

The Swans at Roxleigh

The new maid arrived at Roxleigh determined not to be intimidated. Fair-haired, with a serious mouth and eyes already warmed by crinkles in the corners, she followed Mrs. Pimm from room to room, the heels of her black shoes clacking on the floorboards. She asked questions about her allowance and her days off. She did not inquire about the nature of the former master or the absence of the new one.

The new maid's name was Helen Sands. She had arrived on the train northbound from St. Hugh's College in Oxford, having sent her application and a letter of recommendation from her supervising nurse on ahead of her. She had seen the position for a maid at Roxleigh House advertised in *The Times*, but never expected Mrs. Pimm to approve her as its recipient. She supposed that, after the war, it was difficult to find workers. Everyone had gone to London, no one to Cumbria. The rugged hills near the Scottish border would never transform into mountains of money.

But Helen did not like money. It made people unpleasant.

So she thrust everything she owned into a cardboard suitcase, and marched down to the station to find the train, gleaming black as a stallion in its stall. Casting herself into a seat, she spread her hands out to either side of her and closed her eyes and then opened them wide in the delicious moment as the train jerked into life. Through glass smeared with the sticky fingerprints of a child, she watched as the station doors blinked past, and the gray fog of Oxford rushed out to meet them. Beneath her feet the thrum of the train said *speed speed speed!*

An elderly woman, one arm stretched out in fear of falling, dropped into the seat across from her. Helen scooted her bottom back against the seat, put her hands in her lap, and looked at the stone buildings sliding by, one after another. In the distance, the towers and spires of the University cut angles into the sky.

The elderly woman rustled through a handbag. She produced a box of stationary and a pen. Helen watched, silent and envious, the movement of her hand up and down, up and down as she wrote.

After a while she fetched down her case and heaved out a book which thudded onto the empty seat beside her. Bits of paper stuck up from its middle, and the wavering edge of the pages showed yellow. The elderly woman asked what it was. Helen said, "*Seven Pillars of Wisdom.*"

The muscles of the woman's brow pinched in thought. "Is it theology?" she asked at length.

"No," said Helen, hiding a smile; it was rather the opposite. "It's by T.E. Lawrence. It tells about the Arab Revolt."

"Oh, Lawrence of Arabia," said the woman. "I remember reading about his funeral in the papers. Ten years ago now, it must have been. Before the war even! He was very young when he died. What's a young lady like yourself reading a book like that for?"

"I like it. It makes me feel there are possibilities."

But the woman did not pay attention; she tapped her pen against her lips. "Didn't he kill some bicyclists?"

"No," Helen said quietly. "He swerved to avoid them, and killed himself." She slapped the book open to Chapter LV. T.E. declared that, *In the blank light of victory we could scarcely identify ourselves*. Whatever that meant; it sounded good. The Arabs had taken Akaba. In the seat across from Helen, the woman fell silent, except for the scratch and bustle of her pen.

She disembarked at Nottingham. No one else took her place. Helen sighed, and spread her legs over the seat next to her, the book heavy in her lap.

So she arrived in Cumbria, in lake country, in a blur of English pastures in whose green grass she imagined hungry men pacing along the glittering sand outside Akaba. Jolting off the train, she blinked in surprise at the sloping roofs of Keswick, the green points of the evergreens converging about the town square. A faint but sticky snow had seized the fringes of the trees and dulled the black shingles of the houses. The clouds hovered, black and gray, around the crowns of the Cumbrian Mountains. One white cloud drifted in front of the black ones, ruffling its edges like wings.

Helen hefted her suitcase, twisting her arm so that the weight thudded against her back. The smallness of Keswick made her feel more distinct, as though she had climbed off the train into the eye of a needle. In Oxford, she had never worried about eyes.

The people wore wool of a rough, dim color, as though they wanted to blend in with the clouds. But their faces, ruddy and weathered, seemed friendly enough; their chapped lips would part for smiles the way clouds would for the sun.

She glanced about. Mrs. Pimm had said that she should ring Roxleigh House, and the groundskeeper, Telson, would pick her up. But Helen decided that she would walk to Roxleigh. She asked a stoop-shouldered man with a cane where to go, and he pointed her up the right lane and onto the next.

Keswick simply ended. The white walls of houses abutted the brooding green of the forest. She paused on the boundary, contemplating the dampness that rose from between the trees and softened the hang of her skirt.

She tramped up into the hills. The handle of the suitcase bit into her palm. To her left, visible in slivers between the leaves of the trees, breathed the lake of Derwentwater, gray as moonlight. She thought of the Arabs trampling the sand by Akaba. She imagined her cotton skirt a white robe that caught the glare of the sun, a curved dagger jammed through her belt.

Roxleigh House lay beyond the next two hills, a broad face of bricks blooming from the slope above the water's edge. Around the house the grass created a flat carpet, its greenery weathered due to the winter; from a distance, the trees looked stuck on, like knobs. The house itself rose in gray slab walls, stringing together three roofs, their notched dormers wandering in jigsaw patterns above the eaves trough. The windows reflected the dull glare off the lake. A woman stood on the front stoop, shaking out a carpet. Mrs. Pimm.

Helen squeezed the handle of her suitcase. She was no maid. What business did she have pretending to be one?

But Mrs. Pimm decided to like her. And Mrs. Pimm, like any good housekeeper, was never wrong. Not in her own domain.

She had rolled up the rug and thrown it back in the house by the time Helen arrived. "Telson would have brought the buggy to fetch you," she said.

"It was a short walk," said Helen.

Mrs. Pimm lifted her head back. It seemed to indicate approval, thought Helen, though of the not-yet-sure kind. She took in Mrs. Pimm. Mrs. Pimm had great dark eyes, and silver-spangled dark hair, and a chin which might have hidden any secret beneath its various craggy recesses. She wore a dress of fustian, its color a durable brown. She looked like the sort of person who ought to carry a great wreath of keys on her belt, always clanking and shifting against each other, but she did not. A silver cross, with the Christ ensconced, peeped out between the two top buttons on her cardigan.

"You're from Oxford, then," she said.

"No," said Helen, "in fact. I'm from Dorset."

Mrs. Pimm's brows pinched together.

"We're famous for little - although Lawrence of Arabia lived near my house." Still this elicited little reaction. Helen said, "But I did go to Oxford."

They were back on Mrs. Pimm's ground. She said, "I've never had a girl with an education working for me."

Helen flushed, but she said, "I didn't finish at St. Hugh's. Became a nurse instead, for the war effort. So you see, I'm only tolerably educated."

Mrs. Pimm digested this. Her mouth became small. "And you studied to be a nurse?"

Oh dear, thought Helen. She expected Mrs. Pimm would not condone archaeology; it made one's knees dirty. Her fingers fiddled on the suitcase handle. "Yes," she lied.

But Mrs. Pimm nodded. Little tucks of satisfaction appeared around her nose. "You'll do," she said.

Mrs. Pimm showed Helen the house. The upstairs rooms, overwhelmed by white sheets, as though the ghosts of furniture had taken residence. The downstairs rooms, strained by simplicity, all the pots and the silver arranged in rows, like strips of garden given too much care. Mrs. Pimm did not show her the china closet. Helen realized that she must have given some of the plates away in the war.

They used oil lamps to light the place, and outside the yellow orbs of light spread a moving darkness, blanketing the house. In the plain corridor, on her way to her little room, Helen turned out her lamp. In the darkness she heard her own breathing, felt the thumping of her heart, and imagined these things belonged to the house as well: that the house breathed, sighed, rolled over in its sleep.

She made her way, through the dark, to her room. If she did not see where she went, she reasoned, she might be anywhere. She dreamed of a sandy place by the sea. As she strolled across it, shrubs gushed upwards in green bursts from the sand. She was running along the beach at her home in Dorset, and the English Channel sloshed cold waves in from France. She was calling out to someone, but he was not coming back.

Like so many people (thought Helen), the master of Roxleigh died during the war, though due rather to his liver than to the Nazis. Being childless, he left Roxleigh House to a nephew, who presently served as a corporal of some kind in the East. Mrs. Pimm felt sure he had not died during the war, because she and Telson still received their pay.

The former master, of the liver, had retired to Roxleigh before the war. Once the house had been his country retreat; but in the end he died there. He left behind a dressing gown embroidered with silver fish, a wooden comb with one tooth broken off, and a box of talc powder. Helen, sweeping under his bed, discovered a round brass button with white thread still looped through the hole. She also discovered a collection of cut-glass bottles on the *escritoire*, several still bright with rum and cognac. The single heavy-bottomed tumbler showed a thin, unappetizing skim of dust.

She took it downstairs to wash and clean it, and put it in the cupboard. She was certain that Mrs. Pimm noticed, because she checked when she saw it, but she said nothing.

Mrs. Pimm did not go into the master's bedroom. In fact, she did not seem to like being above-stairs at all. Helen could not see why: though the décor was tasteless (specializing mainly in cherubs and pastoral scenes), the wide windows let out a lovely view down to Derwentwater. Helen asked if she might wash the windows. The soapy water, scented with lemon, gave her the warm, aesthetic feeling she had been craving. No mangled limbs here, no blood; no crippling or death on the horizon. Just the view, waiting to be seen.

But there was no one to distract her, either. Her thoughts spun on without purpose; no one would trouble to drag her from them and make her laugh. She existed now for the sake of existing. Nothing else.

She found it strange that her days never blurred into each other. Perhaps the sight over the lake, one day benighted with clouds, the next brilliant beneath blue skies, made each day a separate time of its own. In Oxford, she had lived in a swivel from patient to bandages to water and back again. At night she would fall down, dizzy, into sleep. But in Cumbria, each day she and Mrs. Pimm set themselves new tasks, or completed old ones which took them to new places in the house. When they sat in the parlor during the evenings, Helen read books while Mrs. Pimm did her sewing. She found that here *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* did not fit; Yeats did, or even Tennyson. Once, remembering how *the long light shakes across the lakes and the wild cataract leaps in glory*, she glanced to Derwentwater and saw that it did.

The swans returned to Derwentwater on a dim morning in March. Helen had marched out to the front stoop, broom collected under her elbow like a rifle, to do battle with the cobwebs above the door. She raised the broom to attack, and a hoarse voice cried out behind her. She saw what appeared at first to be glorious clouds, skimming their wings upon the gray sky. But then the leader called again, low and disgruntled. She dropped the broom with a clank and cried, "Swans!"

They landed in a ribbon of white feathers upon Derwentwater, and the water shuddered beneath their impact.

"They are lovely, aren't they?" said Helen to Mrs. Pimm, over tea and dry scones.

Mrs. Pimm blew on her tea to cool it. "Old Master used to hunt them, before he started drinking more cognac than what was good for him."

"But they're too beautiful to hunt!" Helen exclaimed. "And just think. Don't they put you in mind of the old stories – the ones where the swans are

enchanted princes, and somewhere nearby their sister is weaving them shirts of nettles, so they may turn back into men?"

Mrs. Pimm looked down her nose. "I don't know where you get these notions! And with your education. Enchanted princes. *Phh.*"

"Maybe the former master was one," Helen said teasingly, lightening her voice to show she meant only fun.

But Mrs. Pimm set her spoon on her saucer and rose to cart the dishes off. Helen sighed. Her remaining tea looked lucently up at her from the bottom of her cup, like an eye. *Let it allow her to see clearly!* She drank it off.

It did not seem to help. Later, reflecting as she undressed for bed, she found she had the same answer as ever to the problem of Mrs. Pimm and the former master: a horribly typical answer, which she did not like. She shook out her nightgown with a snap, and dismissed the matter from her mind.

The days toiled by. Mrs. Pimm asked Helen no questions after their first meeting; perhaps she assumed that quiet nurses had no pasts. Or, in a fit of high-mindedness, she chose to be close-lipped and English about it. Helen did not know which it was, but she felt nevertheless an overwhelming gratitude. On gray days she would have embraced Mrs. Pimm, if that lady would ever have accepted it. Instead Helen tried to think of mopping and sweeping as embraces of a kind; washing the laundry became a pure happiness, the joy of isolation.

It seemed nothing could break through the routine of their days. Mrs. Pimm shuffled through the house, isolated in her memories; Helen hefted her broom and iron as weapons against the incursion of others.

When they spoke they asked each other questions that did not intrude: what sort of weather it was, had Mrs. Pimm read this book (she had not), had Helen ever been north of the Scottish border (nor had she). The movements of their daily routines seemed, like clever brooms, to sweep in circles about each other, without ever getting to know each other better. On cold days, having completed her work, Helen curled by the fireplace with a book, and her heart felt warm and soft. She thought of herself only as a mass of body content in a chair, with no outward needs. She never wanted it to change.

One morning Mrs. Pimm returned from Keswick with a letter. Dark lines smeared across its row of stamps, and the edges were browned. Across the front sprawled a personal black handwriting, rather masculine, with the vowels half cut off. Helen studied the envelope, but made no move to open the letter, though it lay mere centimeters from her fingertips. She did brush the front, soft from handling.

It had no return address, but a stamp which read *BEIRUT*.

She wanted to ask Mrs. Pimm what it was. Mrs. Pimm had become quiet since she brought home the letter. Her mouth folded; her shoulders tipped inward. Her strides shortened. Her footsteps, instead of clacking, thumped full-footed upon the floor.

"It's a lovely day," Helen would remark.

Mrs. Pimm lifted her chin to the left. It might have been a response.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" It became the question Helen asked every time that she did not have the courage to ask the real question; the question, *Whatever is the matter, Mrs. Pimm?* But every time Mrs. Pimm replied that tea would be lovely. They sipped it together, at the little table beneath the lacy curtains.

And at last, out of sympathy perhaps for Mrs. Pimm's silences, Helen could no longer avoid her own thoughts. Though she sat so near to the fire that the chair arms scalded to the touch, the heat ceased to warm her. Instead she felt the draft outside the fire; she felt a chill, drifting up from London, from Oxford, from the mild south, sapping the luster from the day.

She returned to *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. But always, after reading a single page, the thoughts intruded. She could not help them. The memories split into her consciousness always: the regret living with her like a thorn driven through her ribcage, cutting a curved slice through the center of her being. Her wrists fell limp. She sat with her feet curled beneath her, staring at the lip of the book, the sharp line that divided the top of the page from the blur that was the carpet.

Mrs. Pimm would notice, and ask whether she was cold.

"No," said Helen. "I think I'll turn in early." But she could not sleep. Instead there played out, like a hammer hurling up and down, the memories of what she had witnessed, of what she might have done but had not. She tossed from one side to the other; her elbows felt raw from rubbing against the sheets.

In the morning she and Mrs. Pimm faced each other across the little table, both their eyelids gummy, both their cheeks wanting color, wanting life.

Between bouts of working, Helen found her feet carrying her down to the water's edge, without direction from her brain. Her toes created crescent-shaped depressions in the gravel. The swans floated away from her, casting grim looks over their back-feathers. She tightened her sweater around her ribcage. She thought of how she had come here to escape. She had been fine, she had been running perfectly well, until Mrs. Pimm's letter arrived.

She wondered what the letter had said.

Soon enough, she found out.

Another March morning rose upon them, the continuation of a month's work. But April peeped around the corner: the trees spread with a green blush of buds, the grass began to lift vibrant heads. In their little tuck of shoreline, the pussy willows dipped forth white tongues on brown branches.

Helen, looking out the window, saw a swan lift its head and jab one of its fellows in the rump. She almost laughed, and glanced habitually over her shoulder to share the amusement. But there was no one to laugh with her; not even Mrs. Pimm, who would not have found it amusing anyway.

She returned to washing the dishes, the warm water rubbing wrinkles into her fingertips. At first, above the splashing and clinking of her own work, she did not hear the rumbling. But then it struck her: a purring sound, like a huge cat, bursting up from the hillside. She dropped a plate, sending up a gush of water that soaked her up to the elbows. She thought of planes, helicopters, of danger and blackouts and death.

But then it appeared: a car. Only a car! Or not only, since they had become rare after the war. It rolled down the hill like oil, the sunlight reflecting a murky black off its top. One of the swans beat itself up from the water, dragging its feet; the rest looked on, interested observers.

"Mrs. Pimm!" she called. "Mrs. Pimm, there's a car coming."

And Mrs. Pimm appeared at her side, with hardly a sound, so that Helen started away from her. But Mrs. Pimm did not notice: her thin brows squeezed over her small, frank nose. Together they watched the car rolling, rolling toward them, until it ground with a flailing of dust to a stop. They saw, through the light-ripped windshield, the driver's silhouette, imprinted with a hat.

"My saints," said Mrs. Pimm. "I didn't think... I never thought he would come."

The door ricocheted open. The man stilled it, and pushed himself out. He swept off the cap and threw it onto the seat. His fair hair bushed upwards. He smoothed it back in a sharp gesture; Helen, stiffening, for a moment saw someone else.

But this living man, though not tall, stood taller than Ned Lawrence; and his body was too square beneath the long rectangular cut of his coat. He looked around, his eyes narrowing. High spots of crimson peeled on his cheeks, his forehead. He was sun burnt in March.

"It's the nephew, isn't it," said Helen flatly.

The nephew possessed a name, Arthur Challans. The sun in Syria had burnt him. Only two weeks ago he had staggered, bandy-legged, off the boat onto the Dover soil, from his long work as a corporal in the East. He moved with

a feverish quality, swinging his legs in short bursts, as though he could not walk fast enough.

He treated them not unkindly, but as though they were children whose favorite games he had not yet learned. The East made his accent clipped and rigorous, so that he said, "Fetchme acuppatea!" rather than the more typical vernacular. And he watched the women as they fetched it for him, his glance lingering on their hands, on the turn of their heels, on Helen's trim and tucked-in waist. She flushed, and clanked the teacup onto the table so that it rattled in its saucer.

He said little beyond his commands. Helen found herself glancing at him repeatedly with impatience. What did he *want*?

Mrs. Pimm said, "And if you'll let us know how long you'll be staying, sir, we'll plan for enough food."

"Don't know," he said. "Few days. Maybe longer."

Mrs. Pimm would seem to him to have no expression whatever; but Helen saw the way she drew further and further into herself, the way her flesh became only flesh, and not a vehicle of expression.

"And," she said, "will Mrs. Challans be coming?"

"Unlikely," said Mr. Challans. He drank off his tea; he slurped. "I'll go for a walk," he said. Out he went, swinging his legs, like a soldier.

Helen said, by way of an opening, "How perplexing," but Mrs. Pimm only turned her back and refused to talk about it.

That night it struck Helen worse than ever, so that she could not even close her eyes. She lay on her back, breathing in shallow breaths, bubbles floating through her darkened vision. Mr. Challans, she thought, had been in Syria. Syria, Syria, Syria. He had been in Syria too. Damascus lay in Syria, didn't it? Damascus, and the green trees, and the mild scent of the sea.

Jack (another man, but different from Ned) had grinned at her from the hospital bed, over the white cloth wrapping his fractured knee. He was American; he grinned often. "Far enough from home being here!" he had said. "Ever hear of Chippewa Falls? Nah, didn't think so."

"But I've heard of Chicago," she had answered.

"Everyone's heard of Chicago, sweetheart."

And so many places. So many places she had never been, so many places no one could bring her to. She should have asked Jack about America. She might have gone back with him. He had seemed to want it; but he never asked her.

She imagined Chicago. The wind skirled and laughed around the tall buildings, the tallest buildings in the world, of glass and brick, standing up

against the elements. She tried to imagine Chippewa Falls, and saw Keswick. She tried to imagine being with Jack in Chicago, but she saw only herself, a woman's shape in a skirt.

She missed him, but she couldn't say it. He was the one who knew how to talk and laugh and joke, when she could only see the bandages and wounds, the accumulating debris of war.

As for Ned Lawrence, who seemed to her the epitome of what a person should be: driven, but thoughtful; intelligent, but capable of action. She had known him so briefly, and so young. At first Dorset had not satisfied him; if only, he would say, he were ten years less old. He missed having something to do. But he settled into the rhythm of it, and she, his young friend and, perhaps, protégé, learned to guard herself against his unexpected wit. Together they strolled on the bluffs by the sea, drank tea, talked about books. Then the motorbike accident, the fracturing of his skull, ripped him out of her life, and she lost him the way one would lose a blood vessel, painfully and vitally. She missed him for years; she had been searching for his double ever since, and never found him.

The American who made her smile, and told her stories... She had *liked* him. Ned always rather awed her; Jack did not know how to do any such thing.

It was all ridiculous. She thrust back the covers, slapped her feet into her slippers. The rush of standing up made her dizzy; she staggered, clasping her hand to her head. But she collected herself and clicked open the door. She left her bathrobe, supposing she would not need it. The house, with all its grand and empty rooms, would stand like a mausoleum to the gentry, the ghost of a woman (herself) drifting through it in her white nightgown.

But someone else stood in front of the wide windows sashed by the sweeping curtains. A man, not tall, trailing a plume of cigarette smoke like fleece from a distaff.

She gasped in her breath. But he had already heard her: he turned, a brown and almost indistinguishable figure amid the furniture.

"Miss Sands?" he demanded.

"Don't let me disturb you."

"No, no." He chuckled, or, perhaps, coughed on his cigarette; it was such a low, grunting sound that it was hard to guess which. "You're a night wanderer."

She edged forward into the room, her hands tight on her elbows. "Not usually."

"Oh? Hm. I find myself up most nights, between 3 and 4 am." He dragged on the cigarette; the red tip glowed like pursed lips. "Cigarette?" he asked.

She did not smoke, ordinarily. But tonight she would; something must take the tension away from the noise in her brain. She accepted the cigarette from

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his warm, calloused hand, and bent forward to get the light. The smoke flooding her mouth tasted dirty, unpleasant.

They stood in silence, each looking out the window, smoking. In the chilly light of the moon the trees looked almost naked, their new leaves an inadequate covering; they cast rattling shadows through the night sky. Under their shadows the lake swarmed in a vast desert of water.

"So you were in the East," she said.

He thrust his free hand into his pocket. "I was in the East," he agreed.

She puffed in on the cigarette again, then dropped her hand so that the white stub pearly its smoke by her side. "I knew a man once," she said. "Who served in the East."

"A soldier?"

"Yes."

"Hmm." He flicked the ash from his cigarette with a jab of his little finger. She thought of how she would have to clean the ash up in the morning. She wished Arthur Challans had stayed in Syria.

She said, "He liked it there. Better than England maybe - not in the end, but when he was younger. It was dry and he could think so clearly."

"I suppose he was your beau."

"No!" She actually stepped backwards with the force of it. He moved toward her uncertainly, one hand stretched out. "No," she said, steadying herself but putting her hands out in front of her. "I was a girl when I knew him. Fifteen or so. And he gave me Aeschylus to read."

"Aeschylus... It was *Agamemnon*, I hope," said Mr. Challans. He tucked his hand back in his pocket.

"Do you like *Agamemnon*?"

"A man," said Mr. Challans, smoking his cigarette, "comes back from war and finds his wife with another man. And she murders him."

Helen said, peering through the dark at his face, "I know."

"I don't suppose I like or dislike it. I suppose it tells the truth."

It must be to do with Mrs. Challans. Helen twisted the cigarette between her fingers, uneasy.

"She killed his mistress, too," Mr. Challans remarked. "The woman he truly loved. That's how it works out."

Helen rather doubted *Agamemnon* truly loved Cassandra. More likely she was just a sweet little piece (as Jack would have said). She did not think *Agamemnon* had it in him to really love anyone but himself. But still. One should not say these things to a man like Mr. Challans, who spoke of the mythical events as though he had lived through them.

His cigarette had burned down to the nub. He cast about in the dark for an ashtray. Helen looked out the window at the stark trees. "I suppose," she said, "I had better go back. I might sleep now."

"Wait," he said. "Your man in the East... What's he to you now?"

"Dead," said Helen. She had begun to walk toward the door, but stopped on the balls of her feet, rocking a little.

"I'm sorry."

"That's all right. I never knew him very well."

He said nothing to that. She saw the jostling of his arms as he tugged out the box of cigarettes. She walked quickly, and left him.

The next morning he treated her as brusquely as ever. She supposed that nighttime confidences, such as they were, did not count for much.

She climbed the stairs to make his bed for him; apparently men were incapable of straightening coverlets and throwing some pillows on top. He had left the curtains down, throwing a damp gray light over the room. Helen tied them back. As she smoothed the covers on the bed, a glint of silver on the bed stand caught the corner of her eye. She glanced over her shoulder, blinked, looked again. It lay there, small and cold: a pistol. He had been polishing it, to judge by the smoothness of the nickel.

She went back downstairs without touching it.

Perhaps Mrs. Pimm had not slept that night either, for the three of them rattled about the house like flies in a glass, buzzing and annoying each other. Helen supposed she knew what was wrong with Mrs. Pimm, and what had been troubling her since the letter arrived: she feared that Mr. Challans would deprive her of Roxleigh.

Yet what could it matter? What in the uneven, creaking house could hold her there, but memories? Possibly she retained, as well, a sense that she was its proprietor, since she had lived there so long. Mr. Challans would never be so callous as to throw her out, Helen thought.

But still she said nothing, and Helen did not, quite, dare ask any questions of her.

She noticed that Mr. Challans continued to watch her, when he thought she was not looking. She could not tell whether his glances imparted desire, or malice, or a simple curiosity. She pretended not to notice.

At last he opted to take a walk. A type of tranquility returned as the door crashed behind him; they had their routine, Helen and Mrs. Pimm. Helen said in

a loud voice meant to sound free and happy, "I'll just fetch the wood in and then put the kettle on for tea. All right?"

Mrs. Pimm stood in front of the sink, drying her hands in quick swipes of the white cotton towel. She had been drying her hands for minutes now. She said, without looking away from it, "Wait a moment. I've something to say to you."

Helen shifted her feet. She wanted to run outside and fetch the wood. The solidity of the bark flaking off in her arms would weigh her down, plant her feet for her.

"Mr. Challans has made a decision," Mrs. Pimm said. "He did mention it. In the letter. But I wanted to wait, you see, to confirm."

"Yes," Helen said softly.

"Well," said Mrs. Pimm, bursting out a great breath. "There's no two ways about it. He's selling the house. He can't afford to keep it."

She tucked the towel around its rod. "You'll lose your job, of course," she said. "I'm sorry. At least it must be a temporary business, for a lady like you." She turned then and left. And Helen, her hands pressed together at her chest, could find no words to say.

Arthur Challans had wanted to make a final visit to Roxleigh, while he owned it and while it looked as he remembered it out of the scenes of his childhood, when he rode the train north to visit his uncle. So Helen supposed, at least. It was confirmed later.

It seemed she was destined to leave this harbor of tranquility, of no questions asked. She left the table unmade, the sauce unprepared for dinner. She picked up *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and sat in the chair she had always wanted to sit in. It was a great winged chair in the upstairs parlor, settled beside the window, its broad frame upholstered in flowered jacquard. Out on the lakeshore, the swans cavorted in a white sprawl of wings and webbed black feet.

From the back of the book, she pulled a slim packet held together by a length of knotted string. She tugged the string aside and slid the letters free. The first, very old, she had kept because it delighted her childhood sensibilities; he wrote it to her in mockery of Aeschylus and Homer. *O Helen of the sound mind – Well, what may winged words say but that you must bring your bicycle to Clouds Hill instantly? And bring Aeschylus. We will discuss poetry. E.M.F. is here to correct us on inadequacies, of which I have many. – TE*

The rest had come to her from Jack. She could not find it in her heart to unfold them; she knew how they read by heart. A series of letters as he receded away into America, always forgetting to send her his permanent address, the one in Chippewa Falls. The letters told her that he missed her, or related a story she

would find funny, because, he had said, "I want that formidable Englishness to get lost and give me a real laugh." She sent letters in response to the return addresses, but she could not guess whether he had received them. Finally she did not hear from him at all for three months. A wife would have waited longer; but they had never spoken of marriage, and even if they had, she would have refused. And, left without a word from him, the weight of Oxford had settled on her like a cemetery, as though all the buildings stood as houses for the dead. She could not bear it any longer.

So she left, for Roxleigh. If he wrote to her now, would the letter even reach Cumbria? She had given him up, she thought. The wilds of mid America had gulped him into its maw, and she did not have the courage to go find him there.

But he wasn't the man she liked best, anyway, was he? Was he? What of someone like Ned Lawrence – the man she claimed to understand but did not really, the man unfathomable to her as glass. Reading his book, she did not know how anyone could do what he had done. It was enough work to get up the courage to send a letter to America.

But then, Ned had never married.

Perhaps she would not either. She did not know. She thumped her head against the wing of the chair. It was not such a comfortable chair as it had looked like; the cushion pushed up at her stiffly, rather than giving way to her shape.

"I will not impose on you much longer," Arthur Challans said to them, before supper. "I'll be gone soon."

Helen noticed that his glance dropped to the table. He did not seem *happy* about being gone. The wife, left behind in London as contemptuously as Clytemnestra, must not want him back. Or perhaps she was not like Clytemnestra at all; perhaps it was he who was like Agamemnon. Helen wondered about Mr. Challans in the East.

He carried a picture and a poem with him everywhere. She had noticed his tendency to draw them from his breast pocket; but he did not do so in her presence until she stepped into the study that evening to stoke the fire. She shoved the coals back in the grate, and thumped a log down on top of it all. Combing the hair back from her forehead, she saw him fondling the picture and asked abruptly, "Is it Mrs. Challans?"

He blinked, then grunted out a laugh. "She'd like that. No." He was smoking again; it seemed to draw the color out of his eyes. He glanced at her. "Here," he said. "Have a look." He handed her the picture, keeping his fingers at its top with care, so that their hands would not touch.

Helen looked. This Cassandra would not arrest any Greek with her beauty. The photographer had posed her at an angle, so that her head leaned back over her body; it made her jaw and neck look white and thick. The dark swab of her lips looked as though it had been painted on. The whites of her eyes showed in small triangles.

Mr. Challans said, "Our favorite poem was 'Leda and the Swan.' Used to read it to her. I keep a copy with me."

Helen glanced at him, then back at the picture. Leda: the mother of Helen in myth. Ned Lawrence had, in a fit of amusement, called to her, *O daughter of Leda, let's drink the tea!*

"And so," Mr. Challans said, "we've both lost someone to the East." He spoke in a matter of fact tone, but his hands clenching the folded poem belied his urgency.

She handed the picture back to him. "I haven't lost anyone to the East."

"Your beau... the Aeschylus man?" he asked, his brows rising, creating waves through his forehead.

"I lost him to a motorbike accident. In Dorset." And she lost the other one to the West. But Arthur Challans would never hear about him; already, in handing him Ned, she felt she had hacked off a piece of her dreams to lay in his lap, though he did not understand what it meant. She stood up, tugging her skirt into line.

"Mrs. Pimm tells me," she remarked, "we're being evicted."

His hands paused in putting the photograph away. The lines grew tight around his mouth. "I haven't the money to keep you on."

"The war, I suppose."

"I suppose," he said, lifting his head, his face puckering. "I suppose it is the war. But uncle Beattie didn't leave me a cent, did he? Left me a great clodhopping house, but not one ha'penny, not one measly pound. You know who got the money, don't you?" His face was flushing red under the sunburn.

Helen put her hands behind her back. "No," she said.

"Henry Laird," Mr. Challans spat. "*Laird*, my arse!" He kicked his foot against the andiron.

"Who," Helen asked, "is Henry Laird?"

"His bastard, of course." He flung out a hand. "You know. *Her* son."

Helen's hands dropped to her sides. "Not Mrs. Pimm's."

"Of course, hers. Nothing like keeping up the good name of the family, oh no." He fumbled in his pocket for the hard-topped cigarette box, produced it, lit up. The smoke danced in front of his face. "And what," he said, "am I going t' do now? Has anyone thought of that, eh? Anyone at all? My wife wants evening

gowns. Parties. Do you know," he said, "when I saw her at the docks, I didn't even recognize her."

Helen asked softly, "How did the other lady die?"

Mr. Challans burst out a cloud of smoke. The silence rang between them, smoke-ringed. At last he said, in so low a voice it might have been a growl, "They hadn't good doctors over there. If anyone asks, it's TB."

"But it wasn't?"

He stared at the opposite wall, smoking. He said nothing.

Helen ran her fingertips along the pleats of her skirt. "I'm sorry," she said at last. "I should have better manners than to pry." She closed the door behind her as she left. He remained slumped in the chair, his chin tucked to his collarbone.

In the end, she thought, she pitied him. He seemed to have nothing to live for. Whereas she at least knew how to have hope; she could turn the pages of her days like a book, and forge through the story of her life.

She wondered whether Mrs. Pimm would go to live with her son. Henry Laird. A grandiose name for a bastard boy. It must have suited the former master's humor.

And Helen, Helen would go...

She glanced through the yellow lamplight to her suitcase, piling with dust on top of the armoire. Such a small thing, to carry all the necessities of her life. She did not know where to go; she would cast about like a fish on land, until she found the right river. Perhaps she should take up archaeology again. But she could not go back to Oxford.

She tucked herself into bed. She dreamed first of Jack: they were walking together past the tall blocks of city buildings. They leaned against each other, arms linked, and she could not tell whether they were happy or thoughtful, only that they were content together. They turned a corner, and she discovered herself walking beside a rock-dappled river, its banks softened by the newly budded trees. A woman with a thick white neck sat singing on a flat boulder, her fingers long and nimble, stringing together a shirt of nettles. Through the trees echoed the harsh voice of a swan. The woman glanced up. *Not yet!* she cried. *I haven't finished it yet.*

But the swan circled and landed before her, his black eyes dense as coal. And the woman held up the shirt, though one sleeve was missing, and spun it over his head.

He became Arthur Challans, naked. The white and serrated wing of a swan protruded from his left shoulder. He pulled away from it, staring.

She woke to the explosion of noise. She thrashed upright in bed, blinking in the darkness. Let it be a swan, she thought. Let it be a swan, and not him. The fool.

She thrust her feet into slippers and ran through the darkened house. The parlor stood empty, but, glancing by chance out the massive windows, she saw the man's silhouette on the shore. She threw back the bolts on the door and ran through the wet grass. He was still standing there when, nearly reaching him, she staggered as her foot met something hard and small. He had thrown the pistol away. It blinked in the moonlight.

"I put it to my head," Mr. Challans said. "To my head."

But still he stood there, a motionless man, his shoulders tipped forward. And she saw what his leaning body pointed at, the white shadow that did not move in the nettles, the white and limpid body of a swan.

They shook hands in the morning, when she left. She looked into his eyes, but saw nothing there to touch; their color had become opaque, not the windows to the soul but the lids closing it. "Perhaps," she said quietly, "you should leave her, and keep Roxleigh."

He blinked slowly. Crimson touched the peaks of his cheekbones, but he said nothing.

The door shook as Mrs. Pimm came in. The fresh smell of spring rolled off her. Helen turned and embraced her. She did not think Mrs. Pimm would stand for it, but she held Helen silently, the contours of her body absorbing Helen's tremors.

"You'll be all right?" Helen murmured.

"Yes." Mrs. Pimm was patting Helen's hair with soft strokes from the pads of her fingers. "But will you, child?"

"I'll be fine," Helen said. "I'll write to you."

The light shook over Derwentwater, becoming absorbed in the white plumes of the swans as they drifted, tossing their heads, thrusting out their wings. They seemed to have forgotten the tragedy, if it had ever happened. Helen felt almost exhausted with the strain of going, but nevertheless a smile warmed the edges of her lips at the sight of the swans, ever moving, the need for leave-taking as instinctive in them as the need for love.

By the time she reached Keswick, they had beaten off the water and flown away. She could not see where upon the gray lake they landed.

The train waited, purring, at the station. Her hard-soled shoes rang on the metal steps. The conductor doffed his cap to her. She squeezed down the aisle past a black-haired man in tweed, whose Roman nose swung after her as she passed. She did not notice him. She settled on her seat with *Seven Pillars* closed beside her, the seat, perhaps, of her mind. But she did not open it. She kept her eyes on the window, to see where the train would take her.

The train jolted and sighed into life. For a moment Keswick hovered outside the window, separated only by the glass. Then the forest blinked over it like the shutter of an eye, and she became herself alone, a fair-haired woman in a suit, riding the train into the south.