sisters by the hour on a strip of coco-nut matting to play forward¹⁰² with a perfectly straight bat had something Christlike about it. He was certainly Christian rather than Pagan in his divinity, for it soon became clear that this particular forward stroke to be applied to every ball indifferently, was a symbol of moral rectitude¹⁰³, and that one could neither slog nor bowl a sneak¹⁰⁴ without paltering¹⁰⁵ rather dangerously (as poor Gerald Duckworth¹⁰⁶ used to do) with the ideals of a sportsman and an English gentleman. Then, he would run miles to fetch cushions; he was always shutting doors and opening windows; it was always George who said the tactful thing, and broke the bad news, and braved my father’s irritation, and read aloud to us when we had the whooping cough, and remembered the birthdays of aunts, and sent turtle soup to invalids, and attended funerals, and took children to the pantomime—oh yes, whatever else George might be he was certainly a saint.

But then there was the faun. Now this animal was at once sportive and demonstrative and thus often at variance with the self-sacrificing nature of the God. It was quite a common thing to come into the drawing room and find George on his knees with his arms extended, addressing my mother, who might be adding up the weekly books¹⁰⁷, in tones of fervent adoration. Perhaps he had been staying with the Chamberlains for the week-end. But he lavished caresses, endearments, enquiries and embraces as if, after forty years in the Australian bush, he had at last returned to the home of his youth and found an aged mother still alive to welcome him. Meanwhile we gathered round—the dinner bell had already rung—awkward, but appreciative. Few families, we felt, could exhibit such a scene as this. Tears rushed to his eyes with equal abandonment. For example when he had a tooth out he flung

himself into the cook’s arms in a paroxysm¹⁰⁸ of weeping. When Judith Blunt refused him he sat at the head of the table sobbing loudly, but continued to eat. He cried when he was vaccinated. He was fond of sending telegrams which began “My darling mother” and went on to say that he would be dining out. (I copied this style of his, I regret to say, with disastrous results on one celebrated occasion. “She is an angel” I wired, on hearing that Flora Russell had accepted him, and signed my nickname ‘Goat’. “She is an aged Goat” was the version that arrived at Islay, and had something to do, George said, with Flora’s reluctance to ally herself with the Stephen family.” But all this exuberance of emotion was felt to be wholly to George’s credit. It proved not only how deep and warm is feelings were, but how marvelously he had kept the open heart and simple manners of a child.

But when nature refused him two pointed ears and gave him only one she knew, I think, what she was about. In his wildest paroxysms of emotion, when he bellowed with grief, or danced round the room, leaping like a kid¹⁰⁹, and flung himself on his knees before the Dowager Lady Carnarvon¹¹⁰ there was always self conscious, a little uneasy about him, as though he were not quite sure of the effect—as though the sprightly faun had somehow been hobbled together with a timid and conventional old sheep.

It is true that he was abnormally stupid. He passed the simplest examinations with incredible difficulty. For years he was crammed by Mr Scoones; and again and again he failed to pass the Foreign Office examination. He had existed all his life upon jobs found for him by his friends. His small brown eyes seemed perpetually to be boring into something too hard for them to penetrate. But when one compares them to the eyes of a pig, one is alluding not merely to their stupidity, or to their greed—George, I have been told, had the reputation of being the greediest young man in London ball-rooms—but to something obstinate¹¹¹ and pertinacious¹¹² in their expression as if the pig were grouting for truffles¹¹³ with his snout and would by sheer persistency succeed in unearthing them. Never shall I forget the pertinacity with which he learnt “Love in the Valley”¹¹⁴ by heart in order to impress Flora Russell; or the

¹⁰⁸ Paroxysm: a fit, attack, or sudden increase or recurrence of symptoms (as of a disease); convulsion.

¹⁰⁹ Kid: here, a young goat.

¹¹⁰ Elizabeth Catherine Howard, Lady Carnarvon (1858-1929) was the second wife and widow of the 4th Lord Carnarvon, who died in 1890. George Duckworth married Lady Margaret Herbert, the daughter of Lord Carnarvon by his first wife, in 1904. Therefore, Lady Carnarvon was the widow of his father-in-law. The Carnarvon estate, Highclere Castle, serves as the setting for TV’s *Downton Abbey*.

¹¹¹ Obstinate: stubborn.

¹¹² Pertinacious: holding firmly to an opinion or a course of action; persistent; tenacious.

¹¹³ Grouting for truffles: digging for truffles, an edible underground fungus usually found near tree roots. Truffles are highly valued in international cuisine for their delicate flavor. Since pigs also love truffles, truffle harvesters often follow the tracks of pigs to locate this delicacy.

¹¹⁴ “Love in the Valley” is a 208-line romantic pastoral poem by George Meredith (1828-1909).

¹⁰² The forward defense in cricket is a defensive shot played in response to a ball that the batter can’t score a run from or that would be risky to hit. It is typically the first tactic beginning cricket players learn.

¹⁰³ Rectitude: morally correct behavior or thinking; righteousness.

¹⁰⁴ A slog is a type of shot cricket shot in which the batsman attempts to hit the ball as far as possible, roughly the equivalent of baseballs’ high fly. Bowling is a type of toss toward the wicket, which is defended by the batsman.

¹⁰⁵ Paltering: to talk or act insincerely or misleadingly; equivocate.

¹⁰⁶ Gerald Duckworth (1870-1937) was George Duckworth’s younger brother and thus Virginia’s half-brother. Gerald Duckworth founded the publishing firm Duckworth and Co., which is still in existence today and published Woolf’s first two novels before she and her husband, Leonard, founded the Hogarth Press.

¹⁰⁷ Weekly books: weekly records of income and expenses.

determination with which he mastered the first volume of *Middlemarch*¹¹⁵ for the same purpose; and how immensely he was relieved when he left the second volume in a train and got my father, whose set was ruined, to declare that in his opinion one volume of *Middlemarch* was enough. Had his obstinacy been directed solely to self-improvement there would have been no call for us to complain. I myself might even have been of use to him. But it gradually became clear that he was muddling out a scheme, a plan of campaign, a system of life—I scarcely know what to call it—and then we had every reason to feel the earth tremble beneath our feet and the heavens darken. For George Duckworth had become after my mother's death, for all practical purposes, the head of the family. My father was deaf, eccentric, absorbed in his work, and entirely shut off from the world. The management of affairs fell upon George. It was usually said that he was father and mother, sister and brother in one—and all the old ladies of Kensington and Belgravia¹¹⁶ added with one accord that Heaven had blessed those poor Stephen girls beyond belief, and it remained for them to prove that they were worthy of such devotion.

But what was George Duckworth thinking and what was there alarming in the sight of him as he sat in the red leather arm-chair after dinner, mechanically stroking the dachshund Shuster, and lugubriously¹¹⁷ glancing at the pages of George Elliot? Well, he might be thinking about the crest on the post office notepaper, and how nice it would look picked out in red (he was now Austen Chamberlain's¹¹⁸ private secretary) or he might be thinking how the Duchess of St Albans had given up using fish knives at dinner; or how Mrs Grenfell had asked him to stay and he had created as he thought a good impression by refusing; at the same time he was revolving in the slow whirlpool of his brain schemes of the utmost thoughtfulness—plans for sending us for treats; for providing us with riding lessons; for finding jobs for some of poor Augusta Croft's innumerable penniless children. But the alarming thing was that he looked not merely muddled and emotional but obstinate. He looked as if he had made up his mind about something and would refuse to budge an inch. At the time it was extremely difficult to say what he had made up his mind to, but after the lapse of many years I think it may be said brutally and baldly, that George had made up his mind to rise in

¹¹⁵ *Middlemarch: A Study in Provincial Life*: an eight-“book” serialized novel by George Elliot, the pen name of Mary Anne Evans (1819-1880), set in the fictional Midlands town of Middlemarch. Its long, complicated plot and subplots track the lives of many characters; thus, the these many “volumes,” as Woolf refers to them, would be difficult for an unsophisticated reader to follow.

¹¹⁶ Kensington and Belgravia: wealthy districts in London. Kensington is known for its high-end shopping avenue Kensington High Street, and Belgravia is known for its expensive homes and is one of the wealthiest districts in the world.

¹¹⁷ Lugubriously: in a mournful, dismal, or gloomy manner, especially to an exaggerated or ludicrous degree.

¹¹⁸ Sir Joseph Austen Chamberlain (1863-1937) was a British statesman who served as Cabinet Minister in his terms of Secretary of State for India and as War Minister. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1926.

the social scale. He had a curious inborn reverence for the British aristocracy; the beauty of our great aunts had allied us in the middle of the nineteenth century with, I think I am right in saying, two dukes and quite a number of earls and countesses. They naturally showed no particular wish to remember the connection but George did his best to live up to it. His reverence for the symbols of greatness now that he was attached to a Cabinet Minister had fuller scope. His talk was all of ivory buttons that the coachmen of Cabinet Ministers wear in their coats; of having the entrée at Court; of baronies descending in the female line; of countesses secreting the diamonds of Marie Antoinette in black boxes under their beds. His secret dreams as he sat in the red leather chair stroking Schuster were all of marrying a wife with diamonds, and having a coachman with a button, and having the entrée at Court. But the danger was that his dreams were secret even to himself. Had you told him—and I think Vanessa did once—that he was a snob, he would have burst into tears¹¹⁹. What he liked, he explained, was to know ‘nice people’; Lady Jeune was nice; so were Lady Sligo, Lady Carnarvon and Lady Leitrim. Poor Mrs Clifford, on the other hand, was not; nor was old Mr Wolstenholme; of all of our old friends, Kitty Maxse, who might have been Lady Morpeth, came nearest to his ideal. It was not a question of birth or wealth; it was—and then if you pressed him further he would seize you in his arms and cry out that he refused to argue with those he loved. “Kiss me, kiss me, you beloved”, he would vociferate¹²⁰; and the argument was drowned in kisses. He lived in the thickest emotional haze, and as his passions increased and his desires became more vehement—he lived, Jack Hills¹²¹ assured me, in complete chastity until his marriage—one felt like an unfortunate minnow shut up in the same tank with an unwieldy and turbulent whale.

Nothing stood in the way of his advancement. He was a bachelor of prepossessing¹²² appearance though inclined to fat, aged about thirty years, with an independent income of something over a thousand a year¹²³. As private secretary to Austen Chamberlain he was as a matter of course invited to all the great parties of all the great peers. Hostesses had no time to remember, if they had ever known, that the Duckworths had made their money in cotton, or coal, not a hundred years ago, and did not really rank, as George made out, among the ancient families of Somersetshire. For I have it

¹¹⁹ Woolf also discusses George Duckworth's snobbery in her essay “Am I a Snob?” which she later also read to the Memoir Club, in 1936.

¹²⁰ Vociferate: shout, complain, or argue loudly or vehemently.

¹²¹ Jack Hills: the widower of George and Gerald's sister, Stella (who was thus Virginia Woolf's half-sister). Stella married Hills in 1897 but died suddenly on their return from their honeymoon at the age of 28.

¹²² Prepossessing: attractive or appealing in appearance.

¹²³ Adjusted for inflation and rate of exchange, George Duckworth's 1921 annual income of £1,000 would be worth about \$214,000 US today. Note that the US dollar was worth more in 1904 (see footnote 5) than in 1921.

on the best authority that when the original Duckworth acquired Orchardleigh about the year 1810 he filled it with casts¹²⁴ from the Greek to which he had attached not merely fig leaves for the Gods but aprons for the Goddesses—much to the amusement of the Lords of Longleat¹²⁵ who never forgot that old Duckworth had sold cotton by the yard and probably bought his aprons cheap. George, as I say, could have mounted alone to the highest pinnacles of London society. His mantelpiece was a gallery of invitation cards from every house in London. Why then did he insist upon cumbering himself with a couple of half-sisters who were more than likely to drag him down? It is probably useless to enquire. George's mind swam and steamed like a cauldron of rich Irish stew. He believed that aristocratic society was possessed of all the virtues and all the graces. He believed that his family had been entrusted to his care. He believed that it was his sacred duty—but when he reached that point his emotions overcame him; he began to sob; he flung himself on his knees; he seized Vanessa in his arms; he implored her in the name of her mother, of her grandmother, by all that was sacred to the female sex and holy in the traditions of our family to accept Lady Arthur Russell's invitation to dinner¹²⁶, to spend the week-end with the Chamberlain's at Highbury¹²⁷.

I cannot conceal my own opinion that Vanessa was to blame; not indeed that she could help herself, but if, I sometimes think, she had been born with one shoulder higher than the other, with a limp, with a squint, with a large mole on her left cheek, both our lives would have been changed for the better. As it was, George had a good deal of reason on his side. It was plain that Vanessa in her white satin dress made by Mrs Young, wearing a single flawless amethyst round her neck, and a blue enamel butterfly in her hair—the gifts, of course, of George himself—beautiful, motherless, aged only eighteen, was a touching spectacle, an ornament for any dinner table, a potential peeress, anything might be made of such precious material as she was—outwardly at least; and to be seen hovering round her, providing her with jewels, and Arab horses, and expensive clothes, whispering encouragement, lavishing embraces where were not entirely concealed from the eyes of strangers, redounded¹²⁸ to the credit of George himself and invested his figure with a pathos which it

¹²⁴ Casts from the Greek: i.e., reproductions of Greek statues.

¹²⁵ Longleat is an English stately home, currently the seat of the Marquesses of Bath, adjacent to the village of Horningsham and near the towns of Warminster in Wiltshire and Frome in Somerset.

¹²⁶ A *Spectator* article dated 12 March, 1910, soon after the death of Lady Arthur Russell, observed, "it may be truly said that the Arthur Russells' house in Audley Square was, not only during Lord Arthur's life, but afterwards and up to the present time, the focus for some of the best talk and pleasantest evenings that the London world had to offer."

¹²⁷ Highbury Hall is a mansion commissioned in 1878 by Sir Austen Chamberlain to be his Birmingham residence two years after he became Member of Parliament for Birmingham. He lived there until his death in 1914.

¹²⁸ Redounded: contributed greatly to (a person's credit or honor).

would not otherwise have had in the eyes of the dowagers of Mayfair. Unfortunately, what was inside Vanessa did not altogether correspond with what was outside. Underneath the necklaces and the enamel butterflies was one passionate desire—for paint and turpentine, for turpentine and paint. But poor George was no psychologist. His perceptions were obtuse¹²⁹. He never saw within. He was completely at a loss when Vanessa said she did not wish to stay with the Chamberlains at Highbury; and would not dine with Lady Arthur Russell—a rude, tyrannical old woman, with a bloodstained complexion and the manners of a turkey cock. He argued, he wept, he complained to Aunt Mary Fisher¹³⁰, who said she could not believe her ears. Every battery was turned upon Vanessa. She was told that she was selfish, unwomanly, callous and incredibly ungrateful considering the treasures of affection that had been lavished upon her—the Arab horse she rode and the slabs of bright blue enamel which she wore. Still she persisted. She did not wish to dine with Lady Arthur Russell. As the season wore on, every morning bright its card of invitation for Mr Duckworth and Miss Stephen; and every evening witnessed a battle between them. For the first year or so George, I suppose, was usually the victor. Of they went, in the hansom cab of those days and late at night Vanessa would come into my room complaining that she had been dragged from party to party, where she knew no one, and had been bored to death by the civilities of young men from the Foreign Office and the condescensions of old ladies of title. The more Vanessa resisted, the more George's natural obstinacy persisted. At last there was a crisis. Lady Arthur Russell was giving a series of select parties on Thursday evenings in South Audley Street. Vanessa had sat through one entire evening without opening her lips. George insisted that she must go next week and make amends, or he said, "Lady Arthur will never ask you to her house again." They argued until it was getting too late to dress. At last Vanessa, more in desperation than in concession, rushed upstairs, flung on her clothes and announced that she was ready to go. Off they went. What happened in the cab will never be known. But whenever they reached 2 South Audley Street—and they reached it several times in the course of the evening—one or the other was incapable of getting out. George refused to enter Vanessa in such a passion; and Vanessa refused to enter with George in tears. So the cabman had to be told to drive once more round the park. Whether they ever managed to alight I do not know.

But next morning as I was sitting spelling out my Greek George came into my room carrying in his hand a small velvet box. He presented me with the

¹²⁹ Obtuse: characterized by a lack of intelligence or sensitivity; annoyingly insensitive or slow to understand.

¹³⁰ Aunt Mary Fisher (1841-1916), née Jackson, was the sister of the Stephen children's mother, Julia Jackson Stephen, and the wife of noted historian Herbert William Fisher.

jewel it contained—a Jews' harp¹³¹ made of enamel with a pinkish blob of matter swinging in the centre which I regret to say only fetched a few shillings when I sold it the other day. But his face showed that he had come upon a different errand. His face was sallow¹³² and scored with innumerable wrinkles, for his skin was as loose and flexible as a pug dog's, and he would express his anguish in the most poignant manner by puckering lines, folds, and creases from forehead to chin. His manner was stern. His bearing rigid. If Miss Willet of Brighton could have seen him then she would certainly have compared him to Christ on the cross. After giving me the Jews' harp he stood before the fire in complete silence. Then, as I expected, he began to tell me his version of the preceding night—wrinkling his forehead more than ever, but speaking with a restraint that was at once bitter and manly. Never, never again, he said, would he ask Vanessa to go out with him. He had seen a look in her eyes which positively frightened him. It should never be said of him that he made her do what she did not wish to do. Here he quivered, but checked himself. Then he went on to say that he had only done what he knew my mother would have wished him to do. His two sisters were the most precious things that remained to him. His home had always meant more to him—more than he could say, and here he became agitated, struggled for composure, and then burst into a statement which was at once dark and extremely lurid¹³³. We were driving Gerald from the house, he cried—when a young man was not happy at home—he himself had always been content—but if his sisters—if Vanessa refused to go out with him—if he could not bring his friends to the house—in short, it was clear that the chaste, the immaculate George Duckworth would be forced into the arms of whores. Needless to say he did not put it like that; and I could only conjure up in my virgin consciousness, dimly irradiated by having read the “Symposium”¹³⁴ with Miss Case, horrible visions of the vices to which young men were driven whose sisters did not make them happy at home. So we went on talking for an hour or two. The end of it was that he begged me, and I agreed, to go a few nights later to the Dowager Marchioness of Sligo's ball. I had already been to May Week at Cambridge¹³⁵, and my recollections of galloping round the room with

¹³¹ Jews' harp: also called jaws harp or mouth harp, it is plucked instrument consisting of a flexible metal or bamboo tongue or reed attached to a frame. The tongue/reed is placed in the performer's mouth and plucked with the finger to produce a note.

¹³² Sallow: of a sickly yellowish hue or complexion.

¹³³ Lurid: very vivid in colour, esp. so as to create an unpleasantly harsh or unnatural effect.

¹³⁴ “Symposium”: a series of philosophical dialogues by Plato dated c. 385–380 BCE in which a group of men attending a symposium—a drinking party—expound upon the origins, purpose and nature of love. Woolf would have read the text in the original Greek as a part of her translation exercises with Miss Case, her tutor. Note that while Adrian and Thoby Stephen were educated at “public” schools, Virginia and Vanessa were home-schooled by their parents and tutors.

¹³⁵ May Week: a traditional end-of-term week of heady celebration with parties and balls and other social gatherings at Cambridge University. It formerly occurred just before final exams; now it takes place in June, *after* exams have been completed.

Hawtrey, or sitting on the stairs and quizzing the dancers with Clive¹³⁶, were such as to make me wonder why Vanessa found dances in London so utterly detestable. A few nights later I discovered for myself. After two hours of standing about in Lady Sligo's ball-room, of waiting to be introduced to strange young men, of dancing a round with Conrad Russell or with Esmé Howard, of dancing very badly, of being left without a partner, of being told by George that I looked lovely but must hold myself upright, I retired to an ante-room and hoped that a curtain concealed me. For some time it did. At length old Lady Sligo discovered me, judged the situation for herself and being a kind old peeress with a face like a rubicund¹³⁷ sow's carried me off to the dining room, cut me a large slice of iced cake, and left me to devour it by myself in a corner.

On that occasion George was lenient. We left about two o'clock, and on the way home he praised me warmly, and assured me that I only needed practice to be a great social success. A few days later he told me that the Dowager Countess of Carnarvon particularly wished to make my acquaintance and had invited me to dinner. As we drove across the Park he stroked my hand, and told me how he hoped that I should make friends with Elsie—for so both he and Vanessa had called her for some time at her own request—how I must not be frightened—how though she had been vice-reine¹³⁸ of Canada and vice-reine of Ireland she was simplicity itself—always since the death of her husband dressed in black—refused to wear any of her jewels though she had inherited the diamonds of Marie Antoinette—and was the one woman, he said with a man's sense of honour. The portrait he drew was of great distinction and bereavement. There would also be present her sister, Mrs Popham of Littlecote, a lady also of distinction and also bereaved, for her husband, Dick Popham of Littlecote, came of an ancient unhappy race, cursed in the reign of Henry the Eighth, since which time the property had never descended from father to son. Sure enough Mary Popham was childless, and Dick Popham was in a lunatic asylum. I felt that I was approaching a house of grandeur and desolation, and was not a little impressed. But I could see nothing alarming either in Elsie Carnarvon or in Mrs Popham of Littlecote. There were a couple of spare prim little women, soberly dressed in high black dresses, with grey hair strained off their foreheads, rather prominent blue eyes, and slightly protruding front teeth. We sat down to dinner.

¹³⁶ Sir Ralph Hawtrey (1875-1979) became an economist and was a close friend of John Maynard Keynes, the foremost economist of the 20th century; Clive Bell (1881-1964) later became an art critic, married Vanessa Stephen (who became an *avant garde* painter and designed her sister's book covers), and was a founding member of the Bloomsbury Group.

¹³⁷ Rubicund: having a ruddy complexion; high-colored; rosy.

¹³⁸ Vice-reine: a woman who is the governor of a country, province, or colony, ruling as the representative of a sovereign—or the wife of a viceroy, who would perform those functions.

The conversation was mild and kindly. Indeed I soon felt that I could not only reply to their questions—was I fond of painting?—was I fond of reading?—did I help in my father’s work?—but could initiate remarks of my own. George had always complained of Vanessa’s silence. I would prove that I could talk. So off I started. Heaven knows what devil prompted me—or why to Lady Carnarvon and Mrs Popham of Littlecote¹³⁹ of all people in the world would I, a chit¹⁴⁰ of eighteen, should have chosen to discourse upon the need of expressing the emotions! That, I said, was the great lack of modern life. The ancients, I said, discussed everything in common. Had Lady Carnarvon ever read the dialogues of Plato? “We—both men and women—” once launched it was difficult to stop, nor was I sure that my audacity was not holding them spell-bound with admiration. I felt that I was earning George’s gratitude for ever. Suddenly a twitch, a shiver, a convulsion of amazing expressiveness, shook the Countess by my side; her diamond, of which she wore a chaste selection, flashed in my eyes; and stopping, I saw George Duckworth blushing crimson on the other side of the table. I realised that I had committed some unspeakable impropriety. Lady Carnarvon and Mrs Popham began at once to talk of something entirely different; and directly dinner was over George, pretending to help me on with my cloak, whispered in my ear in a voice of agony, “They’re not used to young women saying anything—.” And then as if to apologize to Lady Carnarvon for my ill breeding, I saw him withdraw with her behind a pillar in the hall, and though Mrs Popham of Littlecote tried to attract my attention to a fine specimen of Moorish metal work which hung on the wall, we both distinctly heard them kiss. But the evening was not over. Lady Carnarvon had taken tickets for the French actors, who were then appearing in some play whose name I have forgotten. We had stalls of course, and filed soberly to our places in the very centre of the crowded theatre. The curtain went up. Snubbed, shy, indignant, and uncomfortable, I paid little attention to the play. But after a time I noticed that Lady Carnarvon on one side of me, and Mrs Popham on the other, were both agitated by the same sort of convulsive twitching which had taken them at dinner. What could be the matter? They were positively squirming in their seats. I looked at the stage. The hero and heroine were pouring forth a flood of voluble French which I could not disentangle. Then they stopped. To my great astonishment the lady leapt over the back of a sofa; the gentleman followed her. Round and round the stage they dashed, the lady shrieking, the man groaning and grunting in pursuit. It was a fine piece of realistic acting. As the pursuit continued, the ladies beside me held to the arms of their stalls with claws of iron. Suddenly, the actress dropped exhausted upon the sofa, and the man with a howl of gratification, loosening his clothes quite visibly,

¹³⁹ Littlecote: the Pophams’ large Elizabethan country manor and estate in Wiltshire dating back to the 13th century. Henry VIII courted Jane Seymour there.

¹⁴⁰ Chit: an archaic term for a child, sometimes used in British slang to designate a young woman, emphasizing her youth.

leapt on top of her. The curtain fell. Lady Carnarvon, Mrs Popham of Littlecote and George Duckworth rose simultaneously. Not a word was said. Out we filed. And as our procession made its way down the stalls I saw Arthur Cane leap up in his seat like a jack-in-the-box, amazed and considerably amused that George Duckworth and Lady Carnarvon of all people should have taken a girl of eighteen to see the French actors copulate upon the stage.

The brougham was waiting, and Mrs Popham of Littlecote, without speaking a word or even looking at me, immediately secreted herself inside it. Nor could Lady Carnarvon bring herself to face me. She took my hand, and said in a tremulous voice—her elderly cheeks were flushed with emotion—“I do hope, Miss Stephen, that the evening has not tired you very much.” Then she stepped into the carriage, and the two bereaved ladies returned to Bruton Street. George meanwhile had secured a cab. He was much confused, and yet very angry. I could see my remarks at dinner upon the dialogues of Plato rankled bitterly in his mind. And he told the cabman to go, not back to Hyde Park Gate as I had hoped, but on to Melbury Road.

“It’s quite early still”, he said in his most huffy manner as he sat down. “And I think you want a little practice in how to behave to strangers. It’s not your fault of course, but you have been out much less than most girls of your age.” So it appeared that my education was to be continued and that I was about to have another lesson in the art of behavior at the house of Mrs Holman Hunt¹⁴¹. She was giving a large evening party. Melbury Road was lined with hansoms, four-wheelers, hired flies¹⁴², and an occasional carriage drawn by a couple of respectable family horses. “A very *dritte*¹⁴³ crowd,” said George disdainfully as we took our place in the queue¹⁴⁴. Indeed all our old family friends were gathered together in the Moorish Hall¹⁴⁵, and directly I came in I recognized the Stillmans, the Lushingtons, the Montgomeries, the Morrises, the Burne-Joneses—Mr Gibbs, Professor Wolstenholme and General Beadle would certainly have been there too had they not all been sleeping for many years beneath the sod. The effect of the Moorish Hall, after Bruton Street, was

¹⁴¹ Holman Hunt (1827-1910) was a prominent British painter and one of the founders of the pre-Raphaelite movement, and artistic style known for vivid colours, attention to minute details, and use of symbolism. “The Light of the World” (1854), an allegorical painting of Christ knocking on a door which has no outward knob, became his most famous painting, generating a considerable income through print reproductions alone. In the 12th chapter of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee mentions that a reproduction of “The Light of the World” hangs in the First Purchase African M.E. Church of Maycomb.

¹⁴² Flies: one-horse carriages, especially ones for hire.

¹⁴³ *Dritte*: (German for “third”), here meaning a third-tier group of people, thus of no social importance.

¹⁴⁴ Queue: a line or sequence of people or vehicles awaiting their turn to be attended to or to proceed.

¹⁴⁵ Here, Woolf appears to have confused the Moorish Hall in nearby Leighton Hall with the Moorish decorations in Hunt’s house. [editor’s note]

garish, a little eccentric, and certainly very dowdy¹⁴⁶. The ladies were intense and untidy; the gentlemen had fine foreheads and short evening trousers, in some cases revealing a pair of bright red Pre-Raphaelite socks. George stepped among them like a Prince in disguise. I soon attached myself to a little covey of Kensington ladies who were being conveyed by Gladys Holman Hunt across the Moorish Hall to the studio. There we found old Holman Hunt himself dressed in a long Jaeger dressing gown, holding forth to a large gathering about the ideas which had inspired him in painting “The Light of the World”, a copy of which stood upon an easel. He sipped cocoa and stroked his flowing beard as he talked, and we sipped cocoa and shifted our shawls—for the room was chilly—as we listened. Occasionally some of us strayed off to examine with reverent murmurs other bright pictures upon other easels, but the tone of the assembly was devout, high-minded, and to me after the tremendous experiences of the evening, soothingly and almost childishly simple. George was never lacking in respect for old men of recognised genius, and he now advanced with his opera hat pressed beneath his arm; drew his feet together, and made a profound bow over Holman Hunt’s hand. Holman Hunt had no notion who he was, or indeed who any of us were; but went on sipping his cocoa, stroking his beard, and explaining what ideas had inspired him in painting “The Light of the World”, until we left.

At last—at last—the evening was over.

I went up to my room, took off my beautiful white satin dress, and unfastened the three pink carnations which had been pinned to my breast by the Jews’ harp. Was it really possible that tomorrow I should open my Greek dictionary and go on spelling out the dialogues of Plato with Miss Case? I felt I know much more about the dialogues of Plato than Miss Case could ever do. I felt old and experienced and disillusioned and angry, amused and excited, full of mystery, alarm and bewilderment. In a confused whirlpool of sensation I stood slipping off my petticoats, withdrew my long white gloves, and hung my white silk stockings over the back of a chair. Many different things were whirling round in my mind—diamonds and countesses, copulations, the dialogues of Plato, Mad Dick Popham and “The Light of the World”. Ah, how pleasant it would be to stretch out in bed, fall asleep and forget them all!

Sleep had almost come to me. The room was dark. The house silent. Then, creaking stealthily, the door opened; treading gingerly, someone entered. “Who?” I cried. “Don’t be frightened,” George whispered. “And don’t turn on the light, oh beloved. Beloved—” and he flung himself on my bed, and took me in his arms.

Yes, the old ladies of Kensington and Belgravia never knew that George Duckworth was not only father and mother, brother and sister to those poor Stephen girls; he was their lover also.

THE DEATH OF THE MOTH¹⁴⁷

Moths that fly by day are not properly to be called moths; they do not excite that pleasant sense of dark autumn nights and ivy-blossom which the commonest yellow-underwing asleep in the shadow of the curtain never fails to rouse in us. They are hybrid creatures, neither gay like butterflies nor sombre like their own species. Nevertheless the present specimen, with his narrow hay-coloured wings, fringed with a tassel of the same colour, seemed to be content with life. It was a pleasant morning, mid-September, mild, benignant¹⁴⁸, yet with a keener breath than that of the summer months. The plough was already scoring the field opposite the window, and where the share had been, the earth was pressed flat and gleamed with moisture. Such vigour came rolling in from the fields and the down beyond that it was difficult to keep the eyes strictly turned upon the book. The rooks¹⁴⁹ too were keeping one of their annual festivities; soaring round the tree tops until it looked as if a vast net with thousands of black knots in it had been cast up into the air; which, after a few moments sank slowly down upon the trees until every twig seemed to have a knot at the end of it. Then, suddenly, the net would be thrown into the air again in a wider circle this time, with the utmost clamour and vociferation, as though to be thrown into the air and settle slowly down upon the tree tops were a tremendously exciting experience.

The same energy which inspired the rooks, the ploughmen, the horses, and even, it seemed, the lean bare-backed downs, sent the moth fluttering from side to side of his square of the window-pane. One could not help watching him. One was, indeed, conscious of a queer feeling of pity for him. The possibilities of pleasure seemed that morning so enormous and so various that to have only a moth’s part in life, and a day moth’s at that, appeared a hard fate, and his zest in enjoying his meagre opportunities to the full, pathetic. He flew vigorously to one corner of his compartment, and, after waiting there a second, flew across to the other. What remained for him but to fly to a third corner and then to a fourth? That was all he could do, in spite of the size of the downs¹⁵⁰, the width of the sky, the far-off smoke of houses, and the romantic voice, now and then, of a steamer out at sea. What he could do he did. Watching him, it seemed as if a fibre, very thin but pure, of the

¹⁴⁷ Published in *The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays*, 1942.

¹⁴⁸ Benignant: having a good effect; beneficial.

¹⁴⁹ Rooks: small birds in the crow family, with black feathers that give a blue or purplish sheen in the sunlight.

¹⁵⁰ Downs: hills, from the Celtic word *dun*.

¹⁴⁶ Dowdy: old-fashioned or unfashionable and without style in appearance.

enormous energy of the world had been thrust into his frail and diminutive body. As often as he crossed the pane, I could fancy that a thread of vital light became visible. He was little or nothing but life.

Yet, because he was so small, and so simple a form of the energy that was rolling in at the open window and driving its way through so many narrow and intricate corridors in my own brain and in those of other human beings, there was something marvelous as well as pathetic about him. It was as if someone had taken a tiny bead of pure life and decking it as lightly as possible with down and feathers, had set it dancing and zig-zagging to show us the true nature of life. Thus displayed one could not get over the strangeness of it. One is apt to forget all about life, seeing it humped and bossed and garnished and cumbered so that it has to move with the greatest circumspection and dignity. Again, the thought of all that life might have been had he been born in any other shape caused one to view his simple activities with a kind of pity.

After a time, tired by his dancing apparently, he settled on the window ledge in the sun, and, the queer spectacle being at an end, I forgot about him. Then, looking up, my eye was caught by him. He was trying to resume his dancing, but seemed either so stiff or so awkward that he could only flutter to the bottom of the window-pane; and when he tried to fly across it he failed. Being intent on other matters I watched these futile attempts for a time without thinking, unconsciously waiting for him to resume his flight, as one waits for a machine, that has stopped momentarily, to start again without considering the reason of its failure. After perhaps a seventh attempt he slipped from the wooden ledge and fell, fluttering his wings, on to his back on the window sill. The helplessness of his attitude roused me. It flashed upon me that he was in difficulties; he could no longer raise himself; his legs struggled vainly. But, as I stretched out a pencil, meaning to help him to right himself, it came over me that the failure and awkwardness were the approach of death. I laid the pencil down again.

The legs agitated themselves once more. I looked as if for the enemy against which he struggled. I looked out of doors. What had happened there? Presumably it was midday, and work in the fields had stopped. Stillness and quiet had replaced the previous animation. The birds had taken themselves off to feed in the brooks. The horses stood still. Yet the power was there all the same, massed outside indifferent, impersonal, not attending to anything in particular. Somehow it was opposed to the little hay-coloured moth. It was useless to try to do anything. One could only watch the extraordinary efforts made by those tiny legs against an oncoming doom which could, had it chosen, have submerged an entire city, not merely a city, but masses of human beings; nothing, I knew, had any chance against death. Nevertheless after a pause of exhaustion the legs fluttered again. It was superb this last protest, and so frantic that he succeeded at last in righting himself. One's sympathies, of

course, were all on the side of life. Also, when there was nobody to care or to know, this gigantic effort on the part of an insignificant little moth, against a power of such magnitude, to retain what no one else valued or desired to keep, moved one strangely. Again, somehow, one saw life, a pure bead. I lifted the pencil again, useless though I knew it to be. But even as I did so, the unmistakable tokens of death showed themselves. The body relaxed, and instantly grew stiff. The struggle was over. The insignificant little creature now knew death. As I looked at the dead moth, this minute wayside triumph of so great a force over so mean an antagonist filled me with wonder. Just as life had been strange a few minutes before, so death was now as strange. The moth having righted himself now lay most decently and uncomplainingly composed. O yes, he seemed to say, death is stronger than I am.

AM I A SNOB?¹⁵¹

Molly has very unfairly, I think, laid upon me the burden of providing a memoir tonight. We all forgive Molly everything of course because of her insidious, her devastating charm. But it is unfair. It is not my turn; I am not the oldest of you. I am not the most widely lived or the most richly memoried. Maynard, Desmond, Clive and Leonard all live stirring and active lives; all constantly brush up against the great; all constantly affect the course of history one way or another. It is for them to unlock the doors of their treasure-houses and to set before us those gilt and gleaming objects which repose within. Who am I that I should be asked to read a memoir? A mere scribbler¹⁵²; what's worse, a mere dabbler in dreams; one who is not fish, flesh, fowl or good red herring. My memoirs, which are always private, and at their best only about proposals of marriage, seductions by half-brothers, encounters with Ottoline¹⁵³ and so on, must soon run dry. Nobody now asks me to marry them; for many years nobody has attempted to seduce me. Prime Ministers never consult me. Twice I have been to Hendon, but each time the aeroplane refused to mount into the air. I have visited most of the capitals of Europe, it is true; I can speak a kind of dog French and mongrel Italian; but so

¹⁵¹ Woolf wrote this essay while at the height of her fame and read it to the Memoir Club on December 1, 1936. The "Molly" referred to in her introduction is Molly MacCarthy, a writer and a founding member of the Bloomsbury Group, the influential artistic circle including her husband Desmond (referred to on the next page of this essay), Virginia and Leonard Woolf, novelist E. M. Forster, and economist John Maynard Keynes, also referred to later in this essay. It was Molly MacCarthy who coined the term "Bloomsburies" to describe this informal gathering of intellectuals. She also founded the Memoir Club.

¹⁵² Scribbler: A writer whose work has little or no value or importance.

¹⁵³ Lady Ottoline Violet Anne Morrell (1873-1938) was a British aristocrat and society hostess who lived in Bloomsbury. Her patronage was influential in artistic and intellectual circles, where she befriended writers such as Aldous Huxley, Siegfried Sassoon, T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence and several artists.

ignorant am I, so badly educated, that if you ask me the simplest question—for instance, where is Guatemala?—I am forced to turn the conversation.

Yet Molly has asked me to write a paper. What can it be about? That is the question I asked myself, and it seemed to me, as I sat brooding, that the time has come when we old fogies¹⁵⁴—we ignorant and private living old fogies—must face this question—what are our memoirs to be about, if the Memoir Club is to go on meeting, and if half the members are people like myself to whom nothing ever happens? Dare I suggest that the time has come when we must interpret Molly's commands rather liberally, and instead of sweeping the lamp of memory over the adventures and excitement of real life, must turn that beam inwards and describe ourselves?

Am I speaking for myself only when I say that though nothing worth calling an adventure has befallen me since I last occupied this thorny and prominent chair I still seem to myself a subject of inexhaustible and fascinating anxiety?—a volcano in perpetual eruption? Am I alone in my egotism when I say that never does the pale light of dawn filter through the blinds of 52 Tavistock Square¹⁵⁵ but I open my eyes and exclaim, "Good God! Here I am again!"—not always with pleasure, often with pain; sometimes with a spasm of acute¹⁵⁶ disgust—but always, always with interest?

Myself then might be the subject of this paper; but there are drawbacks. It would run to so many volumes—that single subject—that those of us who have hair; those whose hair is still capable of growth—would find it tickling their toes before I had done. I must break off one tiny fragment of this vast subject; I must give one brief glance at one small corner of this universe—which still to me seems as trackless and tiger-haunted as that other upon which is written—where I know not—the word Guatemala; I must, I say, choose one aspect only; and ask one question only; and this is it—Am I a snob?

As I try to answer it, I may perhaps turn up a memory or two; I may perhaps revive certain of your own memories; at any rate, I will try to give you facts; and though of course I shall not tell the whole truth, perhaps I shall tell enough to set you guessing. But in order to answer that question, I must begin by asking—what is a snob? And since I have no skill in analysis—since my education was neglected—I shall take the obvious course of trying to find some object against which I can measure myself: with which to compare

myself. Desmond, for instance. Naturally I take Desmond¹⁵⁷ first. Is he a snob?

He ought to be. He was educated at Eton, then went to Cambridge. We all know the old tag about grateful science adoring the aristocracy. But whenever Eton and Cambridge did to encourage snobbery in him, nature did far more. She gave him all the gifts that a grateful aristocracy adores in science; a golden tongue; perfect manners; complete self-possession; boundless curiosity, mixed with sympathy; he can also sit a horse and shoot a peasant at a pinch. As for poverty, since Desmond has never minded how he dresses, no one else has ever given the matter a thought. So here, undoubtedly, is my pattern; let me compare my case with his.

We were standing, when I thought this, at a window in the drawing room at Tavistock Square. Desmond had lunched with us; we had spent the afternoon talking; suddenly he remembered that he was dining somewhere. But where? "Now where am I dining?" he said and took out his pocket book. Something distracted his attention for a moment and I looked over his shoulder. Hastily, furtively¹⁵⁸, I ran my eye over his engagements. Monday Lady Bessborough 8:30. Tuesday Lady Ancaster 8:30. Wednesday Dora Sanger seven sharp. Thursday Lady Salisbury ten o'clock. Friday lunch Wolves and dine Lord Revelstoke¹⁵⁹. White waistcoat¹⁶⁰. White waistcoat was twice underlined. Years later I discovered the reason—he was to meet our king, our late lamented¹⁶¹ George. Well, he glanced at his engagements; shut the book and made off. Not a word did he say about the peerage¹⁶². He never brought the conversation round to Revelstoke; white waistcoats were unmentioned. "No," I said to myself with a keen pang of disappointment as he shut the door, "Desmond, alas, is not a snob."

I must seek another pattern. Take Maynard¹⁶³ now. He too was at Eton and at Cambridge. Since then he has been concerned in so many great affairs

¹⁵⁷ Sir Desmond MacCarthy (1877-1952), husband of Molly and a renowned drama critic, literary editor, and columnist.

¹⁵⁸ Furtively: taken, done, used, etc., surreptitiously or by stealth.

¹⁵⁹ John Baring, 2nd Baron Revelstoke (1863-1929), senior partner of Barings Bank from the 1890's until his death.

¹⁶⁰ Waistcoat: a vest, which in Britain was traditionally worn in formal or business attire.

¹⁶¹ Lamented: mourned for, as for a person who is dead.

¹⁶² Peerage: the legal system of primarily hereditary titles of nobility in the United Kingdom. Although Desmond MacCarthy did join the peerage when he was knighted by King George VI in 1951 as a member of the Royal Society of Literature, the purpose of the meeting Woolf describes here—which occurred several years prior to her 1936 reading of this essay—and how it involves the peerage is unclear.

¹⁶³ John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946), a member of the Bloomsbury Group and the most influential economist of the 20th century. He advocated the use of governmental revenue (taxes) and spending to mitigate the adverse effects of economic recessions and depressions. His approaches have recently aided U.S. recovery following the financial crisis of the 2010's.

¹⁵⁴ Fogies: excessively conservative or old-fashioned persons, especially those who are intellectually dull.

¹⁵⁵ 52 Tavistock Square: The Bloomsbury house Woolf lived in the longest and where she wrote most of her novels. The Woolfs left Tavistock Square in 1939 because so many houses near them had been bombed. Eventually it, too, was destroyed in WWII.

¹⁵⁶ Acute: extremely great or serious.

that were he to rattle his engagements under our noses we should be fairly deafened with the clink of coronets¹⁶⁴ and dazed with the glitter of diamonds. But are we deafened? Are we dazed? Alas, no. Dominated, I suspect by the iron rod of old Cambridge, dominated too by that moral sense which grows stronger in Maynard the older he gets, that stern desire to preserve our generation in its integrity, and to protect the younger generation from its folly, Maynard never boasts. It is for me to inform you that he lunched today with the Prime Minister. Poor old Baldwin¹⁶⁵ with the tears running down his cheeks marched him up and down—up and down beneath the celebrated pictures of Pitt and Peel¹⁶⁶. “If only,” he kept saying, “you would take a seat in the cabinet, Keynes; or a peerage, Keynes ...” It is for me to tell you that story. Maynard never mentioned it. Pigs, plays, pictures—he will talk of them all. But never of Prime Ministers and peerages. Alas and alas—Maynard is not a snob. I am foiled again.

All the same, I have made one discovery. The essence of snobbery is that you wish to impress other people. The snob is a flutter-brained, hare-brained creature so little satisfied with his or her own standing that in order to consolidate it he or she is always flourishing a title or an honour in other people’s faces so that they may believe, and help him to believe what he does not really believe—that he or she is somehow a person of importance.

This is a symptom that I recognise in my own case. Witness this letter. Why is it always on top of all my letters? Because it has a coronet—if I get a letter stamped with a coronet that letter miraculously floats on top. I often ask—why? I know perfectly well that none of my friends will ever be, or ever has been impressed by anything I do to impress them. Yet I do—here is the letter—on top. This shows, like rash or a spot, that I have the disease. And I go on to ask when and how did I catch it?

When I was a girl I had certain opportunities for snobbery, because though outwardly an intellectual family, very nobly born in a bookish sense, we had floating fringes in the world of fashion. We had George Duckworth¹⁶⁷ to begin with. But George Duckworth’s was of so gross and palpable¹⁶⁸ a

¹⁶⁴ Coronet: a crown worn by nobles or peers.

¹⁶⁵ Stanley Baldwin (1867-1947), British Conservative politician, three times prime minister between 1923 and 1937. He was a relative of the author Rudyard Kipling (*The Jungle Book*) and the renowned painter Sir Edward Burne-Jones, for whom Julia Stephens, Woolf’s mother, posed for a 1866 painting).

¹⁶⁶ Pitt and Peel: William Pitt the Younger (1759-1806) was the first British Prime Minister to implement a freer trade economic policy; Sir Robert Peel, 2nd Baronet (1788-1850) was a later British Prime Minister. While Home Secretary, Peel helped create the modern concept of the police force, leading to officers known as “Bobbies.”

¹⁶⁷ George Duckworth: Virginia Woolf’s half-brother (1868-1934), a public servant who in 1919 was made a Companion of the Order of the Bath, a British order of chivalry founded by King George I in 1725.

¹⁶⁸ Palpable: readily or plainly seen, heard, perceived, etc.; obvious; evident.

texture that I could smell it and taste it from afar. I did not like that smell and taste. My temptation reached me in subtler ways—through Kitty Maxse originally, I think—a lady of the most delicate charm, of the most ethereal grace so that the great, whom she introduced, were sprayed and disinfected and robbed of their grossness. Who could call the Marchioness of Bath gross, or her daughters, the Ladies Katherine and Beatrice Thynne? It was unthinkable. Beautiful they were and stately; they dressed disgracefully, but they held themselves superbly. When we dined or lunched with old Lady Bath I sat there shivering with ecstasy—an ecstasy that was wholly snobbish perhaps but made up of different parts—of pleasure, terror, laughter and amazement. There Lady Bath sat at the end of the table on a chair stamped with the coronet and arms of the Thynnes; and on the table beside her on two cushions lay two Waterbury watches. These she consulted from time to time. But why? I do not know. Had time any special significance for her? She seemed to have endless leisure. Often she would nod off to sleep. Then she would wake and look at her watches. She looked at them because she liked looking at them. Her indifference to public opinion intrigued and delighted me. So too did her conversation with her butler Middleton.

A carriage would pass the window.

“Who’s that driving by?” she would suddenly say.

“Lady Suffield, my lady”, Middleton would reply. And lady Bath would look at her watches. Once I remember the word “marl” cropped up in a conversation.

“What’s marl, Middleton?” Lady Bath asked.

“A mixture of earth and carbonate of lime, my lady,” Middleton informed her. Meanwhile Katie had seized a bloody bone from the plate and was feeding the dogs. As I sat there I felt these people don’t care a snap what anyone thinks. Here is human nature in its uncropped, unpruned, natural state. They have a quality which we in Kensington lack. Perhaps I am only finding excuses for myself, but that was the origin of the snobbery which now leads me to put this letter on top of the pack—the aristocrat is freer, more natural, more eccentric than we are. Here I note that my snobbery is not of the intellectual kind. Lady Bath was simple in the extreme. Neither Katie nor Beatrice could spell. Will Rothenstein¹⁶⁹ and Andrew Lang¹⁷⁰ were the brightest lights in their intellectual world. Neither Rothenstein or Andrew Lang impressed me. If you ask me would I rather meet Einstein or the Prince of Wales. I plump for the Prince without hesitation.

¹⁶⁹ William Rothenstein: (1872-1945) British painter, draughtsman, and writer on art.

¹⁷⁰ Andrew Lang: (1844-1912) Scottish poet, novelist, literary critic, and contributor to the field of anthropology, best known as a collector of folk and fairy tales.

I want coronets; but they must be old coronets; coronets that carry land with them and country houses; coronets that breed simplicity, eccentricity, ease; and such confidence in your own state that you can surround your plate with Waterbury watches and feed dogs bloody bones with your own hands. No sooner have I said this than I am forced to qualify this statement. This letter rises up in witness against me. It has coronet on top but it is not an old coronet; it is from lady whose birth is no better—perhaps worse—than my own. Yet when I received this letter I was all in a flutter. I will read it to you.

Dear Virginia,

I am not very young and since ALL my friends are either dead or dying I would much like to see you and ask you a great favour. You will laugh when I tell you what it is but in case you would lunch here alone with me on (the) 12th or 13th, 17th or 18th, I will tell you what it is. No, I won't. I will wait to know if on any one of these dates you can see your admirer.

Margot Oxford¹⁷¹

I wrote at once—though I seldom write at once—to say that I was entirely at Lady Oxford's service. Whatever she asked, I would do. I was not left in doubt very long. Soon came this second letter.

Dear Virginia,

I think I should warn you of the favour which I want you to do for me. All my friends are either dying or dead and I am aware that my own time is closing round me. The greatest compliment ever paid me—among few—was when you said I was a good writer. This, coming from you, might have turned my head as you are far the greatest female writer living. When I die, I would like you to write a short notice in *The Times* to say you admired my writing, and thought that journalists should have made more use of me. I am not at all vain, but I have been hurt by being first employed and then turned down by editors of newspapers. This may seem trivial to you—as indeed it is—but I would like you to give me to the press. Do not give another thought to this if it bothers you, but praise from you would delight my family when I am dead.

Your ever admiring

Margot Oxford

You could send it to the Editor of *The Times* as Dawson keeps and values all contributions upon those who are dead.

¹⁷¹ Margot Asquith, Lady Oxford, second wife of Herbert Asquith, Earl of Oxford and Prime Minister 1908-1916).

Now I was not, I think, flattered to be the greatest female writer in Lady Oxford's eyes; but I was flattered to be asked to lunch with her alone. "Of course." I replied, "I will come and lunch with you alone." And I was pleased when on the day in question Mabel, our dour¹⁷² cook, came to me, and said, "Lady Oxford has sent her car for you, ma'am." Obviously she was impressed by me; I was impressed myself. I rose in my own esteem because I rose in Mabel's.

When I reached Bedford Square there was a large lunch party; Margot was rigged up in her finery; a ruby red cross set with diamonds blazed on her breast; she was curled and crisp like a little Greek horse; tart and darting like an asp or an adder. Philip Morrell was the first to feel her sting. He was foolish and she snubbed him. But then she recovered her temper. She was very brilliant. She rattled off a string of anecdotes¹⁷³ about the Duke of Beaufort and the Badminton hunt; how she had got her blue; how she had (heard) about Lady Warwick and the (Prince of Wales?) about Lady Ripon, Lady Bessborough; Lord Balfour¹⁷⁴ and "the souls." As for age, death and obituary articles, *The Times*, nothing was said of them. I am sure she had forgotten that such things existed. So had I. I was enthralled. I embraced her warmly in the hall; and the next thing I remember is that I found myself, and seeing the butchers' shops and the trays of penny toys through an air that seemed made of gold dust and champagne.

Now no party of intellectuals has ever sent me flying down the Farrington road. I have dined with H.G. Wells to meet Bernard Shaw, Arnold Bennett and Granville Barker¹⁷⁵ and I have only felt like an old washerwoman toiling step by step up a steep and endless staircase.

It must have been about twelve years ago, for we were still living in Richmond¹⁷⁶, that I received one of those flyaway missives¹⁷⁷ with which we are now all so familiar—a yellow sheet upon which a hand bowls like an intoxicated hoop; and finally curls itself into a scrawl which reads Sibyl Colfax.

¹⁷² Dour: relentlessly severe, stern, or gloomy in manner or appearance.

¹⁷³ Anecdotes: short accounts of a particular incident or event, especially of an interesting or amusing nature.

¹⁷⁴ Lord Balfour was a philosopher and statesman, serving as Prime Minister from 1902-1905. He was the central figure in an exclusive aristocratic and intellectual circle known as "the Souls."

¹⁷⁵ H. G. Wells (1866-1946) was most known for his science fiction novels including *The War of the Worlds*, *The Time Machine*, *The Invisible Man*, and *The Island of Doctor Moreau*; George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) was a central member of the socialist Fabian Society and a popular Irish essayist, novelist, playwright most known for *Pygmalion* (the inspiration of the musical *My Fair Lady*), *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Saint Joan*, and *Man and Superman*; Arnold Bennett (1867-1931) was a journalist, screenwriter, and novelist; Granville Barker (1877-1946) was an actor-manager, producer, director, critic, and playwright most known for his productions of George Bernard Shaw's plays and innovative productions of Shakespeare.

¹⁷⁶ The Woolfs lived in Richmond from 1914-1924.

¹⁷⁷ Missives: written messages; letters.

“It would give me so much pleasure,” it read, “If you would come to tea”—here followed a variety of dates—“To meet Paul Valery¹⁷⁸.” Now as I have always met Paul Valery or his equivalent since I can remember, to be asked out to tea to meet him by a Sibyl Colefax¹⁷⁹ whom I did not know—I had never met her—was no lure to me. If it had been, it was counteracted by another fact about myself to which I have some shyness in alluding; my dress complex; my suspenders¹⁸⁰ complex in particular. I hate being badly dressed; but I hate buying clothes. In particular I hate buying suspenders. It is partly, I think, that in order to buy suspenders you must visit the most private room in the heart of a shop; you must stand in your chemise¹⁸¹. Shiny black satin women pry and snigger¹⁸². Whatever the confession reveals, and I suspect it is something discreditable, I am very shy under the eyes of my own sex when in my chemise. But in those days twelve years ago skirts were short; stockings had to be neat; my suspenders were old; and I could not face buying another pair—let alone hat and coat. So I said, “No, I will not come to tea to meet Paul Valery.” Invitations then showered; how many tea parties I was asked to I cannot remember; at last the situation became desperate; I was forced to buy suspenders; and I accepted—shall I say fiftieth—invitation to Argyll House. This time it was to meet Arnold Benedict.

The very night before the party a review of one of my books by Arnold Benedict appeared in the *Evening Standard*. It was *Orlando*¹⁸³, I think. He attacked it violently. He said it was a worthless book, which had dashed every hope he might have had of me as a writer. His whole column was devoted to trouncing me. Now though very vain—unlike Lady Oxford—my vanity as a writer is purely snobbish. I expose a large surface of skin to the reviewer but very little flesh and blood. That is, I mind good reviews and bad reviews only because I think my friends think I mind them. But as I know that my friends almost instantly forget reviews, whether good or bad, I too forget them in a few hours. My flesh and blood feelings are not touched. The only criticisms of my books that draw blood are those that are unprinted; those that are private.

¹⁷⁸ Paul Valery: French poet, essayist, and philosopher (1871-1945).

¹⁷⁹ Lady Sibyl Colefax (1874-1950) was a prominent London socialite admired for her exquisite taste, displayed sumptuously at Argyll House, their 200 year-old mansion. After losing most of her money in the 1929 Wall Street Crash, she was able to set up a thriving interior decorating firm that is still in operation. Leonard Woolf described her as “an unabashed hunter of lions.”

¹⁸⁰ Unlike men’s “braces,” women’s suspenders are a garment worn around the waist, with clips suspended from them to hold up stockings.

¹⁸¹ Chemise: a woman’s loose-fitting, shirt-like undergarment.

¹⁸² Snigger: a sly or disrespectful laugh; snicker.

¹⁸³ *Orlando*: Woolf’s 1928 experimental novel about a young aristocrat, Orlando, who grows up during the reign of Elizabeth I yet ages only about 30 years over the next three centuries, transforming from male to female in the process. In it, Woolf explores the significance of historical periods, literary movements, artistic expression, and gender upon the shaping of the individual.

Thus as twenty four hours had passed since I read the review, I went into the drawing room at Argyll House far more concerned with my appearance as a woman than with my reputation as a writer. Now I saw Sibyl for the first time and I likened her to a brunch of red cherries on a hard black straw hat. She came forward and led me up to Arnold Bennett as a lamb is led to the butcher.

“Here is Mrs. Woolf!” she said with a smile. As a hostess she was gloating. She was thinking, now there will be a scene which will redound¹⁸⁴ to the credit of Argyll House. Other people were there—they too seemed expectant; they all smiled. But Arnold Bennett, I felt, was uncomfortable. He was a kind man; he took his own reviews seriously; here he was shaking hands with a woman whom he had “slanged,” as he called it, only the evening before.

“I am sorry, Mrs. Woolf,” he began, “that I slanged your book last night...” he stammered¹⁸⁵. And I blurted out, quite sincerely, “If I choose to publish books, that’s my own look out. I must take the consequences.”

“Right—right,” he stammered. I think he approved. “I didn’t like your book,” he went on. “I thought it a very bad book...” He stammered again.

“You can’t hate my books more than I hate yours, Mr. Bennett”, I said. I don’t know if he altogether approved of that; but we sat down together and talked and got on very well indeed. I was pleased to find in some letters of his that have been published that he commended me for bearing him no grudge. He said that we got on finely.

But that is not my point. My point is that this little scene pleased Sibyl, and was the foundation of what I suppose I must call, subject to qualifications, my intimacy with her. I was instantly promoted from tea to meat. It was lunch to begin with; then when I refused lunch, it was dinner. I went—I went several times. But I found by degrees that I was always asked to meet writers; and I did not want to meet writers; and then that if I had Noel Coward on my left, I always had Sir Arthur¹⁸⁶ on my right. Sir Arthur was very kind; he did his best to entertain me; but why he thought that I was primarily interested in the Dye-stuffs Bill I have never found out. So it was, however. Our talk always drifted that way. At one time I was the second leading authority in England on that measure. But at last, what with Noel Coward on my left and Sir Arthur on my right, I felt I could no longer bring myself to dine with Sibyl. I excused myself the more she persisted. Then she suggested that she should come and

¹⁸⁴ Redound: to have a good or bad effect or result, as to the advantage or disadvantage of a person or thing.

¹⁸⁵ Stammer: to speak with involuntary pauses or repetitions; stutter.

¹⁸⁶ Sir Noel Coward: (1899-1973) British comic playwright, composer, director, actor, singer, and lyricist, renowned for his wit, flamboyance and style. Sir Arthur is Sibyl Colefax’ husband (1866-1936).

see me. She came. Again my snobbery asserted itself. I bought iced cakes; tidied up the room; threw away Pinker's bones, and pulled covers over the holes in the chairs. Soon I realised that her snobbery demanded nothing but a burnt bun; as untidy a room as possible; and if my fingers were covered with ink stains it was all to the good. We struck up an intimacy on those lines. She would exclaim, "Oh how I long to be a writer!" and I would reply, "Oh Sibyl, if only I could be a great hostess like you!" Her anecdotes of the great world amused me very much; and I drew lurid if fanciful pictures of my own struggles with English prose. As we became more—shall I call it intimate?—can snobs be intimate?—she would sit on the floor, pull up her skirts, adjust her knickers—she only wears one undergarment, I may tell you; it is of silk—and pour out her grievances. She would complain almost with tears in her eyes—how Osbert Sitwell¹⁸⁷ had laughed at her; how people called her a climber, a lion hunter. How vilely untrue this was... abused. Once in the middle of one of these confidences—and they flattered me very much—the telephone rang; and Lady Cunard's¹⁸⁸ butler asked me to dine with her ladyship—whom I had never met. Sibyl, when I explained the situation, was furious. "I've never heard of such insolence!" she exclaimed. Her face was contorted with a look that reminded me of the look on a tigress's face when someone snatches a bone from its paws. She abused Lady Cunard. Nothing she could say was bad enough for her. She was a mere lion hunter; a snob. Again, there was Lady Cholmondeley¹⁸⁹. She asked me to go and see her. "And who is Lady Cholmondeley?" I asked. Never shall I forget the careful and vindictive way in which she pulled that lady's character to pieces. She couldn't understand, I remember she said, anybody being so insolent as to ask another person to dine when they did not know them. She strongly advised me to have nothing to do either with Lady Cunard or Lady Cholmondeley. Yet she had done the very same thing herself. What was the difference between them?

In short there was much to interest me in our intimacy; such as it was. It developed. Soon she suggested a plan which I have never had the courage to make public. It was that there should be fortnightly parties—now at Tavistock Square, now at Argyll House; we were to ask four of our friends; she was to ask four of hers; Bloomsbury and the great world were to mix; she, I rather think, delicately intimated that she would stand the cost. But even I, even at my most intoxicated, saw that this would never do. Once we provided

¹⁸⁷ Sir Francis Osbert Saxeveverell Sitwell, 5th Baronet (1892-1969) was an English writer and brother to the writers Edith and Saxeveverell Sitwell. "The Sitwells," as they were called, formed an illustrious literary family.

¹⁸⁸ Maud Alice Burke (1872-1948), later Lady Cunard, was an American-born, London-based society hostess. Futilely hoping for a court appointment, she supported the American divorcée Wallis Simpson, for whom King Edward VIII abdicated the throne in 1936 to marry.

¹⁸⁹ Sybil Rachel Betty Cecile Sassoon, Marchioness of Cholmondeley, (1894-1989): British Superintendent of the Women's Royal Naval Service and member of the prominent Rothschild and Sassoon families. Her home, Houghton Hall in Norfolk, was one of the stately homes of England.

Lytton¹⁹⁰ for her; the party was a deadly failure. Lytton was very good and very patient; but he said to me at leaving, "Please don't ask me to meet Colefax again."

We reached a kind of frankness. Time after time she threw me over shamelessly; time after time I found out that her excuse only meant that she had a better engagement elsewhere. For example—here is one of those excuses—she had invited herself for a particular day: it was inconvenient; but I had kept it free.

Dearest Virginia,

I had an unpleasant week of going to my business at 10 instead of 9 and coming back to bed at 6. I thought this would have mended me by Tuesday of which I was summoned by a difficult lady to see bedroom curtains in Piccadilly at 5:30 and the interview, prolonged till 6:15, sent me to bed altogether! Now I've mended and now you are engaged. Could I come on the 18th or would you come here on the 16th at 6? If not the 18th then the 23rd, if you'll have me.

Ever your devoted

Sibyl

The day after I met someone who had been at a cocktail party at Madame d'Erlanger's and had met Sibyl. "Was there any talk of bedroom curtains?" I asked. Apparently there was none.

I used to tax her with it; she scarcely prevaricated¹⁹¹. But once when I played the same trick on her—throwing over an engagement, but giving her three weeks' notice—I got a series of letters which in the violence of their abuse, in the sincerity of their rage—for she imputed¹⁹² to me the vilest motives—I had been seduced by a better engagement—I had been dining, she was sure, with Lady Cunard or Lady Cholmondeley—reached a pitch of eloquence that was really impressive. The light all this threw on her psychology generally, was very interesting. Why did we go on seeing each other? I wondered. What was in fact the nature of our relation? Light was to be thrown on it in a startling way.

One morning last February the telephone rang soon after breakfast, and Leonard answered it. I saw his face change as he listened.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "You don't say so!" then he turned to me and said, "Arthur Colefax is dead!"

¹⁹⁰ Lytton Strachey: (1880-1932) Renowned British biographer and critic and founding member of the Bloomsbury Group.

¹⁹¹ Prevaricate: to speak or act falsely or evasively with intent to deceive.

¹⁹² Impute: To relate to a particular cause or source; attribute the fault or responsibility to.

Harold Nicolson was on the telephone; he had rung up to say that Arthur Colefax had died suddenly the afternoon before; he had only been ill one day; Sibyl, he said, was distracted. Sir Arthur was dead! A clap struck me full in the face. A clap of genuine surprise and sympathy. It was not for Sir Arthur. For him I felt what one feels for an old cabinet that has always stood in the middle of a drawing room. The cabinet had gone—it was surprising—it was sad. But I had never been intimate with the cabinet. For Sibyl my feeling was different—with her I had been—I was intimate. And for her I felt, as I say, a clap of genuine, unadulterated sympathy. No sooner had I felt it than it split into several pieces. I was very sorry; but I was also very curious. What did she feel—what did she really feel about Arthur?

Now when a feeling is thus mixed it is very difficult to put into words. In proof of this, when it came to writing a letter of sympathy, I boggled. No words that I could find seemed right. I wrote and rewrote; finally I tore up what I had written. We were going down to Monks House¹⁹³ for the weekend; I picked three flowers; tied them up with a card on which I wrote “For Sibyl. With love from Leonard and Virginia.” As we passed Argyll House Leonard rang the bell of that now shrouded mansion and gave the flowers into the hand of the weeping Fielding. She at least seemed genuinely heart-broken. That was my solution of the problem.

And it seemed to be amazingly successful. That is, I received a four page letter a few days later, a heart-broken letter—a letter about Arthur and their happiness; about the old days when they had sat on Greek islands in the sun; about the perfection of their marriage; and her present solitude. It read sincerely; it read as if she were telling the truth; and I was a little flattered that she should tell it so openly, so intimately, even so gushingly¹⁹⁴, to me.

When I heard later that she had written letters very like the one she sent me to people whom she scarcely knew at all, I was not so well pleased. When I heard that she had dined out every night since his death, and read in the papers that Lady Colefax had been at this great party and at that first night¹⁹⁵, I was baffled did she feel less than she made out? Or was she being very brave? Was she so tanned and leathered by society that the only thing she could not face was solitude? It was an interesting problem in the psychology of snobbery.

She wrote to me several times. She told me she was leaving Argyll House. She asked me to come and see the May in flower for the last time; I did not go;

¹⁹³ Monks House: the Woolf's 18th-century cottage in the village of Rodmell in East Sussex. The Woolf's entertained many intellectuals associated with the Bloomsbury Group there, such as the novelist E. M. Forster, the poet T. S. Elliot, the painter Roger Fry, and the biographer Lytton Strachey.

¹⁹⁴ Gushingly: flowing out suddenly, copiously, or forcibly

¹⁹⁵ First night: the first public performance of a play, concert, gallery show, or the like.

then she asked me to come and see the tulips in flower for the last time. We were away, and I did not go. Then when I came back in October, she wrote and said that unless I came on Tuesday the 27th of October I should never see Argyll House again. On the 30th she was leaving forever. She particularly wanted, she said, to see me alone. I was flattered. I said I would come; and on the morning of Tuesday Fielding rang up to remind me; and to say that her ladyship wanted to come at 4:45 punctually.

It was a wet and windy evening; leaves swirled along the pavement of the King's road; and I had a feeling of chaos and desolation. At 4:45 precisely I rang the bell of Argyll House for the last time. The door was opened not by Fielding but by a seedy man in a brown suit who looked like a bailiff¹⁹⁶. He was surly.

“You're too late”, he said, shaking his head and holding the door only half open, as if to stop me.

“But Lady Colefax told me to come at a quarter to five”, I said.

That rather stumped him.

“I don't know anything about that”, he said. “But you'd better come this way.”

And he led me not into the drawing room but into the pantry. It was odd to find oneself in the pantry of Argyll House—that pantry from which so many succulent dishes had issued. The pantry was full of kitchen tables; and on them were ranged dinner services, bunches of knives and forks, stacks of tumblers and wine glasses—all with tickets on them. Then I realised that the whole place was up for sale; the surly man was the auctioneer's agent. I stood there looking about me when fielding hurried in from the kitchen, still in her grey dress and muslin apron, but so flustered and so distracted that I felt she was dressed in sack cloth and ashes. She waved her hands in despair.

“I don't know where Lady Colefax is,” she moaned. “And I don't know where to put you. The people are still here. They ought to have gone at four—but still all over the place...”

“I'm so sorry, Fielding,” I said. “This is very sad—”

Tears ran down her cheeks; were in her eyes; she moaned, as she waved her hands and led me in a fluttering, undecided way, first into a scullery¹⁹⁷, then into the dining room. I sat down on one of the brown chairs in that rich festive room. Last time I had sat there Sir Arthur was on my right; Noel Coward was on my left. Now the chairs were ticketed; there were tickets on

¹⁹⁶ Bailiff: a legal officer to whom some degree of authority, care or jurisdiction is committed

¹⁹⁷ Scullery: a small room or section of a pantry in which food is cleaned, trimmed, and cut into cooking portions before being sent to the kitchen.

the glass trees on the mantelpiece; on the chandelier; on the candlesticks. A man in a black overcoat was strolling about the room, picking up now a candlestick, now a cigarette box, as if calculating what they were worth. Then two furtive fashionable ladies came in. one of them held out her hand to me.

“Have you come to see the furniture?” she said to me, in a low tone, as if she were at a funeral. I recognized Ava Bodley—Mrs. Ralph Wigram¹⁹⁸.

“No. I’ve come to see Sibyl”, I said.

I thought I detected a shade of envy in her face; I was a friend; she was a mere sightseer. She strolled off, and began looking at the furniture. Then, as I sat there, trying to fix my mind on Sir Arthur and the kindness which he had always shown me—the door half opened; round the edge peered Sibyl who beckoned, silently, as if she were afraid to show herself in her own dining room I followed her, and she took me into the drawing room and shut the door.

“Who was that?” she said to me anxiously.

“Mrs. Wigram”, I replied. She wrung her hands.

“Oh I hope she didn’t see me”, she murmured. “They ought to have gone at four. But they’re still all over the place.”

The drawing room however was empty; though there were tickets on the chairs and tables. We sank down side by side on the sofa. I used to liken her to a bunch of glossy red cherries on a hard straw hat. But now the cherries were pale. The dye had run. The black brim was soppy with water. She looked old and ill and haggard lines were grooved as if with a chisel on either side of her nose. I felt extremely sorry for her. We were like two survivors clinging to a raft. This was the end of all her parties; we were sitting in the ruins of that magnificent structure which had borne so lately the royal crown on top. I put my bare hand on her bare hand and felt, “This is genuine. There can be no mistake about this.”

Then Fielding brought in tea—the kind of tea people have when they are starting a journey; a few slices of thin bread and butter and three parliament biscuits. Sibyl apologised for the tea. “What a horrid tea!” Then she began to talk rather distractedly; she told me about her operation; how the doctors said she ought to take a six months’ holiday. “Am I Greta Garbo¹⁹⁹?” she said. Then how she had bought a house in North Street; how she was going to stay with the Clarkes... She was always breaking off and saying, “Oh but don’t let’s go

into that.” It was as if she wanted to say something, but could not. After all, she had asked me to come to see her alone.

At last I said, “I’m sorry, Sibyl...”

The tears came to her eyes. “Oh it’s been awful! You cant think what its like”, she began. Then she stopped. The tears did not fall. “You see I’m not a person who can say what they feel”, she said. “I can’t talk. I’ve not talked to anybody. If I did, I couldn’t go on. And I’ve got to go on...” and again she began telling me how she had bought a house in North Street, from a madman; the house was very dirty... Then the door opened and Fielding beckoned.

“Mrs. Wigram wants to speak to you, milady”, she said. Sibyl sighed; but she got up and went.

On the whole I admired her very much. I thought, as I sat there, how brave she was. Was she not giving a supper party that very night, here, in the midst of the ruins, in the midst of the chairs and tables that were all up for sale? But here she came back.

“How I loathe that woman!” she exclaimed.

And she told me as she began to eat her bread and butter how Mrs. Wigram was a mere climber; the sort of woman who pushed and shoved and she had just played, too, a dirty trick on her. When she heard that Sibyl wanted the house in North Street, she had told the Lyttons, who had bid against her. But she had got the house in spite of them; and very cheap too; for seven hundred pounds less than she expected—“Oh but don’t lets talk about that,” she broke off. And again I tried to be intimate. I said something rather commonplace and awkward about leaving houses—how much one minded it and so on. Then again tears came into her eyes. “Yes”, she said, looking round here, “I’ve always had a passion for this house. I’ve felt about it as a lover feels...”

Again the door opened.

“Lady Mary Cholmondeley²⁰⁰ on the telephone, milady,” said Fielding.

“Tell her I’m engaged”, said Sibyl angrily. Fielding went.

“Who can she mean?” Sibyl asked. “I don’t know any Lady Mary Cholmondeley. Can it be... oh dear,” she sighed getting up, “I must go and see myself. Fielding’s the bane of my life”, she sighed. First she cries, then she laughs; and she won’t wear spectacles though she’s blind as a bat. I must go and see for myself.”

¹⁹⁸ Wife of Ralph Follet Wigram, a British government official in the Foreign Office.

¹⁹⁹ Greta Garbo: (1905-1990) Swedish film actress and international megastar. In 1941, she retired at the age of 35 after appearing in 28 films, preferring to live a private life out of the limelight.

²⁰⁰ Fielding has apparently confused the British novelist Mary Cholmondeley (1859-1925) with the Marchioness of Cholmondeley.

Again she left me. Another illusion had gone, I thought. I had always thought Fielding a treasure—an old servant to whom Sibyl was devoted. But no. First she cried; then she laughed; and she was as blind as a bat. This was another peep into the pantry at Argyll ouse

As I sat there waiting I thought of the times I had sat on that sofa—with Sir Arthur; with Arnold Bennett; with George Moore²⁰¹; with old Mr. Birrell; with Max Beerbohm²⁰². It was in this room that Olga Lynn threw down her music in a rage because people talked; and here that I saw Sibyl glide across the room and lead Lord Balfour, beaming benevolence and distinction, to soothe the angry singer... But Sibyl came back again, and again took up her bread and butter.

“What were we talking about”, she said, “Before Fielding interrupted? And what am I to do about Fielding?” she added. “I can’t send her away. She’s been with us all these years. But she’s such an awful... but don’t lets go into that,” she broke off again.

Again I made an effort to talk more intimately. “I’ve been thinking of all the people I’ve met there”, I said. “Arnold Bennett. George Moore. Max Beerbohm...”

She smiled. I saw that I had given her pleasure. “That’s what I’ve wanted—that the people I like should meet the people I like. That’s what I tried to do—” “And that’s what you’ve done,” I said, warming up. I felt very grateful to her, although in fact I had never much enjoyed meeting other writers, still she had kept open house; she had worked very hard; it had been a great achievement in its way. I tired to tell her so.

“I have enjoyed myself in this room so much”, I said. “Do you remember the party when Olga Lynn threw down her music? And then, that time I met Arnold Bennett. And then—Henry James²⁰³...” I stopped. I had never met Henry James at Argyll House. That was before my time.

“Did you know him?” I said, quite innocently.

²⁰¹ George Moore: (1852-1933) Irish novelist, short story writer, poet, art critic, memoirist, and dramatist.

²⁰² Max Beerbohm: (1872-1956) extremely popular British essayist, parodist, and caricaturist whose caricatures of Victorian notables are found in museums all over the world.

²⁰³ Henry James: (1843-1916) Renowned American author who acquired British citizenship in 1915. He was a personal friend of Virginia Woolf’s parents and sometimes visited 22 Hyde Park Gate, the Stephen family’s London residence, and Talland House, the family’s summer residence in the seaside town of St Ives, Cornwall, the setting for Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse*.

Interestingly, it was the philosopher and psychologist William James, Henry James’ brother, who in 1890 coined the expression “stream of consciousness,” the literary style Woolf later helped pioneer in her 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse*.

“Know Henry James!” Sibyl exclaimed. Her face lit up. It was as if I had touched on a nerve, the wrong nerve, I rather felt. She became the old Sibyl again—the hostess.

“Dear H.J.! I should think I did! I shall never forget”, she began, “How when Wolcott Balestier died in Vienna—he was Rudyard Kipling’s brother-in-law, you know—” Here the door opened again; and again Fielding—Fielding who was as blind as a bat and the curse of Sibyl’s life—peered in.

“The car’s at the door, milady”, she said.

Sibyl turned to me. “I’ve a tiresome engagement in Mount Street,” she said. “I must go. But I’ll give you a lift.”

She got up and we went into the hall. The door was open. The Rolls Royce was waiting at the door behind the gate. This is my farewell, I said to myself, pausing for a moment, and looked, as one looks for the last time, at the Italian pots, at the looking-glasses, all with their tickets on them, that stood in the hall. I wanted to say something to show that I minded leaving Argyll House for the last time. But Sibyl seemed to have forgotten all about it. She looked animated. The colour had come back into the cherries; the straw hat was hard again. “I was just telling you,” she resumed. “When Wolcott Balestier²⁰⁴ died in Vienna, Henry James came to see me, and he said, ‘Dear Sibyl, there are those two poor women alone with the corpse of that dear young man in Vienna, and I feel that it is my duty—’ By this time we were walking down the flagged pathway to the car.

“Mount Street,” she said to the chauffeur and got in. “H.J. said to me,” she resumed, “I feel it is my duty to go to Vienna in case I can be of any assistance to those two bereaved ladies...’” And the car drove off, and she sat by my side, trying to impress me with the fact that she had known Henry James.

THE CINEMA²⁰⁵

People say that the savage no longer exists in us, that we are at the fag-end²⁰⁶ of civilisation, that everything has been said already, and that it is too late to be ambitious. But these philosophers have presumably forgotten the movies. They have never seen the savages of the twentieth century watching the pictures. They have never sat themselves in front of the screen and thought how for all the clothes on their backs and the carpets at their feet, no

²⁰⁴ Wolcott Balestier: (1861-1891), unsuccessful American writer and editor, notable primarily for his connection to Rudyard Kipling, who married Balestier’s sister Caroline within a year after Balestier died of typhoid fever and published Balestier’s novel *The Naulakha* posthumously in 1892.

²⁰⁵ Published Spring 1926 in the New York journal *Arts*.

²⁰⁶ Fag-end: A poor or worn-out end; remnant

great distance separates them from those bright-eyed naked men who knocked two bars of iron together and heard in that clangour a foretaste of the music of Mozart.

The bars in this case, of course, are so highly wrought and so covered over with accretions²⁰⁷ of alien matter that it is extremely difficult to hear anything distinctly. All is hubble-bubble²⁰⁸, swarm and chaos. We are peering over the edge of a cauldron in which fragments of all shapes and savours seem to simmer; now and again some vast form heaves itself up and seems about to haul itself out of chaos. Yet at first sight the art of the cinema seems simple, even stupid. There is the king shaking hands with a football team; there is Sir Thomas Lipton's²⁰⁹ yacht; there is Jack Horner²¹⁰ winning the Grand National. The eye licks it all up instantaneously, and the brain, agreeably titillated, settles down to watch things happening without bestirring itself to think. For the ordinary eye, the English unaesthetic eye, is a simple mechanism which takes care that the body does not fall down coal-holes, provides the brain with toys and sweetmeats²¹¹ to keep it quiet, and can be trusted to go on behaving like a competent nursemaid until the brain comes to the conclusion that it is time to wake up. What is its purpose, then, to be roused suddenly in the midst of its agreeable somnolence²¹² and asked for help? The eye is in difficulties. The eye wants help. The eye says to the brain, "Something is happening which I do not in the least understand. You are needed." Together they look at the king, the boat, the horse, and the brain sees at once that they have taken on a quality which does not belong to the simple photograph of real life.

They have become not more beautiful in the sense in which pictures are beautiful, but shall we call it (our vocabulary is miserably insufficient) more real, or real with a different reality from that which we perceive in daily life? We behold them as they are when we are not there. We see life as it is when we have no part in it. As we gaze we seem to be removed from the pettiness of actual existence. The horse will not knock us down. The king will not grasp our hands. The wave will not wet our feet. From this point of vantage, as we watch the antics of our kind, we have time to feel pity and amusement, to generalise, to endow one man with the attributes of the race. Watching the boat sail and the wave break, we have time to open our minds wide to beauty and register on top of it the queer sensation—this beauty will continue, and

this beauty will flourish whether we behold it or not. Further, all this happened ten years ago, we are told. We are beholding a world which has gone beneath the waves. Brides are emerging from the abbey—they are now mothers; ushers are ardent—they are now silent; mothers are tearful; guests are joyful; this has been won and that has been lost, and it is over and done with. The war sprung its chasm at the feet of all this innocence and ignorance but it was thus that we danced and pirouetted, toiled and desired, thus that the sun shone and the clouds scudded, up to the very end.

But the picture-makers seem dissatisfied with such obvious sources of interest as the passage of time and the suggestiveness of reality. They despise the flight of gulls, ships on the Thames, the Prince of Wales, the Mile End Road, Piccadilly Circus²¹³. They want to be improving, altering, making an art of their own—naturally, for so much seems to be within their scope. So many arts seemed to stand by ready to offer their help. For example, there was literature. All the famous novels of the world, with their well-known characters and their famous scenes, only asked, it seemed, to be put on the films. What could be easier and simpler? The cinema fell upon its prey with immense rapacity, and to the moment largely subsists upon the body of its unfortunate victim. But the results are disastrous to both. The alliance is unnatural. Eye and brain are torn asunder ruthlessly as they try vainly to work in couples. The eye says "Here is Anna Karenina²¹⁴." A voluptuous lady in black velvet wearing pearls comes before us. But the brain says, "That is no more Anna Karenina than it is Queen Victoria." For the brain knows Anna almost entirely by the inside of her mind—her charm, her passion, her despair. All the emphasis is laid by the cinema upon her teeth, her pearls, and her velvet. Then "Anna falls in love with Vronsky"—that is to say, the lady in black velvet falls into the arms of a gentleman in uniform and they kiss with enormous succulence, great deliberation, and infinite gesticulation, on a sofa in an extremely well-appointed library, while a gardener incidentally mows the lawn. So we lurch and lumber through the most famous novels of the world. So we spell them out in words of one syllable, written, too, in the scrawl of an illiterate schoolboy. A kiss is love. A broken cup is jealousy. A grin is happiness. Death is a hearse. None of these things has the least connection with the novel that Tolstoy wrote, and it is only when we give up trying to connect the pictures with the book that we guess from some accidental scene—like the gardener mowing the lawn—what the cinema might do if left to its own devices.

²⁰⁷ Accretions: increases in size or extent by natural growth or by gradual external addition.

²⁰⁸ Hubble-bubble: an uproar.

²⁰⁹ Thomas Lipton: (1848-1931) British baronet, avid yachtsman, and merchant who founded the Lipton tea brand.

²¹⁰ Jack Horner: thoroughbred racehorse that won the 1926 Grand National, a world-renowned annual horse race in Liverpool, England.

²¹¹ Sweetmeats: food rich in sugar; candied fruit, cakes or pastries.

²¹² Somnolence: sleepiness; drowsiness.

²¹³ Piccadilly Circus: road junction in London, England, famous for its many shopping and entertainment places.

²¹⁴ Anna Karenina: titular character of the novel published first in serial form from 1873 to 1877 by Russian author Leo Tolstoy. Anna Karenina is a married aristocrat who has an affair with Count Vronsky, despite her husband's refusal to grant her a divorce. As for the film, Woolf likely refers to the 1915 American silent film adaptation directed by J. Gordon Edwards and starring Danish actress Betty Nansen. No copies of this film survive.

But what, then, are its devices? If it ceased to be a parasite, how would it walk erect? At present it is only from hints that one can frame any conjecture. For instance, at a performance of Dr. Caligari²¹⁵ the other day a shadow shaped like a tadpole suddenly appeared at one corner of the screen. It swelled to an immense size, quivered, bulged, and sank back again into nonentity²¹⁶. For a moment it seemed to embody some monstrous diseased imagination of the lunatic's brain. For a moment it seemed as if thought could be conveyed by shape more effectively than by words. The monstrous quivering tadpole seemed to be fear itself, and not the statement "I am afraid." In fact, the shadow was accidental and the effect unintentional. But if a shadow at a certain moment can suggest so much more than the actual gestures and words of men and women in a state of fear, it seems plain that the cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression. Terror has besides its ordinary forms the shape of a tadpole; it burgeons²¹⁷, bulges, quivers, disappears. Anger is not merely rant and rhetoric, red faces and clenched fists. It is perhaps a black line wriggling upon a white sheet. Anna and Vronsky need no longer scowl and grimace. They have at their command—but what? Is there, we ask, some secret language which we feel and see, but never speak, and, if so, could this be made visible to the eye? Is there any characteristic which thought possesses that can be rendered visible without the help of words? It has speed and slowness; dart-like directness and vaporous circumlocution²¹⁸. But it has, also, especially in moments of emotion, the picture-making power, the need to lift its burden to another bearer; to let an image run side by side along with it. The likeness of the thought is for some reason more beautiful, more comprehensible, more available, than the thought itself. As everybody knows, in Shakespeare the most complex ideas form chains of images through which we mount, changing and turning, until we reach the light of day. But obviously the images of a poet are not to be cast in bronze or traced by pencil. They are compact of a thousand suggestions of which the visual is only the most obvious or the uppermost. Even the simplest image "My love's like a red, red rose, that's newly-sprung in June"²¹⁹ presents us with impressions of moisture and warmth and the glow of crimson and the softness of petals inextricably²²⁰ mixed and strung upon the lift of a rhythm which is itself the voice of the passion and hesitation of the lover. All this, which is accessible to words and to words alone, the cinema must avoid.

²¹⁵ Dr. Caligari: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, a 1920 silent horror film that was very influential and is considered to be one of the greatest horror films of the silent era, if not all time.

²¹⁶ Nonentity: an unimportant person or thing; nonexistence.

²¹⁷ Burgeons: grows or develops quickly; flourishes.

²¹⁸ Circumlocution: expressing an idea in a roundabout or indirect way.

²¹⁹ A line from a poem by Robert Burns (1759-1796), a Scottish poet famous for his inclusion of the Scots dialect in his poetry.

²²⁰ Inextricably: in a manner incapable of being disentangled, undone or solved. Hopelessly.

Yet if so much of our thinking and feeling is connected with seeing, some residue of visual emotion which is of no use either to painter or to poet may still await the cinema. That such symbols will be quite unlike the real objects which we see before us seems highly probable. Something abstract, something which moves with controlled and conscious art, something which calls for the very slightest help from words or music to make itself intelligible, yet justly uses them subserviently—of such movements and abstractions the films may in time to come be composed. Then indeed when some new symbol for expressing thought is found, the film-maker has enormous riches at his command. The exactitude of reality and its surprising power of suggestion are to be had for the asking. Annas and Vronskys—there they are in the flesh. If into this reality he could breathe emotion, could animate the perfect form with thought, then his booty could be hauled in hand over hand. Then, as smoke pours from Vesuvius²²¹, we should be able to see thought in its wildness, in its beauty, in its oddity, pouring from men with their elbows on a table; from women with their little handbags slipping to the floor. We should see these emotions mingling together and affecting each other. We should see violent changes of emotion produced by their collision. The most fantastic contrasts could be flashed before us with a speed which the writer can only toil after in vain; the dream architecture of arches and battlements, of cascades falling and fountains rising, which sometimes visits us in sleep or shapes itself in half-darkened rooms, could be realised before our waking eyes. No fantasy could be too far-fetched or insubstantial. The past could be unrolled, distances annihilated, and the gulfs which dislocate novels (when, for instance, Tolstoy has to pass from Levin to Anna and in doing so jars his story and wrenches and arrests our sympathies) could by the sameness of the background, by the repetition of some scene, be smoothed away.

How all this is to be attempted, much less achieved, no one at the moment can tell us. We get intimations only in the chaos of the streets, perhaps, when some momentary assembly of colour, sound, movement, suggests that here is a scene waiting a new art to be transfixed. And sometimes at the cinema in the midst of its immense dexterity and enormous technical proficiency, the curtain parts and we behold, far off, some unknown and unexpected beauty. But it is for a moment only. For a strange thing has happened—while all the other arts were born naked, this, the youngest, has been born fully-clothed. It can say everything before it has anything to say. It is as if the savage tribe, instead of finding two bars of iron to play with, had found scattering the seashore fiddles, flutes, saxophones, trumpets, grand pianos by Erard and Bechstein²²², and had begun with incredible energy, but without knowing a note of music, to hammer and thump upon them all at the

²²¹ Vesuvius: a volcano near Naples best known for its eruption in 79 CE that buried and destroyed the Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum.

²²² Erard and Bechstein: piano manufacturers and dealers.

same time.

CRAFTSMANSHIP²²³

The title of this series is “Words Fail Me,” and this particular talk is called “Craftsmanship.” We must suppose, therefore, that the talker is meant to discuss the craft of words—the craftsmanship of the writer. But there is something incongruous, unfitting, about the term “craftsmanship” when applied to words. The English dictionary, to which we always turn in moments of dilemma, confirms us in our doubts. It says that the word “craft” has two meanings; it means in the first place making useful objects out of solid matter—for example, a pot, a chair, a table. In the second place, the word “craft” means cajolery, cunning, deceit. Now we know little that is certain about words, but this we do know—words never make anything that is useful; and words are the only things that tell the truth and nothing but the truth. Therefore, to talk of craft in connection with words is to bring together two incongruous ideas, which if they mate can only give birth to some monster fit for a glass case in a museum. Instantly, therefore, the title of the talk must be changed, and for it substituted another—A Ramble round Words, perhaps. For when you cut off the head of a talk it behaves like a hen that has been decapitated. It runs round in a circle till it drops dead—so people say who have killed hens. And that must be the course, or circle, of this decapitated talk. Let us then take for our starting point the statement that words are not useful. This happily needs little proving, for we are all aware of it. When we travel on the Tube²²⁴, for example, when we wait on the platform for a train, there, hung up in front of us, on an illuminated signboard, are the words “Passing Russell Square²²⁵.” We look at those words; we repeat them; we try to impress that useful fact upon our minds; the next train will pass Russell Square. We say over and over again as we pace, “Passing Russell Square, passing Russell Square.” And then as we say them, the words shuffle and change, and we find ourselves saying, “Passing away saith the world, passing away²²⁶, . . . The leaves decay and fall, the vapours weep their burthen to the ground. Man comes²²⁷. . . .” And then we wake up and find ourselves at King’s Cross²²⁸.

Take another example. Written up opposite us in the railway carriage are the words: “Do not lean out of the window.” At the first reading the useful meaning, the surface meaning, is conveyed; but soon, as we sit looking at the

words, they shuffle, they change; and we begin saying, “Windows, yes windows—casements opening on the foam of perilous seas in faery lands forlorn²²⁹.” And before we know what we are doing, we have leant out of the window; we are looking for Ruth in tears amid the alien corn. The penalty for that is twenty pounds or a broken neck.

This proves, if it needs proving, how very little natural gift words have for being useful. If we insist on forcing them against their nature to be useful, we see to our cost how they mislead us, how they fool us, how they land us a crack on the head. We have been so often fooled in this way by words, they have so often proved that they hate being useful, that it is their nature not to express one simple statement but a thousand possibilities—they have done this so often that at last, happily, we are beginning to face the fact. We are beginning to invent another language—a language perfectly and beautifully adapted to express useful statements, a language of signs. There is one great living master of this language to whom we are all indebted, that anonymous writer—whether man, woman or disembodied spirit nobody knows—who describes hotels in the Michelin Guide²³⁰. He wants to tell us that one hotel is moderate, another good, and a third the best in the place. How does he do it? Not with words; words would at once bring into being shrubberies and billiard tables, men and women, the moon rising and the long splash of the summer sea—all good things, but all here beside the point. He sticks to signs; one gable; two gables; three gables. That is all he says and all he needs to say. Baedeker²³¹ carries the sign language still further into the sublime realms of art. When he wishes to say that a picture is good, he uses one star; if very good, two stars; when, in his opinion, it is a work of transcendent genius, three black stars shine on the page, and that is all. So with a handful of stars and daggers the whole of art criticism, the whole of literary criticism could be reduced to the size of a sixpenny bit—there are moments when one could wish it. But this suggests that in time to come writers will have two languages at their service; one for fact, one for fiction. When the biographer has to convey a useful and necessary fact, as, for example, that Oliver Smith went to college and took a third in the year 1892, he will say so with a hollow 0 on top of the figure five. When the novelist is forced to inform us that John rang the bell after a pause the door was opened by a parlourmaid who said, “Mrs. Jones is not at home,” he will to our great gain and his own comfort convey that repulsive statement not in words, but in signs—say, a capital H on top of the figure three. Thus we may look forward to the day when our biographies and

²²³ Written to be read for a BBC broadcast on April 20, 1937.

²²⁴ Tube: the London subway system.

²²⁵ Russell Square is a Tube stop in the Bloomsbury district of London.

²²⁶ Lines from a poem by Christina Rossetti (1830-1894).

²²⁷ Lines from “Tithonus,” a poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892).

²²⁸ Kings Cross is the Tube stop just past the Russell Square stop.

²²⁹ Lines from “Ode to a Nightingale,” a poem by John Keats (1793-1821).

²³⁰ Michelin Guide: a series of annual guide books published by the French company Michelin for more than a dozen countries, published first in 1900 as a guide for French motorists.

²³¹ Baedeker: a series of annual guide books published by the German company Karl Baedeker since 1827. Like the Michelin Guide, it contains maps, information about routes and travel facilities, descriptions of noteworthy sights and attractions, and lodging information.

novels will be slim and muscular; and a railway company that says: "Do not lean out of the window" in words will be fined a penalty not exceeding five pounds for the improper use of language.

Words, then, are not useful. Let us now enquire into their other quality, their positive quality, that is, their power to tell the truth. According once more to the dictionary there are at least three kinds of truth: God's or gospel truth; literary truth; and home truth (generally, unflattering). But to consider each separately would take too long. Let us then simplify and assert that since the only test of truth is length of life, and since words survive the chops and changes of time longer than any other substance, therefore they are the truest. Buildings fall; even the earth perishes. What was yesterday a cornfield is today a bungalow. But words, if properly used, seem able to live for ever. What, then, we may ask next, is the proper use of words? Not, so we have said, to make a useful statement; for a useful statement is a statement that can mean only one thing. And it is the nature of words to mean many things. Take the simple sentence "Passing Russell Square." That proved useless because besides the surface meaning it contained so many sunken meanings. The word "passing" suggested the transiency of things, the passing of time and the changes of human life. Then the word "Russell" suggested the rustling of leaves and the skirt on a polished floor also the ducal house of Bedford and half the history of England²³². Finally the word "Square" brings in the sight, the shape of an actual square combined with some visual suggestion of the stark angularity of stucco. Thus one sentence of the simplest kind rouses the imagination, the memory, the eye and the ear—all combine in reading it.

But they combine—they combine unconsciously together. The moment we single out and emphasise the suggestions as we have done here they become unreal; and we, too, become unreal—specialists, word mongers, phrase finders, not readers. In reading we have to allow the sunken meanings to remain sunken, suggested, not stated; lapsing and flowing into each other like reeds on the bed of a river. But the words in that sentence "Passing Russell Square" are of course very rudimentary words. They show no trace of the strange, of the diabolical power which words possess when they are not tapped out by a typewriter but come fresh from a human brain—the power that is to suggest the writer; his character, his appearance, his wife, his family, his house—even the cat on the hearthrug. Why words do this, how they do it, how to prevent them from doing it nobody knows. They do it without the writer's will; often against his will. No writer presumably wishes to impose his own miserable character, his own private secrets and vices upon the reader. But has any writer, who is not a typewriter, succeeded in being wholly impersonal? Always, inevitably, we know them as well as their books. Such is the suggestive power of words that they will often make a bad book into a

very lovable human being, and a good book into a man whom we can hardly tolerate in the room. Even words that are hundreds of years old have this power; when they are new they have it so strongly that they deafen us to the writer's meaning—it is them we see, them we hear. That is one reason why our judgments of living writers are so wildly erratic. Only after the writer is dead do his words to some extent become disinfected, purified of the accidents of the living body.

Now, this power of suggestion is one of the most mysterious properties of words. Everyone who has ever written a sentence must be conscious or half-conscious of it. Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations—naturally. They have been out and about, on people's lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries. And that is one of the chief difficulties in writing them today—that they are so stored with meanings, with memories, that they have contracted so many famous marriages. The splendid word "incarnadine," for example—who can use it without remembering also "multitudinous seas"²³³? In the old days, of course, when English was a new language, writers could invent new words and use them. Nowadays it is easy enough to invent new words—they spring to the lips whenever we see a new sight or feel a new sensation—but we cannot use them because the language is old. You cannot use a brand new word in an old language because of the very obvious yet mysterious fact that a word is not a single and separate entity, but part of other words. It is not a word indeed until it is part of a sentence. Words belong to each other, although, of course, only a great writer knows that the word "incarnadine" belongs to "multitudinous seas." To combine new words with old words is fatal to the constitution of the sentence. In order to use new words properly you would have to invent a new language; and that, though no doubt we shall come to it, is not at the moment our business. Our business is to see what we can do with the English language as it is. How can we combine the old words in new orders so that they survive, so that they create beauty, so that they tell the truth? That is the question.

And the person who could answer that question would deserve whatever crown of glory the world has to offer. Think what it would mean if you could teach, if you could learn, the art of writing. Why, every book, every newspaper would tell the truth, would create beauty. But there is, it would appear, some obstacle in the way, some hindrance to the teaching of words. For though at this moment at least a hundred professors are lecturing upon the literature of the past, at least a thousand critics are reviewing the literature of the present, and hundreds upon hundreds of young men and women are passing

²³³ Allusion to a short soliloquy by Macbeth (2.2.55-61) as he looks horrified at his hands bloodied while murdering King Duncan, bemoaning that the blood could turn "the multitudinous seas incarnadine," i.e. turn all the seas red.

²³² The Russells constitute a long line of Dukes of Bedford, from 1414 to the present.

examinations in English literature with the utmost credit, still—do we write better, do we read better than we read and wrote four hundred years ago when we were unlectured, uncriticised, untaught? Is our Georgian literature a patch on the Elizabethan? Where then are we to lay the blame? Not on our professors; not on our reviewers; not on our writers; but on words. It is words that are to blame. They are the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things. Of course, you can catch them and sort them and place them in alphabetical order in dictionaries. But words do not live in dictionaries; they live in the mind. If you want proof of this, consider how often in moments of emotion when we most need words we find none. Yet there is the dictionary; there at our disposal are some half-a-million words all in alphabetical order. But can we use them? No, because words do not live in dictionaries, they live in the mind. Look again at the dictionary. There beyond a doubt lie plays more splendid than *ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA*; poems more lovely than the *ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE*; novels beside which *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE* or *DAVID COPPERFIELD* are the crude bunglings of amateurs²³⁴. It is only a question of finding the right words and putting them in the right order. But we cannot do it because they do not live in dictionaries; they live in the mind. And how do they live in the mind? Various and strangely, much as human beings live, by ranging hither and thither, by falling in love, and mating together. It is true that they are much less bound by ceremony and convention than we are. Royal words mate with commoners. English words marry French words, German words, Indian words, Negro words, if they have a fancy. Indeed, the less we enquire into the past of our dear Mother English the better it will be for that lady's reputation. For she has gone a-roving, a-roving fair maid²³⁵.

Thus to lay down any laws for such irreclaimable vagabonds is worse than useless. A few trifling rules of grammar and spelling are all the constraint we can put on them. All we can say about them, as we peer at them over the edge of that deep, dark and only fitfully illuminated cavern in which they live—the mind—all we can say about them is that they seem to like people to think and to feel before they use them, but to think and to feel not about them, but about something different. They are highly sensitive, easily made self-conscious. They do not like to have their purity or their impurity discussed. If you start a Society for Pure English, they will show their resentment by starting another for impure English—hence the unnatural violence of much modern speech; it is a protest against the puritans. They are

²³⁴ Allusion to great literary works: *Antony and Cleopatra* is a play by William Shakespeare (1564-1616); "Ode to a Nightingale" is a poem by John Keats (1793-1821); *Pride and Prejudice* is a novel by Jane Austen (1775-1817); *David Copperfield* is the eighth novel by Charles Dickens (1812-1870).

²³⁵ Allusion to the traditional sea shanty "The Maid of Amsterdam," in which the sailor rebuffs a sexual advance by a woman with the remark, "I'll go no more a-roving / With you fair maid."

highly democratic, too; they believe that one word is as good as another; uneducated words are as good as educated words, uncultivated words as cultivated words, there are no ranks or titles in their society. Nor do they like being lifted out on the point of a pen and examined separately. They hang together, in sentences, in paragraphs, sometimes for whole pages at a time. They hate being useful; they hate making money; they hate being lectured about in public. In short, they hate anything that stamps them with one meaning or confines them to one attitude, for it is their nature to change.

Perhaps that is their most striking peculiarity—their need of change. It is because the truth they try to catch is many-sided, and they convey it by being themselves many-sided, flashing this way, then that. Thus they mean one thing to one person, another thing to another person; they are unintelligible to one generation, plain as a pikestaff to the next. And it is because of this complexity that they survive. Perhaps then one reason why we have no great poet, novelist or critic writing to-day is that we refuse words their liberty. We pin them down to one meaning, their useful meaning, the meaning which makes us catch the train, the meaning which makes us pass the examination. And when words are pinned down they fold their wings and die. Finally, and most emphatically, words, like ourselves, in order to live at their ease, need privacy. Undoubtedly they like us to think, and they like us to feel, before we use them; but they also like us to pause; to become unconscious. Our unconsciousness is their privacy; our darkness is their light. . . . That pause was made, that veil of darkness was dropped, to tempt words to come together in one of those swift marriages which are perfect images and create everlasting beauty. But no—nothing of that sort is going to happen to-night. The little wretches are out of temper; disobliging; disobedient; dumb. What is it that they are muttering? "Time's up! Silence!"

HOW SHOULD ONE READ A BOOK?²³⁶

In the first place, I want to emphasise the note of interrogation at the end of my title. Even if I could answer the question for myself, the answer would apply only to me and not to you. The only advice, indeed, that one person can give another about reading is to take no advice, to follow your own instincts, to use your own reason, to come to your own conclusions. If this is agreed between us, then I feel at liberty to put forward a few ideas and suggestions because you will not allow them to fetter that independence which is the most important quality that a reader can possess. After all, what laws can be laid down about books? The battle of Waterloo was certainly fought on a certain

²³⁶ Initially read at a school before being published in the Second Series of *The Common Reader* in 1932.

day; but is *Hamlet* a better play than *Lear*²³⁷? Nobody can say. Each must decide that question for himself. To admit authorities, however heavily furred and gowned, into our libraries and let them tell us how to read, what to read, what value to place upon what we read, is to destroy the spirit of freedom which is the breath of those sanctuaries. Everywhere else we may be bound by laws and conventions—there we have none.

But to enjoy freedom, if the platitude²³⁸ is pardonable, we have of course to control ourselves. We must not squander our powers, helplessly and ignorantly, squirting half the house in order to water a single rose-bush; we must train them, exactly and powerfully, here on the very spot. This, it may be, is one of the first difficulties that faces us in a library. What is “the very spot”? There may well seem to be nothing but a conglomeration and huddle of confusion. Poems and novels, histories and memoirs, dictionaries and blue-books²³⁹; books written in all languages by men and women of all tempers, races, and ages jostle each other on the shelf. And outside the donkey brays, the women gossip at the pump, the colts gallop across the fields. Where are we to begin? How are we to bring order into this multitudinous chaos and so get the deepest and widest pleasure from what we read?

It is simple enough to say that since books have classes—fiction, biography, poetry—we should separate them and take from each what it is right that each should give us. Yet few people ask from books what books can give us. Most commonly we come to books with blurred and divided minds, asking of fiction that it shall be true, of poetry that it shall be false, of biography that it shall be flattering, of history that it shall enforce our own prejudices. If we could banish all such preconceptions when we read, that would be an admirable beginning. Do not dictate to your author; try to become him. Be his fellow-worker and accomplice. If you hang back, and reserve and criticise at first, you are preventing yourself from getting the fullest possible value from what you read. But if you open your mind as widely as possible, then signs and hints of almost imperceptible fineness, from the twist and turn of the first sentences, will bring you into the presence of a human being unlike any other. Steep yourself in this, acquaint yourself with this, and soon you will find that your author is giving you, or attempting to give you, something far more definite. The thirty-two chapters of a novel—if we consider how to read a novel first—are an attempt to make something as formed and controlled as a building: but words are more impalpable²⁴⁰ than

bricks; reading is a longer and more complicated process than seeing. Perhaps the quickest way to understand the elements of what a novelist is doing is not to read, but to write; to make your own experiment with the dangers and difficulties of words. Recall, then, some event that has left a distinct impression on you—how at the corner of the street, perhaps, you passed two people talking. A tree shook; an electric light danced; the tone of the talk was comic, but also tragic; a whole vision, an entire conception, seemed contained in that moment.

But when you attempt to reconstruct it in words, you will find that it breaks into a thousand conflicting impressions. Some must be subdued; others emphasized; in the process you will lose, probably, all grasp upon the emotion itself. Then turn from your blurred and littered pages to the opening pages of some great novelist—Defoe, Jane Austen, Hardy²⁴¹. Now you will be better able to appreciate their mastery. It is not merely that we are in the presence of a different person—Defoe, Jane Austen, or Thomas Hardy—but that we are living in a different world. Here, in *Robinson Crusoe*, we are trudging a plain high road; one thing happens after another; the fact and the order of the fact is enough. But if the open air and adventure mean everything to Defoe they mean nothing to Jane Austen. Hers is the drawing-room, and people talking, and by the many mirrors of their talk revealing their characters. And if, when we have accustomed ourselves to the drawing-room and its reflections, we turn to Hardy, we are once more spun round. The moors²⁴² are round us and the stars are above our heads. The other side of the mind is now exposed—the dark side that comes uppermost in solitude, not the light side that shows in company. Our relations are not towards people, but towards Nature and destiny. Yet different as these worlds are, each is consistent with itself. The maker of each is careful to observe the laws of his own perspective, and however great a strain they may put upon us they will never confuse us, as lesser writers so frequently do, by introducing two different kinds of reality into the same book. Thus to go from one great novelist to another—from Jane Austen to Hardy, from Peacock to Trollope, from Scott to Meredith²⁴³—is to be wrenched and uprooted; to be thrown this way and then that. To read a novel is a difficult and complex art. You must be

²⁴¹ Defoe, Jane Austen, Hardy: British novelists. Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) was a journalist, pamphleteer, and spy now most known for his novel *Robinson Crusoe* about a man marooned on a tropical island; Jane Austen (1775-1817) was a romance novelist most known for *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma*; Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was a poet and novelist critical of the rigidity of Victorian society, most known for his novels *Far From the Madding Crowd*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure*.

²⁴² Moors: open areas of wild, uncultivated uplands; heaths.

²⁴³ Thomas Love Peacock (1785-1866), British poet, essayist, playwright, and novelist most known for his satire; Anthony Trollope (1815-1882), Victorian novelist on political, social, and gender issues and social satirist; Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), Scottish historical novelist, poet, and playwright; George Meredith (1828-1909), popular Victorian novelist and poet.

²³⁷ Napoleon's French army was defeated by an Anglo-Allied army on Sunday, June 18, 1815 at Waterloo in present-day Belgium. Critics generally regard *Hamlet* and *King Lear* as Shakespeare's finest tragedies.

²³⁸ Platitude: a trite, meaningless, biased, or mundane statement, often presented as if it were significant and original. From the French *plat*, meaning “flat.”

²³⁹ Blue-books: listings of socially prominent people.

²⁴⁰ Impalpable: unable to be felt or touched; or not easily comprehended.

capable not only of great fineness of perception, but of great boldness of imagination if you are going to make use of all that the novelist—the great artist—gives you.

But a glance at the heterogeneous²⁴⁴ company on the shelf will show you that writers are very seldom “great artists”; far more often a book makes no claim to be a work of art at all. These biographies and autobiographies, for example, lives of great men, of men long dead and forgotten, that stand cheek by jowl with the novels and poems, are we to refuse to read them because they are not “art”? Or shall we read them, but read them in a different way, with a different aim? Shall we read them in the first place to satisfy that curiosity which possesses us sometimes when in the evening we linger in front of a house where the lights are lit and the blinds not yet drawn, and each floor of the house shows us a different section of human life in being? Then we are consumed with curiosity about the lives of these people—the servants gossiping, the gentlemen dining, the girl dressing for a party, the old woman at the window with her knitting. Who are they, what are they, what are their names, their occupations, their thoughts, and adventures?

Biographies and memoirs answer such questions, light up innumerable such houses; they show us people going about their daily affairs, toiling, failing, succeeding, eating, hating, loving, until they die. And sometimes as we watch, the house fades and the iron railings vanish and we are out at sea; we are hunting, sailing, fighting; we are among savages and soldiers; we are taking part in great campaigns. Or if we like to stay here in England, in London, still the scene changes; the street narrows; the house becomes small, cramped, diamond-paned, and malodorous. We see a poet, Donne²⁴⁵, driven from such a house because the walls were so thin that when the children cried their voices cut through them. We can follow him, through the paths that lie in the pages of books, to Twickenham to Lady Bedford’s Park²⁴⁶, a famous meeting-ground for nobles and poets; and then turn our steps to Wilton, the great house under the downs, and hear Sidney²⁴⁷ read the *Arcadia* to his sister; and ramble among the very marshes and see the very herons that figure

²⁴⁴ Heterogeneous: diverse in character or content; different in kind; incongruous; unlike.

²⁴⁵ John Donne (1572-1631), British poet, satirist, lawyer, and cleric in the Church of England, the most widely read of the “metaphysical” poets, whose works used extended metaphors to explore themes of love, sensuality, and spirituality.

²⁴⁶ Twickenham House and Moor Park, Farnham, are English estates made famous in the 17th century by Lucy Russell, Countess of Bedford, one of the most influential social and political figures during the reign of James I. Lady Bedford was also significant in the development of English estate and garden design.

²⁴⁷ Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) was a British poet, courtier, and soldier, one of the most prominent figures during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. He dedicated his immensely popular *Arcadia*—an adventurous romance idealizing the shepherd’s life—to his sister Mary. Mary married the second Earl of Pembroke, and the Pembroke estate, Wilton House, is one of the most beautiful estates in Britain.

in that famous romance; and then again travel north with that other Lady Pembroke, Anne Clifford, to her wild moors, or plunge into the city and control our merriment at the sight of Gabriel Harvey in his black velvet suit arguing about poetry with Spenser²⁴⁸. Nothing is more fascinating than to grope and stumble in the alternate darkness and splendour of Elizabethan London. But there is no staying there. The Temples and the Swifts, the Harleys and the St. Johns beckon us on²⁴⁹; hour upon hour can be spent disentangling their quarrels and deciphering their characters; and when we tire of them we can stroll on, past a lady in black wearing diamonds, to Samuel Johnson and Goldsmith and Garrick²⁵⁰; or cross the channel, if we like, and meet Voltaire and Diderot, Madame du Deffand; and so back to England and Twickenham—how certain places repeat themselves and certain names!—where Lady Bedford had her Park once and Pope lived later, to Walpole’s home at Strawberry Hill²⁵¹. But Walpole introduces us to such a swarm of new acquaintances, there are so many houses to visit and bells to ring that we may well hesitate for a moment, on the Miss Berrys’ doorstep, for example, when behold, up comes Thackeray²⁵²; he is the friend of the woman whom Walpole loved; so that merely by going from friend to friend, from garden to garden, from house to house, we have passed from one end of English literature to another and wake to find ourselves here again in the present, if we can so differentiate this moment from all that have gone before. This, then, is one of

²⁴⁸ Sir Edmund Spenser (1552-1599), along with Shakespeare, is considered one of the greatest poets in the English language. While a student at Pembroke College, Cambridge, he became friends with Gabriel Harvey, who later became a noted scholar whose views often differed considerably from those of Spenser. Even so, Spenser often solicited Harvey’s views.

²⁴⁹ Sir William Temple (1628-1699), British statesman and essayist; Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), Anglo-Irish satirized most remembered for his *Gulliver’s Travels*. He was Sir William Temple’s personal secretary from 1688 onward; Robert Harley (1661-1724), 1st Earl of Oxford and important political figure; Henry St. John (1678-1678), British politician, government official, and political philosopher who became a friend and political ally of Robert Hartley.

²⁵⁰ Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), British poet, essayist, literary critic, biographer, editor, ethics philosopher, and author of the first definitive dictionary of the English language, a task nine years in the making; Oliver Goldsmith (1730-1774), British novelist, poet, and playwright most known for his novel *The Vicar of Wakefield*, his pastoral poem *The Deserted Village*, and his satirical play *She Stoops to Conquer*; David Garrick (1717-1779), British actor, playwright, theatre manager, and producer whose innovative realistic acting style influenced generations of actors. His mentor and friend Samuel Johnson remarked, “his profession made him rich and he made his profession respectable.”

²⁵¹ Alexander Pope (1688-1744), British poet best known for his satirical and critical verses such as “The Rape of the Lock” and “An Essay on Criticism” and for his translations of Homer. His witty and perceptive epigrams in heroic couplets are often quoted; Horace Walpole (1717-1797), British art historian, antique expert, and politician who became the Earl of Oxford. His eccentric Gothic revival home, Strawberry Hill in Twickenham, featured towers and battlements and interiors designed to create “gloomth.”

²⁵² William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863) was a British novelist most known for his satire. He was also father-in-law to Woolf’s father, Sir Leslie Stephen, through Stephen’s first marriage to Thackeray’s daughter, Minnie. When she was young, Woolf’s mother, Julia, had also known Thackeray.

the ways in which we can read these lives and letters; we can make them light up the many windows of the past; we can watch the famous dead in their familiar habits and fancy sometimes that we are very close and can surprise their secrets, and sometimes we may pull out a play or a poem that they have written and see whether it reads differently in the presence of the author. But this again rouses other questions. How far, we must ask ourselves, is a book influenced by its writer's life—how far is it safe to let the man interpret the writer? How far shall we resist or give way to the sympathies and antipathies that the man himself rouses in us—so sensitive are words, so receptive of the character of the author? These are questions that press upon us when we read lives and letters, and we must answer them for ourselves, for nothing can be more fatal than to be guided by the preferences of others in a matter so personal.

But also we can read such books with another aim, not to throw light on literature, not to become familiar with famous people, but to refresh and exercise our own creative powers. Is there not an open window on the right hand of the bookcase? How delightful to stop reading and look out! How stimulating the scene is, in its unconsciousness, its irrelevance, its perpetual movement—the colts galloping round the field, the woman filling her pail at the well, the donkey throwing back his head and emitting his long, acrid moan. The greater part of any library is nothing but the record of such fleeting moments in the lives of men, women, and donkeys. Every literature, as it grows old, has its rubbish-heap, its record of vanished moments and forgotten lives told in faltering and feeble accents that have perished. But if you give yourself up to the delight of rubbish-reading you will be surprised, indeed you will be overcome, by the relics of human life that have been cast out to moulder. It may be one letter—but what a vision it gives! It may be a few sentences—but what vistas they suggest! Sometimes a whole story will come together with such beautiful humour and pathos and completeness that it seems as if a great novelist had been at work, yet it is only an old actor, Tate Wilkinson, remembering the strange story of Captain Jones; it is only a young subaltern²⁵³ serving under Arthur Wellesley and falling in love with a pretty girl at Lisbon; it is only Maria Allen letting fall her sewing in the empty drawing-room and sighing how she wishes she had taken Dr. Burney's good advice and had never eloped with her Rishy. None of this has any value; it is negligible in the extreme; yet how absorbing it is now and again to go through the rubbish-heaps and find rings and scissors and broken noses buried in the huge past and try to piece them together while the colt gallops round the field, the woman fills her pail at the well, and the donkey brays.

But we tire of rubbish-reading in the long run. We tire of searching for what is needed to complete the half-truth which is all that the Wilkinsons, the

Bunburys, and the Maria Allens are able to offer us. They had not the artist's power of mastering and eliminating; they could not tell the whole truth even about their own lives; they have disfigured the story that might have been so shapely. Facts are all that they can offer us, and facts are a very inferior form of fiction. Thus the desire grows upon us to have done with half-statements and approximations; to cease from searching out the minute shades of human character, to enjoy the greater abstractness, the purer truth of fiction. Thus we create the mood, intense and generalised, unaware of detail, but stressed by some regular, recurrent beat, whose natural expression is poetry; and that is the time to read poetry . . . when we are almost able to write it.

Western wind, when wilt thou blow?
The small rain down can rain.
Christ, if my love were in my arms,
And I in my bed again!²⁵⁴

The impact of poetry is so hard and direct that for the moment there is no other sensation except that of the poem itself. What profound depths we visit then—how sudden and complete is our immersion! There is nothing here to catch hold of; nothing to stay us in our flight. The illusion of fiction is gradual; its effects are prepared; but who when they read these four lines stops to ask who wrote them, or conjures up the thought of Donne's house or Sidney's secretary; or enmeshes them in the intricacy of the past and the succession of generations? The poet is always our contemporary. Our being for the moment is centred and constricted, as in any violent shock of personal emotion. Afterwards, it is true, the sensation begins to spread in wider rings through our minds; remoter senses are reached; these begin to sound and to comment and we are aware of echoes and reflections. The intensity of poetry covers an immense range of emotion. We have only to compare the force and directness of

I shall fall like a tree, and find my grave,
Only remembering that I grieve,²⁵⁵

with the wavering modulation of

Minutes are numbered by the fall of sands,
As by an hour glass; the span of time
Doth waste us to our graves, and we look on it;
An age of pleasure, revelled out, comes home
At last, and ends in sorrow; but the life,
Weary of riot, numbers every sand,
Wailing in sighs, until the last drop down,

²⁵⁴ Lines from an anonymous 16th-century poem.

²⁵⁵ Lines from Act 4, Scene 1 of *The Maid's Tragedy* by Francis Beaumont (1584-1616) and John Fletcher (1579-1625) published in 1618.

²⁵³ Subaltern: British military term for a junior officer literally meaning "subordinate."

So to conclude calamity in rest,²⁵⁶
or place the meditative calm of
whether we be young or old,
Our destiny, our being's heart and home,
Is with infinitude, and only there;
With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be,²⁵⁷
beside the complete and inexhaustible loveliness of

The moving Moon went up the sky,
And nowhere did abide:
Softly she was going up,
And a star or two beside—²⁵⁸

or the splendid fantasy of
And the woodland haunter
Shall not cease to saunter
When, far down some glade,
Of the great world's burning,
One soft flame upturning
Seems, to his discerning,
Crocus in the shade,²⁵⁹

to bethink us of the varied art of the poet; his power to make us at once actors and spectators; his power to run his hand into character as if it were a glove, and be Falstaff²⁶⁰ or Lear; his power to condense, to widen, to state, once and for ever.

“We have only to compare”—with those words the cat is out of the bag, and the true complexity of reading is admitted. The first process, to receive impressions with the utmost understanding, is only half the process of reading; it must be completed, if we are to get the whole pleasure from a book, by another. We must pass judgment upon these multitudinous impressions; we must make of these fleeting shapes one that is hard and lasting. But not directly. Wait for the dust of reading to settle; for the conflict and the questioning to die down; walk, talk, pull the dead petals from a rose, or fall

²⁵⁶ Lines from Act 4, Scene 3 of *The Lover's Melancholy*, a verse tragicomedy by John Ford (1586-1639).

²⁵⁷ Lines from *The Prelude* by William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

²⁵⁸ Lines from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1771-1834).

²⁵⁹ Lines from “When the World is Burning,” a poem by Ebenezer Jones (1820-1860).

²⁶⁰ Sir John Falstaff, one of Shakespeare's most beloved comic characters who appears in three Shakespeare plays: both *Henry IV* plays and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

asleep. Then suddenly without our willing it, for it is thus that Nature undertakes these transitions, the book will return, but differently. It will float to the top of the mind as a whole. And the book as a whole is different from the book received currently in separate phrases. Details now fit themselves into their places. We see the shape from start to finish; it is a barn, a pigsty, or a cathedral. Now then we can compare book with book as we compare building with building. But this act of comparison means that our attitude has changed; we are no longer the friends of the writer, but his judges; and just as we cannot be too sympathetic as friends, so as judges we cannot be too severe. Are they not criminals, books that have wasted our time and sympathy; are they not the most insidious enemies of society, corrupters, defilers, the writers of false books, faked books, books that fill the air with decay and disease? Let us then be severe in our judgments; let us compare each book with the greatest of its kind. There they hang in the mind the shapes of the books we have read solidified by the judgments we have passed on them—*Robinson Crusoe*, *Emma*, *The Return of the Native*²⁶¹. Compare the novels with these—even the latest and least of novels has a right to be judged with the best. And so with poetry—when the intoxication of rhythm has died down and the splendour of words has faded, a visionary shape will return to us and this must be compared with *Lear*, with *Phèdre*²⁶², with *The Prelude*; or if not with these, with whatever is the best or seems to us to be the best in its own kind. And we may be sure that the newness of new poetry and fiction is its most superficial quality and that we have only to alter slightly, not to recast, the standards by which we have judged the old.

It would be foolish, then, to pretend that the second part of reading, to judge, to compare, is as simple as the first—to open the mind wide to the fast flocking of innumerable impressions. To continue reading without the book before you, to hold one shadow-shape against another, to have read widely enough and with enough understanding to make such comparisons alive and illuminating—that is difficult; it is still more difficult to press further and to say, “Not only is the book of this sort, but it is of this value; here it fails; here it succeeds; this is bad; that is good.” To carry out this part of a reader's duty needs such imagination, insight, and learning that it is hard to conceive any one mind sufficiently endowed; impossible for the most self-confident to find more than the seeds of such powers in himself. Would it not be wiser, then, to remit this part of reading and to allow the critics, the gowned and furred authorities of the library, to decide the question of the book's absolute value for us? Yet how impossible! We may stress the value of sympathy; we may try to sink our identity as we read. But we know that we cannot sympathise

²⁶¹ Novels by Daniel Defoe (pub. 1719), Jane Austen (pub. 1815), and Thomas Hardy (1878), respectively, referred to previously in the bottom of the left column on page 35.

²⁶² *Phèdre* (originally *Phèdre et Hippolyte*) is a tragedy in five acts written in alexandrine verse by the French dramatist Jean Racine (1639-1699), first performed in 1677.

wholly or immerse ourselves wholly; there is always a demon in us who whispers, "I hate, I love", and we cannot silence him. Indeed, it is precisely because we hate and we love that our relation with the poets and novelists is so intimate that we find the presence of another person intolerable. And even if the results are abhorrent and our judgments are wrong, still our taste, the nerve of sensation that sends shocks through us, is our chief illuminant; we learn through feeling; we cannot suppress our own idiosyncrasy without impoverishing it. But as time goes on perhaps we can train our taste; perhaps we can make it submit to some control. When it has fed greedily and lavishly upon books of all sorts—poetry, fiction, history, biography—and has stopped reading and looked for long spaces upon the variety, the incongruity²⁶³ of the living world, we shall find that it is changing a little; it is not so greedy, it is more reflective. It will begin to bring us not merely judgments on particular books, but it will tell us that there is a quality common to certain books. Listen, it will say, what shall we call THIS? And it will read us perhaps *Lear* and then perhaps the *Agamemnon*²⁶⁴ in order to bring out that common quality. Thus, with our taste to guide us, we shall venture beyond the particular book in search of qualities that group books together; we shall give them names and thus frame a rule that brings order into our perceptions. We shall gain a further and a rarer pleasure from that discrimination. But as a rule only lives when it is perpetually broken by contact with the books themselves—nothing is easier and more stultifying than to make rules which exist out of touch with facts, in a vacuum—now at last, in order to steady ourselves in this difficult attempt, it may be well to turn to the very rare writers who are able to enlighten us upon literature as an art. Coleridge and Dryden and Jonson, in their considered criticism, the poets and novelists themselves in their considered sayings, are often surprisingly relevant; they light up and solidify the vague ideas that have been tumbling in the misty depths of our minds. But they are only able to help us if we come to them laden with questions and suggestions won honestly in the course of our own reading. They can do nothing for us if we herd ourselves under their authority and lie down like sheep in the shade of a hedge. We can only understand their ruling when it comes in conflict with our own and vanquishes it.

If this is so, if to read a book as it should be read calls for the rarest qualities of imagination, insight, and judgment, you may perhaps conclude that literature is a very complex art and that it is unlikely that we shall be able, even after a lifetime of reading, to make any valuable contribution to its criticism. We must remain readers; we shall not put on the further glory that belongs to those rare beings who are also critics. But still we have our responsibilities as readers and even our importance. The standards we raise

²⁶³ Incongruity: state of not being in harmony or incompatible with the context or surroundings.

²⁶⁴ *Agamemnon* is an ancient Greek tragedy by Aeschylus (c. 425-455 BCE) as part of a trilogy including *The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides*.

and the judgments we pass steal into the air and become part of the atmosphere which writers breathe as they work. An influence is created which tells upon them even if it never finds its way into print. And that influence, if it were well instructed, vigorous and individual and sincere, might be of great value now when criticism is necessarily in abeyance²⁶⁵; when books pass in review like the procession of animals in a shooting gallery, and the critic has only one second in which to load and aim and shoot and may well be pardoned if he mistakes rabbits for tigers, eagles for barn-door fowls, or misses altogether and wastes his shot upon some peaceful cow grazing in a further field. If behind the erratic gunfire of the press the author felt that there was another kind of criticism, the opinion of people reading for the love of reading, slowly and unprofessionally, and judging with great sympathy and yet with great severity, might this not improve the quality of his work? And if by our means books were to become stronger, richer, and more varied, that would be an end worth reaching.

Yet who reads to bring about an end, however desirable? Are there not some pursuits that we practice because they are good in themselves, and some pleasures that are final? And is not this among them? I have sometimes dreamt, at least, that when the Day of Judgment dawns and the great conquerors and lawyers and statesmen come to receive their rewards—their crowns, their laurels, their names carved indelibly upon imperishable marble—the Almighty will turn to Peter and will say, not without a certain envy when he sees us coming with our books under our arms, "Look, these need no reward. We have nothing to give them here. They have loved reading."

²⁶⁵ Abeyance: a state of temporary inactivity, disuse, or suspension.