At the end of the meal, the Sunday curry lunch which many of the expatriates in Dar es Salaam ate in the upstairs dining room of the Rex Hotel, Ernie Grigson leaned over and whispered seriously and slowly to Leo Mockler's ear: 'I'm going to ask you for a big favor some time when I'm sober.' Ernie found his glass and swallowed some beer. He added, 'Mention it to me tomorrow, okay?'

Leo said yes, expelling it quickly with a vaporous belch, and as he did he saw Margo at the end of the table watching the two of them. Although Margo did not speak, she had the staring look of the practiced wife who knows without hearing him what her husband is saying.

But Ernie and Margo weren't married. They had planned to be months before, and then, out of the blue, Amy – Ernie's wife – went to India with the two children. Amy was living in an ashram outside Bombay. She wrote letters which were vague and dreamy and which always ended with demands for money. She never mentioned divorce. Ernie wondered if perhaps she was ill (the food? the heat? – Amy had never been strong). He wrote to the elderly Canadian lady who ran the ashram; he asked about Amy. The lady wrote back in shaky script on handmade paper, stamped at the top with a Hindu symbol in blue: Amy was fine and the children were happy; 'Amy's thoughts are serene and with us. She has many friends here. It will confuse her to preoccupy her mind with the separation. Amy needs time.'

Ernie was angry: Amy in India had all the time in the world! And it had been understood that the divorce was a mutual wish. In those last months before Amy left for Bombay they had even stopped discussing the divorce: the arguments ended and the indifference that followed was more final than silence, worse than their quarreling had ever been.

Margo had moved in with Ernie the day Amy left. Leo visited them. He could sense their tension, which was lovers' tension, haphazardly pitching them into moods. Marriage, they agreed, was a trivial, nearly silly ceremony – but Ernie was still married to Amy and that mattered. Three times Leo heard the elderly Canadian lady's letter being read out; the last time it was read by Margo, who was pregnant now.

It was April in Dar es Salaam, and the rains were on them. The road to Ernie's house was sodden, and the raised sections at the edges broke off in chunks. There were a number of simple brown puddles which proved bottomless and swallowed the wheels of cars. And insects, seemingly given life by the floods of rainwater, crawled over the

furniture and clung to windows. Even when it was not raining the air was heavy with wetness and insect racket. Ernie said that screens killed the breeze.

Leo, who lived at a boarding house, The Palms, a mile up the Oyster Bay Road, stopped driving all the way out to Ernie's. He saw the couple only on Sundays at the curry lunch. He was glad he did not see them often, because Margo's mood now did not concern the divorce anymore but was rather a tight shrewish incomprehension over why Ernie had married Amy in the first place. And Leo, once used as a witness, was expected to take sides. So it was 'What do you think, Leo?' and also the rain that kept him away.

On Monday at five Leo pushed through the swinging saloon doors of the Rex and saw Ernie at the end of the bar, standing with one foot on the brass rail, studying the deeply scarred dart board.

'Large Tusker,' said Leo to the barman, drawing beside Ernie and startling him.

'Rough day?' asked Ernie. He held his glass to his lips.

'The usual,' said Leo. He worked at the National and Grindlays on Shirazi Street. He seldom spoke about his job to Ernie, who had something to do with traffic control at the airport, and thought naively (but like most other people) that Leo was rich because he worked in a bank. 'I get long leave in September,' said Leo. 'I need it, too. I'm thinking of going back via Beirut and Athens.'

'I might be able to do something for you – get you a concession, reduced rates, that sort of thing,' said Ernie.

'Really?' Ernie had never made an offer like that before; and the most Leo had allowed Ernie at the bank was jumping the queue on Saturday mornings at the end of the month. 'As a matter of fact I was also thinking of going to Prague, but it costs a bit extra.'

'I could fix it for you,' said Ernie. 'There's a connecting flight to Prague from Athens. Have you booked?'

'No,' said Leo.

'Write down the places you want to go on a piece of paper. Leave it to me. I'll take care of it.'

Then Leo remembered what Ernie had said on Sunday. He was going to mention it. But it seemed so obvious: the favor in return.

‘What are you drinking?’ asked Leo.

‘I’m all right,’ said Ernie. He looked into his glass and said, ‘You remember what I asked you yesterday?’

‘The favor?’

‘That’s right,’ said Ernie, and tried to chuckle. ‘Well, the other day I was trying to think who was my best friend. I thought of Charlie and Agnes, Alan, the boys at the airport. And you know what? I couldn’t think of one that I could rely on.’

‘Money?’ asked Leo. He felt sure it was not, but said it to help Ernie along.

‘No. I don’t have much, but that’s the thing, see? This is the one thing money won’t buy.’

‘You’ve got me in suspense,’ said Leo.

‘It’s my divorce,’ said Ernie. He put his glass down, and with his hands empty he seemed to become conscious of their trembling. He picked them up and made fists and began to rub his eyes, speaking tiredly as he did so: ‘I’ve been seeing lawyers about it, and they all say it’s hopeless. There are only two legal grounds for divorce here in Tanganyika.’ A long-time resident, Ernie always used the country’s colonial name. ‘Nonconsummation and adultery, just like UK. And since I’ve got two kids I can’t very well say I never poked my wife, can I?’ He laughed briefly and took his fists from his eyes, which were now very red. ‘So that leaves me with adultery.’

‘It happens in the best of families,’ said Leo.

‘Sure,’ said Ernie, ‘but did you ever think how hard it is to prove? The lawyers tell me that I have to supply the name of the chap and of course his address. Then I have to give the number of times and the places where I think it happened. If I can’t give the details my divorce is up the spout.’ Ernie shook his head. ‘God, I haven’t had a good night’s sleep in ages.’

‘Amy’s no help, I suppose.’

‘Useless,’ said Ernie. ‘Absolutely useless. I send a check every bloody month and she never thanks me. She’s only written a couple of times. She wants a tape recorder, she wants a camera. I don’t know what she does with the money – a hundred quid goes a long way in India.’ In a resigned tone Ernie said, ‘But she always took me for granted, you know.’

‘Well, who do you think it was that –’ Leo stopped deliberately, but Ernie simply

watched Leo's eyes and showed no inclination to speak. 'That, um, committed adultery with her?'

'That's just it!' Ernie said. 'She didn't. That's only the grounds.'

'Oh, the grounds,' said Leo. 'But in order to get your divorce here you've got to prove she went off with someone, isn't that right?'

'I could go to Mexico. Divorces are easy there – mental cruelty, incompatibility, lots of vague stuff,' said Ernie. 'But I can't spare the time.'

'It really is hopeless,' said Leo. 'Funny, I thought Amy was playing around.'

'She wasn't,' said Ernie, seemingly offended by what Leo had said. 'I'm no fool. We weren't suited to each other – I knew that before we got married. But she went on about how she'd kill herself if I wouldn't have her. That sort of thing. We got married and that was a mistake, but no one made a monkey out of me, not even when my marriage was breaking up.'

The image suggested a great ship foundering in a boiling sea; but marriage was a flimsy agreement, its only drama was its legality, the image was arrogant. It was the male pride, thought Leo: Ernie denying his cast-off wife's adultery. Her sin was his humiliation. He wanted it all ways.

'Maybe,' said Leo, 'she'll divorce you. After all, you were playing around, weren't you?'

'I found a woman I loved,' said Ernie. His sincerity reproached Leo.

'It's still adultery,' said Leo quickly, trying to cover his embarrassment. 'Amy can divorce you for it, can't she?'

'She's up in the clouds,' said Ernie. 'She's in that ashram. You know what they do there? They pray, sort of, and meditate, silly things like that. Besides, she's got her money coming every month. They all have in these ashrams – they're all rich or divorced there. They don't care; they go around barefoot and write poems. No, she'll never divorce me. I'll have to divorce her, and if I don't do it soon Margo's going to have a bastard in five months' time. A bastard with no passport,' Ernie said bitterly.

'But how do you expect to –' Again Ernie did not speak. He waited for Leo to finish. 'You can't divorce her. You haven't got any grounds. It's impossible, you said so yourself.'

'No, I didn't,' said Ernie.

Leo laughed. ‘Yes, you did!’

‘It’s possible,’ said Ernie slowly, ‘but it’s illegal. Did you ever hear of connivance?’

‘I suppose conniving is what we’re doing now,’ said Leo.

‘Not yet,’ said Ernie. ‘Have another drink?’ Leo said yes, and Ernie went on. ‘Amy never committed adultery with anyone and you know it. She wouldn’t know where to begin. But if I say she did and can prove it, I can get the divorce – providing she agrees to the whole business.’

‘You mean, concoct a story about a boy friend she had?’

‘They call them corespondents.’

‘So you have to find a corespondent.’

‘That’s the favor I was going to ask you,’ said Ernie, and he said it with the same sincerity that had picked at Leo’s shame earlier – that reproachful sentence, ‘I found a woman I loved.’

‘Me?’ said Leo, but couldn’t laugh. In a very thin voice he said, ‘I only met her once.’

‘Twice,’ said Ernie. He took out a worn pocket diary and fingered the pages.

Leo remembered the first time. He was new in the country, and, having met Ernie casually in the Rex, Ernie had invited him home for a last drink. Amy had made a show of surprise, so wooden and deliberate that the word theatrical occurred to Leo; and then she used halting sarcasm: ‘At least you could have given me a ring and let me know you were bringing someone.’

Ernie, much to Leo’s discomfort, turned his back on his wife.

Leo said, ‘I’m terribly sorry if I’m intruding.’

‘It’s not you,’ Amy had said, ‘it’s him.’

It was clear they were not getting on well, and Leo thought: if a man was kind to her she would take him as a lover. Amy left the room. She came back without the ribbon in her hair; her hair was long and alive with the electricity the comb had left in it. She was charming to Leo, got him a drink, lit his cigarette, sat beside him and said, ‘Have you got pots and pots of money?’ when Leo told her he worked at the National and Grindlays.

‘No, I’m just a clerk on the foreign exchange side, though I started out on fixed deposits. As a matter of fact, I’m trying to save enough money so that I can resign in a few years and go back to university.’

‘I was at Exeter,’ Amy said. Her reply was pleasing: she was one of the few people who had not said, ‘At your age?’ when he mentioned going back to university. ‘I did art history, but I read fiction most of the time.’

‘I read a lot of novels,’ said Leo. ‘I’m very fond of –’

‘I haven’t read a book since –’ Here Amy looked at Ernie. ‘Since I met you.’

‘Well, children must take up a great deal of your time,’ said Leo.

‘Not here,’ she said. ‘We’ve got slaves – ayahs. They do everything, washing, cooking … the children are devoted to them. I’ve plenty of time. But no … interest. Are you married?’

Leo shook his head.

‘God, how I envy you.’ Amy closed her eyes and seemed to relax, and Leo took a good look at her. She was pale, small boned, blonde as a Swede, with a sharp lean nose and breasts which were probably small – it was hard to tell: she was wearing a loose shirt, one of Ernie’s perhaps, and the breasts were only suggestions at the pockets. But she had a lovely fragile face, and with her eyes closed Leo could imagine her head on a pillow.

‘You could do a little art history here,’ Leo said.

‘Bongo drums,’ said Amy contemptuously. ‘India – that’s where the art is. Have you ever been to India, Leo?’

‘No.’ When had he told her his name? ‘But I’ve always wanted to go.’

‘Indians are fabulous creatures – very catlike, I always think, very gentle and smooth,’ she said, stroking her forearm as she spoke. ‘Erotic sculpture on temples. Yes! On holy temples! Fantastic things. They worship the lingam, you see. You wouldn’t believe what they get up to,’ she said, her eyes flashing. ‘Look at poor Ernest – he’s blushing!’

‘I am not blushing,’ said Ernie. ‘I’ve heard all this rubbish before. Here, Leo, you want to have a look at those temples? There they are.’ He pointed to a shelf of large books, boxed editions; art books, Leo knew, even from across the room.

Leo stayed late, talking mostly to Amy (‘My aunt was a character,’ Amy said at one

point, ‘I once saw her lose her temper and down a whiskey, then smash her glass into the fireplace …’). After twelve Ernie drove Leo back to The Palms. In the car Leo said, ‘I like your wife. She’s very intelligent.’

‘We’re getting a divorce,’ said Ernie.

It was a statement to which the only tactful response was silence. And Leo knew as Ernie said it that he would have nothing to do with Amy. A married lover, it was said, was a convenient if temporary pleasure; but a woman on the verge of divorce was a terrible risk, a man-eater.

Apparently there was a second meeting – Ernie swore it was so, it was marked in his pocket diary – but Leo could not recall it. His interest in Amy died with the news of the divorce. He could remember being a bit sorry, because he had never made love to a married woman, and now his courage failed him. The next time Leo saw Ernie in the Rex, Ernie was with Margo. Leo knew that he could not be friends with both wife and lover. His friendships had to be Ernie’s or there would be misunderstandings. And Leo felt mild relief, as if something cloudy and uncertain in his life had disappeared, when Amy went to India. It was a surprising feeling: he barely knew the woman.

‘… happens all the time,’ Ernie was saying. Used to giving orders at the airport and unfamiliar with persuading people to do things, Ernie got excited and distracted telling Leo his idea. He began by saying that he considered it a big favor, but later in the evening he said in a wheedling tone that there was no risk; it was a small thing really, if Leo could see it in its proper perspective. ‘Look at the paper. Every Thursday they give the court proceedings, and, Christ, they’re practically all divorces – even in a little dump like Tanganyika.’

Ernie took out his handkerchief and wiped his face. The bar had filled up with seamen who stood, like Ernie, with one foot on the brass rail, glancing around. The regulars were at tables, drinking slowly or not at all, and looking up and commenting when people left or entered through the swinging doors of the bar.

‘It’s a strange request,’ Leo said finally. ‘I don’t know what to do.’

‘There’s no one else I can turn to,’ said Ernie.

‘So it really isn’t such a small matter, is it?’

‘For me, no. It’s a life-or-death business for me. But you – God, it’s nothing.’

‘It’s a lie, though.’

‘Oh, yes, I know that,’ said Ernie. ‘There’s no getting around that.’

‘And a lie is serious, especially in a legal matter. It’s perjury. The whole thing could backfire. I could lose my job at the bank.’

‘It won’t backfire, I swear.’

‘Everyone knows we’re friends. They’ll know we made it up.’

‘That’s just it. These divorces, look at them. Who is it that’s always named as the third party – it’s friends every single time! How else would the wife meet the bloke? The women here don’t get out much. The only men they meet are the friends of their husbands. That’s how it happens –’

‘You mentioned the court proceedings in the paper,’ said Leo. ‘I read the paper every day and I’ve never noticed them, but what bothers me is that other people here probably read them all the time. It would be just like my manager, Farnsworth, to see something like that. If he did I’d be finished.’

‘Nothing to worry about,’ said Ernie, becoming eager again. ‘Don’t give that a thought. The editor of the Standard is an old pal of mine. I could ask him not to print our names. He’d do it, I know he would. He’s a very old friend. I’ve known him for years.’

‘Then why don’t you name him as corespondent?’ said Leo. But he was sorry as soon as he said it.

‘Leo, for God’s sake!’ Ernie said helplessly. ‘Don’t you see I can’t? You’re my last hope. If you refuse me, I’m stuck – Margo says she’ll go away. She’ll leave me.’ Ernie began to sigh softly. ‘Everyone lets me down, Amy, Margo, my kids – those kids mean a lot to me. You don’t have any kids. You don’t know what it’s like to be away from them. It kills me. Leo, I cry when I think of them – I’m not ashamed, I do.’ Ernie looked mournfully at Leo and said, ‘If you did this for me, you can’t imagine what I’d do for you. I’d do anything –’ Ernie put his hand on Leo’s wrist: the fingers were wet and Leo felt disgust, felt his arm turn clammy as Ernie said, ‘Just name it – anything –’

‘Stop,’ said Leo, and drew away. ‘I don’t want to make a deal with you,’ he said. But he said it to convince himself, because at the source of Leo’s disgust was the thought that he could have had anything he named; and what was most sinister to him was that he was tempted to ask. But he said: ‘First put it to Amy. See if she’ll agree to it. I take it Margo already agrees. Then – this is crucial – make sure that nothing appears in the Standard. Get a definite promise from the editor. If Amy agrees and nothing gets into print, I’ll be satisfied.’

Ernie beamed. ‘We’re halfway there! Amy’s already said yes.’

‘What? But how did you know I’d agree?’

‘I didn’t.’ Ernie grinned. ‘I just said that I was going to ask you. Here’s her letter. I think she means business.’ Ernie took out a wrinkled aerogram with a pink stamp printed on it. He showed it to Leo, smoothing it on the bar. The handwriting was large, willful, done with a felt marking pen: I suppose it will happen eventually, so it might as well be your way. Better with Leo than others I could name – he’s a nice boy. There was no signature. Leo folded the aerogram and before he handed it back to Ernie he looked at the unusual return address: Amy/Ashram/Kolhapur.

The following Sunday at lunch Ernie was exuberant; he sat a few feet away from the table and held his beer mug on his knee; he laughed loudly and often. He said that he had seen the editor of the Standard and got the promise from him; and the lawyer, who was an Indian, knew of the connivance and was drawing up the papers. It was all set.

‘Have a beer,’ said Ernie. ‘You’re not drinking, Leo. Cheer up!’

‘I’ve stopped drinking,’ said Leo. He hadn’t, but the lie was necessary: he wanted nothing from Ernie. On his way to the toilet Leo paid for his own meal. He said he had a headache and went back to The Palms. He did not want Ernie to think that the favor, which already he regretted, could be repaid so easily, or at all. He withdrew into spiteful lassitude and stopped seeing Ernie altogether.

Some weeks after that lunch he was visited by the Indian lawyer, whose name was Chandra and who drove out to The Palms and said softly, ‘Are you alone?’ and then ‘I’ve come to deliver a subpoena.’

That was ominous; it gave Leo a fright, but Chandra said, ‘Not to worry – it’s just a formality,’ and stayed for tea. They talked, and as they did, Leo thought: Here is a good man; he would never ask of me what Ernie did. And Leo wished that he had met Chandra instead of Ernie.

Walking to Chandra’s car, Leo asked, ‘Did you know Amy?’

Eagerly Chandra said, ‘Yes – oh, she was a fine person. She knew a great deal about Indian art – very interested in Indian culture. A graduate, did you know? I was hoping Ernie would try to patch things up – but –’

‘He wasn’t interested,’ said Leo.

‘I should not say this,’ said Chandra. ‘But he did not deserve her.’

‘You’re right,’ said Leo. And he startled the Indian by saying, ‘He’s a selfish bastard.’

Chandra looked warily at Leo and then said good-bye.

He's wondering how I can say that, thought Leo. But the betrayal was not Leo's – it was Ernie's. Ernie's lie had changed Leo and made him restless. He slept badly and had disturbing dreams. In a dream he watched his mother snarling at Ernie and saying, 'What have you done to our Leo?' Ernie had replied by sticking his tongue out at the old lady.

A month after he agreed to act as corespondent he admitted his hatred of Ernie to himself. Leo found himself falling into conversations with bank customers who knew Ernie; Leo made a point of calling Ernie a shit, and he encouraged the customers to agree with him. He saw each of Ernie's enemies – there were quite a number, Leo realized – as his own friends.

Amy as well. He thought of her in ramshackle India with her two children, living from day to day, in a silent ashram, in retreat from the world. It seemed a kind of destitution that he had connived with Ernie in forcing upon her. How she must hate me, he thought. But Amy did not know that his part in the conspiracy had ruined his friendship with Ernie and Margo. Amy didn't know that in his agreeing to the favor he had accepted the blame and had had to construct the adultery in his mind in order to convince himself of his blame. That preoccupation had begun to obsess and arouse him, almost as if it had all been true and he was looking back at a recent half-completed passion which had confused rather than exhausted his feelings.

On an impulse he wrote to her. It was late in the morning, just after coffee, and there were no customers in the bank because it was raining very hard. He felt lonely, but writing the letter lifted his spirits. An impediment, the cramp of language he had sometimes experienced in letter writing, did not arise this time. The hollowness of letters with all their inadequate phrases had caused him to stop writing letters entirely, but the letter to Amy gave him pleasure. He said, I rather like the idea of being your lover. He said, I agreed to it because Ernie seemed so upset, but I don't like him anymore. He said, in his last long paragraph, I'm sitting in the bank and looking out into the empty foyer and the rainy street – and that was especially strange because as he wrote it he did look around the bank and he tried to explain all the things he saw to this lonely woman.

She replied. It came quickly and it made Leo realize that India was just across the water, closer than England. Amy talked about the children, how brown they had become; about the ashram's activities, the poetry magazine, the outings, the play school that was being organized. She said, I've seen those sexy temples, by the way. Fantastic! She said she was learning a bit of Hindi. And she finished her letter with a long paragraph similar to Leo's: It's late now and our chickens are silent. The room seems quite empty and I'm smoking a cigarette I rolled from the air edition of the

Guardian Weekly …

That was an aerogram. Her next was many sheets of notepaper in a thick envelope. She unburdened herself and responded to Leo's remark about Ernie (I don't like him anymore). She analyzed her marriage more candidly and more fairly than Ernie had ever done; it was a little history, their first meeting and their first disappointments. She said how excited she had been when Leo had come home unexpectedly with Ernie. Leo read, fascinated: she was a victim and here she was alone; Leo had had a part in victimizing her. The deception was like a fishbone in his throat.

Leo wrote Amy a long apology; he asked her to forgive him for agreeing to the lie. He said he was sorry and that if he had it to do over again he would refuse. Amy's reply was: Don't say that. Don't regret what you've said. You did something fine because you believed Ernie was your friend. I think about you often, Leo, and I sometimes wish we really had gone off together. But it's too late for that now. You're a very sweet person. If you regret what you did, then I'll have to as well. And I don't want that. I'm happy here.

The bank manager, Farnsworth, frowned at Leo when the coffee boy knocked on the glass partition and said Leo had a telephone call.

'Take your call,' said Farnsworth. 'I'll check these figures in the meantime.'

'Sorry,' said Leo. 'I'll be right back.'

'Shauri kwisha!' It was Ernie. 'It's all settled! I've just come out of court this minute. It'll be final in three weeks. God, the judge gave me the third degree, asked me how well I knew you and did I know what you were up to … Leo, are you there?'

'Yes. Look, I'm busy –'

'I thought you'd laugh when I told you. Say, Leo, is there anything wrong?'

'I'm with the manager. Piles of work –'

'I understand. But what a weight off my shoulders! It's like – just like a big weight lifted off my shoulders. I can breathe again! I feel like celebrating. How about a drink at the Rex?'

'It's not even noon, Ernie.'

'I can drive right over. Say yes.'

'No, I've got work to do.'

‘Leo, are you feeling all right?’

‘I’m fine; I have to go. The manager’s waiting. I’ll ring you back.’

But he didn’t ring Ernie back that day; he busied himself with the July figures. And the next day he could have rung, but he had no excuse for neglecting to ring the previous day, none that Ernie would believe. Ernie would still say he was ill or out of sorts. Leo was waiting – for courage, he told himself. He did not want to hear about the divorce and he did not want to see Ernie until he could say what he felt: that Ernie had betrayed him and made him victimize poor Amy.

The third day Ernie rang three times in the morning. Leo told the switchboard operator that if Ernie Grigson rang again – she was to ask for the name – she should tell him that Leo was not available. Leo tried to stay out of sight; he worked in the vault, then in a back office hidden from the street. But late in the afternoon, when he was standing at the front counter and going over his transactions on the electric adding machine, he sensed someone pause at the window, and he felt it must be Ernie, peering in at him.

It wasn’t. Two European ladies had stopped. Leo looked up and they began walking. He didn’t recognize them – they were deeply tanned; one wore a headscarf, the other a straw hat – but their gestures were distinct. As they moved along the sidewalk, one looked through the bank’s window, directly at him with her broad brown face and bright red lips, and then she quickly looked away and seemed to mumble; the second turned and stared at Leo, shielding her eyes from the glare in a kind of salute. And they walked on. The women did not face each other, but Leo could tell they were speaking. He realized it was Thursday.

Farnsworth came over as Leo was searching the columns of the Standard for the Court Record. He couldn’t find it at first, and when he did find the right column (it resembled the account of a cricket match) it was with difficulty that he located his name among the many there.

‘I see we’ve got our name in the papers, Mockler,’ said Farnsworth curtly. ‘Feel like talking about it?’

‘No,’ said Leo.

The Palms was run by a small, neat widow of sixty or more whose husband had been a District Officer in Morogoro. She had a son Leo’s age who was an accountant with a public relations firm in Capetown, and usually, before dinner, when Leo was having his drink on the verandah, she joined him and spoke about her son. The other guests tried to avoid her chatter, but Leo was grateful for her company and even listened with

patient interest to her reading her son's letters.

But that Thursday, the day Leo's name appeared in the Standard's Court Record, the widow avoided him. She sat at another table with an older resident, a man Leo knew by his nickname, and only once looked at Leo: wickedly, he thought, as if at a traitor. The widow and her elderly companion spoke in rapid whispers, then very loudly and irrelevantly ('Are the Browns in nine?' 'I believe they are, yes') to disguise their whispering.

Leo ate alone and felt eyes on him and voices behind him. But he was determined not to be intimidated; after dinner he had his coffee on the verandah instead of the lounge. He turned his back to the people in the bar, which adjoined the verandah, and he faced the sea. The waves lapped, making a breathless splashing, and the palm fronds rattled out of sight, high above him. In the darkness, across that ocean, were India and Amy. He felt like going up to his room and writing her a note. He fought the impulse. If he walked through the bar they would say, 'Expect he's going up to write to the other party.' They would laugh, because now they believed they knew his closest secret.

A silence consumed the bar sounds; it was as if the sea had mysteriously risen inside and drowned every person there. It happened like that, unnaturally, and the only sounds were the palms and the regular waves and, far-off, one or two barking voices, perhaps of fishermen, the shouts skipping in from the water.

Leo turned to see Ernie walking through the bar. The widow said, 'He's outside.'

Ernie was at the doorway. He paused and smiled weakly, then came toward Leo with both hands out.

'Leo, I'm sorry,' he said, too loud. The people in the bar must have heard because they went silent in a hush once again and Leo could hear the ice rattling in their glasses.

'Go away,' the whisper was barely audible. 'Don't talk to me here.'

'It was the African –'

'Lower your voice,' Leo hissed.

'The African,' said Ernie. But it was a poor whisper. 'At the printery. The stupid bugger forgot what the editor told him about leaving out your name. It's all his fault –'

'Get out,' said Leo. He tossed his head. 'They're listening.'

'I just wanted to tell you that I promised I'd make your bookings – for your long leave. But you never gave me a list of places. You mentioned Vienna, wasn't it? And I forgot

the others. So write them down on a piece of paper –'

'All right,' said Leo. 'Tomorrow. Now do me a favor.'

'Yes, of course,' said Ernie.

'Get out of here this minute.'

'You hate me, don't you? I don't blame you –'

'Ernie!' In his exasperation he raised his voice, and again he heard the ice in the glasses.

'Margo's in the car. She said to thank you,' said Ernie.

'Leave by the beach, so they don't see you.'

Leo went up to bed by entering the building from the back door, avoiding crossing through the bar. Going up the stairs he thought he heard the widow's voice, '– Indian lawyer came to see him – Knew it then, of course –' her voice was a high, satisfied whine.

Chandra, the widow, the people in the bar, Margo, Amy, Ernie – everyone had got what he wanted out of the divorce, except Leo. All the blame was his and he was suffering for no good reason, as if he alone had been made to sit in a zone of dead air.

'Coffee?' inquired Farnsworth; Leo said yes, Farnsworth suggested the Gymkhana Club, and Leo knew it was serious: it was in the Billiard Room of the Gymkhana Club that Leo's predecessor, a man who traded currency on the side, was sacked.

Farnsworth was relaxed. He talked about the club, how long he had been a member, all the changes he had seen, how women weren't allowed in the upstairs lounge, how he and others in the old days used to wait every second Friday for the mailboat and the English papers. He leaned forward and said, 'Let's take the bull by the horns –'

A man entered the club and, greeting Farnsworth, smiled at Leo.

'You're due for leave in September, am I right?'

'The fifteenth,' said Leo.

'Well, I've been thinking,' said Farnsworth. 'We're not all that busy. I think you can take it a bit earlier than that.'

‘How soon would that be?’ asked Leo.

‘Say – within the next fortnight,’ said Farnsworth. ‘That’ll give you time to make your bookings. If you have any difficulty I’ll see what I can do.’

‘I won’t have any trouble with that,’ said Leo.

‘Better settle up with the tax people before you go.’

‘Aren’t I coming back here?’ asked Leo.

‘Do you want to?’ Farnsworth looked surprised. ‘I would have thought not.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Leo.

‘This club has seen its share of scandal,’ said Farnsworth, and then he smiled. He stood up and put his arm on Leo’s shoulder. ‘I know how it is,’ he said. ‘Don’t do anything foolish. Things look pretty black to you now. But when you’re back in the UK, everything will seem different. You’ll see.’

‘Can you drop me at the post office? I have a cable to send.’

Later in the morning Leo rang Ernie.

‘About those plane bookings,’ Leo said. ‘I’ve changed my mind about Beirut –’

‘Very sensible,’ said Ernie. ‘How do you want me to route you?’

‘I’m going to London,’ said Leo.

‘Any stops?’

‘Yes,’ said Leo, ‘Bombay.’

‘That’s in India,’ said Ernie. He laughed. ‘It’ll cost a lot extra.’

‘You can afford it,’ said Leo.

She had said she would be at the airport, but it was a man who stepped out of the crowd of people with bundles and took Leo by the arm and spoke his name. The man was English; he was dressed like a holy man, in a dusty white robe. His hair was to his shoulders and he had a full beard, the tip of which he clutched as he spoke to Leo: ‘Amy’s told me all about you,’ he said, but not unkindly. His eyes were extremely gentle, and he held Leo’s arm the way one holds an invalid’s.

His name was Bob, he said. He was agreeable and helpful, and even recognizing the vast differences in their appearances, Leo felt close to him, saw him as one who had perhaps lived on the periphery of Amy's marriage – probably helped her through the divorce – as Leo had lived alongside Ernie.

'Amy couldn't get away,' said Bob. 'I'm supposed to take you to the ashram.' He guided Leo through the crowd and hailed a taxi, and they bumped along through more crowds to a railway station which had the appearance of a busy refugee encampment.

They traveled second class; it was a compromise. Leo wanted first class, which was air-conditioned, and Bob said he always went third. In the train Bob said, 'You look petrified!'

'What's that?' asked Leo, glancing out the window.

'A rice field,' said Bob.

'No, those naked people.'

'Oh, beggars. India's full of them.'

They arrived at the ashram at night. It was an enormous compound, as plain as an army barracks, surrounded by a freshly painted wall which was floodlit. Amy's house was big, two storied, and she was at the upper window, a white face with darkness behind it.

Leo bounded up the stairs ahead of Bob, but when he saw her his nerve failed and he could not kiss her. Then Bob was in the room, putting Leo's suitcase against the wall and saying awkwardly, 'Well here you are. I'll be going now.'

'You're a dear,' said Amy. Bob had opened the door. She said, 'Narendra?'

'Baroda,' said Bob, and was away.

'I see you speak the language,' said Leo.

'Pardon?' said Amy, and then, 'Oh that,' and smiled.

She was wearing a sari and gold bangles, and her hair was loosely braided in one thick strand with a tassel at the tip in the Indian style. She was not the person Leo had written to, not the person he had seen at Ernie's house. She was thinner, more angular, awkward, plain even, and her speech was shallow. She was not pretty; she was any English housewife in an Indian costume, and Leo noticed she was smoking

and wore a watch.

Leo fumbled with his hands and finally said, ‘It’s a nice house you’ve got.’

‘Very old,’ said Amy. ‘It belonged to one of the first residents of the ashram. A wonderful old man. It’s got a fantastic view of the place. You’ll see in the morning.’

‘The kids,’ said Leo. ‘Are they asleep?’

‘Hours ago,’ said Amy.

‘They didn’t wait up,’ said Leo.

‘They didn’t know you were coming.’

Leo was going to ask why, but didn’t. He found it hard to speak to Amy, and it was odd, because he could have written to her very easily; but now he could hardly think of anything to say. She seemed a vague acquaintance, met after a long time, someone he barely knew.

‘That’s a very handsome oil lamp,’ said Leo, pointing to the lantern on a carved table; it was the only light in the room.

‘Only five rupees at the bazaar,’ said Amy. ‘It’s solid brass.’

‘Do you mind if I blow it out?’ said Leo. He did not wait for Amy’s reply. He walked over, raised the chimney and puffed on it. The room was dark. Leo said, ‘Where am I going to sleep?’

‘Silly,’ said Amy, and Leo heard the gold bangles clink and saw the sparks from the cigarette being stubbed out. He heard her walking toward him and saw her arm move outward as if flinging her sari off.

They made love ineptly, in silence, with unsatisfying speed on a rocking charpoy. Leo apologized, saying that it had been a long plane journey and that he was tired. And Amy confessed that she was upset, too. It had been dutiful; there was no passion, and Leo felt that he had lived through the act a hundred times already, even to the apology.

He was too excited to sleep, as if he had been rushed through a tunnel, and he told himself that it was the plane. He lay beside Amy and now the room did not seem so dark: he could make out large squares on the ceiling. He still heard the plane, the roar of the landing, and felt the deafening pressure in his ears. He said to himself, ‘I’m in India,’ but he felt nothing. All the utterance brought to him was India’s flat map shape,

the vast red patch, the sharp triangle drooping into green ocean, the black borders and dots of cities. But he would get to know it, and 'Yes,' he thought, 'this could be home for me.'

'I want to marry you,' said Leo at last.

'No,' said Amy, 'don't say that.'

'Yes,' he held her, but felt her struggle slightly.

'I can't,' she said; and then pulling away, 'What was that?'

Amy rose up on her elbow and looked at the ceiling.

'Did you hear a bicycle?'

'A bicycle?'

'Go look – go to the window,' said Amy.

Leo walked to the window. Down in the yard a bicycle leaned on its kickstand. An Indian, hard to make out except for the gleaming whiteness of his dhoti, was walking away from it.

'What?' asked Amy.

But Leo did not answer until he had lain down again. 'Nothing,' he said, 'just an Indian.'

Amy put her hand to her throat and started to laugh. 'It might be Narendra,' she said. 'My husband.' Her laugh was coarse, that stranger's laugh that fitted the new image Leo had of her.

Leo leaped up and looked for his pants, but just as he caught sight of them – they were knotted in a pile ten feet from the bed – he heard feet quickly mounting the stairs.