‘The satisfaction of working snails out of shells,’ said Cox, ‘is the satisfaction of successfully picking one’s nose.’ He had been hunched over his plate, screwing the gray meat out of the glistening yellow-black shell. Now he looked up and said, ‘Don’t you think so?’

Mrs Etterick looked at him sideways. She said, ‘I’m glad Gina is upstairs.’

But her expression told him that he had scored. Encouraged, he said, ‘A horrible, private sort of relief. Like finding exactly what you need at Woolworth’s. A soap dish. Those plastic discs you put under chair legs so they won’t dent the carpet.’

‘Now you’ve gone too far,’ said Mrs Etterick.

Rudge said, ‘And how is dear Gina? Is she any better?’

‘She seems happy. In that sense she is better,’ said Mrs Etterick. ‘But hers is not the sort of affliction that can be cured in a place like Sunbury. She is so very backward in some ways. I say “affliction” – but that doesn’t describe it. She is like a different racial type altogether, like someone from a primitive tribe. Terribly sweet, but terribly uncivilized. I sometimes think what a pity it was, when she was born that –’

Mrs Etterick faced her snails and reproached herself with a shudder.

‘There is a kind of light in her face,’ Rudge said. ‘I noticed it when she let me in tonight. She was standing there like a very serious head prefect.’

‘She is nearly thirty,’ said Mrs Etterick. ‘I still have to wash her face and comb her hair. Head prefects, in my experience, can manage those things.’

Cox had finished his snails. He was smiling at Rudge.

Rudge said, ‘I meant there was a gentleness about her, something distinctly proper.’

‘She broke a vase this afternoon. She kept asking me where she should put it. I could hardly hear her. She gets very exasperated, awfully flustered. I came down the stairs. When she saw me she started to juggle it. They don’t have the same joints in their fingers that we do. Then it went crash.’ Mrs Etterick dropped a snail shell with her tongs, as if intending to give drama to what Gina had done. She said, ‘I think she did it

on purpose.’

‘Perhaps a plea for love,’ Rudge said.

‘Rubbish,’ said Mrs Etterick. ‘That vase cost less than a pound.’

Cox began to laugh. He was not a man given to expression, but the laugh accomplished his purpose; it complimented Mrs Etterick and it mocked Rudge. But it also slewed in his throat, and it was loud with greed.

Rudge said, ‘I’ve always wanted a daughter. Particularly at a time of year like this. Christmas. It seems part of the season.’

‘You sound like her,’ said Mrs Etterick, rising, collecting the plates. Rudge rose to help her, but she waved him aside, saying that she could manage.

Cox rocked his chair back and yawned. Then he said, ‘Those snails were marvelous.’

‘It’s a sort of kit,’ said Mrs Etterick. ‘You get snail mince and empty shells in a box. You stuff the shells and heat them through. It’s really very simple.’

She returned with a casserole dish on which spills of juice had been baked black on the rim. ‘Cassoulet,’ she said. ‘I put it in the oven this morning. I had to spend the day shopping.’

‘When I didn’t see you in your office,’ said Cox, ‘I thought you were home, cooking. Now I don’t feel so guilty.’

‘I couldn’t face the party.’

‘It was all secretaries,’ Rudge said.

‘So you noticed,’ Cox replied.

‘I noticed you,’ said Rudge.

Cox turned to Mrs Etterick. ‘Are you going away for Christmas?’

‘My plans are still pretty fluid,’ she said. ‘Gina’s been on at me to make a week of it. That’s a fairly grim prospect.’

Cox said, ‘So you might be alone?’

‘I’m not sure.’

The two men ate in silence. Upstairs, the radio was loud.

Mrs Etterick said, ‘Gina’s transistor. I decided to give her her present early. She will leave the door open.’

Cox said, ‘I hate Christmas.’

Mrs Etterick filled Rudge’s glass with claret and said, ‘You’ll be spending Christmas here in London, then?’

‘I have an open invitation in Scotland,’ Rudge said.

‘Snow in the Highlands!’ said Cox.

‘Rain, more likely. The Lowlands – Peebles,’ said Rudge. ‘It’s my mother.’

‘Will you go?’ asked Mrs Etterick.

Rudge stared, holding his knife and fork, and with hunger on his face he seemed on the point of cutting a slice from Mrs Etterick’s white forearm and stuffing it into his mouth. He lowered the implements and in a subdued voice said, ‘That depends.’

‘Such a lovely house you have, Diana. I hadn’t realized you’d such a passion for oriental art. It’s all frightfully dazzling.’ Cox had finished eating and had lit a cigarette. ‘Is this an ashtray, or a funerary urn?’

‘Both,’ said Mrs Etterick. ‘Yes, we were in Thailand. That’s where I lost my husband. He was at the university.’

‘An academic in the family,’ said Cox. ‘Forgive me – I wasn’t mocking.’

‘He was the bursar.’

‘Was it one of these tropical diseases?’ asked Rudge.

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Etterick. ‘She was about twenty, one of these heartless Chinese girls that are determined to leave Thailand. I can’t tell you how beautiful she was. She set about him like an infection. They’re in Australia now. I imagine she’s quite bored with Richard these days. I got the Buddhas, the bronzes, the porcelain. You could pick it up for next to nothing then. The looters, you know. It was all looters.’

Rudge said, ‘I was thinking of staying in town over Christmas. Perhaps taking in a show or a concert. Last year, I saw Verdi’s Otello. Placido Domingo. Overwhelming.

I've always wanted to attend the carol service at Saint Paul's. Something traditional.'

'Last year,' Cox said, 'Boxing Day, I went up to the Odeon in Holloway and saw a double bill. The Godfather – both parts. Best afternoon I'd spent in ages. Place was full of yobs.'

Mrs Etterick said, 'I'd like to close my eyes and open them and discover it's January.'

'I'd like to spend the next eight days in bed, watching rubbish on television and eating buttered toast. I mean, really pig it until London's back to normal,' Cox said.

'In Bangkok, you never knew it was Christmas. The heat was dreadful – I loved it. And Gina had an amah then. Amazing, isn't it? They were both seventeen, only the amah was about a foot shorter. But she kept Gina well in check. There were parties, but none of this bogus nostalgia. All the Christmas decorations were in the massage parlors and the brothels – well, that's what Richard told me. The Americans carried on, of course. But they would.'

'I had no idea there was another Far East hand at Alliance,' Cox said.

'Another?' said Mrs Etterick.

'I was in Malaya during the war,' Cox said. 'It was long before your time. But I stayed on. I rather enjoyed the Japanese surrender. It was a terrible shambles. They handed Kota Bahru over to me – can you imagine?'

Rudge said, 'There is so much that we have yet to understand about the East. Yes, I suppose one can treat it all as a great joke. Those funny little people. But our destiny lies in the hands of those funny little people.'

'They go out of their way to insult us,' Cox said. 'They make no serious attempt to understand us. Never did. I have always taken the view that we should offer them all the friendly attention they offer us. I mean, if they turf out our people we should immediately turf out one of theirs. Only language they understand.'

'Who are we talking about?' asked Rudge.

'Orientals,' Cox said.

'You lump them all together.'

'My dear boy, they lump us all together. We are westerners, they are orientals.'

Rudge said, 'Did Shiner ever tell you that terrible story about his visit to the Canton

Trade Fair? It was when Alliance sent that industrial software delegation over, about three years ago.'

Cox said, 'I never speak to Shiner. I don't like his eyes, or his software, for that matter.'

'His secretary had that nervous breakdown,' said Mrs Etterick. 'That spoke volumes.'

'It makes no difference whether we like Shiner or not,' Rudge said. 'The story still stands.'

Cox said, 'Get on with it, then. I can see there is no way of stopping you.'

'Apparently they went all out to impress our delegation,' Rudge said. 'Took them to spindle factories, steel mills, hydroelectric plants. Well, you know. Then they took them to a model commune. The interpreter got hold of the headman and translated what he said. "In five years our cotton acreage has risen fiftyfold," says the headman. "We have increased production of vegetable fiber by two hundred percent." Shiner was terribly impressed. They inspected the schools, the electricity plant, the kitchens. All this time, the headman is raving about the progress they've made and saying how happy everyone is. "Under the wise leadership of Chairman Mao, we have gone from strength to strength." Shiner signed the visitor's book and said he'd have to leave. "No," said the headman, "there is one more thing I must show you." Out of politeness, Shiner agreed. Then there was a bit of by-play between the interpreter and the headman. The headman said that he wanted to take Shiner upstairs, but that the staircase was very narrow and the room was small and so forth. The interpreter relented, and off they went, Shiner and the headman, to inspect this attic.'

'Now comes the interesting part,' Cox said.

'There was a cradle in this attic. The headman leaned over to Shiner and said, "That is my daughter." He spoke in English! Shiner was astonished, but before he could recover himself, the headman had picked up the child. He was frantic. He put the child in Shiner's arms and said, "Take her with you! Please, take her away from here! You must do this! She has no future here in China!"'

'Is this an ashtray, too?' said Cox to Mrs Etterick. But she was squinting at Rudge.

'Shiner never said a word,' said Rudge. 'He simply put the child back into the cradle and took himself away. But he told me he was really quite shaken by it.'

'I'd divide anything Shiner says by ten,' said Cox.

'The story is true,' Rudge said. 'There were others present. He had witnesses.'

‘But there were only two of them in the attic. You said so.’

‘I think it is a heart-rending story,’ Rudge said. He appealed to Mrs Etterick. ‘I sometimes wonder what I would have done if I’d been in Shiner’s position.’

‘If you’d had any sense you’d have taken the next rickshaw out of the place,’ Cox said.

‘I’d like to think I was the sort of man who could get that infant out of the country.’

‘And where would you bring this ashen-faced tot? To England? What future would she have here?’

Mrs Etterick said, ‘Gina was very happy in Bangkok. She hasn’t been nearly so happy since.’

‘I have nothing so dramatic to offer as Shiner’s story,’ Cox said. ‘I wasn’t on a company swan to the Canton Trade Fair. I was in the army, and Kota Bahru was about the grimmest place I’d ever seen. I couldn’t imagine why the Japanese had wanted to capture it, or why we were so bloody keen to get it back. But I was an officer and I was put in charge of the reoccupation. What made me think of this? I suppose it was your mention of looters, Diana. After the surrender, Malaya was swarming with looters and Kota Bahru seemed to have more than its fair share. They made me livid. They spent the war hiding behind trees while British soldiers were dying in battle or rotting in prison camps. One day, I was driving along in my jeep. This was just outside of town. I saw a looter running across the road with an enormous great sack. I slammed on the brakes and hopped out of the jeep. And I suppose I yelled at him to stop – I really can’t remember. It all happened so fast. I then took out my pistol – the chap was still beetling away with his sack – and fired. One shot. The man fell dead.’

‘That’s horrible,’ Rudge said.

‘I was afraid,’ Cox said, ‘that he might still be alive. He was lying there. I couldn’t see any blood. I wasn’t even a good shot! I thought he was faking – the way animals pretend they’re dead. He had flopped over so quickly, just like a rabbit. I kept my pistol aimed at him as I walked over to him, and then I saw that I had got him right through the heart. The blood had started to clot on his blouse. It was a woman’s blouse. I imagine he had stolen that, too.’

‘What a thing to have on your conscience,’ Rudge said.

‘Precisely,’ Cox said. ‘I thought I’d have a terrible night. But not a bit! I went back to my bungalow and ate a huge meal and then slept like a baby.’

Mrs Etterick said, ‘And I’ll bet everyone blamed you afterward and said you hadn’t any right.’

‘Some fools did, but I don’t suppose anyone really cared.’

‘There’s no dessert,’ Mrs Etterick said. ‘I have some fresh fruit and some cheese, if anyone’s interested.’

‘I’ll help you clear away these things,’ said Cox.

‘Leave them, please, Austin,’ Mrs Etterick said. ‘I rather like sitting in the rubble.’

Rudge said, ‘Some years, there’s lots of snow in Peebles.’ He stood up. ‘I ought to be off,’ he said. ‘Are you going? We’re both crossing the river. We could share a taxi.’

‘I’m going to linger a bit in the rubble,’ Cox said. ‘But don’t let me hold you up.’ Now he looked at Mrs Etterick, ‘Or would it be simpler if we both left?’

Though it was almost eight-thirty, it was still dark the following morning as the mother and daughter walked down St John’s Hill to Clapham Junction. Mrs Etterick was brisk and silent, keeping four steps ahead of Gina, who was unusually talkative for this early hour. Passing the sweet shops on the hill, Gina remarked that they might buy their chocolate oranges on the way back; at the Granada, Gina said they’d have to see the Disney film – perhaps tomorrow; and there were Christmas trees stacked at the flower shop: Gina fell behind, choosing one. Mrs Etterick had not paused, or replied, and Gina had toiled on clumsy feet to catch up with her. The daughter was big, but had the stumbling round-shouldered gait of a small child. Her eyes were hooded slits in her fat solemn face and her arms swung uselessly in her sleeves.

Gina said, ‘After Daddy died and went to Heaven –’

Mrs Etterick quickened her pace.

A crowd of people stood at the ticket window. Mrs Etterick joined them. Now Gina entered the lobby.

‘Mum,’ she said in a pleading voice. ‘After Daddy died –’

‘You’re talking much too loud,’ Mrs Etterick said sharply. ‘You’ll have to stand in the corner. Over there.’

Gina lugged herself to the corner and waited, murmuring.

It was Mrs Etterick’s turn. She put her money down and leaned toward the plastic

grille. ‘One single and one return to Sunbury, please.’