

## Isobel English

### FEUILLE MORTE

NOW, WHEN SHE DESCRIBED THE EMOTION TO HERSELF, or even to other people, although it was something like twenty years since the day she had first met him, she could still invest each detail with the original flavour of exquisite uncertainty: a tangle and blurring of words, unfinished sentences tapering off into a sad little smile and a delicate drooping of the wrists. The whole of her life was mysteriously shadowed, as the brim of her hat cast lilac splashes on her cheeks: "You see, my dear, the little secret was to keep them like two happy saucepans, just off the boil." She would have described the movement of her hands as she expressed this emotional feat, this refinement in the art of love, as "sheer poetry"—leaving the confidant of the moment deeply aware of his own gaucherie.

To maintain the poetry in her life, to feed and fatten the emotion once it had been regularized (after her husband had, like a dying man, made several sharp strokes in the air—quite insignificant and entirely useless—and then like David turned his face to the wall) and to maintain the atmosphere of shadowy not-quite-love, had been as simple as turning the gramophone handle: a stocking or silk scarf pushed into the sound box to take off edges of the human voice and the whispering indefinable subtlety of "*La Vie est vaine . . .*" followed by "*Votre âme est un paysage choisi.*" Oh, it had all been so exactly as she had hoped and wished it might be, from the moment in her fourteenth year when she had first opened the book of Verlaine.

In Bournemouth, in spite of the pines and the landscaped thickets of rhododendrons that blackened the naturally steep framework of the town, there was a nostalgic discontent in her heart. Perhaps retirement had brought an oversimplification of her situation, or there was no longer the need to slip away in the early evening to the lounge of some old-fashioned Kensington Hotel to meet him, now that they all lived under the almost conventional roof of "Heathlands"—a boarding

house (in a road that stood at right angles to the promenade) boasting a sea view, subsequently discovered to be so only from the lavatory and landing windows.

"My husband's friend is an artist," she had told the hotel owners; "for him it is essential to have some vision of nature to feed on." And she would leave him, after a gentle pat on the bony dome of his skull, letting her hand travel down to the tip of his finely arched nose—more a gesture of regret than of affection, and not to be prolonged. She would leave him sitting in the upright wicker chair at the window, bent just a little forward because that was the way most comfortable for his poor back since the last stroke.

After tea had always been their time: between the hours of five and six, before afternoon faded into evening, was the time when they could come closest to each other in spirit. In the London winters, she had hurried through the streets to the little green and white bandstand perched at the edge of the Round Pond. There he would be waiting, quite naturally, with all the grave elegance of the aristocrat; as if he had just stepped down from the white-pillared house behind the trees where he had sat all the afternoon counting and recounting the number of trees felled in his forest during the past month.

It was different now, in Bournemouth. To begin with, he was unable to take more than a few tottery steps towards the washstand. (She secretly resented the sturdy, almost indecently developed calves of her husband, whose requirements were no more than the distance from the hotel to the cinema.)

Lately she had taken to walks by herself; along the windy front, chattering softly in a language that was neither French nor English; forming words and ideas that floated out to sea, insubstantial as paper boats. Sometimes she would hesitate and speak to a face; or stare down into strange young eyes searching for the soul behind. Once she had cried out, "Don't look at me as if I was an old woman, can't you see that I am young behind my eyes?" She would tell Edward of these encounters, describing them with dipping swallow-like gestures and fluttering sighs; trying, although she knew it to be impossible, to revive the feelings of twenty years ago. "If you could only believe in me enough to walk." This was the final barb before she left him to change her dress for dinner.

After his second stroke there was horrifying change in his physical condition, and their relationship ended abruptly. She could stand before him in all the gathered beauty of gauzy hat and trailing chiffon scarf, stand with her hands actually touching the crumbled skin of his cheeks, and all he could do was droop slightly the lid of his left eye to acknowledge his pleasure in her presence.

He was completely paralyzed, and the power of speech was denied him. "He is still so very handsome, my poor Edward," she wrote to a friend in Paris, "I stand and embrace his unfeeling hands, and it is as perfect as caressing an effigy carved in coldest marble."

After several weeks of endurance—a trained nurse installed in the room next to his, and she herself constantly in attendance, as she expressed it—she could bear it no longer. "One cannot waste one's entire spirit on an animal," she remarked to her husband after a long night in the sickroom when the nurse was off duty; "he knows nothing now, except the fear that his milk slops might be taken away from him before he has emptied the bowl."

It had been terrible to see the fear in those greedy eyes, the beseeching look, when as a gesture of defiance to prove to herself that she could still evoke a spark of emotion even in an almost dead man, she had playfully taken the half-filled bowl from under his chin and put it on the dressing table. Then she had quite coldly folded her hands and stared into his empty face. "Of course," she hastened to add when she was describing the episode, "I let him finish up the remains in the bowl afterwards."

They arranged for him to go to a home for indigent gentlefolk situated a little way out of Bournemouth in the direction of Southampton. "When I go to see Edward," she thought, riding along in a single-decker bus, "I shall try to think of all the trees that have cast shadows over my life. I shall try to think of him lying there, quietly resting, but supremely aware." She bothered to redden the full part of her puckered lips; to put on a romantic hat and scarf and fasten a faded velvet rose to the shoulder of her dress. It was after all, just as it had always been. The position had never altered, she told herself; whether she was walking swiftly through the park, the wind ruffling the bunch of feathery curls over her forehead, her hands plunged into the little fur muff, going towards the bandstand; or whether she rode on a Southern Counties bus to visit him, now that he was indisposed. It was still exactly as it had always been; love had never grown cold. She carried this feeling with her right up to the final stages of the journey, until she had her hand on the knob and was pushing open the door.

On the last Saturday of his life, the matron sent a request for her to step into the office on her way out. "But he seems exactly the same," she had remonstrated, noting the hard, unfeeling quality of the other woman's cuffs. "He moved his eyes, twice he moved his eyes, there was a glint of amusement that I could interpret, he was smiling at me with his eyes."

The matron felt for the watch pinned beneath the thick stuff of her apron. "Nevertheless, Mrs. Ellsworth, he is a very sick man as you undoubtedly know, and if there are any relatives who might wish to see him, they should be informed at once. The doctor said that it can only be a matter of days."

Walking out of the narrow hall where the air smelled of illness and cooking unsuccessfully masked by disinfectant, she came suddenly into the brilliant sun, that showed up and made uglier the yellow gravel of the paths. "That terrible woman . . ." she thought, wincing as the stones pierced the flimsy fabric of her shoes—"That terrible woman trying to probe into his past, when I have been his entire past." She spoke to her husband at dinner; felt the isolation of long unshared conversation closing in on her, and went to bed early.

Three days later, he died, quite alone, at three o'clock in the morning. They told her on the telephone: "He must have slipped away while Nurse was answering another bell; he looked so much the same when she returned that she did not at first notice that he had gone."

She covered her face with black tulle pinned firmly into the crown of her hat, and rode over on the bus at the same time as usual to see him. When she saw the sympathetic expression on the matron's face, and then the smoothed-out countenance of the recently prepared dead, a shudder went through her body. "You've changed him," she hissed, when she came out of the death chamber, "you've tampered with his expression. No one, not even I, ever saw such a look of resignation on his face." She wondered if she had said too much, if indeed she had spoken at all. The matron continued to regard her with the same look of fixed sympathy.

Later in the afternoon, she walked along the treed roads, up and down, in and out of the frequent hollows black with laurel; sitting sometimes to rest on a seat; letting the wind touch her face, move her curls as it had done so often before. She did not weep for Edward, or even think very much about his death. She whispered little snatches of poetry under her breath, sometimes repeating the same lines over and over again; savouring the words separately as if each had a secret and detached meaning of its own.

They announced his death in the *Times*, giving "Heathlands" Private Hotel as his last address. The nursing home she refused to acknowledge. It had been a great failure. He had hardly known her there—and perhaps things might have been different. "Imagine," she wrote several weeks later to a friend, "his ex-wife has turned up here to stay. She has insisted that about five Masses in Latin be said for him. I stand by and say nothing, and only hope the incantation will not be fatal to his soul."