

'Well, they can be *my* present, Marcus dear.'

I was surprised to see the fondness in her face.

Marian said she would find out what I needed. For this she would have to examine my exiguous wardrobe, an inquisition which I dreaded; but when it came, when all soft and flouncy she appeared in our room, heralded by Marcus, what a delight it was! — a transformation scene. She studied each garment almost reverently. 'How beautifully they are mended!' she said. 'I wish we had someone who could mend like that!' I didn't tell her that my mother had done it, but perhaps she guessed. She was quick at finding out things. 'Those clothes you had at home were a myth, weren't they?' she said. 'A myth?' I echoed. 'I mean you didn't really have them?' I nodded, happy to have been found out, delighting in the shared secret. But how could she have known?

CHAPTER 4

The expedition to Norwich was a turning-point: it changed everything. Of the expedition itself I remember little except a general sense of well-being which seemed to mount and mount in me, ever seeking higher levels, like wine filling a glass. Ordinarily, the process of buying clothes irked me, for I was not vain of my appearance and had no reason to be. I never felt that it had much to do with me until the amusement caused by my looking so hot convinced me that it had. The idea that I was somehow bound up with what I looked like was a revelation to me and at first a very disturbing one. When Marian told me that one thing suited me and another didn't (she was never for a moment in doubt), when I realized that her main concern was for clothes that would look well rather than wear well, a new feeling was born in me whose sweetness I remember, though it died so quickly. I came back not only feeling it was glorious to be me, but intimately satisfying to look like me.

We lunched at the Maid's Head in Wensum Street,¹ and this was a great occasion for me, for even when my father was alive it was held to be a great extravagance to go to a hotel: if we went out for a meal it was always to a restaurant.

We had started away from Brandham early and by lunch-time we had nearly finished our shopping. One by one the parcels were put into the carriage until the seat in front of us was covered with them. I could hardly believe that most of them were for me. 'Would you like to array yourself now,' Marian asked me, 'or would you rather wait till we get home?' I still remember the indecision that this question brought me; in the end, for the sake of prolonging anticipation, I said that I would wait. Hot as it must have been in Norwich — for the thermometer, when we visited it later in the day, still stood at eighty-three, and had been higher — I don't remember feeling the heat, for all my winter wear.

What did we talk about that has left me with an impression of wings and flashes, as of air displaced by the flight of a bird? Of swooping and soaring, of a faint iridescence² subdued to the enfolding brightness of the day?

It all seemed to depend on her presence, yet when after luncheon she dismissed me, asking me to amuse myself for an hour in the Cathedral, my ecstasy continued.³ No doubt it was partly that I knew that I should soon see her again; but never had I felt in such harmony with my surroundings. It was as though the whole building, striving upwards to its famous vaulted roof, expressed what I was feeling, and later when I left the cool gloom of the interior for the heat and sunshine outside, the domain of Tombland⁴ whose name fascinated me, I kept craning my neck to try to fix the point, the exact point, at which the summit of the spire pierced the sky.

*O altitudo!*⁵ She had asked me to meet her by the statue of Sir Thomas Browne; and in order not to be late I was early; the carriage was there with its two horses, the coachman raised his whip in salute. I hung around the statue, wondering who Sir Thomas Browne was, shy of getting into the carriage and sitting there as if I owned it; and then I caught sight of her on the far side of the square. She seemed to be saying good-bye to someone, at least I had the impression of a raised hat. She came slowly towards me, threading her way through the drowsy traffic, and did not see me till much later. Then she waved her parasol with its frilly, foamy edges, and quickened her step.

My spiritual transformation took place in Norwich: it was there that, like an emerging butterfly, I was first conscious of my wings. I had to wait until tea for the public acknowledgement of my apotheosis. My appearance was greeted with cries of acclaim, as if the whole party had been living for this moment. Instead of gas-jets, fountains of water seemed to spring up around me. I was made to stand on a chair and revolve like a planet, while everything of my new outfit that was visible was subjected to admiring or facetious comment. 'Did you get the tie from Challow's?' cried Denys. 'I won't pay for it unless you did!' Marian said yes. Actually, as I discovered afterwards, the tie had another name on it: we had gone to so many shops! 'What a cool customer he looks!' said someone, wittily. 'Yes,' said another,

'just like a cucumber, and the same shade of green!' They discussed what kind of green it was. 'Lincoln green!'⁶ said another voice. 'He might be Robin Hood!' I was delighted by that, and saw myself roaming the greenwood with Maid Marian. 'Don't you *feel* different?' somebody asked me, almost as indignantly as if I had denied it. 'Yes,' I exclaimed, 'I feel quite another person!' — which was less than the truth. They all laughed at this. The talk drifted away from me, as it does from children, and I got down awkwardly from my pedestal, realizing that my moment was over; but what a moment it had been. 'Come here, my dear,' said Mrs Maudsley, 'and let me look at you near to.' I went towards her nervously, caught like a moth in the beam from her eye, that black searchlight, whose pressure and intensity never varied. She rubbed the soft, thin material between her fingertips. 'These smoked pearl buttons are nice, I think, don't you? Yes, I think it does very well, and I hope your mother will think so, too. By the way, Marian,' she added, turning to her daughter as if I and my concerns no longer existed for her, 'did you find time for those little commissions I gave you — the things we shall be wanting next week?' 'I did, Mama,' said Marian.

'And did you do any shopping for yourself?'

Marian shrugged her shoulders.

'Oh no, Mama; that can wait.'

'You mustn't wait too long,' said Mrs Maudsley evenly. 'You didn't see anyone in Norwich, I suppose?'

'Not a cat,' said Marian. 'We were hard at it all the time, weren't we, Leo?'

'Yes, we were,' I answered, so eager to agree with her that I forgot the hour I had spent in the Cathedral.

From being my enemy the summer had become my friend: this was another consequence of our Norwich shopping. I felt I had been given the freedom of the heat, and I roamed about in it as if I was exploring a new element. I liked to watch it rise shimmering from the ground and hang heavy on the tops of the darkening July trees. I liked the sense of suspended movement that it gave or seemed to give, reducing everything in Nature to the stillness of contemplation. I liked to touch it with my hand, and feel it on my throat and round my knees, which now were bare to its embrace. I yearned to travel far, ever farther into it, and achieve a close approximation with it;