

the more anxious to assert himself against her, and exercise the overt authority which his father never exerted. Between Mr and Mrs Maudsley I never saw a sign of disagreement; she went her way and he went his, gnome-like, leaving a trail of gold.¹¹ I should hardly have known they were married, accustomed as I was to the more demonstrative manner of my parents. He alone, it seemed to me, was not included in the plans that Mrs Maudsley made for everybody, for she had us all, I gradually realized, on a string, which I came to think of as the beam of her dark eye.¹² We seemed to come and go unnoticed but really we did not.

'My sister is very beautiful,' Marcus said to me one day. He announced it quite impersonally, as who should say 'Two and two make four', and I received it in the same spirit. It was a fact, like other facts, something to be learned. I had not thought of Miss Marian¹³ (I think I called her this to myself) as beautiful, but when I saw her next I studied her in the light of Marcus's announcement. It must have been in the front part of the house for I have an impression of light, which was absent in our part, Marcus's and mine; I believe I had some schoolboy notion that the front of the house, where the grown-up people lived, was the 'private side' and that I was trespassing when I went there. She must have been sitting still for my scrutiny, for I have the impression that I was looking down on her, and she was tall, even by grown-up standards. I must have taken her unawares, for she was wearing what I afterwards came to think of as her 'hooded' look. Her father's long eyelids drooped over her eyes, leaving under them a glint of blue so deep and liquid that it might have been shining through an unshed tear. Her hair was bright with sunshine, but her face, which was full like her mother's, only pale rose-pink instead of cream, wore a stern brooding look that her small curved nose made almost hawklike. She looked formidable then, almost as formidable as her mother. A moment later she opened her eyes — I remember the sudden burst of blue — and her face lit up.

So that is what it is to be beautiful, I thought, and for a time my idea of her as a person was confused and even eclipsed by the abstract idea of beauty that she represented. It did not bring her nearer to me, rather the opposite; but I no longer confused her with the other young ladies who circled, planet-like, around the perimeter of my vision.

Those early days were a time of floating impressions, unrelated to each other, making little sense, let alone a story. Scenes linger with me — generally in tones of light and dark, but sometimes tinged with colour. Thus I remember the cedar on the lawn, its dark foliage and the brightness of the turf around its shadow; and I also remember the hammock of crimson canvas slung on two poles beneath it. The hammock was a novelty that had just succeeded the corded, knotted kind that caught your buttons and dragged them off. It was much frequented by the young people and I can still hear them laugh as it tipped them out and spilt them on the grass.

Of this there is no mention in my diary. Of the stables there is more than one, but I have no recollection of them, though I carefully entered the names of five of the horses, Lady Jane, Princess, Uncas, Dry Toast, and Nogo — Nogo I thought deliciously funny, but I can't remember what he or any of them looked like. I can, however, remember the coach-house, though the diary is silent about it. The lamps, the springs, the shafts, the dashboards, with their shining paint and super-polish, fascinated me. And the smell of harness leather — to me more captivating than the stronger horse smells. The coach-house was a treasure-house to me.

Enough of the vagaries and inconsistencies of my memory. But one thing which I had forgotten the diary did bring back — and not only the fact but the scene with the utmost vividness. 'Wednesday 11th of July. Saw the Deadly Nightshade — *Atropa Belladonna*.'¹⁴

Marcus wasn't with me, I was alone, exploring some derelict out-houses which for me had obviously more attraction than the view of Brandham Hall from the S.W. In one, which was roofless as well as derelict, I suddenly came upon the plant. But it wasn't a plant, in my sense of the word, it was a shrub, almost a tree, and as tall as I was. It looked the picture of evil and also the picture of health, it was so glossy and strong and juicy-looking: I could almost see the sap rising to nourish it. It seemed to have found the place in all the world that suited it best.

I knew that every part of it was poisonous, I knew too that it was beautiful, for did not my mother's botany book say so? I stood on the threshold, not daring to go in, staring at the button-bright berries and the dull, purplish, hairy, bell-shaped flowers reaching out towards me. I felt that the plant could poison me, even if I didn't touch it,