

Chapter One

Another winter is moving over the surface of the land, scouring the hills and valleys, leaving the inhabitants shivering and gloomy. On the frost-hardened lawn a crow pecks at a rotten apple, a single remnant of autumn's bounty. He jabs at it with his beak as if the apple is a living thing that might flutter away, or as if the apple is an insult to his hunger.

John has been standing at the window for too long. His feet are cold on the hard wooden floor, and a draught swirls around his ankles, but he feels fixed to the spot, mesmerised by the crow's rage. If he lifts his gaze he could see across the rooftops of London to Windsor in the west, to the smudge of her forests. But when the housemaids light the fires for the day, fifty thousand chimneys will belch smoke into the sky, the air will thicken with black smog, and he'll see no further than the garden wall.

This was his nursery fifty years ago - there are still bars on the windows to stop him falling out onto the flowerbeds below. Some people might find it strange to return to the family home in middle age and sleep in their old nursery, but it comforts him. He misses his parents and his nurse Annie more than he can say. It feels like everything good in the world is disappearing.

Suddenly the crow flies off, abandoning the apple. John turns away from the window and pulls his dressing gown tightly around him. The fire is not lit; the maid has not been up yet. He could call for her, but he likes doing it himself: taking the thick birch logs from the basket, their silver papery bark unravelling in his hands, and arranging them neatly in the hearth. There are still a few embers from last night's fire, so he places the logs on the white ash and fans the embers until they flicker into life. Flames lick the fresh logs, catching the bark and sending up a few sparks.

He wishes he was at home. He feels leaden today, full of dread. This afternoon he is visiting Rose and he's fearful of what the visit will bring. He has visited her every week for the past few months, and every week she is more ill and less herself. A day in the garden at Brantwood would give him the strength he needs. He loves creating new paths, digging ponds, coppicing the hazel wood. Physical, outdoor work soothes him. He woke up with a new plan this morning, to divert one of the streams that trickles off the heather moor through the garden. Then he could build a wooden bridge and grow clusters of bright cress leaves in the water below. There's no sound as comforting as running water, whether the burble of a

shallow stream or the gush of a river in full spate. But he is not at home. This house, once his own, belongs to his cousin Joan; he gave it to her when she got married.

His bedroom door opens and a pretty dark-haired girl comes in, struggling to hold a tray with a large pot of coffee and a stack of post. She is new to the household but Joan has common sense; she will have chosen well.

‘Thank you, Sarah,’ he says, as she puts the tray down without disaster, and he’s rewarded with a slightly rabbit smile. She’s prettier when she doesn’t smile. Still, his mood has lifted fractionally. He’s pleased he remembered her name.

She sees the fire is burning merrily and turns to him in confusion.

‘It’s all right,’ he reassures her. ‘I’m an early riser. I often do it myself.’

She looks aghast and begins to apologise.

‘It’s fine, I promise! Go on now, see to the rest of the household.’

She nods and leaves, but still looks perturbed. She will get used to him. He quickly flicks through the letters to see if there’s anything from Rose. If he sees her handwriting his heart will leap, although a letter from her spells misery just as often as happiness. There are no letters from Rose today, but there’s one from his Boston friend, Charles. Letters from Charles usually need to be read sitting down: his tone has become rather bracing lately. He keeps trying to introduce John to people he thinks will do him good, but he’s usually far off the mark as to whom he’ll find agreeable. The last introduction was to Leslie Stephen who, unknown to Charles, wrote a patronising essay on ‘Mr Ruskin’s Recent Writings’ in which he mocked his sensitivity and assured his readers that Mr Ruskin had ‘more claim on our pity than our contempt.’ As far as John is concerned, Mr Stephen is beneath the notice of either sentiment.

More troublesome than Charles’s inept introductions are his criticisms of Rose. His last letter still stings: *the woman to whom your heart has been given is a torment to herself and to you through her insane conceits and fluctuations*. Why must Charles be so hard on his Sweet Briar? He doesn’t understand her, doesn’t see her goodness. She has always been true to him, it’s Rose’s parents, and interfering friends, who have kept them apart. If he and Rose could just have been left in peace, they would have been happy together.

He can’t face any of this today, so instead of opening Charles’s letter he pours a cup of coffee and opens one from Dr Daniel Oliver of Kew Gardens. Dr Oliver is attempting to explain (yet again, bless the dear man!) the formation of woody stems in plants. He is always so obliging with answers to John’s botanical queries, but why do men of science have to use such ugly language? This morning he cannot steer his thoughts enough to follow Dr Oliver’s

letter; they whirl and eddy, flowing round obdurate words such as ‘cell multiplication’ and on towards more treacherous rapids where thoughts of Rose lie in wait: sharp rocks ready to tear him to shreds.

He keeps to his room for the next few hours, looking through his correspondence and working on his books - he is writing seven at present. He tries to write a section for a different one each day. There’s an updated version of *The Stones of Venice*, as well as books on geology, botany, birds, animals and Greek mythology. Most of them he’s publishing in instalments, with book publication scheduled for next year.

Sarah brings him breakfast and replaces his coffee pot. She pokes the fire vigorously, as if to make up for not lighting it herself earlier. At noon she brings him up a light lunch - bread, potted meat, some pickles. He prefers to get as much work done as he can in the morning, without joining his cousin’s household. As soon as he makes an appearance there will be demands on his time, his opinions will be sought (on anything from pudding to new gloves), small children will need to be distracted from tears, and there will be Arthur, of course. He’s as demanding as any child.

After lunch he goes out into the garden to look for Downsie. It’s a comfort to walk around the old garden, even in the depths of winter. His mother’s roses are just brittle sticks but the snowdrops are opening which always fills him with hope. In the depths of winter they are a reminder that spring is on her way; that below the quiet soil there is life, pulsing and pushing its way out of bulbs and tubers, gradually heading towards the light, the subtle warmth of the winter sun. He wonders whether the earth feels a prickle as the shoots pierce its skin and push up into the crisp, raw air.

He’s a dedicated gardener, but ‘gardening’ scarcely does justice to the attention he pays to his flowers, his mosses, his trees. He loves to find a new plant that he has never given much notice to before. He will look at for long minutes at a time; if he looks long enough, he believes he will be able to hold on to it in his mind – it won’t vanish, like most of the thoughts and sensations of the day. If he can hold on to it, then it will form part of his bedrock of knowledge of the world. And he needs a bedrock, he needs something he can anchor himself to. Because everything he fails to see, everything he sees but then forgets, is a small death to him.

At Brantwood he has built a rock garden from chunks of granite, limestone and blue slate. He has filled the spaces with Alpine plants - cushions of pale pink saxifrage, purple aubrietia, snowy alyssum and wall cress. When he sits there he can almost feel a mountain breeze, fresh and clean, blowing his troubles away. He cannot stand gardens full of flowers that have been bred in greenhouses, plumped and preened like debutantes, then wheeled outside in enormous pots for just a few weeks at a time. He is interested in what belongs, in the plump mosses that creep over stone walls and the orange lichens that bloom on rotting trees, in the dainty wood anemones that open before the trees unfurl their leaves, so they can receive a little sunshine, and the primroses that colonise every damp bank with no helping hand from man. Before moving to Brantwood he sent strict instructions to the gardeners that no trees were to be cut, no weeds pulled up, and there was to be no iron fencing. He wrote:

If I choose to grow thistles six feet high all over the ground I will. And I'll build my boathouse as I like or not at all – and the moles shall be un/mole/ested...

He has a soft spot for velvety moles, always busy in their dark chambers. When he sees them hanging from fences, pinned up by gamekeepers and farmers - and for what? - he has to look away.

He finds Downsie in the hothouse. 'A dull time of year for you, Downsie,' he says, motioning the dry-looking vines and barren flower beds.

'Och, it's never dull for me, young master,' David Downs replies, tenderly scattering soil over newly sown seeds. He has called John this all his life - John's father will always be the 'master', no matter that he's eleven years dead. 'Take care of the soil and the plants will take care of themselves.'

'What have you got there?' He loves to watch Downsie work, there's so much pleasure to be had in watching a skilled gardener coaxing the world into life.

'Early salad leaves. March is almost upon us.'

'There's a comforting thought.'

Downsie fills another seed tray with damp earth and makes a few shallow drills which he fills with dust-like brown seeds.

'I had an idea I wanted to discuss with you, Downsie.'

'Oh, aye?'

'I'm thinking about running a stream through the garden. I think we could arrange a system of diversions easily enough. Perhaps build a little bridge too. What do you think?'

Downsie nods. 'We could do that. It'll be bonny enough in summer. There are plenty of lads to see to things here, I could go up in the next day or two. P'raps you could draw me a plan, show me how you'd like it?'

John smiles. They both love having a new project. 'I certainly could.'

He checks his pocket watch. Two o'clock. His carriage will be ready to take him to Rose's hotel.

§§§

For the last few years Rose has criss-crossed the length and breadth of Britain in search of good health, staying in nursing homes and hotels, but to no avail: every year she is thinner and weaker, and every year she becomes more preoccupied by the state of her soul.

Two solid, capable-looking nurses are in Rose's sitting room, quietly sewing. One of them looks up as he enters and smiles at him: John is a regular visitor. She nods at him to go through to Rose's bedroom. 'She's resting, Mr Ruskin, but I'm sure she'll be glad to see you.'

Rose is in bed, her hair fanned out around her head. Its gleaming gold quality has vanished and there's a grey pallor to her skin.

'Hello Rosie,' he murmurs, and sits in the armchair beside her bed.

She gives a faint smile, but unhappy thoughts seem to pass over her face like dark clouds. Just a short while ago they enjoyed a sort of domestic bliss in this hotel: having tea, playing chess, even taking short walks, usually to church. They sometimes talked of the past, but without recriminations. 'Shadows came between us,' she said. For him, those 'shadows' were her parents. For a long time he hated them, but he has no energy for that anymore.

He clasps her hands above the silk-embroidered coverlet. They are cold and hard and remind him of the Tomb of Ilaria del Carretto that he saw in Lucca last year: a beautiful young woman carved in marble, sleeping in innocence until judgement day. He wishes he could convince Rose of her own innocence, could stop her fretting about endless made-up sins.

Was it wrong, to propose to her, all those years ago? She was eighteen and he thought she loved him. But she asked him to wait three years, until she was of age, for an answer. And then - nothing. He didn't hear from her for many months, and then she was reticent,

elusive even. With him! Who'd been counting off the days until she answered as if they were a prison sentence.

'I have a message from Joanie,' he tells her. 'She sends you all her love and says to make sure you get better soon. Then she will come and visit you and tell you about all the mischief the children have been getting up to with their new puppy.'

'Bruno?'

'No, not Bruno, my love.'

Bruno was Rose's dog when she was young, an enormous deerhound that her mother used to jokingly refer to as Rose's husband.

'Joan means Hamish, the children's puppy.'

'I'll say a prayer for Joanie. Dear God, in all your mercy, take care of Joan and the babies—'

There was a pause.

'Are you alright, my love?' he asks.

Rose is breathing a little harder, her eyes still closed.

'Yes.' She's fretful, like a child on the verge of tears.

'Can I fetch you anything? A little water?'

She shakes her head. Her lips are chapped and sore and the bones in her face are too prominent. He bathes his handkerchief in a bowl of water and gently presses it to her mouth. He encourages her to suck the water from it but she pushes it away.

'Don't let me come between you and God,' she blurts. 'Promise me. I worry about your eternal soul.'

So do I, he thinks, but he's not going to surrender his soul to Rose's god. Her god is cruel and unforgiving, and nothing Rose does is ever good enough. He can see that her god is working on her fragile mind now, this precious girl who's never been anything less than a saint. When she was well she'd been a devoted visitor to the tenants on her father's estate, knitting them shawls and taking them baskets stuffed with loaves of bread and Baptist tracts, the latter supplied by her father. She was always welcomed by the tenants, her kind manner and concern were so patently sincere. But now she has worn herself out worrying about hell and eternity and whether she's good enough for heaven, or will be damned as a sinner for not trying hard enough.

An eerie wail begins to emanate from her, bringing the nurses hurrying into the room. One of them addresses him in hushed but urgent tones. 'Please Mr Ruskin sir, if you could step outside.'

Rose raises her arms into the air, only to bring them hurtling down onto her stomach. Fear is etched on her face. He leaves the room, but rather than stay nearby where he might hear her distress he keeps walking - along the thickly carpeted corridor, through the foyer, past the huge walnut reception desk, and out into the dark February day. Flakes of snow swirl from a low, heavy sky, and a sharp wind rushes at him. There's hardly anyone walking the streets, just the occasional cab rushing past, a dusting of snow gathering on the horses' thick manes.

He paces the frozen streets for an hour, turning this corner then that, hardly noticing his direction. He finds himself at Hyde Park and walks along to the Italian Gardens - he hasn't been there for years. The marble is grubby and algae-stained, scarcely what Prince Albert must have envisioned when he commissioned it. It feels like a mausoleum, another sign of a country in mourning, one whose Queen refuses to be parted from her widow's weeds.

He feels coldness seeping into him so he turns back towards the hotel. The nurses let him back in to her room. 'She's quiet, but please try not to say anything that could disturb her.'

Rose is sitting up in bed, but her exhaustion's apparent. Her fingers tremble on the eiderdown and her facial muscles twitch and jerk.

'Rosie,' he whispers. He kneels on the floor and very gently takes her hands. 'Lie back now and rest, my Sweet Briar.'

She does as he says, and he glances at the nurse still standing in attendance by the door. She catches his eye and leaves them in peace, keeping the door ajar.

'Should I say a hymn?' Rose's voice startles him; he didn't expect her to speak.

'A hymn, my love?'

'I should like "Jesus, lover of my soul."'

'Very well, dearest.'

They sing it together, somewhat tunelessly.

'God bless you,' she adds when it ends.

'God bless you too, Rosie.'

Their gods are very different, but he isn't going to argue theology with a dying girl. She closes her eyes and seems to fall asleep. He releases her hands and slowly stands. His joints ache and his knees crack loudly but she doesn't wake.

He doubts he will see her again. Her parents are coming to fetch her in a couple of hours. They are taking her to Dublin where yet another doctor claims he can help her. But her

mind is gone now and it's clear to him that her body will be leaving the world soon too. In his carriage he stares blankly out at the passing streets. Snow is falling more heavily now, erasing details from the city, leaving everything temporarily pure and clean: but how soon it will be muddied and ruined.

Back at Herne Hill he tried to slip upstairs unseen but Joan half-collides with him in the hall. She looks at his face and clasps him.

'Oh Cuz. Is it very bad?'

'I think it's all over, Joanie. Rosie won't ever get well.'

She begins to weep into his jacket and he puts his arms around her.

'But Cuz, she's so young,' she sobs. 'I don't understand. What's wrong with her?'

'It's in her mind, Joanie. She's not well in her mind.'

Lily toddles out of the kitchen and grips his lower legs with her pudgy hands. She wails at the sight of her usually cheerful mother crying. He goes to give her his handkerchief but realises he left it by Rose's bedside.

Joan dries her tears on her own hanky and then bends down to kiss her daughter's curls. She gives a shuddering sigh and smiles at him.

'What can I get you, Cuz? How about a hot chop and a glass of sherry?'

It's his usual comfort food. What bliss it would be - a light supper, an early night. He shakes his head. 'I'm dining at Mrs Smallhill's.'

'Can't you cancel? I'm sure she'd understand.'

'I cancelled the last time. She'll think I don't like her.'

'You don't.'

'My dear Joanie, you're right. But I need to spread the word about the Guild of St George, and I need wealthy women like Mrs Smallhill to put their hands in their pockets.'

Joan shakes her head. 'I admire your perseverance, Cuz. But listen, there's something I must tell you.'

'Can't it wait? I'm so tired, Joanie.'

'No, it's urgent - it concerns Crawley.'

Crawley is his valet, the most wonderfully dependable manservant he's ever had.

'Is he ill?'

‘No, but his wife is. Two doctors went to Brantwood and they took her away immediately. He telegraphed this morning.’

He rubs his face. ‘My goodness, the poor man.’

‘Apparently she’s been declining for some time, all the servants seem to know about it. Crawley’s been trying to keep it from you.’

‘What a burden he’s been carrying! I wish I’d known, I could have helped.’

‘He’s terribly upset, Cuz. He doesn’t think he’ll be able to continue as your valet.’

No more Crawley? He knows it’s selfish, but he can’t help feeling resentful - Crawley knows exactly how and when he likes his coffee, knows how to shave him and coiff his hair correctly, he understands when he’s needed and when John prefers to be alone to manage things himself. At the thought of training up another manservant he groans. But this is wrong - he must think of Crawley’s anguish, not his own. He must set things right, let him know he will be supported - and that his children will be cared for.

‘Do you have the telegram still? I’ll write to him now, start making some arrangements.’

He already has a plan beginning to form - a less demanding job for Crawley, caretaking at his Drawing School in Oxford. And then - he must look for a new valet.

§§§

Everything that is good in the world is disappearing. This thought returns to him - he is becoming haunted by it. But now he is at dinner, in company, trying to make the sparkling conversation that his gracious hostess no doubt expects.

The food is as opulent as he feared. There is never any expense spared at Smallhill House: they have eaten their way through Mock Turtle soup, lobster rissoles, mutton chops with a berry glaze, boiled capon and oysters, plum pudding, Charlotte Russe and jellies. There’s a decanter of sherry at each corner, plus any amount of champagne and Chateau Margaux. He will suffer later, he is getting too old for rich food and wine at this hour. He thinks longingly of the plain chop and early night he might have had. He grits his teeth.

‘Such a lovely dinner, Mrs Smallhill. It’s so kind of you to have invited me. I’m afraid you’re not finding me at my brightest this evening, but-’

She cuts him off. ‘Oh Mr Ruskin, the privilege is all ours! We are blessed to have you in our midst, that we might pick up a few crumbs of wisdom and live all the better for them. My friend Miss Thomas and I were only just talking of you the other day and your wonderful books.’

‘Thank you, Mrs Smallhill, I’m only too delighted that my scribblings might bring you any joy.’

‘And you’re full of wonderful plans for improving the world. Didn’t you set up a little teashop in Paddington? Such a quaint idea, Mr Ruskin. Do tell me how it’s going.’

He can’t be certain she knows the shop has folded, so he gives her the benefit of the doubt. ‘Not at all well, Mrs Smallhill. No one seemed to grasp that my tearoom was selling tea of the highest quality. People insisted on shopping where it was cheaper, despite the fact they were buying an inferior product. I still don’t understand their logic.’

‘People love a bargain, Mr Ruskin.’

‘Yes, I know - and there’s hardly anything in the world that someone cannot make a little worse and sell a little cheaper. But *my* tea was the bargain - I wasn’t even making a profit. I thought by selling in small quantities and at cost-price it would make the product available for more people. But it was not to be. I shan’t be playing the merchant again.’

She titters. ‘No indeed - better stick to your books. And they really *are* wonderful, Mr Ruskin. When are you going to write more books about art? Stick to your strengths, that’s what my husband always says. Isn’t that right, Gerald?’

‘Hmm?’ Her husband is busy flirting with a much younger woman on his left, and turns briefly to hear his wife speak. He nods at John - they see each other at the Club sometimes.

‘I said, stick to your strengths is your motto,’ she repeats.

‘Oh yes, quite right. Very good advice, my dear.’ He turns back to his dainty blonde friend.

After the meal the ladies disperse and he is obliged to make conversation with the men - this is by far the worst part of the evening, the part he dreads most. So often, without the ladies present, the men start braying and chomping their cigars, and the conversation loses all pretence of civility.

‘You’re quite the man for a scheme, aren’t you Mr Ruskin?’ Now the blonde has left the room, Mr Smallhill fastens his attention on John. ‘Didn’t you initiate a street sweeping experiment near Chancery Lane? I heard there was rather a lot of fun and games!’

He can barely bring himself to recall it. It seemed such a good idea - the streets around Paddington were filthy, and there were dozens of young beggars in the area, cold and hungry and unable to find work. So he thought he'd put the two things together and pay a few boys to sweep the streets. He even brandished a broom himself at first, and lots of people came to watch. But after the initial publicity the boys he employed lost enthusiasm and started playing around. He sent Downsie to supervise but even with Downsie keeping the boys in order he had to abandon the project: people started throwing rubbish into the road expressly for the sweepers to clean up; everyone treated it as some kind of joke.

'I'm not sure about fun, but it's true that no one took it seriously. I had to abandon the street sweeping, I'm sorry to say.'

'Ah, well, it was good of you to try,' put in Lord Mitchell. 'But what did you expect?'

The connection between poverty and laziness is well established.' Lord Mitchell permitted himself a small belch and sipped his port.

'You must permit me a different opinion. My experiences teaching at the Working Man's Club means I've seen how hard some of the poorest members of society work - and in gruelling conditions for just a few pennies a day. And some of them still find time to give up a few precious hours to better themselves.'

But what's the *point* Mr Ruskin? Surely an education is wasted on them? How can people like that possibly appreciate culture?'

'Everyone appreciates beautiful things, Lord Mitchell. In fact, I'd go further - everyone has the *right* to appreciate beautiful things. That's why I'm thinking of setting up a working man's museum.'

'A working man's what? Oh ho! That's a good joke, Mr Ruskin! Listen to this gentlemen - Mr Ruskin is setting up a working man's museum!'

The other men still gathered at the table turn to look at him. He grips his napkin. What's wrong with these people?

'Yes, that's right,' he begins. 'A place that working men - and women, of course - can go, in order to see beautiful things. Everyone has a right to beauty - it's not something that should be reserved only for the privileged few.'

'Oh Mr Ruskin, you're always telling people how they should live,' said Mr Smallhill. 'And your aims are admirable, I'm sure. But half the workers live in houses I wouldn't keep my dogs in. That's their choice. They're no more capable of appreciating beauty than Snap my terrier!'

The men chortle and return to their conversations. Mr Smallhill and Lord Mitchell begin gossiping about a mutual acquaintance who's fallen on hard times. He's sorry he can't convince these people of the need for a workers' museum, but he's rather relieved to give up the conversation for the rest of the night. He is exhausted. He sits quietly and thinks of Rose. She understands him better than any of these people. Her soul is sensitive and kind. She will be on her way back to Dublin now, in the company of her parents.

In the carriage home he thinks how much society exhausts him, whether Oxford dons, London hostesses or port-laden lords. Their conversation crushes him like heavy wheels. But he does not want to be always alone either.

§§§

The next morning he's at his desk, a grey wool blanket round his shoulders as if a piece of the soft dawn sky has been tugged down and wrapped around him. He needs to work, it's the only thing that keeps him going. His doctor disagrees, but no medical man knows his mind as well as he does. He needs to stem the tide of despair, to make a dam of words to keep misery at bay. He puts his nib into the inkpot, then presses it onto the paper. Even this simple, repetitive action soothes him. On the page his malleable thoughts harden into black-inked sentences, their grammar like mortar holding each word securely in place. He will carve and chisel and shape each sentence until he has built a cathedral of words. He has done it before; he can do it again.

He is working on *Fors Clavigera*, a series of public letters published once a month addressed to the 'Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain'. Charles has pointed out that the letters are unintelligible to the average working man, being full of allusions to myths, religion, classics and other literary works, but he won't alter his style. He replied:

They aren't written for the working men of the 1870s, but for working men in an ideal future, when they would work but also have time to rest and read and think.

He works all morning, writing *Fors* and planning his museum. He has tea with Arthur in the afternoon - Joan is out visiting and the children are with their nurse. He always tries,

for Joan's sake, to get on with Arthur. Today cook has made shortbread, his favourite, which makes Arthur's company a little more tolerable.

'You seem a bit glum today, Professor,' Arthur observes, puffing his pipe.

John wafts the smoke away with his hand. He can still smell the cigar smoke on his skin from last night, and it makes him slightly nauseous.

'Artie, there's so much unhappiness in the world. It's all around us, I don't know why people can't see it.'

'People don't want to see it, do they.'

'I see it. And I want to help. But I don't seem to be able to *do* anything. That's what's making me glum. Glum and a little crazed, I think.'

'Anyone would go mad, thinking of all the suffering in the world,' says Arthur, biting into a teacake. A trickle of butter runs down his wrist.

'I'm thinking about a new project, Artie - I want you to tell me your opinion. I'd like to open a museum for the workers, to be funded by the Guild of St George. I'll buy a property - a house, probably, so a curator can live there too. And I'll get some items using St George money; the rest of the contents will come from my own collection - paintings and drawings, a fine mineral collection, plaster casts of sculpture from Venice. What do you think?'

'You mustn't give away too much, Professor. Think of your family - you don't want to leave us with nothing!'

'It won't be very valuable things, Arthur. But *good* things - copies of old masters, things that the workers would never get the opportunity to see.'

'Oh, that sounds fine! I thought you were going to give away more Turners and Titians. I was thinking we'd have bare walls before long!'

He ignores Arthur's barb. 'The museum will be open in evenings - and on Sundays. What about that? Then people can go when they're not working. That will be something new - convenient opening hours! I'll locate the museum outside of the city - so the workers can have a walk on the way. A hill would be ideal - get them out of the smog and breathing some clean air.'

He waves Arthur's pipe smoke away again, more pointedly this time. It's an ongoing source of tension between them, but he accepts that in Arthur's own house he can do what he likes - at Brantwood he makes Arthur smoke outside.

'But do you think it's a *sound* idea, Arthur? I'm tired of my plans coming to nothing - and being roundly mocked by the Lord and Lady Don't-Care-and-Do-Nothings of the world.'

Arthur shrugs. 'People might go.'

He gives up and drinks his tea. He'll write to Charles, see what he thinks. Charles is a man of the world, a professor of Art History at Harvard, not a second-rate painter who seems to have stopped painting entirely.

'Got any work on at the moment, Artie?' He tries to say it kindly; Arthur is sensitive about his failing career.

'Yes, yes, of course. I'm busy as a bee at the moment. I'll have a major portrait commission shortly too, so there's no sense filling up the time until that's arranged. I'd hate to have to turn something big down because I'd committed to a dozen small jobs.'

'Quite. Well, I'm glad you've got plans, Artie. I'll be leaving you to get on with them in peace for a couple of months while I'm in Oxford.'

'Well. We'll miss you.' They sip their tea and let the small fib stand. Joan may miss him, and he'll certainly miss her.

'I'm heading off tomorrow, in fact, to get a bit of work done before the students arrive.'

'Fine, fine.'

They sip their tea in silence and he manages a second slice of shortbread.

He takes his carriage to Oxford. Whilst the railway is the most efficient method of travel between London and Oxford, he can't stand feeling like a parcel, being sent from one place to another. The train speeds too fast for him to observe anything properly; he has no time to absorb the changes in the landscape, the vegetation, the weather. It gives him an awful feeling of disconnection, to be in one place and then, suddenly, in quite another. His carriage is old-fashioned, he knows, but it's large and comfortable and it was designed specifically for his needs - there are all sorts of pockets and compartments for his sketchbooks and pencils, his books and prints, and for rugs and cushions. Travelling in it is so smooth he can even write, or doze. Today he is preparing a lecture on glaciers, to be given at the Royal Institution. The lecture will form a chapter of one of the seven books he's writing just now, *Deucalion: Collected Studies of the Lapse of Waves, and Life of Stones*. Sometimes he wonders if he should have been a geologist, he finds it so comforting: the great swathes of geological time, the hard facts of the rocks and minerals, the way the earth reveals her story with such grace and clarity if you know how to read the signs. His happiest days have been

spent in the mountains, especially the Alps, looking at rock formations, examining glaciers, and thinking about the history of the world. Much easier than dealing with people.

He sighs. It is some comfort that these last few months have convinced him of Rosie's love. But to lose her now? His chest tightens. He is fifty-six, he feels too old to begin again, to love somebody new. He doesn't want anybody new. He only wants his sweet Briar Rose. Everything that is good in the world is disappearing.

Chapter Two

This term at Oxford has been most difficult, though he never finds Oxford exactly easy. Preparing and giving lectures is draining, especially on top of the constant demand of writing *Fors* each month and trying to complete his books. But the term is almost over and he has a summer at Brantwood to look forward to - he can almost smell the mineral tang of the fells, hear the trickle of her glacier-cold becks. Just a few more days and he'll be free - he feels almost as giddy as the undergraduates, who seem to do nothing this time of year but drink too much and fall in the river.

Oxford is at her best in May, the meadows a fresh bright green that's deepened but never bettered by the summer months. It is early, about six am, and he is walking along the Cherwell. A few local men are fishing, making the most of the peace before the colleges awake and the river becomes as crowded and noisy as the streets. They stand on the riverbank, as silent and motionless as tree trunks. Further along the river, willows dip their slender stems into the river and the current flows gently round them. He could lose hours watching the changing light on the water. He sometimes comes here with his sketchbook and paints, but no one has come close to capturing water as well as Turner. He alone revealed the astonishing truth of water, he'd not merely painted what people expected to see. He showed its myriad colours and textures; he understood the movement of mighty waves and the storm-raged curdling of sea spume; he was true to the colours of a swell, green and clear yet pale with anger, but also the dignity of the calm, reflective surface. Turner could paint the truth of a river in moonlight, the chaotic tumbling of a mountain cataract and a deep rocky hollow with a green pool of water at rest. There was nothing he didn't understand about water and her endless dance with the earth.

His hand is in his waistcoat pocket again, and he runs his fingers along the edges of a letter. Yesterday Joan wrote with news of Rose. She is expected to die very soon. He thinks of her constantly - walking by the river reminds him being by the Liffey. She was about thirteen, and they were dipping for minnows. She wore a white sunhat, tied with a silk ribbon beneath her perfect chin. She had skipped and danced and sung for joy with him that day, and neither had given a moment's thought to what the future had planned for them.

Soon he must return to his rooms where he is giving a breakfast for a few undergraduates. They are working on a special project with him, building a road at Hinksey. He discovered the village of Ferry Hinksey during one of his walks with the students. Outside

the college walls both he and the boys are more relaxed, and the walks are like long, amiable tutorials. Sometimes they head towards the hills in the east, other times west towards the river at Ferry Hinksey. The land here often floods and the village, though superficially pretty with its cluster of thatched cottages and its neat village green, is in fact a rural slum.

He met the landowner, Mr Harcourt, last autumn and he took the opportunity to berate him over the state of the village. ‘Your tenants live in filth,’ he told him. ‘It’s a matter of national disgrace.’

‘I quite agree, Mr Ruskin. Fine gentleman like ourselves would never live in such a manner. No better than swine, some of these people.’ He puffed himself up, his neck lost under a ruff of jowls.

‘It is not the fault of the tenants, Mr Harcourt. *You* are the landowner - you have a duty to maintain those cottages to a suitable standard. A standard for honest, hardworking people.’

‘Mr Ruskin,’ he said silkily. ‘Have you met my tenants? They don’t match your description in the slightest. It’s all very well to idolise labourers, but if you have to actually deal with them you soon discover they are scarcely men.’

‘Not men? Then what are they? And how can they live like men when the cottages you provide for them are half-ruined? When the reservoir, from which they drink, is nothing more than a shallow pit of brown water? When the muddy track linking the village to the main road to Oxford floods and badly: the villagers are often cut off entirely? And I’m told that cholera is not unusual!’

He hated losing his temper, hated the hot rush of blood to the head, the thudding of his heart. He paid for that argument with a lack of concentration for days afterwards, as he obsessively repeated the exchange in his mind, wondering how he could have expressed himself better. How he could have made Harcourt see the cruelty in his neglect, the unfairness of his behaviour.

Mr Harcourt abruptly changed his tone. ‘Mr Ruskin, I know it could be better, but I can’t afford to get any of that repaired. The tenants pay me a pittance and I’m hardly earning anything from the land. Times are hard for landowners as well as the workers.’

‘I’m not interested in your excuses, Mr Harcourt.’

‘Then why *have* you come?’

‘I’ve come to offer to have the road repaired. Half a dozen undergraduates could sort it out in a few afternoons’ hard work.’

Mr Harcourt burst out laughing. ‘Oxford students? Mend the road? Now that I’d like to see! Be my guest, Mr Ruskin. That will be fine entertainment.’

And so it is proving. But a handful of students are showing themselves to be keen and reliable. He hurries back to his rooms so he can send a reply to Joan before the boys arrive for breakfast.

His rooms in the college are legendary and their contents are insured for £30,000. But if visitors expect a room harmoniously and sensitively decorated they are disappointed. Huge pieces of mahogany furniture – extremely well-made, but dark and old-fashioned – dominate the room, including chairs with bright magenta leather seats, beside banner-screens of rose-coloured silk. Headache-inducing. The walls are crowded with paintings and sketches by Titian, Mantegna and Turner among many others, and several large wooden cabinets are filled with more sketches and drawings, as well as part of his extensive mineral collection. When he is absent from Oxford he entrusts the keys to another don, who is permitted to show round interested visitors.

He sits at his desk and re-reads Joan’s letter. He has time to reply before the boys arrive, but he doesn’t know what to write. He shivers though it isn’t cold and stokes the fire. Breakfasts with his Hinksey boys are simple affairs – an urn of tea, bread toasted in the fire, and plenty of robust conversation. The boys arrive punctually and manage not to make too much of a din on the stairs. They take their seats, chattering excitedly.

‘Good morning, Professor,’ says Alec Wedderburn. ‘We saw Professor Dodgson at dinner last night and he read us a new poem, ‘The Hunting of the Snark’. Has he read it to you yet?’

‘No, I’ve not had that particular pleasure.’

‘It’s very droll. You might enjoy it.’

‘I might.’ But he doubts it. He can’t get used to Dodgson’s puckish personality: he never knows whether Dodgson is being serious or not and finds it impossible to get a word of sense out of him; it’s rather tiring. ‘But what, may I ask, is a snark?’

‘We’ve no idea, Professor!’

‘I wonder if Dodgson does either? Toynbee, will you slice the bread and start toasting. Alec, the tea should be ready now if you would be so kind as to pour.’

He enjoys their youthful exuberance. He was too serious as an undergraduate, and wishes he'd made more time for frolicking. Perhaps he thought he'd have time for enjoyment after his studies. He can't remember what he expected of his life, but he certainly wouldn't have expected to be so alone. Bone-achingly, soul-blisteringly alone.

Today he wants to talk to the boys about drawing. A few years ago he endowed a Drawing School at Oxford - it cost a terrifying amount of money, and he still pays for the drawing master from his own funds. Tomorrow Prince Leopold will be paying a visit to mark a further donation of Turner drawings, much to Arthur's annoyance.

The boys are seated around the fire, but John stands by the window to address them, as if he's at the front of a lecture theatre. He has a view over the meadows down to the river where he was walking earlier. A breeze moves the tops of the trees. He opens the window slightly and hears the bells tolling the quarter past the hour. Oxford seemed to mark the passing of time more than any other city.

'Gentlemen,' he begins. 'It is vital that you are never without a notebook and pencil; at any moment you may want to sketch what you see, or jot down a new fact. I can scarcely bear to consider how many sunsets I've not sketched and have subsequently forgotten; how many seeds of ideas have drifted away because I have not planted them in ink.'

The boys crunch their toast and listen dutifully.

'So much is lost,' he tells them. 'I wish I had time to examine each spear of summer grass. But nothing that an artist records, no hue or shadow, will fade from the book of record.'

He picks up a sketchbook and opens it to reveal one of his own watercolours. It's a pheasant, the chest feathers delicately rendered in cinnamon tints. He turns the page and shows them a study of a velvet crab, the colours of the shell exquisitely marbled. He has obsessed over the details, the fine textures of the world: these are drawings of devotion. Finally, he opens to a kingfisher, its plumage picked out in russet and azure. It's perched on a slender branch, as if ready to flit from the paper at a moment's notice.

The boys gather round, gasping at the beauty of the work.

'These are wonderful,' says Collie. He's a serious boy, dedicated to drawing and minerology; John sees his younger self in William Collingwood. Perhaps he could be useful to the boy.

'Yes, wonderful!' the other boys echo.

'Do you exhibit, Professor?'

‘No. I’m not an artist in that sense. I don’t draw in order for strangers to peer at my work, or hang it in their drawing rooms. I draw in order to *see* the world. When I draw, I look intensely, and this intensity is then carried over to everything I look at, whether I draw it or not. Do you understand?’

Collie nods earnestly.

‘The whole function of the artist in the world is to be a seeing and feeling creature; to be an instrument of such tenderness and sensitiveness that nothing passes them by without notice.’

He brings out another sketchbook, this time containing drawings of Venice. They are studies of buildings and architectural features, and they show the effects of time and nature on the city: the softening of stone by rain and wind, splashes of colour from tufted plants nestling in cracks.

‘Surely you could sell these, Professor? They’re as good as any artist in the RA.’

‘That is not the point, Toynbee,’ he says sternly. ‘I want you to understand that you will never paint anything so well as if you paint for its own sake, rather than because someone is paying you. Artists fail when they aim simply to please the public. Drawing is a way of thinking, not a way of making money.’

‘Do you mean art for art’s sake? Walter Pater says-’ Toynbee begins.

‘What a confounded silly doctrine that is! No, I do not mean that. Art is a way of thinking about the world, of being attentive and patient. You cannot separate art from the society it’s made by. That’s crucial to understand. The artist is always part of his society, and whether it’s a good and just society, or an evil or corrupt one, will be evident in the artist’s work.’

‘Professor, would the human condition best be remedied by art, would you say, or politics?’ asks Smythe. He is the least bright of the students and has a tendency to ask what he believes are profound questions, but which were usually remarkably ill-thought out.

‘To separate the two is a false dichotomy,’ interjects Alec, who has no patience with Smythe.

‘Alec is right,’ says John, looking approvingly at him. Alec blushes and hides his face by sipping his tea. ‘We are forever dividing things up in our minds, which cannot be divided up at all in the world. Political economists have yet to learn this. Man is not merely an economic animal, he is also a moral animal, a co-operative animal, a loving animal, a *kind* animal.’

Alec is devoted to John's ideas and once recited by heart the end of the second chapter of *Unto This Last*. John is touched by the boy's dedication. The public as a whole has not responded positively to these essays, a criticism of modern capitalism. *The Cornhill* refused to publish more than four, so furious were its readers' responses. But his father's reaction hurt the most. John James Ruskin saw it as a criticism of his own career. This was never John's intention - he was proud of his father's honest industry. But John James could not understand why his son had started writing on such matters. Painting and architecture was where John's expertise lay, why get himself muddled up in political and economic questions? It caused a rift between them that never healed.

His students are interested in his ideas, but he does not want to give them the wrong idea. 'I do not represent progress,' he tells them. 'You mustn't think that. Quite the opposite. I believe in chivalry and the efforts of the plough, not the hiss of steam and the thrust of capitalist ventures. I am a man at odds with my times.' To himself he silently adds, 'and that's not an easy way to live.'

'I think that's quite enough breakfasting, my boys. Time for work!'

They walk together to Ferry Hinksey, the boys still full of their enthusiasm for his watercolours.

'I hope this enthusiasm translates into action,' he says, 'and that you will all make more use of the drawing school. It's available to anyone who wishes to use it. I've donated a great many sketches and paintings from my own collection.'

The boys all declare they will be making good use of it immediately.

'Or perhaps in the autumn - we have exams coming up, and then we'll be going home, Professor,' says Toynbee.

'Ah yes - I meant to talk to you about that. I'll be spending the summer at my home in the Lakes - if any of you would like to visit you will be most welcome.'

Toynbee and Smythe will be spending the summer abroad with their parents, but Alec and Collie both say they'd like to come.

'I have a job for you, actually - if you're interested,' he says. 'I'm creating a library of books - twenty or so titles - that I believe everybody should read. I'm going to have them printed in good, but cheap editions. Would you like to work on the first title for me?'

'Oh yes, Professor,' says Collie. 'That would be wonderful.'

‘I’d like to commission a new translation of *The Economist of Xenophon*.’ He smiles at Collie. ‘Does that still sound wonderful?’

‘Oh yes, Professor!’ Collie lives up to his nickname with his energy and dedication to hard work.

‘I realise not every young man would wish to spend his summer holidays translating from the Greek. But I hear you’re rather gifted with languages, Collie. And Alec can help you. I’ll write a new foreword, and with any luck we might get it published by Christmas.’

The boys are keen and immediately begin discussing their summer plans together. He looks forward to having them to stay, they’re good for him.

At Hinksey his heart sinks at the state of the road. It’s so full of ruts and depressions that carts have been avoiding it, instead following their own sweet will over the village green. This is now unsightly with deep ruts of its own, making it useless to the children for their play. Downsie is already here to supervise and keep the boys supplied with picks, spades and barrows. He divides the boys into groups - some are to fill barrows with the rubbish that has collected in the ruts, others are to work on a new drainage gully. Today another small group - also Oxford undergraduates - has gathered to watch - one even has a camera. He half hopes they might be there to support the diggers, but it is wishful thinking. As soon as the boys begin work the crowd start jeering.

The Hinksey diggers look round, uncertain what to do. Downsie tells them to carry on, to ignore the insults, the hoots of laughter.

‘I’m afraid boys, John adds, ‘that it seems this kind of activity brings out the worst in certain Oxford men. But men who try to change the world for the better are always mocked by their contemporaries. Remember you are doing a good thing, whilst they are doing nothing but talking and laughing.’

Was any act of kindness regarded as the act of a fool by his fellow countrymen?

They work on through the afternoon, John arranging for picnic food and cold lemonades to be purchased and distributed among his ‘workers’. The mockers disperse after an hour or so, and the boys make fine progress. He’s reluctant to leave them, but he must travel to Aylesbury that afternoon, to oversee the printing of some plates for *Fors*. Driving through the Vale of Thame the hawthorns are in bloom and the verges frothy with meadowsweet. When the business of the plates has been settled, he decides to stay at the Rose and Crown Inn. He often stays here, it’s funny how the bustle of the inn and its travellers doesn’t bother him. He can write amidst the hubbub of carriages arriving, the shouts of ostlers and coachmen, horses being unhitched, and the voices of the weary

passengers looking forward to their dinner. He is content to be near others as they busy about their lives, so long as they make no demands on *him*.

He feels he has misled the boys this morning: painting and drawing sharpen the memory, including painful ones - they offer no consolation. His most precious drawing is of Rose, done two years ago at Broadlands. They had a few days together there, thanks to their mutual friends, the Cowper-Temples, who did more than anyone to bring them together, to try to persuade Rose's parents that marriage to John would not be harmful, but quite the contrary.

It is not a *good* drawing - he has failed to capture the purity of her beauty, the liveliness of her eyes. But it does look like Rose, and it reminds him of the happy time they spent together. It was drawing that first brought Rose into his life. Seventeen years ago her mother, Maria La Touche, wrote to him, asking him if he would teach her daughter to draw. He agreed to meet Maria, who proved to be an extremely intelligent but bored woman, starved of company and conversation at Harristown, her husband's Irish estate. When John was introduced to Rose he was smitten with the little girl. In her white dress and blue satin ribbon she was a perfect vision of goodness and innocence. Ever since, Rose had written to him about all her adventures, both at home and on her travels in France and Switzerland, where she sketched sunsets and wildflowers to please him, and studied the paintings that she knew he loved.

He has an early dinner in his room at the inn and then retires at ten, an almost unbreakable rule with him now. But he cannot sleep. Thoughts of Rose chase round his mind - he asks himself again and again if there was anything he could have done differently - anything that could have kept her well, kept her sane? He opens his window and leans out. The night air is soft and mild. Sometimes he hears nightingales from this room, but tonight all he can hear are church bells chiming midnight. He gets back into bed and eventually falls into a fitful sleep.

In the morning the sky seems unnaturally dark. A servant brings him some coffee, but it tastes strange, and he gets back into bed. He has no valet still, but does not mind being alone. Another servant comes in, this time with a telegram for him. It is black-edged.

He knows its contents without opening it. He sits in an armchair and lets a wave of fear and nausea sweep over him. He has to use the bedpan and nearly drops it, he's shaking so much.

The telegram is from Maria La Touche, informing him that Rose died on 25th May at seven in the morning in a nursing home in Dublin. Yesterday at seven. An hour before he had

hosted his Hinksey diggers for breakfast. He was serving tea and toast and prattling about art, and already his precious Rose had left the world.

He hears a horse whinnying, the shout of an ostler in the yard below his room. A door bangs in the wind. Her body is probably being placed in the La Touche mausoleum at Harristown at this very moment.

He cannot save himself from the ravine of grief opening up in front of him, but at the moment he hovers above it, seeing the depths he is about to fall: the sheer, rocky, sides that have no roots or footholds to guide him back up. He takes a breath. He is not ready to plunge yet. Prince Leopold is coming to the Drawing School tomorrow. He must float above his grief until the visit is over. He's been preparing himself for Rose's death for a long time, but he's still dizzy with the fact of it. Don't look down. All he has to do is not look down.

He must return to Oxford. He begins to pack his things. But he isn't dressed yet. 'Come on, John,' he says aloud. 'Get yourself together.' With trembling hands he takes off his dressing gown and pulls off his night shirt. His body is pimply with goosebumps and his feet are purplish, yet the room is flooded with sunshine. He cannot bear to wash himself, so he pulls on his trousers and shirt. He fumbles with the buttons on his waistcoat and leaves two undone; his jacket will hide them.

If only Joan was here. She could help him, could tell him what to do. He wonders about cancelling the visit tomorrow. But he has put years of work into the Drawing School, and he does not know if cancelling a royal visit is some sort of taboo. Leopold would understand, but he might not be able to attend another time. Surely he can get through it, surely he can hold himself together for a couple of hours, for the sake of the School?

Oh Rose! Rose! To think you are gone! He is weeping, he wants to call out, to break things, to rip his papers, to scratch his face, his eyes. The sun is shining and Rose's sweet lips are chilled, her eyes see nothing, she will never utter another word. Never think of him or send him one of her sweet letters. Never do anything. Never. Never.

He opens his diary, wondering if writing down his loss will soothe him. But he has no words, only a great aching that might break his body into pieces.

He looks at the blank page, then marks the day with a cross.

§§§

John is at the Drawing School in good time for the royal visit, and a few other Oxford dignitaries - all friends of his - have assembled ready to meet the Prince. It is as if the part of him that has lost Rose has been left behind - that the real him is still sitting on the bed in a small coaching inn on the Oxford Road, holding a telegram. He has sent out a second self to the Drawing School, one who speaks and listens and functions like a human being, yet is nothing but a shell, a paper-thin creation that may or may not last for the two hours that the royal visit is scheduled to last.

Looking around, he takes satisfaction in how the Drawing School has materialised. It's a single large, very airy room within the university's existing museum, with rows of custom-made sloping oak desks. There are adjustable chairs and substantial cabinets for holding thousands of prints, as well as portable frames for displaying canvases. He has thought of - and paid for - everything a student might need. It is the first time that art has been taught at a university, but he is determined it will succeed - to draw well is to look properly, and this world needs people to look at it properly. He doesn't mention to Leopold that the undergraduates have only shown a grudging interest in it, and that the drawing master usually only has one or two pupils to supervise.

Leopold greets him warmly and John is glad to see his friend. They met at Oxford when Leopold was his student and a close friendship grew between them, though Leopold is still only twenty-two. He was often invited to Leopold's house for dinner, to small, informal gatherings, where they would talk about the importance of beauty and how to bring art into the lives of all corners of society. Leopold's mother, the Queen, insists her youngest son lives quietly and simply, but John wonders if he would live this way anyway, of his own choosing. As a student Leopold was so different from other aristocrats at Oxford: those loud, confident young men who have always been surrounded by beautiful things and never bothered to look at them. In contrast, Prince Leopold is hard-working and diligent, with none of that haughty arrogance that others so often assume in society; people who don't realise that kindness, courtesy and warmth are the best manners of all. There is a surprising humility to Leopold, a sense that he is grateful for company. When John asked him to be a trustee of the Drawing School, he accepted with enthusiasm.

John asks after Leopold's health, determined to speak as little about himself as he can, for fear of breaking down.

'I am well, dear friend. Last year the London papers reported that I was dead, and I am in better health than that at least.'

Leopold's quips, often made at his own expense, usually make John laugh, but the thought of the dead can't raise a smile today.

'And Oxford always restores me. It is so good to be back, and especially to see the fruits of your labours.' Leopold gestures to the room, and the mounted sketches and paintings that John has most recently donated. 'If I'd had an ounce of talent I'd have made good use of your fine School.'

Leopold's determination to enjoy life is impressive. He is in constant pain and has many restrictions imposed on him by his mother: he isn't allowed to shoot, ride or even do much walking. Illness is only part of the story. John knows what it means to be controlled by one's mother.

'My mother's very pleased that I am involved in your drawing school, Professor. She likes to see me involve myself. My mother expects a lot from me, and I try not to disappoint her. But sometimes it's not always possible.'

'I'm sure she knows you do your best.'

'Perhaps. She once told me I'd been a very undutiful baby.'

John isn't sure if it's traitorous to laugh but when he meets Leopold's eyes the two men smile.

§§§

After the visit he returns to his rooms and takes to his bed. 'She is dead.' He repeats the words to himself, sometimes in his head, sometimes out loud. He reads some Psalms and the words look relevant but he feels nothing. *The Lord is near unto them who are of a broken heart.* He hardly knows how to grieve for Rose – where to begin? He grieved for his parents but this is different. They were old and had lived good and contented lives. Rose was twenty-seven and had died needlessly, driven to despair by her faith. Where can comfort be found for that?

He has a letter from Joan, with more details. Details he doesn't want. That Rose died alone, her parents unable to get there in time. That she became delirious. Joan sounds distraught, her sentences are awkward and rushed. She was close to Rose, and only a few years older than her. But how can he write and comfort her? His own grief is too big. Insurmountable. The first time he first saw Mont Blanc he felt he could not truly *see* it, no

matter how much he looked. He simply didn't have mind enough to grasp it, let alone draw it. What was the point of putting something on a piece of paper that soared 12,000 feet above him?

Chapter Three

There are several piles of unopened letters stacked on his desk; he's never been so behind in his correspondence before. He should get a secretary, there's too much for one man to cope with. There are fan letters from those who love his writing on art and architecture and want him to write more books on these topics. There are people he's never met, writing whatever occurs to them, just hoping for a reply from a famous man that they can boast about. There are his regular correspondents - friends and acquaintances such as Charles, Dr Oliver, his undergraduate students Alec and Collie.

Charles has written frequently since Rose's death – letters of sympathy of course, but also caution. He urges John to remember that she was not a saint. And he and Joan write to each other every day that they're apart. He wishes she would come to Brantwood, but even his most persistent pleading would have no effect this time - she's in confinement, her third child expected in the early autumn. It doesn't stop him telling her how much he wishes she was with him.

Today there's a letter from Henry Swan, a previous pupil at the Working Men's Club. He is living in Sheffield with his wife now and they're very interested in his Guild of St George - they'd like to hear more, perhaps get involved in some way. John has a wonderful thought: could the Swans be the curators of the new museum he's planning? And why not have the museum in Sheffield? It's famed for its diligent craftsmen, they would surely be interested in seeing fine artworks. Sheffield is a decent-sized town, enclosed by beautiful countryside - a cottage on a hillside, a mile or two out of the city centre, would make the perfect setting. He will write to Mr Swan with his plans - he has nothing to lose. If the Swans don't wish to have the role, they may know other, worthy individuals, that they could suggest.

The cat leaps onto his desk and begins to toy with a pen, pushing it one way, then another, all the time getting closer to the edge. 'I know your game, Puss,' he murmurs, rescuing the pen. Puss neatly jumps onto his lap and curls up, purring loudly. He fondles her ears whilst he reads a letter from Georgiana Cowper-Temple. Such a wonderful friend. Ever since Rose died she has been inviting him to her home in the New Forest, to rest and recuperate. Perhaps he will take up her offer, but not yet. He has been yearning to be at home for a long time, he should at least stay for a couple of months. In some ways he has hardly begun to think about the strange, cold fact that Rose is gone. He plans to spend his days in the

garden and rowing on Coniston Water, and he has invited Edward Burne-Jones and his family to stay for the week. Dear Ned – the only painter he’s ever met who’s sick at the smell of turpentine.

He also has a letter from Prince Leopold - who was greatly distressed when he discovered that Rose had died shortly before the ceremony at the Drawing School. He writes:

The last time we met, Professor, when I came to see your Drawing School, I did not know of your great loss. I am deeply sorry. If I had known I would have cancelled the visit at once, or come only as a friend to offer what small comforts I could.

In his jacket pocket, clipped between two sheets of gold leaf, are all his letters from Rose. The paper is becoming soft with handling and he needs to be careful not to tear them. He can hear her voice when he reads them, her slight Irish lilt, and imagine her look of concentration as she sat down at her little desk in Harristown, her thoughts turned to him and what she might write that would interest him. She could have written anything, pure nonsense, and he would be keeping those letters between gold leaf and pressed against his chest. She never visited Brantwood, but he can’t look across Coniston Water without thinking of that further stretch of water, out of sight but not so very far away, the Irish Sea.

Bramble, his spaniel, has been gently snoring on an armchair. She wakes now, her ears pricking up. He listens too: the pony and trap is coming up the gravel drive. It is the Burne-Joneses - he sent a servant to collect them from Coniston station and bring them the final four miles to Brantwood. He puts Rose’s letters carefully back between the sheets of gold leaf, clips them together, and replaces them in his jacket pocket. He lifts Puss down and she stalks off to sit beside the fire. Then he goes out to greet his friends.

‘Ned! Georgie! And who’s this blue-eyed maid? Not young Margaret, surely?’

Bramble has followed him and is running around the lawn barking joyfully.

‘John! We’ve made it - at last! So good to see you, my friend.’ Ned jumps down from the trap and then helps his wife and daughter.

They look tired, but Ned looks especially pale. John embraces him and Georgie, but Margaret holds back behind her father’s coat. He hasn’t seen her since she was a toddler and she doesn’t seem to remember him. As a child John hated being introduced to adults. He crouches down in front of her.

‘Hello, Margaret, I’m John. I hope you like plum cake? Cook’s made one for tea.’

Georgie nudges her and Margaret steps forward and gives a little curtsy, as if she's been practising.

'I think a curtsy deserves two portions of cake, what do you think?' he asks her.

She smiles and nods.

'I hope *I* get two portions,' says Ned. 'Most tiring journey of my life. Why do you have to live so far away?'

'Oh stop it, Ned,' says Georgie, laughing. 'John - how are you?'

'All the better for seeing your lovely face, my dear. Now tell me what you think of this place. I've been looking forward to showing you my little piece of the world.'

It's the first time the Burne-Jones family have been to his Lakeland home and he's confident they'll approve of both its humility and its view. The house is small, more of a cottage, with ivy round the doors and windows like a coat of shiny, dark green scales. A densely wooded hillside rises up immediately behind the house, tall firs and larches crowding round it, so it nestles unobtrusively into the landscape. But it's the view he bought, not the house: the lawn runs down to Coniston Water, where he's building a little stone harbour for his rowing boat. Banks of purple foxgloves bend gracefully in the breeze, and on the far side of the lake the fells rear up, green and mild at present, but often snow-capped or hidden by mist in winter.

'This place seems like the utopia of St George alright,' says Ned. 'But how can you stand the quiet?'

'I know, Ned: you find music in the rattle of carriages and the calls of the street hawkers; you even love the organ-grinders. Am I right?'

'It's the music of life!'

'Well, so is this. Listen.'

They stand there and in a moment they hear a lamb bleating on a nearby fell. Then a robin in a lilac bush starts up his song. Gradually the trickle of the stream beside the house makes itself heard.

'If I can't hear the voice of the water I always feel there's something missing.'

'But what about company? Don't you get lonely up here?' Ned asks.

'I've got you. I've often got visitors. I didn't think I'd get you here, actually Ned. Didn't you declare you were never venturing further north than Hampstead?'

'I wish I'd kept my word after that journey. But I'm sure your conversation will make it worth every bone-shaking mile.'

As they enter the house Ned gives a yelp. 'My pictures!'

The large hallway crowded with drawings, but in pride of place are several Burne-Jones sketches.

‘Of course. I have your work all over the house, you’d better get used to it.’

He takes his guests up the narrow staircase to his turret room, which gives a view down the full length of the lake.

‘This room was the first addition I made to the house,’ he tells them. They stand at the window and look out. ‘The biggest hill you can see is known locally as The Old Man of Coniston.’

‘And is that what the villagers call *you*?’ Ned teases.

‘I’m sure you’re right. But what am I thinking? You must be tired and hungry. Mary will show you to your rooms, and then we’ll have some tea.’

§§§

Cook has done him proud as usual. They sit in the dining room, where one wall is made up of seven tall windows with lake views. The long table is spread with a white cloth, which is hardly visible under the bread and butter, plum cake, blackcurrant tart, toasted tea cakes, almond biscuits, tea, coffee, cream and sugar. John has no appetite, but he likes to play the host, and it pleases him to see his friends enjoying themselves.

‘My favourite concoction!’ Georgie tells him, putting a piece of plum cake between two slices of bread and butter. ‘Although my absolute favourite dish,’ she confides, ‘is bone marrow on toast.’

‘Georgie,’ Ned scolds. ‘Not everyone wants to hear about your horrible eating habits.’

‘The Professor doesn’t mind - do you, John?’

‘Of course not, my dear. I think it sounds delicious.’

Margaret, hearing John referred to as ‘The Professor’, quietly asks her father what John is Professor *of*.

Ned laughs. ‘He is Professor of Everything, Margaret. This is a man who knows everything about everything, his official title should be Professor of Things in General’.

John is embarrassed by Ned’s effusiveness. He pulls a large plum from his slice of cake and put his thumb in it. ‘I prefer to be called Little Jack Horner,’ he whispers to Margaret, who giggles.

‘But are you a good boy?’ Georgie asks.

‘I think I’ll let Margaret be the judge of that. Pay attention, Margaret - I want you to tell me all my faults at the end of your stay. But I don’t think supplying insufficient cake will be one of them.’

Here he is, having tea with friends, talking to an adorable little girl. He is making jokes and being considerate to his guests. But he is a wraith. A non-presence. At any moment he might begin weeping. He wants to take to his bed. To cut his heart out with the bread knife. To drown in the lake.

After tea he gives them a tour of the house. ‘I thought your wallpaper was designed by Topsy,’ Ned says in a surprised tone. They’re in John’s study, and Bramble has resumed her sleeping position on an armchair.

‘What do you mean? It *is* by Morris.’ John looks around, confused.

‘But you can’t see it.’

It’s true. The wallpaper, which was specially designed by William Morris’s firm, is almost hidden by pictures and bookcases.

‘I need more walls,’ he sighs. ‘There’s never enough space for my pictures. Don’t you dare tell him that his beautiful paper’s hidden. It cost me more than a few shillings per roll.’

‘I like this delightful creature,’ says Georgie, standing at the mantelpiece. She gestures to a small woodcarving of a Swiss maid holding a pruning-hook. It is incongruous with his other artworks, being more primitive, more naïve.

Ned is smoking his pipe down at the water’s edge, but John’s not sorry for some time alone with Georgie. She’s a faithful reader of *Fors Clavigera* and he values her comments.

He smiles. ‘It belonged to my mother.’

Georgie knew his mother a little, and was in awe of the stern Scots woman.

‘You must miss her.’

‘I do. And yet.’ He sighs. ‘I’m freer, of course, but not as free as I thought I’d be. I still wonder what she would think about this or that, and I still sense when she would disapprove. And there’s the guilt, of course.’

‘Guilt?’

‘That I’m not doing what she wanted me to do. That I’ve taken a wrong turning in my life somehow. I thought when she was gone I’d stop being preoccupied with what she thought, but that hasn’t changed.’

‘I feel the same. My father died seven years ago and I consult with him in my mind more than ever.’

They are both quiet for a moment. Georgie touches his arm. ‘How are you, John?’

He knows she is not referring to his mother anymore, but to Rosie. He can be frank with Georgie.

‘It’s hard. Harder than I thought it would be. I prepared myself but in fact I couldn’t prepare myself. But it’s such a waste - such a terrible waste of her life. I feel so angry.’

‘You’ve every right to feel that way. She was a precious girl. Good and true.’

‘I’m trying to distract myself with work - and I succeed sometimes, but never for very long. Physical work is better. I’ve been busy shaping the gardens with Downsie, and there’s a lovely new stream that comes trickling past the side of the house.’

‘How is Mr Downs? I remember him so well from London when I visited you and your mother. He appeared with the loveliest bouquet of flowers for me when I left.’

‘Downsie is the real master of Brantwood. He’s in his element here, I’m sure he prefers it to London - there are sixteen acres of kingdom to call his own. There’s even a moorland, I’ll take you up there tomorrow, it’s jumping with brown hares. Would Margaret like to see a hare?’

‘We’d both love that,’ says Georgie. ‘But we’ll break the news to Ned gently.’

‘Ah, Ned. He can stay in the garden and paint all week if he likes. I don’t want him spoiling the walks with his moaning about mud and a little spot of rain. You and Margaret can accompany me, we’ll have a fine adventure.’

Georgie looks at him with a grateful smile. ‘We’re so pleased you invited us.’

The sun is just starting to set so he stands at the window as he does every evening to take in beauty, but it feels more like a duty than a pleasure. The fells are in shadow but a wide strip of sky above them blazes with embers of orange and pink, and above that huge tumbling clouds of navy and violet are billowing, perhaps bringing a storm from the Atlantic. Yet it doesn’t move him, not like it used to. Once he’d have rushed for his sketchbook, and his soul would have soared with the clouds and blazed with the dying light of day. But now he feels

nothing; it's as if his whole spirit has been turned into ice. He always felt the urge to draw as a sort of instinct, like eating or drinking. Indeed, he used to think of drawing as eating up what he could see into his mind, leaf by leaf, stone by stone.

He draws the curtains against the dusk. 'Tell us a ghost story, Ned.' Ned is a superb teller of tales.

'Very well,' agrees Ned. 'Are you sitting comfortably?'

They settle more deeply into their armchairs.

'No, wait.' Ned springs up and blows out most of the candles around the room, except for one which he holds beneath his pointed beard.

'Don't set yourself on fire, Ned,' John says.

Georgie whispers, 'It wouldn't be the first time.'

'Hush, hush, dear, I've got it under control. Now, let me begin. Let's see... There was once a famous Professor who lived in a wild place between a dark lake and an even darker wood—'

John groans.

'Oh Professor, it's not you!' Ned winks. 'This Professor invited a very good friend of his to stay - this friend was a painter. Not a very good painter, but he persevered.'

'And I suppose that's not you?' says John.

'Do you think I'm no good, then?'

'I've complimented you enough in print. I'm not going to give you a lecture on your virtues here and now.'

'Fair enough,' Ned grins. 'Where was I?'

Ned's story rambles on, but it's not very frightening. Georgie takes Margaret to bed, the little girl can hardly keep her eyes open. When she comes back down Georgie asks John to read.

'You're such a wonderful reader, you make everything so dramatic.'

'She really means it,' adds Ned. 'You're a wonderful reader. Not like Topsy - when he was reading his poetry I saw Georgie stabbing herself with pins to try and keep herself awake!'

John reads from Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* - it was one of his mother's favourites and he is missing her tonight. Strange how reading from her books can make her feel close again.

They have Brantwood strawberries with cream from Low Bank Farm, but despite the summery breakfast it is raining heavily, streams of water braiding the glass. The walk that he was so excited about yesterday will have to be postponed. He is suddenly conscious that there's little in the house with which to entertain Margaret. He doesn't like to stand on ceremony, especially with children. His own upbringing was rather stiff: he remembers the anxiety, consternation even, if he chose to sit on a different chair from usual, or asked for tea at a slightly different hour.

After breakfast he shows her his 'treasures' – his mineral cabinets, custom-made with dozens of silk-lined drawers, stocked with rocks and gems. He lets Margaret pick them up and the little girl is fascinated, especially by the glittering rocks. He has hundreds of specimens - he's been collecting since he was fifteen. He starts telling her their names: agate, amber, amethyst, azurite, siderite with calcite, calcite with hematite, copper, jasper, lava, limestone, malachite, quartz, quartz with rutile - he stops. The child is looking confused.

'Perhaps you'd just enjoy looking at them and holding them?' Georgie suggests.

Margaret nods. 'I tried to remember but now I can only remember amethyst and jasper. My cat's called Jasper because he has green eyes, but your jasper's red.'

He smiles. 'That's right. My jasper has iron in it which makes it red. Do you like cats? I could introduce you to Puss if you'd like?'

She nods eagerly.

'The trick is to find her. She's very wily and can get into the smallest spaces. Once I found her inside a drawer containing some Turner sketches, and she was very grumpy when I heard her miaowing and opened the drawer.'

They search through the house but Puss has absconded. 'Sometimes she visits the horses,' he tells her. 'And Jack, the stable hand, insists he once saw Puss asleep on one of the pony's backs.'

The rain continues to come down heavily. They sit in his study and leaf through his books, until John has inspiration.

'I have it!' He pulls out some large encyclopaedias and stacks them on the floor to make a series of low hurdles from one end of the room to the other. 'Now let's see who's the best at jumping!'

The young girl looks curiously at the stacked books and then at him. He worries for a moment that she is too old for such things, but Georgie says, 'Go on Margaret, I bet you're a better jumper than Mr Ruskin.'

‘Indeed, ladies, my bones are terribly old.’

Margaret is graceful, and she seems delighted at the mad, capering professor. He is reminded of happier days at Winnington Hall. He took Ned and Georgie to Winnington with him on occasion, in part perhaps to show off a little – to prove he had the affections of the girls and their teachers.

‘I remember you dancing a quadrille with them, John,’ says Georgie. ‘You, so thin, and dressed in black, and the girls like winged insects in their white dresses, flitting around you.’

He remembers those days with both pleasure and pain – it has been six years since his last visit to the school.

‘Mrs Bell has left the school now, did I tell you?’

‘Oh, what a shame! She was such a lively headmistress, so good with the girls.’

‘Yes, it’s not the same without her. She was a wonderful teacher but hopeless with money. I did all I could to keep things going but it couldn’t be helped.’

‘You’re always so very generous, John,’ she says. ‘Too generous. You mustn’t forget to look after yourself, as well as every good cause you come across.’

‘I could say the same to you, Georgie. Ned writes to me about you - I hear you’ve abandoned your painting in order to look after your family. Most admirable, my dear, but is it strictly necessary that you should give up something you love so much?’

She sighs. ‘It hasn’t been easy and I *am* teaching myself to etch. But with Margaret to raise and Ned being so... Well, you know how he is. My family needs me at the moment. But I do spread the word of *Fors* to everyone I meet that I think would benefit from it.’

‘Perhaps your time will come, Georgie dear.’ He pats her hand.

§§§

He raises the axe and swings it in a wide arc before bringing it down through the log, as if aiming at something just beneath it. This gives a clean slice and the axe gets stuck less often. He cuts wood on an almost daily basis whilst at Brantwood, irrespective of whether the woodpile needs topping up. It’s a desire to chop and stack that goes far beyond the need for firewood; it satisfies a need in him for physical, tiring action - the repetitiveness is soothing, and if he is sore later, so much the better.

The breeze coming off Coniston Water carries a message of warning: a cold, clean message that summer is leaving. The birch trees are starting to shed their leaves, one small yellow leaf at a time, a pause between each one as if uncertain whether to begin undressing for winter yet. The mushrooms and toadstools are seasoning the woodland floor with spores, like so much spice or smoke, adding richness and flavour to the earth. The plum trees are so laden the branches are snapping under the weight of their fruit. He takes baskets full of them to the kitchen, so Cook can make jam, but he still feels the waste when he sees wasps crawling out of those he's missed, rotting in the long grass.

A figure is crossing the lawn, a tall thin man with a drooping expression. It is Ned, looking more like an ailing knight than ever.

'I've been trying to feed you up while you've been here,' John says as he approaches. 'But it hasn't worked. Look at yourself, Ned, you've almost disappeared.'

Ned gives him a wan smile. 'I should have done what I was supposed to do with my life and become a clergyman, sitting in my slippers writing sermons and getting as fat as Topsy.'

'But instead?'

'I dedicated my life to the spirit.'

'Ouch. Poor clergy. Has any particular member offended you lately or is this just a general feeling of animosity towards men of the cloth?'

'More a general weariness actually, rather than anything against the clergy.' He looks anxious. 'I'm not at my best. I suffer nightmares but my waking thoughts are even worse.'

John has little sympathy for Ned when he's self-pitying, and especially when it concerns his endless infatuations. Georgie has a good deal to bear from her husband, but John does not feel experienced enough to judge another man's behaviour, especially the way a man conducts his marriage. What he does know is that Ned has been infatuated with a Greek beauty for several years. All of London knows it, as her portrait is forever appearing in Ned's work. He also knows that it is hurting Georgie; he saw it in her eyes the moment she arrived. He swings the axe again and Ned steps away.

'Georgie will be alright, John. She's made of iron, you know.'

John thinks of her clear grey eyes and knows there is something iron-like to her, but there are also deep wells of feeling. Especially for her husband, for whom she's never hidden her love.

'I'm sorry about Rose,' Ned begins, but John cuts him off.

'I'm going to spend some time with the Cowper-Temples at Broadlands this autumn.'

‘Oh.’ Ned looks away towards the steep woodland where the rooks are cawing noisily. ‘Have you told Charles you’re going?’

‘He’s not my keeper.’ Charles makes no secret of his loathing of the Cowper-Temples. *Weak reeds* he calls them; they’re always having spiritual fads and trying to enlist John in their latest crazes.

‘No, of course not. I didn’t mean that.’ But Ned seems unsure of what he did mean.

‘Margaret is a charming young girl,’ John says, to change the subject.

‘Yes, I’m quite smitten. She’s perfect. I can never allow her to marry, of course. She must be mine forever.’ Ned is joking, but John perceives the painful kernel of truth. Ned will be devastated when Margaret marries.

‘Young girls are ruined forever by marriage,’ he agrees. ‘But Margaret might be wiser.’ He adds, ‘You’ve not got anything in any exhibitions at the moment have you?’

‘No - I’m still not over the Old Water Colour Society debacle.’

John winces - it seems every topic of conversation is to be a painful one. He had forgotten about that. Seven years ago Ned sent an illustration for exhibition at the Old Water Colour Society. It was a scene from Ovid’s *Phyllis and Demophöon*, with an epigraph, ‘Tell me, what have I done, except not widely love?’ An apt for comment for Ned’s love life, he thought at the time - and it proved to be too apt. Ned’s indiscretions were well-known and the painting was declared indecent and it was removed from the exhibition. Ned resigned from the Society and hasn’t exhibited since. Not anywhere.

§§§

Sunday morning. He has long since given up church-going, but he still gathers the household for prayers sometimes. Puss likes to curl herself across his shoulders while he reads, amusing the servants and lessening the solemnity of the occasion. He has no time for ritual. At one time his mother, Joan and Rose all feared he was losing his faith, but in fact he has never lost it. It has morphed into something private and more meaningful than ritual, and he has little time for sermonising or judging others. He reads the Bible every day, not as a chore or penance, but because he loves it. He knows much of it by heart. He wouldn’t say that his faith is a comfort to him though; far from it. It is a puzzle, a source of hurt even, but it is not something he can simply give up, a parcel to be casually left on a seat and walked away from.

He lies in bed and watches the unsteady progress of a small spider across the bedroom ceiling. It's as grey and wispy as one of its own cobwebs. He doesn't mind sharing his room with spiders, and he certainly never kills them. Who can be sure what they feel? Sometime Puss torments them and he finds them in corners of the room, a ball of stiff, angled legs.

But this spider is alive. 'Hurry, scurry, little spider,' he whispers. Why should a spider have life when Rose is dead? A girl as lively as Rose, always yearning to be outside, to take pleasure in the natural world - riding her pony, paddling in streams, picking wildflowers. What has held him together these last nine years, since his first proposal to Rose, but hope? Gossamer threads of hope, strung through his life. And now they have all been snapped. Were there ever two people who loved each other so much and who had made each other so unhappy? Perhaps – it seemed to be the way with love. Take Ned and Georgie.

'You're even better company than you books, and those are the best in the world,' said Ned, 'But I hate the countryside. You don't mean to settle here permanently do you?'

'I do, Brother Ned. But before you dash off, back to your beloved London, with its unceasing noise and dirt and misery, I want you to hear a paper I have written. It's about Michael Angelo.'

His tone is imperious; he's treating Ned like a child. Sometimes he suffers a kind of paralysis where he knows he's being objectionable, but still can't stop. 'Come to my study now. I'll read it to you.'

The two men seat themselves but the fire hasn't been lit long and the room feels cold. Condensation streams down the windows and gathers in little pools on the wooden sill.

He begins to read from his paper. He compares, extremely unfavourably, Michael Angelo with Tintoret. He describes Michael Angelo's poor draughtsmanship and fading colours, and, in words that shake Ned's heart, he rages about his dark carnality and perverted imagination, which substitutes the flesh of man for the spirit.

It is supposed to be a lesson to Ned, a warning. Ned fully understands the message.

'We will be leaving tomorrow, John. Thank you for your hospitality. I know Georgie and Margaret have had a very good visit. They both needed a rest. But I'm ready to be back in London. I know my place.'

They avoid each other for the rest of the day. The next morning, helping to load their luggage into the trap, John sees that Ned looks glad to be leaving. They shake hands briefly. Then the pony trots down the drive and he is alone again.