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Less Than Angels

Written by Barbara Pym

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LESS THAN ANGELS

Barbara Pym

Introduced by Salley Vickers

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A confused impression of English tourists shuffling round a church in Ravenna, peering at mosaics, came to Catherine Oliphant as she sat brooding over her pot of tea. But then she realized that of course she wasn't in Italy, and the shuffling figures weren't tourists but men and women from nearby offices, coming away from the counter with their trays and settling down at the tables with hardly a glance at the mosaics on the walls. These were large bright peacocks with spreading tails, each one occupying a little alcove, almost like a side chapel in a cathedral. But why didn't the tray-carriers make some obeisance as they passed the peacocks, or lay offerings of buns, poached eggs and salads on the ground before them? Catherine wondered. Obviously the cult of peacock worship, if it had ever existed, had fallen into disuse.

She poured herself another cup of tea which had become dark and stewed, as she preferred it. She felt no guilt, sitting idly at her table in the window, watching the sun streaming through the amethyst and gold stained-glass borders, while everyone around her gulped and hurried to catch trains home, for she earned her living writing stories and articles for women's magazines and had to draw her inspiration from everyday life, though life itself was

sometimes too strong and raw and must be made palatable by fancy, as tough meat may be made tender by mincing.

Catherine was small and thin and thought of herself, with a certain amount of complacency, as looking like Jane Eyre or a Victorian child whose head has been cropped because of scarlet fever. It was natural for her to look a little ragged and untidy, and the fashions of the day, when women in their thirties could dress like girls of twenty in flat-heeled shoes and loose jackets, their hair apparently cut with nail scissors, suited her very well.

Looking out of the window and down into the street, she saw the rush-hour crowds beginning to move towards the bus-stops. Soon they began to take on a human look, to become separate individuals who might even be known to her. This seemed a good deal more likely, though less romantic, in London than in Paris, where it was said that if you sat long enough at a certain café on the pavement, everybody you had ever known or loved would pass by eventually. Surely though, Catherine thought, peering down, it couldn't be quite *everyone*, that would be far too emotionally exhausting.

On this spring evening she knew that she couldn't possibly see Tom, her present love, because he was in Africa studying his tribe, but it was odd that when the moment did come, the familiar faces in the crowd should be those of two senior anthropologists she had once met at a learned gathering he had taken her to. They seemed to be walking in the wrong direction, against the hurrying stream, and Catherine would hardly have remembered them if they had not been rather an unusual pair, like comics in a music-hall turn. Professor Fairfax was tall and thin with a rather shrunken-looking head; it was a strange coincidence that the particular tribe he had studied went in for head shrinking and his students had not been slow to point it out. Dr Vere, his companion, was small and rotund, the perfect antithesis.

Where could they be going at this time, in the wrong direction? Catherine wondered. Was it perhaps significant that two anthropologists, whose business was to study behaviour in human societies, should find themselves pushing against the stream? She hardly knew how to follow up her observation and made no attempt to do so, only asking herself again where they could be going. Curiosity has its pains as well as its pleasures, and the bitterest of its pains must surely be the inability to follow up everything to its conclusion. Professor Fairfax and Dr Vere continued to push their way through the crowds, then they disappeared into a side street and were lost from view. Catherine finished her tea and stood up reluctantly to go.

Down in the street a taxi slowed down opposite to where she was waiting to cross over. She could not have known that the distinguished-looking elderly man inside it, stroking his small silver beard, was Felix Byron Mainwaring, one of the older professors of anthropology, now living in retirement in the country.

The taxi turned into the side street and Professor Mainwaring leaned forward in pleasurable anticipation. He told the driver to stop before he had reached the number he really wanted, so that he could see the house from the outside. He tried to imagine how it would strike his colleagues, approaching in their shabby motorcars or on foot, laden with the paraphernalia of their academic calling, raincoats, brief-cases, files of notes, from which they seemed so unwilling to be parted even on social occasions. Would they raise their eyes to the beautiful Georgian façade – would they even know that it was Georgian? – and envy his skill in having persuaded Minnie Foresight that some, at least, of her late husband's wealth could not be more nobly used than in founding a new anthropological library and research centre and endowing a number of fellowships for young men and women? Certainly *they* could not have done as much. He remembered the

first-class railway carriage and the distant church spires of Leamington Spa seen in the greenish light of a spring evening last year, and Mrs Foresight – it was difficult to think of her as Minnie which was surely an unworthy name – leaning back against the white lace antimacassar, her large blue eyes full of admiration and bewilderment while he talked and explained and persuaded . . . Felix was almost chuckling to himself at the memory of it and gave the driver an unnecessarily large tip as he got out of his taxi.

Fairfax and Vere, trudging along on the opposite side of the street, were talking loudly as they approached the house. Each had a penetrating voice – William Vere because, as a refugee, he had been forced to build a new life in a strange country and make his impression in a foreign language, and Gervase Fairfax because he was the youngest of a large family and had always had to assert himself. Now they were discussing their students, by no means unkindly, for there was a friendly rivalry between them in getting the young people fixed up with research grants which would take them into the 'field' – Africa, Malaya, Borneo or any remote island where there remained a tribe still to be studied.

'Number twenty-three – this must be it,' said Fairfax shortly,

'Yes, I think so.'

They made no comment on the elegance of the house because they did not even glance at it, except to see the number on the door. They were curious to see the place – Felix's Folly, they called it among themselves – but they had both had a hard day and needed a drink.

'I hope everything is ready inside,' said Fairfax, glancing at his watch. 'It's a bad thing to arrive too early, you know. I hope Esther Clovis and her helpers have been cutting sandwiches, or perhaps Felix will have been wise enough to leave that side of it to a catering firm.'

'I suppose he would hardly concern himself with the domestic side of things,' said Vere. 'But we must hope for the best.' He had told his wife that he would not be needing a large meal that evening.

Inside the house there was plenty to eat and drink, but a crisis had arisen. The library had already been open to readers for some days and at this particular moment it happened to be full of young anthropologists, some of them mere students, who had not been invited to the party, which was to take place in the library itself.

Miss Clovis and her friend Miss Lydgate, who was an expert in African languages, had been in and out of the room with plates of eatables in their hands several times, thinking that surely at the sight of food, unexpected in any kind of library, the visitors would realize that something was afoot and make a move to go. But they continued to read books and make notes.

'I shall have to take action,' said Miss Clovis firmly. 'Come, Gertrude,' she added to her friend, 'we will confront them yet again.'

Six faces glanced up from the long table as the two women entered the room. Miss Lydgate was exceptionally tall with white hair, her garments seeming to flutter round her like draperies, while Miss Clovis was of stocky build with roughly cut short hair and tweedy clothes.

'Good afternoon,' she called out in a ringing tone. 'I am so glad to see that you are taking advantage of this splendid new library so soon. There is really something quite special about it, you know.' She paused, expecting some kind of an answer.

It came from Brandon J. Pirbright, a short dapper young man, elegantly dressed in lavender grey with a spotless white nylon shirt and bow tie. 'I guess it must be, Miss Clovis,' he said. 'We haven't been offered refreshments anywhere else, have we, Melanie?'

'Why no,' said his wife, a dark fierce-looking woman, some inches taller than her husband and less elegantly dressed. 'I think it's a lovely idea.'

'It is a celebration of something?' asked another reader, Jean-Pierre le Rossignol, a good-looking young Frenchman, wearing a suit of biscuit-coloured corduroy velvet.

'Well, I suppose you might say that it is,' admitted Miss Clovis, remembering that as well as the Foresight money they had also received a generous grant from the United States and a legacy from a distinguished French anthropologist. Perhaps, after all, it would be a gracious gesture to include these young people in the party. 'A few people are coming in to drink sherry,' she said. 'I should be very pleased if you would join us.'

Miss Clovis now glanced rather doubtfully at the other three readers who had looked up expectantly on hearing her words. They were a girl of nineteen, Deirdre Swan, and two young men, Mark Penfold and Digby Fox. The last two were close friends and at first sight looked rather alike in their shabby tweed jackets and grey flannel trousers; but while Mark's hair was dark and inclined to be curly, Digby's was fairer and straighter and he was also thought to have a nicer disposition. To Miss Clovis they were just two of the many undistinguished-looking students with whom her work brought her into contact; solid, hard-working, worthy and just a little dull. But let them come too, she thought with an impulse of generosity, as representatives of the hundreds who will use this library. They certainly could not afford to dress as elegantly as the American and the Frenchman, but they were none the worse for that and she had never been one to judge too much by outward appearances. Indeed, she hardly could have been when she obviously paid so little attention to her own.

Esther Clovis had formerly been secretary of a Learned Society, which post she had recently left because of some

disagreement with the President. It is often supposed that those who live and work in academic or intellectual circles are above the petty disputes that vex the rest of us, but it does sometimes seem as if the exalted nature of their work makes it necessary for them to descend occasionally and to refresh themselves, as it were, by squabbling about trivialities. The subject of Miss Clovis's quarrel with the President was known only to a privileged few and even those knew no more than that it had something to do with the making of tea. Not that the making of tea can ever really be regarded as a petty or trivial matter and Miss Clovis did seem to have been seriously at fault. Hot water from the tap had been used, the kettle had not been quite boiling, the teapot had not been warmed . . . whatever the details, there had been words, during the course of which other things had come out, things of a darker nature. Voices had been raised and in the end Miss Clovis had felt bound to hand in her resignation. She had been very lucky to be appointed as a kind of caretaker in the new research centre, for it happened that Professor Mainwaring, in whose hands the appointment lay, disliked the President of the Learned Society. Esther Clovis might not be much of a tea-maker but she had considerable organizing ability and knew how to act in a crisis, as at this moment, confronted with the anthropologists who would not go.

'You will join us too?' she beamed, rather alarming in her geniality. 'We must have the younger generation represented. Mrs Foresight will be interested to see what her money is likely to be spent on,' she added obscurely.

'Thank you,' said Mark, who was the first to find himself capable of speech. 'We should like to very much. It's almost a good thing we are so very much *not* dressed for a party,' he murmured to his friend Digby, 'then Mrs Foresight will see that our need is very real.'

Digby smoothed his hair, glanced indifferently at his grubby hands and made some slight adjustment to his tie. 'I suppose we'd better put these away then,' he said, bundling his notes into his brief-case.

Deirdre Swan, who supposed that she too must be included in Miss Clovis's invitation, wished that she had made her escape earlier. She was a tall thin girl with large brown eyes and a rather lost expression; she did not always quite understand what she was doing and was beginning to wonder if it had been a mistake to embark on the study of anthropology rather than history or English literature. Now she stood in a corner, as if trying to merge herself with the rows of books behind her, watching the arrival of the guests with a kind of fearful wonder.

'Ah, Felix!' shrieked Miss Clovis, as Professor Mainwaring entered the room, 'so glad to see you nice and *early*!'

'My dear Esther, I have only just beaten the others to it. Academic toilers do not understand the art of being fashionably late. If it says six o'clock on the invitation cards you can be sure that my colleagues will arrive at that time.'

His forecast was accurate and the hands of the library clock were barely pointing to six when a mass of people seemed almost to hurl itself through the door. First came Professor Vere and Dr Fairfax, still talking loudly. They were followed closely by Father Gemini, a missionary and linguistic expert, whose bushy beard and layers of fusty black garments seemed too much for the warm April evening. Behind him came others, too numerous to describe separately, men, and women too, who had all achieved some kind of eminence in their particular sphere. A few stood out by reason of their odd appearance, but the majority were reassuringly ordinary, the kind of people one might see any day on a bus or in the Underground. Bringing up the rear were a small benevolent-looking man, bowed down by the weight of two suitcases which

appeared to be filled with lead, and a tall thin man walking with a catlike tread. After them there was a pause and a gap in the procession of guests, and then a worried-looking man in dark jacket and striped trousers, who was something in the Colonial Office, came in, peering from side to side. He disliked sherry which he thought 'livery', was rather frightened of Miss Clovis, and was most anxious to get back to his garden in North Dulwich, but he had never ignored the call of duty.

'Well, well, Comus and his rabble rout!' cried Professor Mainwaring, clapping his hands. The man from the Colonial Office dived quickly into a corner, but the Professor did not seem to expect any comment on his remark. 'What a pity *all* our friends cannot be with us today,' he went on, almost in a sarcastic tone. 'My dear friend Tyrell Todd is at this very moment, perhaps, hacking his way through a Congo forest in search of the ever elusive pygmy. Apfelbaum is standing on his head in the Antipodes . . .' Here his invention failed him and he drained his glass of sherry with a gesture. Then he was back at the door, welcoming the guest of honour, Mrs Foresight.

'Ah, Minnie,' he said, bringing out the name almost as if he were savouring its comic flavour, 'this is a great occasion!'

Mrs Foresight, a little plump fair-haired woman dressed in pale blue, entered the room, blinking at the sight of so many people. After she had been welcomed and introduced, she allowed herself to be placed in one of the small easy chairs which had been arranged at strategic points for the older and more distinguished guests. She found herself near Miss Lydgate and began to make what she hoped was suitable conversation.

'And are you just back from the – er – *field*?' she brought out, trying to remember if 'field' was the right word and what exactly it was that people did there. Of course she knew that, really. Felix had explained so clearly what it was that anthropologists did, or

it had seemed clear at the time, whirling through High Wycombe in the dining-car, giggling a little over the difficulty of pouring out tea elegantly. They went out to remote places and studied the customs and languages of the peoples living there. Then they came back and wrote books and articles about what they had observed and taught others how to do the same thing. It was as simple as that. And it was a very good thing that these languages and customs should be known, firstly because they were interesting in themselves and in danger of being forgotten, and secondly because it was helpful to missionaries and government officials to know as much as possible about the people they sought to evangelize or govern.

These thoughts did not arrange themselves quite in this order in Mrs Foresight's head, and they were interspersed with irrelevant reflections on the people round her, but she believed that she had remembered most of what Felix had told her that afternoon in the train and at their meetings afterwards. Her expression as she listened to Miss Lydgate's plans for the writing up of her linguistic researches was one of rather strained interest. Women must so often listen to men with just this expression on their faces, but Mrs Foresight was feminine enough to feel that it was a little hard that so much concentration should be called for when talking to a member of her own sex. It seemed, somehow, a waste of effort.

'It is nice for Miss Clovis to be able to share a flat with you,' she said politely.

'Oh, it all happened most conveniently. When Esther resigned from her post at the Learned Society of course she had to leave her flat there and the new one was rather too big for one person. So I filled the gap, stepped into the breach, as it were.'

'That is a good thing for both of you.'

'Yes, we jog along quite happily together. Neither of us knows

much about cooking and we're both untidy people but it doesn't seem to matter.'

'I suppose common interests are the main thing,' said Mrs Foresight doubtfully, thankful that *she* did not have to live with Esther Clovis or Gertrude Lydgate, for she was fond of her food and liked to have 'nice things' around her. 'How do you manage about cooking?'

'We live out of tins and on frozen stuff, don't we, Gertrude,' said Miss Clovis, who had now joined them. 'And we always choose the kind of meat you can fry – chops and things like that.'

'Braised meat can be delicious, and it isn't difficult to cook,' Mrs Foresight began, but she was interrupted by Father Gemini, who came almost running up to Miss Lydgate, his beard dipping into his sherry glass, waving a sandwich in his hand.

'Oh, Miss Lydgate, I must apologize for that vocabulary I sent you,' he wailed. 'It was *immensely* unfortunate, but the language is spoken by only five persons now, and the only informant I could find was a very old man, so old that he had no teeth.'

'I appreciate your difficulty,' said Miss Lydgate gruffly.

'Yes, and at the time he was drunk, also. It was *most* difficult.'

'I was interested in what appeared to be something *quite new*,' said Miss Lydgate, drawing Father Gemini almost by his beard into a more secluded part of the room. 'Was it *this*?' A very curious sound, which it is impossible to reproduce here, then came from her. Had she been in the company of ordinary people, it might have been supposed that something had gone down the wrong way and that she was choking, but here nobody took any particular notice of her or of Father Gemini when he cried excitedly, 'No, no, it is *this*!' and proceeded to emit a sound which would have appeared to the uninitiated exactly the same as Miss Lydgate's choking noise.

'Now they'll be happy for hours,' said Miss Clovis indulgently.

'I sometimes think what a pity it is that Gertrude and Father Gemini can't marry.'

'Oh?' said Mrs Foresight. 'Is it so impossible?'

'Well, he is a Roman Catholic priest, and it is not usual for them to marry, is it?'

'No, of course, they were forbidden to,' Mrs Foresight agreed. 'Still, Miss Lydgate is much taller than he is,' she added irrelevantly.

'That hardly seems to matter in the academic world,' said Miss Clovis. 'It is, of course, the marriage of true minds that counts.'

'But that beard is so untidy,' said Mrs Foresight distastefully. 'A wife would make him trim it – I always think Professor Mainwaring's is so becoming, a silver imperial, I suppose you'd call his.'

'Yes, Felix is a fine-looking man; he seems to dominate every gathering, and not only because of his height.'

He stood now in the centre of the room, sipping his sherry, and thinking as he did so that if it was not quite the best sherry it was certainly good enough for the occasion. Esther had been wise not to spend the Foresight money on the very best, he decided; the women would not have appreciated it and his colleagues would have been unworthy of it. Many of them, as he put it to himself, were 'not quite out of the top drawer', an old-fashioned expression but one that conveyed his meaning perfectly. He was wise enough not to use it indiscriminately in these enlightened days, however, and his manner to the up-and-coming young men who still gathered round him was gracious and often kindly. After all, it was not his fault that his father had been able to educate him at Eton and Balliol, or that his youth had been passed in the spacious days of the Edwardian era. Indeed, in his own way he had shown courage in defying the wishes of his parents, who had intended him for the

Diplomatic Service, to take up a profession that nobody had ever heard of and that involved going to the remotest parts of the Empire not to govern, which would have been natural and proper, but to study the ways of the primitive peoples living there.

'There really is something rather splendid about him,' said Melanie Pirbright. 'I can imagine he'd have a strong appeal in the States to some of the women's clubs, you know. I wonder if he's ever thought of doing a lecture tour? Doesn't it seem odd that he's never married?'

'Yes, there seems to be no reason for it,' said her husband. 'One wonders whether there might be something between him and Minnie Foresight. Perhaps he feels the burden of his middle name, though. It might be tough to be called Byron – it would certainly take some living up to.'

'You think so?' said Jean-Pierre le Rossignol with his demure smile.

'Perhaps not so difficult for a Frenchman,' said Melanie seriously.

'The name really makes no difference – a man can have many love affairs whatever he is called.'

'Did you ever hear that Professor Mainwaring had had many?' Melanie asked, in the tone of one seeking scientific information. 'These things might get around.'

Jean-Pierre shrugged his shoulders and the corners of his mouth turned down in a grimace that suggested a wealth of secret knowledge. But he said nothing.

'On the whole it seems to be English *women* who don't marry,' Melanie went on. 'It would be interesting to know just why that is.'

'Do you need to ask?' said Jean-Pierre, glancing round the room. 'To begin with, there are too many.'

'Yes, that is a problem. There is a good deal to be said in favour of polygamy, I always think.'

'But some women one would hardly want, even as secondary wives,' said Brandon.

'Aren't you using the term "secondary wife" in the wrong sense, dear?' said Melanie. 'It can have a rather specialized meaning, you know.'

'Listen to her,' said Digby, turning aside to whisper to his friend Mark. 'Can't she ever relax? I was just wondering if we ought to say a word to Prof. Mainwaring.'

'Say a word to him? What could we talk about? I should have thought that no three people could have had less in common than we have.'

'Oh, I just meant social talk – making ourselves known and that kind of thing. After all, we've got to get money from somewhere to do our fieldwork.'

'How sensible you are – let's go then.'

'You say something,' said Digby, giving Mark a sharp push forward.

'Good evening, Professor,' said Mark. 'We just wanted to tell you how much we enjoyed that last paper of yours at the Learned Society.'

'Most stimulating it was,' mumbled Digby.

'Let me see now, which paper was that – "Anthropology – what now?" Or was it "Anthropology – what-ho!",' chuckled the professor. 'One gets confused, you know. I don't remember noticing you in the audience.'

'We were sitting at the back,' said Mark quickly.

'Ah, yes, so that you could slip out easily. Those chairs by the door are always very much in demand. I hope you slipped out quietly? I cannot recollect that there was any disturbance. I often wonder why it is that people *do* slip out as much as they do. With

women it is understandable, I think – a casserole to be seen to or some such thing; perhaps men have trains to catch, or young ladies to meet.'

'We have essays and seminar papers to prepare,' said Digby stolidly.

'And you hope to go out to the field?' said Felix, fixing them with a shrewd glance.

'Well, yes, we do,' said Mark.

'It is difficult . . .' Digby began, but he was interrupted by the arrival of Professor Fairfax who pushed his way into the group crying, 'Now, my dear Felix, I hope you haven't forgotten that you are lunching with me at my club tomorrow?'

'Gervase, my dear boy, certainly I have not forgotten. I am actively looking forward to it.'

'Good evening, Professor Fairfax,' said Mark and Digby, almost in unison.

'Ah, Mr Fox and Mr Penfold, how-do-you-do,' said Professor Fairfax in a perfunctory tone.

Even Mark and Digby, inexperienced as they were in the subtler gradations of social meaning, were perceptive enough to realize that Professor Fairfax was not in the least desirous of knowing how they did, so they edged away and back into their corner.

'Dear boy! My *dear* Felix, my *dear* Gervase,' said Mark scornfully. 'All this bandying about of Christian names disgusts me.'

'We haven't yet acquired the status of being known by ours,' said Digby more mildly. 'It's an interesting study, when you come to consider it. The lower you are in status, the more formal the type of address used, unless you're a servant, perhaps.'

'Still, Fairfax does *know* our names, which is something.'

'But does he know which of us is which?' asked Digby anxiously.

'We can see that he does later. To get the names into their heads – that's the main thing at the moment.'

'Not the most brilliant of your ideas, picking on that paper of his,' said Digby. 'You might at least have chosen some occasion when we really had been present and he might have seen us.'

The young men began bickering among themselves until one of them picked up a decanter of sherry and boldly refilled their glasses. This encouraged them still further and they began to devour plates of sandwiches and little savouries.

They certainly know how to make themselves at home, thought Deirdre Swan, curling her hand round her empty glass and wishing that she had the courage to go home. At nineteen she was still young and sensitive enough to be conscious that she was standing alone and had nothing to drink and to mind about it. Everybody except her seemed to be talking to somebody. She knew Miss Clovis slightly and had spoken to Mark and Digby once or twice, but they were in their third year at the University and she was only in her first. Soon they would be going out to Africa or some other suitable place and then even they, ordinary as they were, would acquire the glamour of those who had been 'in the field'.

Deirdre looked round the room at the little groups of people and the realization came to her that although she was rather too tall and too thin and her clothes were not particularly smart, she was undoubtedly the best-looking woman in the room and certainly the youngest. This comforted her a little and almost gave her the courage to approach one of the groups, until she noticed that it contained Miss Lydgate, whom she wished to avoid. For Miss Lydgate's brother Alaric had recently come to live next door to the Swans in their London suburb and they had not yet made his acquaintance, in spite of the efforts of Deirdre's mother and aunt. Alaric Lydgate was apparently a retired Colonial administrator,

and Deirdre, who had met him in the road once or twice, thought she had detected that 'look' which being in Africa seemed to give to some people, a wild Ancient Mariner gleam in the eye which was usually a sign of some particularly persistent bee buzzing in the bonnet. She did not at all want him to engage her in conversation about Africa and she was afraid that if she made contact with Miss Lydgate it might lead to an introduction to her brother. So she had to go on standing there with her empty glass, praying that one of the young men might take pity on her.

At last Jean-Pierre le Rossignol moved away from his companions and came over to her.

'This is an interesting occasion, I think,' he declared in his precise voice. 'I have not been to such a party before.'

'It isn't like any other kind of party,' said Deirdre rather desperately. 'I suppose it is interesting if you can be detached about it.'

'Oh, but one must be detached about so many things! Otherwise how could a Frenchman endure the English Sunday?'

'It must be difficult. There's very little to do on Sunday, really, unless you go to church.'

'Exactly! And what a variety of churches to go to. There is so much choice – I am quite bewildered.'

'Yes, I suppose there are a lot to choose from if you live right in London. Where I live there are only two.'

'Last week I was at a Methodist Chapel – exquisite!' Jean-Pierre cast his eyes up to heaven. 'The week before at the Friends' House. Next Sunday I have been recommended to try Matins and sermon at a fashionable church in Mayfair.'

Deirdre felt a little out of her depth. Churchgoing was a serious matter in her family, one either went to church or one didn't; there was none of this light-hearted experimenting that Jean-Pierre seemed to indulge in.

'I suppose,' he went on, 'you would say I was a Thomist.' He shrugged his shoulders and then fell to examining his nails, so much more exquisitely manicured than Deirdre's were.

'People seem to be going,' she mumbled, thrown off her balance by not knowing what a Thomist was and not liking to ask.

'I believe it is not correct to stay till the end,' said Jean-Pierre, 'so I must be going. I like to do the correct thing where possible.'

People now began to leave as rapidly as they had arrived, and to pair off in a rather odd way. It was of course to be expected that Professor Mainwaring should escort Mrs Foresight to her car and then drive away with her, but the man from the Colonial Office found himself walking down into the street with Father Gemini and being invited to 'take pot-luck' with Miss Clovis and Miss Lydgate. He protested feebly but it was in vain.

'You can easily get a train to Dulwich – they are very frequent,' said Miss Clovis firmly.

'But it is *North* Dulwich I want to get to,' he said weakly.

'Oh, there isn't such a place!' said Miss Lydgate with rough good humour, leading him and Father Gemini away.

Deirdre found herself alone with Mark and Digby.

'Time gentlemen, please!' said Digby, lurching slightly against a table.

'Did you enjoy the party?' asked Deirdre politely.

'Yes, it improved considerably towards the end,' said Mark. 'We found ourselves near the drink and took the liberty of helping ourselves to it.'

'We are not used to drinking much,' said Digby. 'Do you think we seem the worse for it?'

'I don't know how you usually are,' said Deirdre, disconcerted by their odd, stilted way of walking. Perhaps they *were* the worse for drink.

'We are usually rather dim and hard-working,' said Mark. 'You

know,' he added, turning to Digby, 'I do feel we should have said a word to Dashwood.'

'Dashwood? Oh, that man from the Colonial Office. Yes, I suppose we ought to keep in with him.'

'Well, good-bye,' said Deirdre shyly. 'My bus goes from here.'

'I suppose we could have taken her to have a meal somewhere,' said Digby, looking after the moving bus.

'Whatever for?'

'It would have been a nice gesture.'

'We might have taken Prof. Mainwaring out – that would have been even nicer. Anyway, I expect her mother would have supper waiting for her at home.'

'Yes, probably. She seems quite a nice girl, but hardly . . .'

'Not very interesting really.'

'No.'

The two young men had stopped outside a cinema and were gazing at a poster which showed a young woman, with more obvious charms than Deirdre's, reclining seductively in a transparent negligee across what seemed to be Niagara Falls.

'I have that seminar paper to prepare,' said Mark reluctantly.

'Yes, of course,' said Digby meekly.

So they crossed the road and waited for the bus which would take them to their lodgings in Camden Town. But even on the bus they felt reluctant to return to work.

'I know,' said Digby, 'let's go and see Catherine. She'll probably have some news of Tom.'

'And she may be cooking something,' said Mark practically. 'It's so depressing cooking for one person, or so one hears. Let's go and make it worth her while to prepare a good meal.'