# My Cousin Rachel

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## Published by Virago Press

Extract

# 1

They used to hang men at Four Turnings in the old days. Not any more, though. Now, when a murderer pays the penalty for his crime, he does so up at Bodmin, after fair trial at the Assizes. That is, if the law convicts him, before his own conscience kills him. It is better so. Like a surgical operation. And the body has decent burial, though a nameless grave. When I was a child it was otherwise. I can remember as a little lad seeing a fellow hang in chains where the four roads meet. His face and body were blackened with tar for preservation. He hung there for five weeks before they cut him down, and it was the fourth week that I saw him.

He swung between earth and sky upon his gibbet, or, as my cousin Ambrose told me, betwixt heaven and hell. Heaven he would never achieve, and the hell that he had known was lost to him. Ambrose prodded at the body with his stick. I can see it now, moving with the wind like a weather-vane on a rusty pivot, a poor scarecrow of what had been a man. The rain had rotted his breeches, if not his body, and strips of worsted drooped from his swollen limbs like pulpy paper.

It was winter, and some passing joker had placed a sprig of holly in the torn vest for celebration. Somehow, at seven years old, that seemed to me the final outrage, but I said nothing. Ambrose must have taken me there for a purpose, perhaps to test my nerve, to see if I would run away, or laugh, or cry. As my guardian, father, brother, counsellor, as in fact my whole world, he was forever testing me. We walked around the gibbet, I remember, with Ambrose prodding and poking with his stick; and then he paused and lit his pipe, and laid his hand upon my shoulder.

'There you are, Philip,' he said, 'it's what we all come to in the end. Some upon a battlefield, some in bed, others according to their destiny. There's no escape. You can't learn the lesson too young. But this is how a felon dies. A warning to you and me to lead the sober life.' We stood there side by side, watching the body swing, as though we were on a jaunt to Bodmin fair, and the corpse was old Sally to be hit for coconuts. 'See what a moment of passion can bring upon a fellow,' said Ambrose. 'Here is Tom Jenkyn, honest and dull, except when he drank too much. It's true his wife was a scold, but that was no excuse to kill her. If we killed women for their tongues all men would be murderers.'

I wished he had not named the man. Up to that moment the body had been a dead thing, without identity. It would come into my dreams, lifeless and horrible, I knew that very well from the first instant I had set my eyes upon the gibbet. Now it would have connection with reality, and with the man with watery eyes who sold lobsters on the town quay. He used to stand by the steps in the summer months, his basket beside him, and he would set his live lobsters to crawl along the quay in a fantastic race, to make the children laugh. It was not so long ago that I had seen him.

'Well,' said Ambrose, watching my face, 'what do you make of him?'

I shrugged my shoulders, and kicked the base of the gibbet with my foot. Ambrose must never know I cared, that I felt sick at heart, and terrified. He would despise me. Ambrose at twenty-seven was god of all creation, certainly god of my own narrow world, and the whole object of my life was to resemble him.

'Tom had a brighter face when I saw him last,' I answered. 'Now he isn't fresh enough to become bait for his own lobsters.'

Ambrose laughed, and pulled my ears. 'That's my boy,' he said. 'Spoken like a true philosopher.' And then he added, with a sudden flash of perception, 'If you feel squeamish, go and be sick behind the hedge there, and remember I have not seen you.'

He turned his back upon the gibbet and the four roads, and went striding away down the new avenue he was planting at the

time, which cut through the woods and was to serve as a second carriage-way to the house. I was glad to see him go because I did not reach the hedge in time. I felt better afterwards, though my teeth chattered and I was very cold. Tom Jenkyn lost identity again, and became a lifeless thing, like an old sack. He was even a target for the stone I threw. Greatly daring, I watched to see the body move. But nothing happened. The stone hit the sodden clothing with a plonk, then shied away. Ashamed of my action I sped off down the new avenue in search of Ambrose.

Well, that was all of eighteen years ago, and to the best of my recollection I have not thought much of it since. Until these last few days. It is strange how in moments of great crisis the mind whips back to childhood. Somehow I keep thinking of poor Tom, and how he hung there in his chains. I never heard his story, and few people would remember it now. He killed his wife, so Ambrose said. And that was all. She was a scold, but that was no excuse for murder. Possibly, being over-fond of drink, he killed her in his cups. But how? And with what weapon? With a knife, or with his bare hands? Perhaps Tom staggered forth from the inn upon the quay, that winter's night, all lit with love and fever. And the tide was high, splashing upon the steps, and the moon was also full, shining on the water. Who knows what dreams of conquest filled his unquiet mind, what sudden burst of fantasy?

He may have groped his way home to his cottage behind the church, a pale rheumy-eyed fellow stinking of lobster, and his wife lashed out at him for bringing his damp feet inside the door, which broke his dream, and so he killed her. That well might be his story. If there is survival after death, as we are taught to believe, I shall seek out poor Tom and question him. We will dream in purgatory together. But he was a middle-aged man of some sixty years or more, and I am five-and-twenty. Our dreams would not be the same. So go back into your shadows, Tom, and leave me some measure of peace. That gibbet has long since gone, and you with it. I threw a stone at you in ignorance. Forgive me.

The point is, life has to be endured, and lived. But how to

live it is the problem. The work of day by day presents no difficulties. I shall become a Justice of the Peace, as Ambrose was, and also be returned, one day, to Parliament. I shall continue to be honoured and respected, like all my family before me. Farm the land well, look after the people. No one will ever guess the burden of blame I carry on my shoulders; nor will they know that every day, haunted still by doubt, I ask myself a question which I cannot answer. Was Rachel innocent or guilty? Maybe I shall learn that too, in purgatory.

How soft and gentle her name sounds when I whisper it. It lingers on the tongue, insidious and slow, almost like poison, which is apt indeed. It passes from the tongue to the parched lips, and from the lips back to the heart. And the heart controls the body, and the mind also. Shall I be free of it one day? In forty, in fifty years? Or will some lingering trace of matter in the brain stay pallid and diseased? Some minuscule cell in the blood stream fail to race with its fellows to the fountain heart? Perhaps, when all is said and done, I shall have no wish to be free. As yet, I cannot tell.

I still have the house to cherish, which Ambrose would have me do. I can reface the walls where the damp enters, and keep all sound and well and in repair. Continue to plant trees and shrubs, cover the bare hills where the wind comes roaring from the east. Leave some legacy of beauty when I go, if nothing else. But a lonely man is an unnatural man, and soon comes to perplexity. From perplexity to fantasy. From fantasy to madness. And so I swing back again to Tom Jenkyn, hanging in his chains. Perhaps he suffered too.

Ambrose, those eighteen years ago, went striding down the avenue, and I in wake of him. He may well have worn the jacket I am wearing now. This old green shooting jacket, with the leather padding on the elbows. I have become so like him that I might be his ghost. My eyes are his eyes, my features his features. The man who whistled to his dogs and turned his back upon the four roads and the gibbet could be myself. Well, it was what I always wanted. To be like him. To have his height, his shoulders,

his way of stooping, even his long arms, his rather clumsy looking hands, his sudden smile, his shyness at first meeting with a stranger, his dislike of fuss, of ceremony. His ease of manner with those who served and loved him – they flatter me, who say I have that too. And the strength which proved to be illusion, so that we fell into the same disaster. I have wondered lately if, when he died, his mind clouded and tortured by doubt and fear, feeling himself forsaken and alone in that damned villa where I could not reach him, whether his spirit left his body and came home here to mine, taking possession, so that he lived again in me, repeating his own mistakes, caught the disease once more and perished twice. It may be so. All I know is that my likeness to him, of which I was so proud, proved my undoing. Because of it, there came defeat. Had I been another man, agile and quick, with a deft tongue and a shrewd head for business, the past year would have been no more than another twelve months come and gone. I should be settling down to a brisk contented future. To marriage, possibly, and to a young family.

But I was none of these things, nor was Ambrose. We were dreamers, both of us, unpractical, reserved, full of great theories never put to test, and, like all dreamers, asleep to the waking world. Disliking our fellow men, we craved affection; but shyness kept impulse dormant until the heart was touched. When that happened the heavens opened, and we felt, the pair of us, that we had the whole wealth of the universe to give. We would have both survived, had we been other men. Rachel would have come here just the same. Spent a night or two, and gone her way. Matters of business would have been discussed, some settlement arranged, the will read formally with lawyers round a table, and I – summing up the position in a glance – have given her an annuity for life, and so been quit of her.

It did not happen that way because I looked like Ambrose. It did not happen that way because I felt like Ambrose. When I went up to her room, that first evening she arrived, and after knocking stood within the door, my head bent slightly because of the low lintel, and she got up from the chair where she had

been sitting by the window and looked up at me, I should have known then, from the glance of recognition in her eyes, that it was not I she saw, but Ambrose. Not Philip, but a phantom. She should have gone then. Packed up her trunks and left. Travelled back to the place where she belonged, back to that shuttered villa, musty with memories, the formal terraced garden and the dripping fountain in the little court. Returned to her own country, parched in mid-summer and hazy with heat, austere in winter under the cold and brilliant sky. Some instinct should have warned her that to stay with me would bring destruction, not only to the phantom she encountered, but finally to her also.

Did she, I wonder, when she saw me standing there diffident and awkward, smarting with sullen resentment at her presence yet hotly conscious of being host and master, and all too angrily aware of my big feet and arms and legs, sprawling, angular, an unbroken colt – did she, I wonder, think swiftly to herself, 'Ambrose must have been thus when he was young. Before my time. I did not know him when he looked like this' – and therefore stayed?

Perhaps that was the reason why, when I had that brief meeting with Rainaldi, the Italian, for the first time also, he too looked at me with the same shock of recognition quickly veiled, and playing with a pen upon his desk thought for a moment, and then softly said to me, 'You have only arrived to-day? Then your cousin Rachel has not seen you.' Instinct had warned him also. But too late.

There is no going back in life. There is no return. No second chance. I cannot call back the spoken word or the accomplished deed, sitting here, alive and in my own home, any more than poor Tom Jenkyn could, swinging in his chains.

It was my godfather Nick Kendall who, in his bluff straightforward fashion, said to me on the eve of my twenty-fifth birthday – a few months ago only, yet God! how long in time – 'There are some women, Philip, good women very possibly, who through no fault of their own impel disaster. Whatever they touch somehow turns to tragedy. I don't know why I say this to you,

but I feel I must.' And then he witnessed my signature on the document that I had put before him.

No, there is no return. The boy who stood under her window on his birthday eve, the boy who stood within the doorway of her room the evening that she came, he has gone, just as the child has gone who threw a stone at a dead man on a gibbet to give himself false courage. Tom Jenkyn, battered specimen of humanity, unrecognisable and unlamented, did you, all those years ago, stare after me in pity as I went running down the woods into the future?

Had I looked back at you, over my shoulder, I should not have seen you swinging in your chains, but my own shadow.

# 2

I had no sense of foreboding, when we sat talking together that last evening, before Ambrose set out on his final journey. No premonition that we would never be together again. It was now the third autumn that the doctors had ordered him to winter abroad, and I had become used to his absence and to looking after the estate while he was away. The first winter that he went I had been up at Oxford still, so his going had made very little difference to me, but the second winter I came down for good and remained the whole time at home, which was what he wanted me to do. I did not miss the gregarious life at Oxford, in fact I was glad to be quit of it.

I never had any desire to be anywhere but at home. Apart from my schooldays at Harrow, and afterwards at Oxford, I had never lived in any place but this house, where I had come at the age of eighteen months after my young parents died. Ambrose, in his queer generous way, was seized with pity for his small orphaned cousin, and so brought me up himself, as he might have done a puppy, or a kitten, or any frail and lonely thing needing protection.

Ours was a strange sort of household from the first. He sent my nurse packing when I was three years old, because she smacked my bottom with a hairbrush. I don't remember the incident, but he told me later.

'It made me so damnably angry,' he said to me, 'to see that woman belabouring your small person with her great coarse hands for some trifling misdemeanour that she was too unintelligent to comprehend. After that, I corrected you myself.'

I never had reason to regret it. There could not be a man more fair, more just, more lovable, more full of understanding.

He taught me my alphabet in the simplest possible way by using the initial letters of every swearword – twenty-six of them took some finding, but he achieved it somehow, and warned me at the same time not to use the words in company. Although invariably courteous he was shy of women, and mistrustful too, saying they made mischief in a household. Therefore he would employ only menservants, and the tribe was controlled by old Seecombe, who had been my uncle's steward.

Eccentric perhaps, unorthodox – the west country has always been known for its odd characters – but despite his idiosyncratic opinions on women, and the upbringing of small boys, Ambrose was no crank. He was liked and respected by his neighbours, and loved by his tenants. He shot and hunted in the winter, before rheumatism got a grip on him, fished in the summer from a small sailing boat he kept anchored in the estuary, dined out and entertained when he had the mind to do so, went twice to church on a Sunday even though he did pull a face at me across the family pew when the sermon was too long, and endeavoured to induce in me his passion for the planting of rare shrubs.

'It's a form of creation,' he used to say, 'like anything else. Some men go in for breeding. I prefer growing things from the soil. It takes less out of you, and the result is far more satisfying.'

It shocked my godfather, Nick Kendall, and Hubert Pascoe, the vicar, and others of his friends who used to urge him to settle down to domestic bliss and rear a family instead of rhododendrons.

'I've reared one cub,' he would make reply, pulling my ears, 'and that has taken twenty years off my span of life, or put them on, whichever way I care to look at it. Philip is a ready-made heir, what's more, so there is no question of having to do my duty. He'll do it for me when the time comes. And now sit back in your chairs and be comfortable, gentlemen. As there is no woman in the house we can put our boots on the table and spit on the carpet.'

Naturally we did no such thing. Ambrose was nothing if not

fastidious, but it delighted him to make these remarks before the new vicar, hen-pecked, poor fellow, with a great tribe of daughters, and round the dining-room table would go the port after Sunday dinner, with Ambrose winking at me from his end of the table.

I can see him now, half hunched, half sprawling in his chair – I caught the habit from him – shaking with silent laughter when the vicar made his timid ineffectual remonstrance, and then, fearing he might have hurt the man's feelings, intuitively changing the tone of the conversation, passing on to matters where the vicar would be at ease, and putting himself to the utmost trouble to make the little fellow feel at home. I came to appreciate his qualities the more when I went to Harrow. The holidays passed all too swiftly, as I compared his manners and his company with the urchins who were my schoolmates, and the masters, stiff and sober, lacking to my mind all humanity.

'Never mind,' he used to say, patting my shoulder before I started off, white-faced, a trifle tearful, to catch the coach to London. 'It's just a training process, like breaking in a horse; we have to face it. Once your schooldays are behind you, and they will be before you've even counted, I'll bring you home here for good, and train you myself.'

'Train me for what?' I asked.

'Well, you're my heir, aren't you? That's a profession in itself.'

And away I would go, driven by Wellington the coachman to pick up the London coach at Bodmin, turning for a last glimpse of Ambrose as he stood leaning on his stick with the dogs beside him, his eyes wrinkled in sure and certain understanding, his thick curling hair already turning grey; and as he whistled to the dogs and went back into the house I would swallow the lump in my throat and feel the carriage wheels bear me away, inevitably and fatally, along the crunching gravel drive across the park and through the white gate, past the lodge, to school and separation.

He reckoned without his health, though, and when school and university lay behind me it was then his turn to go.

'They tell me if I spend another winter being rained on every

day I shall end my days crippled in a bath-chair,' he said to me. 'I must go off and search for the sun. The shores of Spain or Egypt, anywhere on the Mediterranean where it is dry, and warm. I don't particularly want to go, but on the other hand I'm damned if I'll end my life a cripple. There is one advantage in the plan. I shall bring back plants that nobody else has got. We'll see how the demons thrive in Cornish soil.'

The first winter came and went, likewise the second. He enjoyed himself well enough, and I don't think he was lonely. He returned with heaven knows how many trees, shrubs, flowers, plants of every form and colour. Camellias were his passion. We started a plantation for them alone, and whether he had green fingers or a wizard's touch I do not know, but they flourished from the first, and we lost none of them.

So the months passed, until the third winter. This time he had decided upon Italy. He wanted to see some of the gardens in Florence and Rome. Neither town would be warm in winter, but that did not worry him. Someone had assured him that the air would be dry, if cold, and that he need not have any fear of rain. We talked late, that evening. He was never one for early bed, and often we would sit together in the library until one or two in the morning, sometimes silent, sometimes talking, both of us with our long legs stretched out before the fire, the dogs curled round our feet. I have said before that I felt no premonition, but now I wonder, thinking back, if it was otherwise for him. He kept looking at me in a puzzled, reflective sort of way, and from me to the panelled walls of the room and the familiar pictures, and so to the fire, and from the fire to the sleeping dogs.

'I wish you were coming with me,' he said suddenly.

'It wouldn't take me long to pack,' I answered.

He shook his head, and smiled. 'No,' he said, 'I was joking. We can't both be away for months at a time. It's a responsibility, you know, being a landowner, though not everybody feels as I do.'

'I could travel with you down to Rome,' I said, excited at the

idea. 'Then, granting the weather did not hold me back, I'd still be home by Christmas.'

'No,' he said slowly, 'no, it was just a whim. Forget it.'

'You're feeling well enough, aren't you?' I said. 'No aches or pains?'

'Good God, no,' he laughed, 'what do you take me for, an invalid? I haven't had a twinge of rheumatism for months. The trouble is, Philip boy, I'm too much of a fool about my home. When you reach my age, perhaps you'll feel about it the way I do.'

He got up from his chair and went over to the window. He drew back the heavy curtains and stood for a few moments, staring out across the grass. It was a quiet, still evening. The jackdaws had gone to roost, and for once even the owls were silent.

'I'm glad we did away with the paths and brought the turf close to the house,' he said. 'It would look better still if the grass went sloping right to the end there, by the pony's paddock. One day you must cut away the undergrowth to give a view of the sea.'

'How do you mean,' I said, '*I* must do it? Why not you?'

He did not answer at once. 'Same thing,' he said at last, 'same thing. It makes no odds. Remember though.'

My old retriever, Don, raised his head and looked across at him. He had seen the corded boxes in the hall, and sensed departure. He struggled to his feet, and went and stood beside Ambrose, his tail drooping. I called softly to him, but he did not come to me. I knocked out the ashes of my pipe into the hearth. The clock in the belfry struck the hour. From the servants' quarters I could hear Seecombe's grumbling voice scolding the pantry boy.

'Ambrose,' I said, 'Ambrose, let me come with you.'

'Don't be a damn fool, Philip, go to bed,' he answered.

That was all. We did not discuss the matter any more. Next morning at breakfast he gave me some last instructions about the spring planting, and various things he had in mind for me to do before his return. He had a sudden fancy to make a small pool

where the ground was marshy in the park by the entrance to the east drive, and this would have to be cut out and banked if we got some passable weather in the winter months. The time for departure came all too soon. Breakfast was over by seven, for he was obliged to make an early start. He would pass the night at Plymouth, and sail from there on the morning tide. The vessel, a trader, would take him to Marseilles, and from there he would travel into Italy at his leisure; he enjoyed a long sea trip. It was a raw damp morning. Wellington brought the carriage to the door, and it was soon piled high with baggage. The horses were restless and eager to be off. Ambrose turned to me, and laid his hand upon my shoulder. 'Take care of things,' he said, 'don't fail me.'

'That's a hit below the belt,' I answered. 'I've never failed you yet.'

'You're very young,' he said. 'I put a great deal on your shoulders. Anyway, everything I have is yours, you know that.'

I believe then if I had pressed the matter he would have let me go with him. But I said nothing. Seecombe and I put him in the carriage with his rugs and sticks, and he smiled at us from the open window.

'All right, Wellington,' he said, 'drive on.'

And they went away down the drive just as the rain began.

The weeks passed much as they had done during the two previous winters. I missed him as I always did, but there was plenty to occupy me. If I wished for company I rode over to visit my godfather, Nick Kendall, whose only daughter, Louise, was a few years younger than myself, and a playmate from childhood days. She was a staunch girl, with no fancy ways, and pretty enough. Ambrose used to jest at times and say she would make me a wife one day, but I confess I never thought of her as such.

It was mid-November when his first letter came, brought back in the same vessel that had landed him at Marseilles. The voyage had been uneventful, the weather good, despite a bit of a tossing in the Bay of Biscay. He was well, and in good spirits, and looking

forward to the journey into Italy. He was not trusting himself to a diligence, which would have meant going up to Lyons anyway, but had hired himself horses and a conveyance, and proposed driving along the coast into Italy, and then turning towards Florence. Wellington shook his head at the news, and foretold an accident. He was of the firm opinion that no Frenchman could drive, and that all Italians were robbers. Ambrose survived, however, and the next letter came from Florence. I kept all his letters, and I have the bunch of them before me now. How often I read them during the next months; they were thumbed, and turned, and read again, as though by the very pressure of my hands upon them more could be gleaned from the pages than the written words gave of themselves.

It was towards the close of this first letter from Florence, where he had apparently spent Christmas, that he first spoke of cousin Rachel.

'I have made the acquaintance of a connection of ours,' he wrote. 'You have heard me talk about the Coryns, who used to have a place on the Tamar, now sold up and changed to other hands. A Coryn married an Ashley two generations ago, as you will find on the family tree. A descendant of that branch was born and brought up in Italy by an impecunious father and an Italian mother, and married off at an early age to an Italian nobleman called Sangalletti, who departed this life by fighting a duel, it appears, when half-seas over, leaving his wife with a load of debts and a great empty villa. No children. The Contessa Sangalletti, or, as she insists on calling herself, my cousin Rachel, is a sensible woman, good company, and has taken it upon her shoulders to show me the gardens in Florence, and in Rome later, as we shall both be there at the same time.'

I was glad that Ambrose had found a friend, and someone who could share his passion for gardens. Knowing nothing of Florentine or Roman society, I had feared English acquaintances would be few, but here at least was a person whose family had hailed from Cornwall in the first place, so they would have that in common too.

The next letter consisted almost entirely of lists of gardens, which, though not at their best at this season in the year, seemed to have made a great impression upon Ambrose. So had our relative.

'I am beginning to have a real regard for our cousin Rachel,' wrote Ambrose in early spring, 'and feel quite distressed to think what she must have suffered from that fellow Sangalletti. These Italians are treacherous blackguards, there's no denying it. She is just as English as you or I in her ways and outlook, and might have been living beside the Tamar yesterday. Can't hear enough about home and all I have to tell her. She is extremely intelligent but, thank the Lord, knows when to hold her tongue. None of that endless yattering, so common in women. She has found me excellent rooms in Fiesole, not far from her own villa, and as the weather becomes milder I shall spend a good deal of my time at her place, sitting on the terrace, or pottering in the gardens which are famous, it seems, for their design, and for the statuary, which I don't know much about. How she exists I hardly know, but I gather she has had to sell much of the valuable stuff in the villa to pay off the husband's debts.'

I asked my godfather, Nick Kendall, if he remembered the Coryns. He did, and had not much opinion of them. 'They were a feckless lot, when I was a boy,' he said. 'Gambled away their money and estates, and now the house, on Tamar-side, is nothing much more than a tumbled-down farm. Fell into decay some forty years ago. This woman's father must have been Alexander Coryn – I believe he did disappear to the continent. He was second son of a second son. Don't know what happened to him though. Does Ambrose give this Contessa's age?'

'No,' I said, 'he only told me she had been married very young, but he did not say how long ago. I suppose she is middle-aged.'

'She must be very charming for Mr Ashley to take notice of her,' remarked Louise. 'I have never heard him admire a woman yet.'

'That's probably the secret,' I said. 'She's plain and homely, and he doesn't feel forced to pay her compliments. I'm delighted.'

One or two more letters came, scrappy, without much news. He was just back from dining with our cousin Rachel, or on his way there to dinner. He said how few people there were in Florence amongst her friends who could really give her disinterested advice on her affairs. He flattered himself, he said, that he could do this. And she was so very grateful. In spite of her many interests, she seemed strangely lonely. She could never have had anything in common with Sangalletti, and confessed she had been hungry all her life for English friends. 'I feel I have accomplished something,' he said, 'besides acquiring hundreds of new plants to bring back home with me.'

Then came a space of time. He had said nothing of the date of his return, but it was usually towards the end of April. Winter had seemed long with us, and frost, seldom keen in the west country, unexpectedly severe. Some of his young camellias had been affected by it, and I hoped he would not return too soon and find hard winds and driving rains with us still.

Shortly after Easter his letter came. 'Dear boy,' he said, 'you will wonder at my silence. The truth is, I never thought I should, one day, write such a letter to you. Providence works in strange ways. You have always been so close to me that possibly you have guessed something of the turmoil that has been going on in my mind during the past weeks. Turmoil is the wrong word. Perhaps I should say happy bewilderment, turning to certainty. I have made no quick decision. As you know, I am too much a man of habit to change my way of living for a whim. But I knew; some weeks back, that no other course was possible. I had found something I had never found before, and did not think existed. Even now, I can hardly believe it has happened. My thoughts have gone to you very often, but somehow I have not felt calm and steady enough to write, until today. You must know that your cousin Rachel and I were married a fortnight ago. We are now together in Naples, on our honeymoon, and intend returning to Florence shortly. Further than that I cannot say. We have made no plans, and neither of us have any wish, at the present time, to live beyond the moment.

'One day, Philip, not too far distant, I hope, you will know her. I could write much of personal description that would weary you, and of her goodness too, her real and loving tenderness. These things you will see for yourself. Why she has chosen me of all men, a crusty cynical woman-hater if ever there was one, I cannot say. She teases me about it, and I admit defeat. To be defeated by someone like herself is, in a sense, a victory. I might call myself victor, not vanquished, if it were not so damnably conceited a statement.

'Break the news to everyone, give them all my blessings, and hers too, and remember, my dearest boy and pup, that this marriage, late in life, cannot belittle one jot my deep affection for you, rather it will increase it, and now that I think of myself as the happiest of men I shall endeavour to do more for you than ever before, and will have her to help me. Write soon, and if you can bring yourself to do so add a word of welcome to your cousin Rachel.

'Always, your devoted Ambrose.'

The letter came about half-past five, just after I had dined. Luckily, I was alone. Seecombe had brought in the post-bag, and left it with me. I put the letter in my pocket and walked out across the fields down to the sea. Seecombe's nephew, who had the mill cottage on the beach, said good-day to me. He had his nets spread on the stone wall, drying in the last of the sun. I barely answered him, and he must have thought me curt. I climbed over the rocks to a narrow ledge, jutting into the little bay, where I used to swim in summer. Ambrose would anchor some fifty yards out in his boat, and I would swim to him. I sat down, and taking the letter from my pocket read it again. If I could have felt one spark of sympathy, of gladness, one single ray of warmth towards those two who were sharing happiness together down in Naples, it would have eased my conscience. Ashamed of myself, bitterly angry at my selfishness, I could raise no feeling in my heart at all. I sat there, numb with misery, staring at the flat calm sea. I had just turned twenty-three, and yet I felt as lonely and as lost as I had done years before, sitting

on a bench in Fourth Form, at Harrow, with no one to befriend me, and nothing before me, only a new world of strange experience that I did not want.