

leave the nest. No. I always imagined us as one large family party, living here or travelling about – of course, each of them living their own individual lives – but *all* of them coming down to breakfast in the morning and pulling their pa-man's beard . . . Don't you know? . . . (She smiles at Bee absently and hands her a plate of biscuits, saying in an absent voice:) Have an almond finger, dear – won't you? They're awfully good – so short and nutty! (But before Bee has time to take one she puts the plate down and gets up and begins to walk slowly about the room.) Of course no outsider could know – not even you, Bee dear – how united we were, how happy! What jokes we had – what rare old giggles! How we used to kick each other under the table and make faces when the Pa-man would persist in reading out long lists of figures about frozen meat or wool or something . . . And how they used to come and sit in my room at night after I had gone to bed and while their Pa-man was massaging his last remaining hairs and *would* not go – until they were simply chased out with a hair brush . . . Long after they were grown up, I mean . . . Yes . . . I can see them now . . . Margot undoing those two lovely rich silky plaits, Irene manicuring her beautiful little nails, Pip smelling all the pots on my dressing table and Laura *moon*ing over at the window. (She sits down again and blows her nose.) Then came that *fatal* trip to England when Margot married Duncan Henderson. Of course he is a delightful person and desirable in every way and would have been a charming friend for her to correspond with and keep in touch with . . . don't you know? But why – why go to the lengths of marrying him and starting the break up of it all . . . No, I shall never forget my feelings at having to leave that darling child so many thousands of miles away. Of course I had to keep up for Stanley's sake but I had barely got over it when my precious Irene was snatched from me – before my very eyes – whirled off the very deck of the ship, so to speak, by Jimmy Curwen. (Stretches out her arms.) There again – what was there to be said? A delightful person, desirable in every way, rich, handsome, a Southern American – and they are always so perfect to their women . . . Before I could look round another child was gone. I fully expected to arrive home here and find that Laura was engaged *at least* and Pip an old married man . . . Bee: (puts down her cup. Takes a needle out of her bodice and threads it, screwing up her eyes) I took good care that nothing of that sort should happen!

Toots: Oh, I don't suppose it needed such frightfully good care. They are so wrapped up in each other, those two. Pip understands Laura far better than I do and a million times better than her father ever could.

Bee: (dryly) She is difficult, very!

Toots: Oh, I – don't – know – Of course at times I think she is simply intolerable, but then one can't expect all one's children to be alike.