

All My Sisters

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Prologue

Nights she couldn't sleep, she soothed herself by making lists. Lists of the counties of Great Britain, her manufacturing cities and the principal exports of the empire. Lists of the kings and queens of England and the works of William Shakespeare. Every now and then something sparked a memory. *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline*, *The Tempest*, she muttered to herself in the small hours of a hot January night, and she found herself remembering an evening at the theatre. Sitting beside her in the darkness, Arthur took her hand in his. His thumb stroked her palm; she remembered that small, insistent touch, recalled how desire had uncoiled inside her as she listened to the voices on stage. *Nothing of him that doth fade, but doth suffer a sea-change . . .*

Yet he had faded. There were gaps, pieces missing. Whole days – weeks, even – whose events she had forgotten. She could not recall, she realized with a pang, the events of ordinary, unremarkable days. Just as she could no longer really remember the precise shade of his eyes, the exact planes and angles of his face.

Her lists became an attempt to seal and solidify the past. She remembered picnics in the hills, holidays by the seaside. Here, in this desert place, she recalled the

tang of the sea and the slippery rubberiness of a flail of brown seaweed. She heard the groan and clank of the bathing machine as it descended the beach, and remembered how, in the dim, stuffy interior of the hut, she had held her breath, anticipating the shock of the ice-cold water of the North Sea. She and her sisters had worn bathing costumes of black serge. The heavy material of the costumes, when wet, scratched the skin. On another part of the beach the poorer women bathed in the sea in their summer frocks: she and Eva had watched, had seen how their pale skirts floated and billowed around them, giving them the look of strange, transparent sea creatures. *Like jellyfish, Marianne*, Eva had cried, her hand shading her narrowed eyes. *Like great big jellyfish!*

Had they watched them at Filey or at Scarborough, those women who had bobbed, fully dressed, in the surf, their tired faces rapt with delight? It troubled her now that she could not be sure. Waking in the early hours, her head full of nightmares, she was afraid of the future and haunted by the past. On the worst nights a voice echoed. *Four in the morning. The devil's hour.*

More memories to drive away the dark. She remembered the city of Sheffield, in which she had been born and brought up. She remembered the great shops and hotels in the centre, and the slur of grey smoke that hung like a shroud over the industrial district. She remembered the roar of the furnaces, the incessant clatter and crash of hammers and machinery. The crush of people, the smell of smoke and rain.

One airless, sleepless night, she recalled the drawing room at Summerleigh, with its four low armchairs

upholstered in rust-coloured velvet, and Great-aunt Hannah's chair by the fire. On top of the piano were framed photographs of Mother and Father in their wedding finery, and a picture of Grandmother Maclise, as monumental as Queen Victoria, with her bun and jowls and steely glare. And a snapshot of the three boys – James was wearing a blazer and boater, Aidan and Philip were in sailor suits.

And a photograph of the four Maclise girls. She and her sisters were wearing their white muslin dresses. In the photograph the silk sashes around their waists had turned to shades of umber. But in Marianne's memory the sashes were coloured: Iris's sash was the same bright blue as her eyes, Eva's was apple green, Clemency's butter yellow. Her own was the pale pink of Albertine roses. Iris – golden-haired, pink-and-white Iris – leant against the branch of a tree, laughing as she turned towards the camera. Tiny, shapely Eva stared fearlessly ahead. Clemency wore her dress awkwardly, as if ill at ease in muslin and silk. Marianne remembered that she herself had looked away, that the photographer had thought her shy of the lens.

He had been wrong, though. It was not that she was afraid to look, rather that she had always disliked to be looked at. She hated to walk into a crowded room; she never paused, as Iris did as she made her entrance, waiting for men's glances to turn to her, never managed that artful flick of a heel to reveal an alluring few inches of petticoat frilled with lace. She was both contemptuous of flirtation and incapable of it. Love, she had then believed, should be a meeting of hearts and minds, sealed by a glance, capable of surviving absence,

change and death. Love, thought Marianne, came once in a lifetime.

In the distance an engine hooted, jolting her. She started, her eyes wide open in the darkness, her concentration wobbling and splitting, darting down all the familiar nightmarish byways.

The things she had seen, the things she had done. Things she would not then have believed herself capable of. Was anything left of the girl she had once been, the girl who had shied away from a camera lens, the girl who had fled when she felt a man's gaze on her? Was it possible to mutate into a completely different person?

Tell me about your family, Arthur had said to her the first time they met. *Your three brothers and your three sisters*. What would she reply if he could ask her the same question now? That she no longer knew them, those people she had once loved most in the world. And that if they had changed as much as she, then they must be unrecognizable to each other.

Or that she missed them so much she sometimes thought that her grief must ooze with the sweat through her pores. Her sisters, all her sisters, whom she must never see again.

Chapter One

Glued to the wall as she made her slow, solitary circuit around the ballroom, Marianne overheard one of the chaperones make the remark to Mrs Catherwood, who had taken the Maclise girls, along with her own daughter, Charlotte, to the ball. The chaperones sat together in a room next to the ballroom, the door open so that they could keep an eye on their charges. The *tricoteuses*, Iris called them, in that gently sarcastic way of hers. Mrs Palmer said, 'The second Maclise girl is such a beanpole!' and kind Mrs Catherwood replied, 'Marianne will be very striking in a year or two, when she has grown into her looks.' Yet it was the first sentence that stayed with Marianne as she retreated into the shadow of a heavy purple velvet curtain. *Such a beanpole ... such a beanpole ...* The familiar doubts began to creep over her. It was hard not to stoop as some tall girls did to make themselves smaller, hard not to twist the ribbon of her dance programme round its empty pages.

She wished she were at home with Eva and Clemency. Lucky, lucky Eva, to have a cold, and lucky Clemmie, not to be out yet, not to have to endure this horrible ball. She wished she was curled up on the window seat of the bedroom that she shared with Iris,

having taken *Three Weeks* from its hiding place beneath bundles of stockings in her chest of drawers. Reading, Marianne found herself turning the pages in a fever. Sometimes Paul Verdayne, pursuing his mysterious beauty in a Swiss hotel, seemed more real and vivid to her than her home and family.

She longed for mystery and romance, for new sights and faces, for something – someone – to speed the beat of her heart. But what mystery, she thought, as she scornfully surveyed the room, was there to be had in Sheffield? There was Ellen Hutchinson, in a perfectly dreadful pink satin frock, dancing with James. A poor look-out when one's own brother was the best-looking man at a ball. And there was Iris, being steered clumsily round the floor by Ronnie Catherwood. Marianne sighed. Every face was familiar to her. How could she possibly marry one of these boys she had known since childhood, whose faces sported patchy moustaches or, worse, a scattering of scarlet pimples? There was something unfinished about them, something slightly ridiculous. The thought of leaving her family to spend the rest of her life with one of these awkward, commonplace young men was distasteful.

Yet she must marry because, if she did not, then what would she do? Her life would go on, she supposed, in much the same way as it did now. Because her mother never seemed to keep a maid for more than a year, the house did not run as smoothly as it should. And because her mother's health was poor, and because Iris had the knack of avoiding such things, she, Marianne, took responsibility for much of the housekeeping.

It occurred to her that she might end up like Great-aunt Hannah, a spinster aunt. She would wear enormous stays like Great-aunt Hannah's and possibly a wig. Imagining herself in black bombazine with whiskers on her chin, Marianne giggled.

And then she became aware that someone was looking at her. Later she could not have said how she knew. You couldn't *feel* the direction of a man's eyes, could you?

He was standing on the far side of the room. As their eyes met, he smiled and inclined his head in a small bow. She was aware of an odd feeling of recognition. She must know him, she thought, she must have met him at some interminable At Home or dull concert. Yet if they had met before, she would surely have remembered him.

His gaze seemed to burn into her; she felt a sudden need to escape. Darting between portly ladies with ostrich feathers in their hair and middle-aged, moustachioed men, who ogled her as she passed, she hurried out of the ballroom. She reached a long, ill-lit passageway, from which rooms led off to either side. She could hear the clank and hiss of the kitchens. Maids bustled along the corridor carrying trays of glasses; in the distance a manservant in shirt sleeves and apron struck a match to light a cigarette.

Opening a door, Marianne found herself in a small room. Inside, there were a couple of chairs, their upholstery worn and sagging, a music stand, and a piano, a battered upright. Marianne unbuttoned her gloves and ran her fingers over the keys. Then she

shuffled through the music. Sitting down, she played softly at first, not wanting to be discovered, but then she lost herself in the music, gave herself up to it.

The door opened; she saw the man from the ball-room. She lifted her hands from the piano. They shook, hovering a few inches above the keys.

'I beg your pardon,' he said. 'I didn't mean to startle you.'

Quickly she closed the music book. 'I should go back.'

'Why did you run away? Do you prefer playing the piano to dancing?'

'But I wasn't dancing.'

'Did you wish that you were?'

She shook her head. 'I wished I was at home with my sisters.'

His thick, wavy, golden-brown hair was clipped short, and his blue eyes were several shades lighter than her own. His even features and firm jaw gave an impression of solidity and strength. She guessed that he was some years older than her and several inches taller. Beside him she would not have to stoop or bow her head.

He asked her, 'How many sisters do you have?'

'Three.'

'Any brothers?'

'Three.'

'Seven of you! I'm an only child. I've always found it hard to imagine what it must be like to be part of a large family.'

'Only children often seem to envy large families.'

'Do they? I'm afraid I've always rather enjoyed my

solitary state. In a large family one must fear being overlooked.' His gaze rested on her. 'Though I don't suppose you are ever overlooked.'

'I wouldn't mind being overlooked. It's people looking at me – judging me – that I can't bear.' She fell silent, horrified to have spoken so frankly.

'Perhaps they're not judging you. Perhaps they're admiring you.'

The second Maclise girl is such a beanpole. Marianne half-rose from the piano stool. 'I should go back.'

'Why? You don't wish to dance. The company bores you. So why go back? Unless, of course, I bore you more.'

She should return to the ballroom because the proximity of him, enclosed in this small room, unsettled her. But she could not say that. Instead, she sank back into her seat.

'Well, then, that's splendid, Miss . . .?'

'Maclise,' she murmured. 'Marianne Maclise.'

'Arthur Leighton.' He took her hand. 'Tell me about your family. Your three brothers and your three sisters. Where do you fit in?'

'James is the oldest and then there's Iris. Iris is here tonight. You must have seen her in the ballroom. She has golden hair and blue eyes. She's beautiful.'

'Was she wearing a white gown? Diamonds in her ears and a white gardenia in her hair?'

'You *did* notice her.' She was aware of a stab of envy: Iris was always the favourite.

But he said, 'I like to observe. There's often a greater pleasure to be found in observation than in conversation.'

'Oh, do you think so? So do I. Conversation often seems so . . . so *forced*. So *false*.' The words rushed out, a gasp of recognition.

'Though not always,' he said gently. 'Our conversation doesn't feel false, does it?' He went on, 'So there's James and Iris. And then . . . ?'

'And then me, and then Eva. Eva's dark, like me. Though she's not like me at all, really. She's not nearly so tall, and she's more . . . more *certain*, more sure of herself.' Marianne pleated the folds of her silk skirt. 'I seem to see two sides to everything.'

'Some would say that was an asset — a sign of maturity.'

'But how do you choose? When you have to decide something important, how do you know?'

'Sometimes you have to take a chance. That's what I find, anyway.'

She said bitterly, 'I expect the decisions you make are a little more important than mine. I seem to spend an age racking my brains as to whether I should wear my pink dress or my white, or whether I should tell the cook to make blancmange or jam roly-poly.'

'Oh, jam roly-poly,' he said seriously. 'Much nicer than blancmange. And you should wear white rather than pink. Leave pink to pretty blondes like your sister Iris. Though I should love to see you in more dramatic shades. Violet, perhaps, like your flowers — they're just the colour of your eyes.'

Marianne was speechless. No man, neither her father nor her brothers nor her friends' brothers, had ever commented on her clothing in such a way. She was afraid that there was something improper about it.

He went on, 'Who's next? A sister or a brother?'

'Clemency,' she said. 'My sister Clemency's next. And then there's Aidan and Philip. Aidan's thirteen and Phil's just eleven. I'm not sure I know what they're really like. They're just the boys, and they're there at the end of the family. Only Clemmie seems to have time for them. The rest of us just let them get on.'

'It must be a very busy household. You must never be lonely.'

She should go back to the ballroom, she thought. An unmarried girl should never be alone with a man, it was an inviolable rule. Yet she stayed where she was, sitting on the piano stool. The hidden, rebellious part of her, the part that she so rarely allowed a voice, told her to throw caution to the wind and ignore convention. Just now she felt alive; she could almost feel the blood coursing through her veins. For once she did not want to be anywhere else, or be with anyone else.

She gave herself a little shake, as if to drive away such unsuitable thoughts, and said, 'Please tell me about your family, Mr Leighton.'

'I haven't much of one, I'm afraid. My mother died when I was an infant and I lost my father when I was in my twenties. I have an uncle and a cousin or two. But you mustn't feel sorry for me. I have a great many friends.'

'Here? In Sheffield?'

'I've been staying with the Palmers for the past week. I rather like this city. There are some fine sights.' The corners of his mouth curled.

If she were Iris, she would simper now and make some remark that pretended to discourage him, yet

which inspired him to further compliments. For the first time, it occurred to her that he might merely be flirting with her. Her spirits sank, her disappointment heavier than she would have thought possible after such a brief acquaintance.

Then he said, 'When I saw you in the ballroom you were laughing. You looked so serious and then suddenly you laughed. And I wondered why you were laughing.'

'I was imagining,' she said, 'that I was a very old, fat spinster.'

His mouth twitched. 'That doesn't seem a likely fate for you.'

'It seems to me perfectly possible.'

'You can't really think that.'

'I know that I disconcert people. They don't say anything, of course, but I know that I do. I say the wrong things.' She looked up at him. 'Our conversation has been full of wrong things, Mr Leighton. We've talked about things we shouldn't have talked about. Things that aren't quite proper.'

'What should we have talked about?'

'Oh ... the weather ... and how splendid the Hutchinsons' ballroom looks.'

'I see—'

'And how well the band played.'

'The violinist was out of key. Would it be proper for me to mention that?'

She smiled. 'Well, he was. Quite dreadfully.'

After a silence, he said, 'Would it be proper for me to tell you, then, that you were mistaken earlier?'

'Mistaken?'

'When you told me that your sister, Iris, was beautiful.'

She repeated, startled, 'But everyone thinks Iris is beautiful!'

'Iris is very pretty,' he said. 'But she is not beautiful. You, Miss Maclise, are beautiful.'

She had the odd habit, when she was embarrassed, of losing what little colour she had rather than blushing. Now, she felt herself pale, the surface of her skin chilling.

He sat back in his chair, watching her. 'Well then,' he said, 'you should know the truth.'

After the ball, in her bedroom at home, Marianne unpinned the posy of violets she wore at her waist and laid them carefully on her dressing table. Then she unhooked her gown and hung it in the closet and untied her layers of petticoats: they whispered as she shed them, falling to the floor in a pool of silk. She unlaced her stays and peeled off her silk stockings, camisole and knickers. Then she reached up and pulled the pins from her hair. It fell, long and dark, down her back. Naked, she studied her reflection in the mirror. He had told her that she was beautiful and, for the first time in her life, she believed that she was.

She remembered that Arthur Leighton had asked her to play for him and she had played a piece by Rameau. Now, as she hummed the melody under her breath, she recalled how, halfway through the piece, she had reached up to turn the page just as he had reached down to do likewise, and their hands had

touched. And with that touch, in that single moment, she had moved through the thicket of disguises that surrounded men and women, and all that confused her, all she had been contemptuous of – the artifice of appearance, the falseness of flirtation, and all the cold marital calculations of wealth and class – had become unimportant. She had desired him, and she had known, though he had not said, that he had desired her.

She put on her nightgown, and then she took out her diary. *May 20th, 1909*, she wrote. *A magical evening. Tonight, my life has truly begun.*

Clemency reached the top of the attic stairs and peered into the darkness. 'Philip?' she called. 'Philip, are you in here?' Shapes loomed in the light of the oil lamp she was gripping in her hand, revealing themselves after a moment as a three-legged chair or a tower of books, spines hanging from their crumbling backs.

'Philip?' she called again. Philip had a habit of going into hiding the day before he had to return to boarding school, but the attics had been a long shot: he was unlikely to have hidden there because he was afraid of the dark.

As she went back down the corridor, a flicker of movement beneath a bed in an empty room caught her eye. Clemency knelt down by the bed. 'Philip?' she said softly.

No reply. But she could hear his slightly laboured breathing. 'Philip?' she said again. 'Do come out, please. No one's going to be cross with you, I promise.'

There was a shuffling and then he emerged head first from beneath the bed. There were dust balls in his hair and his clothes were filthy.

She sat down on the bed and took him on her knee. 'Dear old Phil,' she said, hugging him, 'I'm so glad to have found you. I've been looking for you since breakfast.' He was wheezing slightly. 'You shouldn't get so dusty. You know it makes you unwell.'

They went downstairs. It was half-term; Philip's bag lay open in the bedroom he shared with Aidan. Clemency thought: *Six weeks, six whole weeks till I see him again. Don't you dare blub*, she scolded herself, and said briskly, 'Your crayons, Philip. You haven't packed your crayons.'

He looked round. The crayons were in an old biscuit tin on top of the chest of drawers. Philip's vague blue gaze turned in their direction, washed over them, moved on.

'On the drawers,' she prompted and watched him squint, struggling to focus.

Clemency went to see her mother. Lilian Maclise was sitting at her dressing table. As always, the room was in semi-darkness, the curtains drawn to shut out the sunlight. Though the day was warm, a fire flickered in the grate.

'Are you feeling better, Mother?'

'I'm afraid not, Clemency.' Lilian sat back in the chair, her eyes closed. Her fair hair fell around her face, framing delicate features. Her hands, rearranging the bottles and jars on the dressing table, were small and pale and slender.

Beside her mother, Clemency always felt big-boned and clumsy. She said, 'I'm worried about Philip, Mother. I think he has trouble with his eyes.'

'Nonsense,' said Lilian. 'No one in the family has poor eyesight.'

Clemency persisted. 'I don't think he can see very well at all. I thought perhaps he should wear spectacles.'

'Spectacles?' Lilian glanced at her reflection in the mirror and gave her silk shawl a forceful twitch. 'What an extraordinary idea. If Philip's eyesight is poor – which I dispute, Clemency – then wearing spectacles would be the worst thing for him. It's well known that wearing spectacles weakens the eyes.'

A trickle of sweat ran down Clemency's back and she moved away from the fire. 'But Mother, he can't see—'

'If you could speak a little less loudly, dear. My poor head.' Lilian closed her eyes.

Alarmed, Clemency said, 'Mother?'

'I'm so sorry, darling.' Lilian pressed her fingertips against her forehead. 'I feel exhausted. And the *pain* . . .'

Clemency's stomach swooped unpleasantly. Mother's health had been so much better recently that for the last month she had been able to join the family downstairs at mealtimes. Clemency had begun to hope that her mother was recovering at last. Not that Clemency could remember Mother ever having been really well – she had taken to her bed shortly after Philip had been born, when Clemency herself had been only five. Philip was eleven now, and the mood of the Maclise household rose and fell according to the state of Lilian's health.

Lilian whispered, 'Oh dear. This really is too tiresome. You must be so fed up with me, darling. I should think you've had just about enough of your hopeless old mother.'

'Of course not! You mustn't ever think that, Mother. I only want you to be well. That's the only thing that matters.'

Lilian smiled bravely. 'Perhaps you'd ask Marianne to bring me a small glass of port wine. And if you would make sure my letters go by the next post...'

As Clemency took the letters and left the room, she thought with a sudden rush of joy, five days, just five days till the beginning of term. Unlike Philip, she loved school. She bounded down the stairs three at a time, her plait bouncing against her back.

Iris caught her at the bottom of the stairs. 'Where are you going?'

'Mother wants a glass of wine and I have to post these.'

Iris, the mean thing, snatched the letters from her. 'I'll take them,' she said and, seizing her hat from the stand, left the house.

Iris's bicycle had a puncture so she took Clemency's. One advantage of Mother's aversion to the telephone, Iris thought, as she pedalled out of the drive, was that it necessitated a great deal of letter writing and consequently a great many excursions to the postbox.

Sometimes, escaping from the house on her bicycle, she glanced in shop windows or just looked at other ladies to get new ideas for trimming hats. Occasionally,

breaking the rule that an unmarried girl should never be alone in the company of men, she met the Catherwood brothers for a walk in the park.

In the four years since she had left school, Iris had received more than a dozen proposals of marriage. She had accepted none of them. One or two of her suitors would have been a very good match, the sort of advantageous marriage Iris expected eventually to make, but still she had turned them down. She simply hadn't wanted to marry any of them. It wasn't that there was anything wrong with them, just that she didn't love them. Recently her inability to find a husband had begun to trouble her. She was twenty-two years old and most of her contemporaries were married or engaged. Some had children. She had begun to doubt whether she was capable of falling in love — other girls seemed to do it all the time, but not once had Iris's heart been touched. Sometimes she found herself staring in the mirror as she brushed out her hair before going to bed and thinking: *Perhaps I am losing my touch*. She had to look at her reflection to reassure herself, to see how her hair, her greatest beauty, fell almost to her waist like a golden veil. Yet it remained with her, that moth of disquiet, stirring now and then, a small, dry flutter in the back of her mind.

The bicycle began to gather speed as she headed downhill. Houses and trees rushed by; Iris's hat threatened to fly from its anchorage of pins and her skirts billowed up, showing rather a lot of ankle.

Then, without warning, the front wheel suddenly bit into the tarmac and Iris lost her grip on the handlebars as she was thrown forward. A split second

later and she was sprawled face down on the road. She couldn't move because the bicycle had fallen on top of her. She wailed, 'My *frock!*' and someone scooped the bicycle off her and said anxiously, 'Are you all right?'

Looking up, she saw that her rescuer was young and not at all bad-looking. He wasn't wearing a hat and his fair, untidy hair, which was lightened in places by the sun to the colour of straw, curled slightly.

The frill which Iris had sewn onto her dress only the previous day was now a ribbon of pink cloth snaking across the tarmac. She said, furiously this time, 'My *frock*. It's *new*.'

He offered her his hand to help her up. 'I think it was the frock that did for you. That bit —' he pointed to the frill — 'got caught in the chain. I say, you *are* hurt.'

Iris's gloves were ripped and her palms were bleeding from where she had put out her hands to break her fall. 'It's nothing much.'

He dug in his pocket and found a handkerchief. 'If you'd let me help.'

She sat on a low wall while he peeled off her gloves and picked out grit from the deep grazes in her hands. Though he was very careful, she had to bite her lip to stop herself crying out. As he tied a handkerchief round each hand, she said politely, 'You've been most kind, Mr—'

'Ash,' he said. 'Just Ash.'

'Ash?'

'Ashleigh Aurelian Wentworth. It's a bit of a mouthful, isn't it? I prefer Ash.'

Iris told him her name. Then, looking round, she said, 'I was supposed to be posting my mother's letters.'

He found them in the gutter, the envelopes crumpled and smeared with mud. 'Perhaps you'd better take them home. Your mother may want to re-address them.'

'Oh dear.' Iris sighed. 'I'm afraid there's going to be a dreadful fuss.'

'It was an accident. I'm sure your mother will understand.'

'Clemency won't,' said Iris ruefully. 'It was her bicycle.'

Ash picked up the bicycle. The front wheel was buckled. 'Where do you live?'

She told him and he said, 'I'll push it home for you, then.'

'I don't want to put you to any trouble. I'm sure you have things to do.'

'It's no trouble. And no, I don't really have anything to do just now.'

'Nothing at all? Where were you going?'

'Nowhere in particular.' He was unpicking a remnant of pink cloth from the bicycle chain. 'I like to wander, don't you?' He flashed her a smile. 'You never know who you might run into.'

They were heading up the hill. She said, 'That's what I was doing, actually. Just wandering. I'm not supposed to, of course.'

'Why on earth not?' She noticed that his eyes were a warm hazel – so much nicer, Iris thought, than the cold blue Maclise eyes. She realized also that he didn't understand at all. So she explained.

'Because I should be chaperoned, naturally. I'm not

meant to go out on my own. My mother or my aunt or my sisters or one of the maids is supposed to come with me. But all that's so tiresome.' She shrugged. 'And, anyway, I like to break the rules.' Glancing at him, she asked, 'Haven't you any sisters?'

'Not one, I'm afraid.'

'And you're not married?' It was always best to establish that sort of thing early on.

'Married? Oh, no.'

'Do you come from Sheffield?'

He shook his head. 'Cambridgeshire. I graduated from university a couple of years ago.'

'And since then?'

'I suppose I've just been *wandering*. And you, Miss Maclise? What do you do?'

'Oh, the usual things,' she said vaguely. 'Tennis and bridge and dancing ...'

He was looking at her as though he expected her to say something more. She racked her brains, trying to think how she passed the time, and added weakly, 'And I sew ...'

'Do you like to read?'

'Sometimes. My sister Marianne always has her nose in a book.'

After a short silence he said, 'Tennis ... dancing ... Doesn't all that get rather ... rather *dull*?'

'Not at all! I love playing tennis – and I adore dancing.' She felt disconcerted, forced to defend a way of life she had not previously questioned. 'What do *you* do, Ash? Apart from wandering, that is.'

'Oh, this and that. I was in London after I left university.'