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The Paying Guests

Written by Sarah Waters

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SARAH WATERS

The Paying Guests



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To Judith Murray,
with thanks and with love

Part One

1

The Barbers had said they would arrive by three. It was like waiting to begin a journey, Frances thought. She and her mother had spent the morning watching the clock, unable to relax. At half-past two she had gone wistfully over the rooms for what she'd supposed was the final time; after that there had been a nerving-up, giving way to a steady deflation, and now, at almost five, here she was again, listening to the echo of her own footsteps, feeling no sort of fondness for the sparsely furnished spaces, impatient simply for the couple to arrive, move in, get it over with.

She stood at a window in the largest of the rooms—the room which, until recently, had been her mother's bedroom, but was now to be the Barbers' sitting-room—and stared out at the street. The afternoon was bright but powdery. Flurries of wind sent up puffs of dust from the pavement and the road. The grand houses opposite had a Sunday blankness to them—but then, they had that every day of the week. Around the corner there was a large hotel, and motor-cars and taxi-cabs occasionally came this way to and from it; sometimes people strolled up here as if to take the air. But Champion Hill, on the whole, kept itself to itself. The gardens were large, the trees leafy. You would never know, she thought, that grubby Camberwell was just down there. You'd never guess

that a mile or two further north lay London, life, glamour, all that.

The sound of a vehicle made her turn her head. A tradesman's van was approaching the house. This couldn't be them, could it? She'd expected a carrier's cart, or even for the couple to arrive on foot—but, yes, the van was pulling up at the kerb, with a terrific creak of its brake, and now she could see the faces in its cabin, dipped and gazing up at hers: the driver's and Mr Barber's, with Mrs Barber's in between. Feeling trapped and on display in the frame of the window, she lifted her hand, and smiled.

This is it, then, she said to herself, with the smile still in place.

It wasn't like beginning a journey, after all; it was like ending one and not wanting to get out of the train. She pushed away from the window and went downstairs, calling as brightly as she could from the hall into the drawing-room, 'They've arrived, Mother!'

By the time she had opened the front door and stepped into the porch the Barbers had left the van and were already at the back of it, already unloading their things. The driver was helping them, a young man dressed almost identically to Mr Barber in a blazer and a striped neck-tie, and with a similarly narrow face and ungreased, week-endy hair, so that for a moment Frances was uncertain which of the two *was* Mr Barber. She had met the couple only once, nearly a fortnight ago. It had been a wet April evening and the husband had come straight from his office, in a mackintosh and bowler hat.

But now she recalled his gingery moustache, the reddish gold of his hair. The other man was fairer. The wife, whose outfit before had been sober and rather anonymous, was wearing a skirt with a fringe to it and a crimson jersey. The skirt ended a good six inches above her ankles. The jersey was long and not at all clinging, yet somehow revealed the curves of her figure. Like the men, she was hatless. Her dark hair was short, curling forward over her cheeks but shingled at the nape of her neck, like a clever black cap.

How young they looked! The men seemed no more than boys, though Frances had guessed, on his other visit, that Mr Barber must be twenty-six or -seven, about the same age as herself. Mrs Barber she'd put at twenty-three. Now she wasn't so sure. Crossing the flagged front garden she heard their excited, unguarded voices. They had drawn a trunk from the van and set it unsteadily down; Mr Barber had apparently caught his fingers underneath it. 'Don't laugh!' she heard him cry to his wife, in mock-complaint. She remembered, then, their 'refined' elocution-class accents.

Mrs Barber was reaching for his hand. 'Let me see. Oh, there's nothing.'

He snatched the hand back. 'There's nothing now. You just wait a bit. Christ, that hurts!'

The other man rubbed his nose. 'Look out.' He had seen Frances at the garden gate. The Barbers turned, and greeted her through the tail of their laughter—so that the laughter, not very comfortably, somehow attached itself to her.

'Here you are, then,' she said, joining the three of them on the pavement.

Mr Barber, still almost laughing, said, 'Yes, here we are! Bringing down the character of the street already, you see.'

'Oh, my mother and I do that.'

Mrs Barber spoke more sincerely. 'We're sorry we're late, Miss Wray. The time just flew! You haven't been waiting? You'd think we'd come from John o' Groats or somewhere, wouldn't you?'

They had come from Peckham Rye, about two miles away. Frances said, 'Sometimes the shortest journeys take longest, don't they?'

'They do,' said Mr Barber, 'if Lilian's involved in them. Mr Wismuth and I were ready at one.—This is my friend Charles Wismuth, who's kindly lent us the use of his father's van for the day.'

'You weren't ready at all!' cried Mrs Barber, as a grinning

Mr Wismuth moved forward to shake Frances's hand. 'Miss Wray, they weren't, honestly!'

'We were ready and waiting, while you were still sorting through your hats!'

'At any rate,' said Frances, 'you are here now.'

Perhaps her tone was rather a cool one. The three young people looked faintly chastened, and with a glance at his injured knuckles Mr Barber returned to the back of the van. Over his shoulder Frances caught a glimpse of what was inside it: a mess of bursting suitcases, a tangle of chair and table legs, bundle after bundle of bedding and rugs, a portable gramophone, a wicker birdcage, a bronze-effect ashtray on a marbled stand . . . The thought that all these items were about to be brought into her home—and that this couple, who were not quite the couple she remembered, who were younger, and brasher, were going to bring them, and set them out, and make their own home, brashly, among them—the thought brought on a flutter of panic. What on earth had she done? She felt as though she was opening up the house to thieves and invaders.

But there was nothing else for it, if the house were to be kept going at all. With a determined smile she went closer to the van, wanting to help.

The men wouldn't let her. 'You mustn't think of it, Miss Wray.'

'No, honestly, you mustn't,' said Mrs Barber. 'Len and Charlie will do it. There's hardly anything, really.' And she gazed down at the objects that were accumulating around her, tapping at her mouth with her fingers.

Frances remembered that mouth now: it was a mouth, as she'd put it to herself, that seemed to have more on the outside than on the in. It was touched with colour today, as it hadn't been last time, and Mrs Barber's eyebrows, she noticed, were thinned and shaped. The stylish details made her uneasy along with everything else, made her feel old-maidish, with her pinned-up hair and her angles,

and her blouse tucked into her high-waisted skirt, after the fashion of the War, which was already four years over. Seeing Mrs Barber, a tray of houseplants in her arms, awkwardly hooking her wrist through the handle of a raffia hold-all, she said, 'Let me take that bag for you, at least.'

'Oh, I can do it!'

'Well, I really must take something.'

Finally, noticing Mr Wismuth just handing it out of the van, she took the hideous stand-ashtray, and went across the front garden with it to hold open the door of the house. Mrs Barber came after her, stepping carefully up into the porch.

At the threshold itself, however, she hesitated, leaning over the ferns in her arms to look into the hall, and to smile.

'It's just as nice as I remembered.'

Frances turned. 'It is?' She could see only the dishonesty of it all: the scuffs and tears she had patched and disguised; the gap where the long-case clock had stood, which had had to be sold six months before; the dinner-gong, bright with polish, that hadn't been rung in years and years. Turning back to Mrs Barber, she found her still waiting at the step. 'Well,' she said, 'you'd better come in. It's your house too, now.'

Mrs Barber's shoulders rose; she bit her lip and raised her eyebrows in a pantomime of excitement. She stepped cautiously into the hall, where the heel of one of her shoes at once found an unsteady tile on the black-and-white floor and set it rocking. She tittered in embarrassment: 'Oh, dear!'

Frances's mother appeared at the drawing-room door. Perhaps she had been standing just inside it, getting up the enthusiasm to come out.

'Welcome, Mrs Barber.' Smiling, she came forward. 'What pretty plants. Rabbit's foot, aren't they?'

Mrs Barber manoeuvred her tray and her hold-all so as to be able to offer her hand. 'I'm afraid I don't know.'

'I believe they are. Rabbit's foot—so pretty. You found your way to us all right?'

'Yes, but I'm sorry we're so late!'

'Well, it doesn't matter to us. The rooms weren't going to run away. We must give you some tea.'

'Oh, you mustn't trouble.'

'But you must have tea. One always wants tea when one moves house; and one can never find the teapot. I'll see to it, while my daughter takes you upstairs.' She gazed dubiously at the ashtray. 'You're helping too, are you, Frances?'

'It seemed only fair to, with Mrs Barber so laden.'

'Oh, no, you mustn't help at all,' said Mrs Barber—adding, with another titter, 'We don't expect that!'

Frances, going ahead of her up the staircase, thought: How she laughs!

Up on the wide landing they had to pause again. The door on their left was closed—that was the door to Frances's bedroom, the only room up here which was to stay in her and her mother's possession—but the other doors all stood open, and the late-afternoon sunlight, richly yellow now as the yolk of an egg, was streaming in through the two front rooms as far almost as the staircase. It showed up the tears in the rugs, but also the polish on the Regency floorboards, which Frances had spent several back-breaking mornings that week bringing to the shine of dark toffee; and Mrs Barber didn't like to cross the polish in her heels. 'It doesn't matter,' Frances told her. 'The surface will dull soon enough, I'm afraid.' But she answered firmly, 'No, I don't want to spoil it'—putting down her bag and her tray of plants and slipping off her shoes.

She left small damp prints on the wax. Her stockings were black ones, blackest at the toe and at the heel, where the reinforcing of the silk had been done in fancy stepped panels. While Frances hung back and watched she went into the largest of the rooms, looking

around it in the same noticing, appreciative manner in which she had looked around the hall; smiling at every antique detail.

'What a lovely room this is. It feels even bigger than it did last time. Len and I will be lost in it. We've only had our bedroom really, you see, at his parents'. And their house is—well, not like this one.' She crossed to the left-hand window—the window at which Frances had been standing a few minutes before—and put up a hand to shade her eyes. 'And look at the sun! It was cloudy when we came before.'

Frances joined her at last. 'Yes, you get the best of the sun in this room. I'm afraid there isn't much in the way of a view, even though we're so high.'

'Oh, but you can see a little, between the houses.'

'Between the houses, yes. And if you peer south—that way'—she pointed—'you can make out the towers of the Crystal Palace. You have to go nearer to the glass . . . You see them?'

They stood close together for a moment, Mrs Barber with her face an inch from the window, her breath misting the glass. Her dark-lashed eyes searched, then fixed. 'Oh, yes!' She sounded delighted.

But then she moved back, and drew in her gaze; and her voice changed, became indulgent. 'Oh, look at Len. Look at him complaining. Isn't he puny!' She tapped at the window, and called and gestured. 'Let Charlie take that! Come and see the sun! The *sun*. Can you see? *The sun!*' She dropped her hand. 'He can't understand me. Never mind. How funny it is, seeing our things set out like that. How poor it all looks! Like a penny bazaar. What must your neighbours be thinking, Miss Wray?'

What indeed? Already Frances could see sharp-eyed Mrs Dawson over the way, pretending to be fiddling with the bolt of her drawing-room window. And now here was Mr Lamb from High Croft further down the hill, pausing as he passed to blink at the stuffed suitcases, the blistered tin trunks, the bags, the baskets

and the rugs that Mr Barber and Mr Wismuth, for convenience, were piling on the low brick garden wall.

She saw the two men give him a nod, and heard their voices: 'How do you do?' He hesitated, unable to place them—perhaps thrown by the stripes on their 'club' ties.

'We ought to go and help,' she said.

Mrs Barber answered, 'Oh, I will.'

But when she left the room it was to wander into the bedroom beside it. And she went from there to the last of the rooms, the small back room facing Frances's bedroom across the return of the landing and the stairs—the room which Frances and her mother still called Nelly and Mabel's room, even though they hadn't had Nelly, Mabel, or any other live-in servant since the munitions factories had finally lured them away in 1916. This was done up now as a kitchen, with a dresser and a sink, with gaslight and a gas stove and a shilling-in-the-slot meter. Frances herself had varnished the wallpaper; she had stained the floor here, rather than waxing it. The cupboard and the aluminium-topped table she had hauled up from the scullery, one day when her mother wasn't at home to have to watch her do it.

She had done her best to get it all right. But seeing Mrs Barber going about, taking possession, determining which of her things would go here, which there, she felt oddly redundant—as if she had become her own ghost. She said awkwardly, 'Well, if you've everything you need, I'll see how your tea's coming along. I shall be just downstairs if there's any sort of problem. Best to come to me rather than to my mother, and—Oh.' She stopped, and reached into her pocket. 'I'd better give you these, hadn't I, before I forget.'

She drew out keys to the house: two sets, on separate ribbons. It took an effort to hand them over, actually to put them into the palm of this woman, this girl—this more or less perfect stranger, who had been summoned into life by the placing of an advertisement in the

South London Press. But Mrs Barber received the keys with a gesture, a dip of her head, to show that she appreciated the significance of the moment. And with unexpected delicacy she said, 'Thank you, Miss Wray. Thank you for making everything so nice. I'm sure Leonard and I will be happy here. Yes, I'm certain we will. I have something for you too, of course,' she added, as she took the keys to her hold-all to stow them away. She brought back a creased brown envelope.

It was two weeks' rent. Fifty-eight shillings: Frances could already hear the rustle of the pound notes and the slide and chink of the coins. She tried to arrange her features into a businesslike expression as she took the envelope from Mrs Barber's hand, and she tucked it in her pocket in a negligent sort of way—as if anyone, she thought, could possibly be deceived into thinking that the money was a mere formality, and not the essence, the shabby heart and kernel, of the whole affair.

Downstairs, while the men went puffing past with a treadle sewing-machine, she slipped into the drawing-room, just to give herself a quick peek at the cash. She parted the gum of the envelope and—oh, there it all was, so real, so present, so *hers*, she felt she could dip her mouth to it and kiss it. She folded it back into her pocket, then almost skipped across the hall and along the passage to the kitchen.

Her mother was at the stove, lifting the kettle from the hotplate with the faintly harried air she always had when left alone in the kitchen; she might have been a passenger on a stricken liner who'd just been bundled into the engine room and told to man the gauges. She gave the kettle up to Frances's steadier hand, and went about gathering the tea-things, the milk-jug, the bowl of sugar. She put three cups and saucers on a tray for the Barbers and Mr Wismuth; and then she hesitated with two more saucers raised. She spoke to Frances in a whisper. 'Ought we to drink with them, do you think?'

Frances hesitated too. What were the rules?

Oh, who cared! They had got the money now. She plucked the saucers from her mother's fingers. 'No, let's not start that sort of thing off. There'll be no end to it if we do. We can keep to the drawing-room; they can have their tea up there. I'll give them a plate of biscuits to go with it.' She drew the lid from the tin and dipped in her hand.

Once again, however, she dithered. Were biscuits absolutely necessary? She put three on a plate, set the plate beside the teapot—then changed her mind and took it off again.

But then she thought of nice Mrs Barber, going carefully over the polish; she thought of the fancy heels on her stockings; and returned the plate to the tray.

The men went up and down the stairs for another thirty minutes, and for some time after that boxes and cases could be heard being shifted about, furniture was dragged and wheeled, the Barbers called from room to room; once there came a blast of music from their portable gramophone, that made Frances and her mother look at one another, aghast. But Mr Wismuth left at six, tapping at the drawing-room door as he went, wanting to say a polite goodbye; and with his departure the house grew calmer.

It was inescapably not, however, the house that it had been two hours before. Frances and her mother sat with books at the French windows, ready to eke out the last of the daylight—having got used, in the past few years, to making little economies like that. But the room—a long, handsome room, running the depth of the house, divided by double doors which, in spring and summer, they left open—had two of the Barbers' rooms above it, their bedroom and their kitchen, and Frances, turning pages, found herself aware of the couple overhead, as conscious of their foreign presence as she might have been of a speck in the corner of her eye. For a while they moved about in the bedroom; she could hear drawers being opened and closed. But then one of them entered their kitchen

and, after a purposeful pause, there came a curious harsh dropping sound, like the clockwork gulp of a metal monster. One gulp, two gulps, three gulps, four: she stared at the ceiling, baffled, until she realised that they were simply putting shillings in the meter. Water was run after that, and then another odd noise started, a sort of pulse or quick pant—the meter again, presumably, as the gas ran through it. Mrs Barber must be boiling a kettle. Now her husband had joined her. There was conversation, laughter … Frances caught herself thinking, as she might have done of guests, Well, they're certainly making themselves at home.

Then she took in the implication of the words, and her heart, very slightly, sank.

While she was out in the kitchen assembling a cold Sunday supper, the couple came down, and tapped at the door, first the wife and then the husband: the WC was an outside one, across the yard from the back door, and they had to pass through the kitchen to get to it. They came grimacing with apology; Frances apologised, too. She supposed that the arrangement was as inconvenient to them as it was to her. But with each encounter, her confidence wobbled a little more. Even the fifty-eight shillings in her pocket began to lose their magic power; it was dawning on her just how thoroughly she would have to earn them. She simply hadn't prepared herself for the oddness of the sound and the sight of the couple going about from room to room as if the rooms belonged to them. When Mr Barber, for example, headed back upstairs after his visit to the yard, she heard him pause in the hall. Wondering what could be delaying him, she ventured a look along the passage, and saw him gazing at the pictures on the walls like a man in a gallery. Leaning in for a better look at a steel engraving of Ripon Cathedral he put his fingers to his pocket and brought out a matchstick, with which he began idly picking his teeth.

She didn't mention any of this to her mother. The two of them kept brightly to their evening routine, playing a couple of games

of backgammon once supper had been eaten, taking a cup of watery cocoa at a quarter to ten, then starting on the round of chores—the gatherings, the turnings-down, the cushion-plumpings and the lockings-up—with which they eased their way to bed.

Frances's mother said good night first. Frances herself spent some time in the kitchen, tidying, seeing to the stove. She visited the WC, she laid the table for breakfast; she took the milk-can out to the front garden, put it to hang beside the gate. But when she had returned to the house and was lowering the gas in the hall she noticed a light still shining under her mother's door. And though she wasn't in the habit of calling in on her mother after she had gone to bed, somehow, tonight, that bar of light beckoned. She went across to it, and tapped.

'May I come in?'

Her mother was sitting up in bed, her hair unpinned and put into plaits. The plaits hung down like fraying ropes: until the War her hair had been brown, as pure a brown as Frances's, but it had faded in the past few years, growing coarser in the process, and now, at fifty-five, she had the white head of an old lady; only her brows remained dark and decided above her handsome hazel eyes. She had a book in her lap, a little railway thing called *Puzzles and Conundrums*: she had been trying out answers to an acrostic.

She let the book sink when Frances appeared, and gazed at her over the lenses of her reading-glasses.

'Everything all right, Frances?'

'Yes. Just thought I'd look in. Go on with your puzzle, though.'

'Oh, it's only a nonsense to help me off to sleep.'

But she peered at the page again, and an answer must have come to her: she tried out the word, her lips moving along with her pencil. The unoccupied half of bed beside her was flat as an ironing-board. Frances kicked off her slippers, climbed on to it, and lay back with her hands behind her head.

This room had still been the dining-room, a month before. Frances had painted over the old red paper and rearranged the pictures, but, as with the new kitchen upstairs, the result was not quite convincing. Her mother's bits of bedroom furniture seemed to her to be sitting as tensely as unhappy visitors: she could feel them pining for their grooves and smooches in the floor of the room above. Some of the old dining-room furniture had had to stay in here too, for want of anywhere else to put it, and the effect was an overcrowded one, with a suggestion of elderliness and a touch—just a touch—of the sick chamber. It was the sort of room she could remember from childhood visits to ailing great-aunts. All it really lacked, she thought, was the whiff of a commode, and the little bell for summoning the whiskery spinster daughter.

She quickly turned her back on that image. Upstairs, one of the Barbers could be heard crossing their sitting-room floor—Mr Barber, she guessed it was, from the bounce and briskness of the tread; Mrs Barber's was more sedate. Looking up at the ceiling, she followed the steps with her eyes.

Beside her, her mother also gazed upward. 'A day of great changes,' she said with a sigh. 'Are they still unpacking their things? They're excited, I suppose. I remember when your father and I first came here, we were just the same. They seem pleased with the house, don't you think?' She had lowered her voice. 'That's something, isn't it?'

Frances answered in the same almost furtive tone. '*She* does, at any rate. She looks like she can't believe her luck. I'm not so sure about him.'

'Well, it's a fine old house. And a home of their own: that means a great deal when one is first married.'

'Oh, but they're hardly newly-weds, are they? Didn't they tell us that they'd been married for three years? Straight out of the War, I suppose. No children, though.'

Her mother's tone changed slightly. 'No.' And after a second,

the one thought plainly having led to the next, she added, 'Such a pity that the young women today all feel they must make up.'

Frances reached for the book and studied the acrostic. 'Isn't it? And on a Sunday, too.'

She felt her mother's level gaze. 'Don't imagine that I can't tell when you are making fun of me, Frances.'

Upstairs, Mrs Barber laughed. Something light was dropped or thrown and went skittering across the boards. Frances gave up on the puzzle. 'What do you think her background can be?'

Her mother had closed the book and was putting it aside. 'Whose?'

She gave a jerk of her chin. 'Mrs B's. I should say her father's some sort of branch manager, shouldn't you? A mother who's rather "nice". "Indian Love Lyrics" on the gramophone, perhaps a brother doing well for himself in the Merchant Navy. Piano lessons for the girls. An outing to the Royal Academy once a year . . . ' She began to yawn. Covering her mouth with the back of her wrist, she went on, through the yawn, 'One good thing, I suppose, about their being so young: they've only his parents to compare us with. They won't know that we really haven't a clue what we're doing. So long as we act the part of landladies with enough gusto, then landladies is what we will be.'

Her mother looked pained. 'How baldly you put it! You might be Mrs Seaview, of Worthing.'

'Well, there's no shame in being a landlady; not these days. I for one aim to enjoy landladying.'

'If you would only stop saying the word!'

Frances smiled. But her mother was plucking at the silk binding of a blanket, a look of real distress beginning to creep into her expression; she was an inch, Frances knew, from saying, 'Oh, it would break your dear father's heart!' And since even now, nearly four years after his death, Frances couldn't think of her father without wanting to grind her teeth, or swear, or leap up and

smash something, she hastily turned the conversation. Her mother was involved in the running of two or three local charities: she asked after those. They spoke for a time about a forthcoming bazaar.

Once she saw her mother's face clear, become simply tired and elderly, she got to her feet.

'Now, have you everything you need? You don't want a biscuit, in case you wake?'

Her mother began to arrange herself for sleep. 'No, I don't want a biscuit. But you may put out the light for me, Frances.'

She lifted the plaits away from her shoulders and settled her head on her pillow. Her glasses had left little bruise-like dints on the bridge of her nose. As Frances reached to the lamp there were more footsteps in the room above; and then her hazel eyes returned to the ceiling.

'It might be Noel or John Arthur up there,' she murmured, as the light went down.

And, yes, thought Frances a moment later, lingering in the shadowy hall, it might be; for she could smell tobacco smoke now, and hear some sort of masculine muttering up on the landing, along with the tap of a slippered male foot . . . And just like that, like a knee or an elbow receiving a blow on the wrong spot, her heart was jangling. How grief could catch one out, still! She had to stand at the foot of the stairs while the fit of sorrow ran through her. But if only, she thought, as she began to climb—she hadn't thought it in ages—if only, if only she might turn the stair and find one of her brothers at the top—John Arthur, say, looking lean, looking bookish, looking like a whimsical monk in his brown Jaeger dressing-gown and Garden City sandals.

There was no one save Mr Barber, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, his jacket off, his cuffs rolled back; he was fiddling with a nasty thing he had evidently just hung on the landing wall, a combination barometer-and-clothes-brush set with a lurid orangey

varnish. But lurid touches were everywhere, she saw with dismay. It was as if a giant mouth had sucked a bag of boiled sweets and then given the house a lick. The faded carpet in her mother's old bedroom was lost beneath pseudo-Persian rugs. The lovely pier-glass had been draped slant-wise with a fringed Indian shawl. A print on one of the walls appeared to be a Classical nude in the Lord Leighton manner. The wicker birdcage twirled slowly on a ribbon from a hook that had been screwed into the ceiling; inside it was a silk-and-feather parrot on a papier-mâché perch.

The landing light was turned up high, hissing away as if furious. Frances wondered if the couple had remembered that she and her mother were paying for that. Catching Mr Barber's eye, she said, in a voice to match the dreadful brightness all around them, 'Got everything straight, have you?'

He took the cigarette out of his mouth, stifling a yawn. 'Oh, I've had enough of it for one day, Miss Wray. I did my bit, bringing up those blessed boxes. I leave the titivating to Lilian. She loves all that sort of thing. She can titivate for England, she can.'

Frances hadn't really looked at him properly before. She'd absorbed his manner, his 'theme'—that facetious grumbling—rather than anything more tangible, more physical. Now, in the flat landing light, she took in the clerkly neatness of him. Without his shoes he was only an inch or two taller than she. 'Puny,' his wife had called him; but there was too much life in him for that. His face was textured with gingery stubble and with little pimple scars, his jaw was narrow, his teeth slightly crowded, his eyes had sandy, near-invisible lashes. But the eyes themselves were very blue, and they somehow made him handsome, or almost-handsome—more handsome, anyhow, than she had realised so far.

She looked away from him. 'Well, I'm off to bed.'

He fought down another yawn. 'Lucky you! I think Lily's still decorating ours.'