Stanford-le-Hope, 10th November 1897
morning

Joseph Conrad woke up annoyed by the light. In the morning it had entered the room, soft but steady, and the room had lost its benevolent darkness. He put the pillow on his eyes, turned around... useless. Fanny, the housekeeper, didn't close the curtains properly. Again. The housekeeper? A maidservant, a maidservant! He cursed and threw the blanket on the floor.

He would have slept again, he had gone to bed very late. He left his bed with a moan and opened the windows. The ivy-covered wall, that separated his house from that of the Mulligans, struggled to get rid of the fog; the hedges had no colour, the branches of the limes and the solitary elm looked like naked, intimidating arms. The faint glow of the morning had only awakened him, nature rested. He thought of his wife Jessie, who was sleeping in the master bedroom. She was not well; and for a few days now, by the seventh month of pregnancy, she had hardly gotten out of bed. Fearing to disturb her, or to wake her unintentionally in her sleep, he had moved into the guest room, even though she had protested.

He opened the door. Just a crack. Jessie's breath was calm, she would sleep peacefully for another hour, like the last few days. He returned to his room and prepared himself carefully, thinking with a sense of heaviness of the many commitments he had made. The barber would come to prepare him for the afternoon photo session: he needed a new official photograph for the magazines he published on. In the evening, he was waiting for Dr. Duveneck, who had to check on Jessie's pregnancy; he had to talk to Fanny - the maidservant, the *all-rounder* maidservant! - to deal with her request for a helper as she had been asking for two weeks now. And, there were not only these annoyances: the hours that awaited him were full of even more serious anxieties. Henry James' answer, for example. Would it have come in

the morning or evening mail? It had already been two weeks since he sent him a letter begging him to give him an opinion and advice on *The Return*, a short novel now rejected by three magazines. The disappointment had been great. For many days now, the fear of not being able to write exotic stories had woken him up in the middle of the night. He couldn't accept being a genre writer. He had been successful - right after the end of his career as a British naval officer – with *Almayer's Madness*, *A Reject of the Isles* and *The Negro of Narcissus*, but he also wanted to be known as the author of metropolitan, modern and psychological stories. At the same time as rejecting *The Return*, magazines such as Cornhill Magazine and Cosmopolis had accepted *The lagoon* and *Anadvancement of progress*, almost a confirmation that they only liked that kind of story. A slap in the face, which threw him into depression, exacerbating the neuralgia in his teeth, a pain that tortured him when artistic and economic uncertainties threatened his serene maturity.

Conrad, after the morning preparations, slowly went down the stairs. The old wood creaked with each step. He caressed the wrought iron of the railing, a piece of neo-Gothic art, that more than any other element of construction or furniture had convinced him to rent that house and tried to free himself from discontent thinking of the anarchist attack in London in 1894, a story he wanted to write. But even that ploy to forget *The Return* proved counterproductive: until he was judged capable of writing exotic adventures no publisher would publish a story with anarchists and secret agents. Planning such a novel just meant he would be hurt.

Fanny liked to place the dishes with the food in a circle, and to place the glasses, jugs and teapots in the centre of the composition; the overall effect of her *mise en place* was always slightly in bad taste, even if it was neat. A geometric type of style and bad taste, who knows who taught her that. But it was already something. She did the same for the food! Coffee and tea were often cold, eggs poorly cooked, smoked fish never looked good and the butter... he raised his head to look for her, but she wasn’t there. She had certainly heard him coming down and she was preparing some other delicacy of her own.

But he didn't call her. She would have justified herself by pointing out that he had gotten up much later than usual: it was not her fault if things had gotten cold.

"You see the elm, Mr. Conrad," she told him the day before pointing past the French window. "It's completely bare and frozen. If this winter goes on like this, it will be very hard for it, and for our nice line of lime trees."

"Those trees don't suffer from the cold," he objected by placing a scarf around his neck.

"I'm not sure, Mr. Conrad. But of course, I won't allow myself to contradict you. This part of the house, however, is already cold now and that's not a good sign."

Fanny didn't have a husband or suitor at 30 years old. There had been a couple of suitors, but according to the couple who ran the grocery store, custodian of the love secrets of Stanford-le-Hope, she had so demotivated them that rumours had gone between the servants of every house in the county with imaginable consequences. Tall, strong and straight, she looked at each person with a determined expression, as if she were always accepting a duel challenge. She was only able to temper her quick ways in her relationship with the gentlemen whose service she was in: but it was obvious that she was difficult for her.

The Conrad family moved into the farm house in Ivy Walls in March, after having lived six months in a modest home on Victoria Street. From the window on the first floor of the room, where Joseph now slept, and where the morning light that bothered him entered, one could see the Thames. He had put a work table near the window to enjoy the view of the river when he raised his eyes from the page, but he didn't mind also working in the room on the ground floor - in the room, that according to Fanny, was the coldest in the house - because from there one could admire the lawn, the elm and the row of lime trees. The bare nature did not help his mood to improve, but for his moods he did not look for antidotes but for coherence. Living in the countryside, an hour from London, had been a choice of physical and spiritual health, dictated by the better climate and tranquillity of the

places - certainly not by the comfort of the houses, which were poor, at least those he could afford. Conrad didn't even have a lot of resources for servants and had to limit himself to an *all-rounder* maidservant like Fanny. He envied Henry James: he knew that in Rye, where he had been living for a year, also fleeing London, he had at least four servants, and received and hosted guests, and for sure he did not have to be ashamed of the quality of the food.

During breakfast, drinking Fanny's burnt coffee, he decided that a reading out loud would help the review of *The Return*. He had already corrected the text in many passages, following the rejections, and since then - almost a month - he had not opened it. Those corrections had cost him a great, extraordinary effort. Would they have convinced him?

He stood up quickly, as if he had to prepare militarily for the commitment. He wondered if he wanted James' letter to arrive before the review began. Knowing *the master'*s judgment, would have helped him? He wondered, too, whether to reread the text alone or with Jessie. He didn't expect her to make judgments that could help him, he didn't think his wife could appreciate his writing: but sometimes, he had to recognise it, Jessie's superficiality was more revealing than the comments of many academic critics.

The return didn't even convince Garnett, his friend, advisor and editor. You didn't do this, he told him. On the other hand, Conrad knew that something was not working in his first modern, psychological novel. The editors, and Garnett, were right. James, he thought with sadness, will confirm their opinion. But he couldn't understand what was not working, and neither could the editors, or Garnett. Was his English still uncertain not to convince? The theme? The plot? The credibility of the characters?

"She comes back quickly hoping her husband hasn't opened the envelope yet and seen the letter," Jessie said after the first draft. "When she realises that he knows everything, she pleads with him to appreciate her sincerity. What sincerity? If she got here in time, she

wouldn't have said anything, and Alvan would have been unaware of it. The wife is a *clever*, horrible woman!”

A *clever*, horrible woman? Jessie had laughed at her own overriding judgment. But if she was right? Conrad did not want his nameless wife in his first psychological novel to appear as a morally detestable woman. But the misogyny against which he fought always got up like a puppet and could have worked without his knowledge. *His wife*, he still asked, was she really a *clever* horrible woman or was it just Jessie who felt it? What would James have said about it?

He set the story in a bourgeois villa. The scene lasted a few hours. Alvan Hervey, a financial trader, comes home from the City and finds a letter from his wife. In a nutshell, she informs him that she has left him for a poet she met at their receptions. Alvan sees the world collapsing on him, the unimaginable had happened, he had never had any suspicion about his wife, he had never sensed her unease. He is particularly concerned about his honour, about the judgment that society would make about the flight of the woman. He's ashamed. Anger lets all sorts of "shapeless and sinful" thoughts come out of his soul. Then the twist: she returns. Alvan sees her emerge from the screen that covers and protects his subconscious impulses. As if through a dream: and immediately transfers the image into a symbol. About what? She raises her veil as if she were lifting an armour visor and looks at him without showing any guilt. He then feels he wants to annihilate her: *he* is blameless, *he* has on his side morality, men and gods, the law and conscience. She's got only that look.

His wife tells him she's wrong. That she was scared. That the letter was a mistake, that it was the beginning of that whole story but that it is also the end of it. That there was nothing irreparable with the poet and that she was faithful to herself and honest with him. But her short, tiring, reticent answers are not enough for Alvan. He wants to know more, at certain times he wants her to leave and at others he wants her to stay, but subjugated to him.

"Have you been together often?" he asks.

"Never!"

During the discussion Alvan loses control, recovers it: but always pushing a little further towards the despair of defeat. There is no remedy, even if nothing has happened. It was enough for her to think of leaving with that *effeminate* intellectual for the respectable world on which he based his whole life to become disordered. Alvan's thoughts become whirling and contradictory; the sentences he addresses to his wife, offensive.

Even when the couple finds rational ground for discussion and explanation, she refuses to give convincing answers. "Is this letter the worst part of this story? I need a clear answer!" Alvan demands. But the answer is provocative: "Then no! The worst part is being back."

During the evening, *the wife* alternates between requests for respect for her dignity. She's got a lot of pride in herself, even though she knows her mistake. When Alvan reproaches her for flirting with the fat poet at home, she loses her temper. "I will not tolerate that," she shouts out. "I'm leaving." But her husband stops her. He doesn't want a scandal. His justification is as noble as it is gratuitous and grotesque: given their social condition, a scandal would undermine the trust of the whole of society in those values and morals they represent.

The discussion between wife and husband continues until late at night, confused, without a dissolution. Alvan is conquered by a deep insecurity, he doesn't understand what passion his wife lived. He doesn't accept the irrational. His harmonious and clear world is falling apart. He has been touched by another reality, and he cannot pretend that it does not exist; he has been touched by a reality constituted by feelings that he has never known, by irregularities, by transgressions. He knew a void that transformed his values from an absolute truth to a weak option, and he and his wife into "two skaters". At the end of the night Alvan will leave, closing the door so hard that the "quiet house vibrated from the roof to the foundations with the crash of thunder. He never came back."

Is this outcome inconsistent? His wife had the courage to reveal the hypocrisy of their relationship, made up of bourgeois conveniences but does not go all the way and goes back; he, who seemed worried only about the breaking of those conveniences, finds, after a whirlpool

of thoughts, fears and furies, the courage to snatch the threads that govern his marriage.

Conrad had written to Garnett that the reader should *see* Alvan think. And this he had done: the ideas, the judgments, the feelings of him came out of the clear and intense lines, overbearing. But why not do the same for his wife? She only came on stage with ambiguous jokes. Where were her ideas, her judgments, her feelings? Where was her flesh?

Fanny reappeared in the dining room to bring the dishes to the kitchen and Conrad asked her to come back as soon as possible, he had to talk to her. Fanny gave a faint smile, she didn't worry about that *he had to talk to her*, often *the gentleman* felt the need to repeat with fussiness the planning of the day, at home he had to work as if on a ship in the open sea organising everything in detail.

She returned without haste, even though she knew that the master could be impatient; but she judged the wind calm, the ship calm: and *the captain* would be lenient. Conrad invited her to sit down abruptly, even this was part of the game. She was not just a hub, but a sort of boatswain, and she had to ensure the management of the entire house. The light coming in through the windows, less bright and warmer than the morning one, coloured the branches of the elm. Two magpies flew in those bare branches.

"You cannot rule this house alone. As you can see, I do not intend to criticise your shortcomings. In fact, I justify them. But we have to find a solution."

"The house is bigger than that on Victoria street; and the lady can't move out of bed."

"I was the first to say that there is no lack of justification. But, I repeat, we must find a solution."

"We'd need a gardener and a woman who'd just do the cleaning."

"I can't afford it," said Conrad lowering his head. Fanny knew that in addition to the small pension that the merchant navy guaranteed him for his sixteen years of service, *the captain* had no other income worthy of the name. The sales of his stories yielded little, and he was ashamed.

"I know there's a little girl in town who has to work," Conrad resumed.

"Amy?"

"Yes."

"Sanderson's daughter?

"Mrs Sanderson's daughter, yes."

"She's 14 years old."

"She'll help you with cleaning. One less mouth at the table will relieve Mrs Sanderson of her difficulties."

"And where would she be staying?" said Fanny suspiciously.

"In your room, near the kitchen. But you can move upstairs to the room next to mine."

"That might be a solution," said Fanny lowering her eyes. She dissimulated her satisfaction. The month before she had already asked to move into that empty room, leaving the damp room behind the kitchen. And she didn't mind the idea of a helper, even though it wasn't all she wanted.

"You have to talk to Mrs. Sanderson."

"With what availability?"

"Just try only with room and board."

"She won't accept."

"She will accept. "Tell her we'll see her later for a salary if the girl has given good evidence of herself.

When Fanny returned to the kitchen, taking with her away a slight smell of November and cabbage, Conrad felt relieved. He had already overcome the first hurdle of the day. Now it was the barber's turn. To the irrepressible George Warren. He was knocking on the door; his extroversion and cheerfulness were felt right from the first touch. Unbearable, but there were no others in Stanford-le-Hope.

"I will fix you up in such a way that the photograph will remain an image for centuries. All the artists will want a beard and hair like yours," Warren said, spreading a broad smile across his round face. The long moustache was part of his performance, moving like exulting arms. The barber was not thirty years old and was a man of excellent appetite and healthy complexion. A little higher than the

back of the curved wooden chair that Conrad loved and in which he sat to get his hair cut, he often pulled himself on the tip of his toes, to raise himself a little; and at the same time, he used to swell his chest. This last manoeuvre wasn't useful in order to increase his stature, but it gave him a feeling of power, and Warren liked to delude himself.

"How do you know I have to take a picture this afternoon, Warren?"

"Mr. Conrad..." sang Warren, scissoring the empty air.

"A touch-up, a fix-up, Warren, nothing more."

"I know what to do. You'll have the thickest moustache and goatee on your cheek. That'll give you a punctual expression. Sharper."

"Do I have a dull expression, Warren?"

"More acute, Mr. Conrad. Sharper, no less dull. Everything must help to show a person who looks far away; or down, deep down. The nose, the moustache. Forward. I'll shorten your hair and layer it, make your forehead even higher. I'll arch your eyebrows..."

"No, don't touch my eyebrows!"

"I'll leave them thick, but they're to be arched. They too must accompany your gaze..."

"My look?"

"There, in the distances of the human spirit."

"When will you stop making fun of me and just scissor the air, Warren? "

"You must value your hawk like appearance, Mr. Conrad."

"Hawk?"

"A strong, powerful hawk. You have a sharp face on wide shoulders and chest, like a wrestler; you are wiry, but your eyes are bright."

"You’re describing me better than I could with one of my characters."

"My job leads me to observe clients and make gods of them."

"Don't exaggerate Warren."

"My scissors are miraculous, especially with people full of hair on their heads and faces like Mr. Joseph Conrad, the great English writer."

"Stop it, Warren, or I'll have to pull down the curtain on this play right now. Besides, I'm not English."

"A Pole who writes in English..."

"Stop it, Warren!"

Conrad placed his hands around his neck to take off the black satin cloth that the barber had carefully fastened to his shirt collar, and ended it there, with him.

"Excuse me, Mr. Conrad," said Warren contrite. "My appreciations are sincere."

"Apology accepted, but now resume your scissors."

"Do you know what happened last night at Stanford-le-Hope?" Warren resumed after a break, beginning to comb Conrad's beard.

"No," replied Conrad irritated, but curious.

"Alice Ticknor has disappeared. They noticed it this morning at dawn. They started looking for her right away, but nothing is known yet."

"Alice Ticknor?"

"Alice Ticknor. Her one-year-old drowned two months ago."

"Yes, I remember that well."

"Have you ever met Alice?"

"Yes," replied Conrad. He'd seen her twice, and he'd even talked to her.

"And her husband, the farmer?"

"No, not her husband."

"And her father-in-law, the head of the family?"

"Is this an interrogation, Warren? I had nothing to do with Alice Ticknor's disappearance," Conrad got so nervous.

"No way, Mr. Conrad," the barber apologised with theatrical mimicry. "But it's important that you have all the elements in your hand."

"Why would it matter that I have all the elements in my hand?" laughed Conrad, amused by that expression.

"A man of culture and adventure like you could help the investigation!" exclaimed Warren, convinced.

Conrad did not mind knowing that he was considered a *man of culture and adventure* and agreed to play the game.

"So, Warren, tell me more about Alice's disappearance. Come on!"

"Husband sounded the alarm early this morning."

"And hadn't he noticed that his wife had left her bed in the night?" Conrad said, raising his eyebrows suspiciously, which would soon be arched.

The barber extended his arms and finally began to sculpt his beard. Conrad recalled that the dead body of Alice's child had been seen in the irrigation channel of the Ticknor land, by two children one evening at dusk. Although the two had not been able to explain why they had passed through there, they were never accused of the death of the child. On the other hand, if they had been guilty, they would not have said they had seen the little corpse, it was said in the village. Someone murmured that the two of them might have been very clever, running to get help after killing the baby. But why would they kill him? For fun? For the pure, bad amorality of two pre-teens?

"Alice was suspected," said barber Warren, starting to finish his moustache.

"An infanticide," murmured a discouraged Conrad.

"Yes. Alice was depressed after childbirth. It happens to a lot of women."

"But not after a year."

"I believe so, Mr. Conrad. I think that's possible. The boy was already one year old, but his mother was still depressed. Her husband fiercely defended her against being a suspect. He loves her, Alice would drive any man crazy."

"Yes?"

"Don't you think so, Mr. Conrad?"

"She is undoubtedly a beautiful woman."

"And now she's missing."

"So: the child could have fallen into the canal alone or been drowned by two amoral pre-adolescents or by his depressed mother. The judge has decided on the first hypothesis. But now the disappearance of Alice could again tilt the balance to the side of infanticide."

"That's right," said the barber enthusiastically.

The subject would have required a laconic, or reflective, tone, but Warren could only be expected to be extroverted and enthusiastic. He laughed, danced and churned even in front of the passage of a hearse. If her husband loved her, Conrad thought, Alice had not killed the child for revenge as Medea; nor for too much love, as some mothers do because convinced that their child is destined for a life of hardship. The economic condition of the Ticknors was not bad. Depression? The dark evil that oppressed Alice did not seem to him to push her to kill her son.

"If I understand correctly, Warren," Conrad resumed, "according to you, Alice kills her son because she is depressed, then, not resisting the guilt, one night she leaves the house and goes under the banks of the river to take her own life. Doesn't it seem credible to you, instead, that the child had died accidentally, and that Alice has run away from home because she is tired of being suspected from all over the town?"

"Too simple, Mr. Conrad," said barber Warren even more cheerfully than before. "If no one had killed the child, the tragedy would have ended there. But now, after a few months, another one is foretold."

A useful theory for writing, Conrad thought. A fortuitous misfortune is a tragedy, but it does not trigger others. There's no guilt. Warren was very familiar with the art of literary construction. A barber!

He thought about his little romance. The wife changes her mind and returns home to destroy the letter before Alvan returns. The letter that revealed her betrayal, but he, after finishing work, does not go to the *club* as usual but returns home earlier than expected. The wife triggers the tragedy with an act of pride and excess, then feels the burden of guilt and tries to remedy: but the case does not allow it. It's all there: the deliberate act, the fault, the remedy, the unexpected. Warren's barber would also appreciate it. Why did Garnett think the story was just a long and boring quarrel without a second tragic and necessary consequence? Isn't it a consistent outcome that he, Alvan, is leaving the house and the family? The final confrontation with his wife cannot stop the rush of feelings and Alvan's exit from the scene is the tragedy that follows the first one.

Conrad did not well remember the composition of some scenes, and so that he felt unconvincing. Maybe he was wrong, the novel worked, and it was just fear, insecurity: but he concluded that there was no point in deluding himself. Garnett wouldn't have given such a weak judgment. Now what? Was it enough to change the ending to redeem everything he had written? Or did he have to commit to a deeper, more stylistic overhaul?

Warren, meanwhile, instead of working with scissors, kept talking.

"They won't find her, they won't find her..."

Conrad did not reply and became sad, hoping that the barber would increase the speed of his scissors and slow down the speed of his tongue. Warren realised that discussing Alice Ticknor's disappearance didn't improve his client's mood and so passed to the grocer's wife, alluding to some of her behaviours; and at the time: it heralded a harsher winter than usual. The grocer's wife and winter performed on a stage moved like puppets by Warren, whose laughter accompanied the movements. In winter it would have been difficult for the grocer's wife to meet *Jeff*, the young lover, on the banks of the river. A pneumonia could be lurking under the damp grass, the *grocer* had to be very careful not to lift her skirt too much on her generous hips - you must have noticed them, Mr. Conrad - if she did not want it to be winter to avenge her unsuspecting husband. Winter!

Conrad shut himself away, he tried not to hear Warren's high-pitched voice, and did not take part in the grocer's, his wife's and winter's screenplay. The concern for *The Return* and the need to reread it increased with each scissor. Become a writer! What a stupid idea. He'll never get decent results. He had only begun because of the guilt he felt towards his father, an intellectual who would not have approved of his career in the merchant navy, but the books would not have been enough to support Jessie and his children who were now beginning to arrive. Was he supposed to go back to sea?

Warren, towards the end of his work, renounced the conversation with Conrad. He thought about his client's weirdness. A Polish man who lived for years on merchant ships, who now rented a house in the countryside around London and claimed to write in English. He couldn't even talk in English! Sometimes it was hard to understand his

sentences, he was wrong about all the accents. Sure, he was charming. And after the care of his scissors he would have even more. He gave an idea of strength. A force that rose from the depths of his gaze, from his aquiline profile.

After he showed the barber to the door, Fanny told Conrad that Jessie had taken her breakfast and that she was fine. She added that, having cleaned the floor from his hair, she would immediately go to Mrs Sanderson to talk about Amy's issue. Conrad nodded without comment and slowly climbed the stairs to see Jessie.

He was almost dazzled by the light of the room. The light entered high, the white blankets on the bed accentuated the light, from the windows you could see a sky clean free from fog and clouds. He wondered if it was the red scarf she kept on her shoulders, the light that entered the room or a particularly healthy morning that coloured Jessie's face, sitting on the bed.

"I got up," Jessie said as soon as she saw her husband at the door.

"I'm glad. You look better."

"We could eat together in the dining room."

"No. The doctor's coming today. If he gives you permission, we'll do it tomorrow."

"George Warren has done well," said Jessie smiling. She reached out inviting Conrad to approach. He bewitched from the very first time by her smile, so composed inside her regular face, was always amazed by the unusual beauty, rounded by graces and harmonies, of that girl. She was 24, 16 years younger than him.

Conrad didn't comment on Warren's work, and didn't approach the bed. The urgency for the review of *The Return* was occupying all the space in his mind. Would he reread it with Jessie or alone?

"What time's the photographer coming?"

"Two o'clock. In two and a half hours."

"Since you've forbidden me to come down, I suggest we have lunch together in our room."

"If Fanny gets back in time. I sent her to talk to Mrs. Sanderson."

"It won't take long. Sanderson will immediately agree."

"When I see her come back, I'll tell her to get ready here."

"Now you're going to work?"

"Yes."

Jessie didn't say anything, she knew about Conrad's concerns about *The return*. He thought that his anxiety came not only from wounded intellectual and artistic pride, but also from economic fear. The publishers paid for a book the equivalent, roughly, of a year's rent, in shabby country houses. What about all the other expenses? Conrad would have had to write a lot to ensure a dignified life for himself and his family, but he wrote slowly.

Economic anguish, however, was more controllable than the frustrated desire for artistic recognition. The doubt of not being able to write stories of the sea consumed him. Garnett, the editors, even Jessie, somehow put it in his head. Would he ever have approached Henry James' heights? Of *Portrait of a Lady* or of *The Bostonians*, for example, that Jessie read and reread?

The two characters in his novel had powerful shadows inside them and the wedding was a conventional ploy to cover them up. When she decides to shed light on herself, what she sees not only terrifies her, but also shows her the uselessness of her gesture: and she prefers to return to ambiguity.

Conrad was on the verge of telling Jessie that he wanted to have her company whilst he was rereading the novel. After giving her a kiss, bending over the bed in his embarrassed way, with his hands intertwined behind his back, as if he were afraid to touch her, instead of getting up and leaving he remained still, bent towards her.

"I'd like to read you *The Return,*" he thought he'd tell her. He knew she'd say, "Yes, please," but he gave up. He remembered her comment, "The wife is a *clever* horrible woman." Jessie couldn't get into the tragedy of his characters. Once again he had asked her to read aloud the *Reed of the Islands* but he had not liked its pronunciation. An English accent, correct, but he liked to listen to his novels with the sound of uncertain English that he had learned, and that sounded inside his head as he wrote.

Jessie: a typist with little culture and a modest family. Conrad's friends - his editor and admirer Garnett most of all - didn't understand why he chose that woman. Conrad, on the other hand, knew it well: he wanted her, and loved her for who she was. Jessie George, not ugly but insignificant in appearance - only he saw her grace and harmony. A typist in the city, fatherless, nine brothers; a practical woman who knew how to cook, sew and keep a house, and who would have been able to raise children. An ordinary woman, very young, and who would never question him. She could only destabilise him with extravagant comments on his work. "Wife is a *clever,* horrible woman."

Jessie was certainly not as horrible as Alvan Hervey's wife nor as the many women who had refused Conrad's marriage proposals in the past. Women of culture, of good society, sophisticated; and sexually aggressive. Jessie George was a virgin when she married Conrad and, docile to the events of life, did not worry after her disappointing wedding night.

During her youth she had quietly waited for love to come; it was enough to wait a little longer, she thought after marriage, and pleasure would also come. When she saw Conrad for the first time - it was three years before - she shook, and her heart began to jump into his chest like a ball. She was ashamed of it: she didn't like to lose control of her emotions and hated the idea that someone could see it. She didn't want to be disapproved for this: her mother wasn't an indulgent woman and if she noticed such weakness, she wouldn't have spoken to her for a week.

What's wrong with this man, she wondered. He's old and doesn't look very healthy. Better ignore it. But Conrad had approached her with the scent of the most exotic seas and with the mystery of an intricate and luxuriant nature. She'd never felt anything like it. And when he bowed slightly in front of her, and smiled, and took her inside her gaze embracing her with the strength of the sea horizon, she felt an extreme weakness. In another situation of strong emotion, she had fainted, and she had also urinated herself: she could not afford such a disaster now. She turned her head around but had to keep still; she lowered her gaze, if she continued to look into the eyes and

Conrad's falcon face, she worsened her emotional stability. She had to regain control: and she managed to do so by looking at the tip of his shiny black shoes. Her sister, Dolly, cleaned them up. So, thinking of Dolly cleaning her shoes, she felt the stability coming back to her, an axis recomposed itself, now she could stand Conrad being close.

She had gone to Shepard's place, where George family home was located, together with Dobson, a friend who had to pick up a typing job. In the wet and bare entrance, Dobson, Conrad, Jessie and her sister Dolly stayed just over a quarter of an hour. Dobson and Conrad sitting on a bench, Jessie, standing, a hand resting on a warm cherry tree sideboard and her little sister Dolly in the middle of the room with typed sheets in her arms. Later, Jessie turned those few minutes into a mythical encounter that her mind would continue to enrich with details for many years. Conrad had noticed Jessie's upset: and he too had felt something for that modest girl.

"I'd read you *The Return*," he still thought he'd say, when he was already on the threshold of the room. He came back to her, and again gave her a soft kiss on the mouth, holding his hands crossed behind his back. But he didn't say anything to her. With that novel, he had to do it himself, he had to concentrate and feel how the sentences felt like to himself. He would have made it, he thought in a moment of optimism. He was fine and the gout that had plagued him the week before seemed to have calmed down. He could work hard, in the evening he would finish and fill the notebook dedicated to the revision notes with further notes, to be added to the text the next day.

Jessie's silhouette in bed struck him as if he had seen her for the first time. His belly had never seemed so big to him. A mother. If he had followed his instinct he would have bowed to embrace that belly, the belly of mothers. The face in the pillow was barely visible, the hair loose... he had sometimes been unfair with his judgment on that girl. She had the sweet, helping soul of an angel. He shouldn't have been afraid by her, but by the son she had in her womb. He had this literary idea, built into his head, that the children were all Oedipus' children destined to kill their father. He smiled at this nonsense: but smiling, he

kept thinking that if she had abandoned him, she would have done it only if pushed by that little scoundrel who waved inside her belly.