Ivy Gripped the Steps

AND OTHER STORIES

BY

Elizabeth Bowen

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NOTE

THE story "Careless Talk" appeared in *The New Yorker*, under the title "Everything's Frightfully Interesting."

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Preface

The stories in this collection, *Ivy Gripped the Steps* were written in wartime London—between the spring of 1941 and the late autumn of 1944. They were written for the magazines or papers in which they originally appeared. During these last years, I did not always write a story when I was asked for one; but I did not write any story that I was not asked for. For, at the same time, I have been writing a novel; and sometimes I did not want to imperil its continuity.

Does this suggest that these stories have been in any way forced or unwilling work? If so, that is very much not the case. Actually, the stimulus of being asked for a story, and the compulsion created by having promised to write one were both good—I mean, they acted as releases. Each time I sat down to write a story I opened a door; and the pressure against the other side of that door must, I found, have been very great, for things—ideas, images, emotions—came through with force and rapidity, sometimes violence. I do not say that these stories wrote themselves—æsthetically or intellectually speaking, I found the writing of some of them very difficult—but I was never in a moment's doubt as to *what* I was to write. The stories had their own momentum, which I had to control. The acts in them had an authority which I could not question. Odd enough in their

way—and now some seem very odd—they were flying particles of something enormous and inchoate that had been going on. They were sparks from experience—an experience not necessarily my own.

During the war I lived, both as a civilian and as a writer, with every pore open; I lived so many lives, and, still more, lived among the packed repercussions of so many thousands of other lives, all under stress, that I see now it would have been impossible to have been writing only one book. I want my novel, which deals with this same time, to be comprehensive. But a novel must have form; and, for the form's sake, one is always having to make relentless exclusions. Had it not been for my from-time-to-time promises to write stories, much that had been pressing against the door might have remained pressing against the door in vain.

I do not feel I "invented" anything written here. It seems to me that during the war in England the overcharged subconsciousnesses of everybody overflowed and merged. It is because the general subconsciousness saturates these stories that they have an authority nothing to do with me.

These are all wartime, none of them *war*, stories. There are no accounts of war action even as I knew it—for instance, air raids. Only one character (in "Mysterious Kôr") is a soldier; and he only appears as a homeless wanderer round a city. These are, more, studies of climate, war-climate, and of the strange growths it raised. I see war (or should I say feel war?) more as a territory than as a page of history: of its impersonal active historic side I have, I find, not written. Arguably, writers are always slightly abnormal people: certainly, in so-called "normal" times my sense of the abnormal has been very acute. In war, this feeling of slight differentiation was suspended: I felt one with, and just like, everyone else. Sometimes I hardly knew where I stopped and everyone else began. The violent destruction of solid things, the explosion of the illusion that prestige,

power and permanence attach to bulk and weight, left all of us, equally, heady and disembodied. Walls went down; and we felt, if not knew, each other. We all lived in a state of lucid abnormality.

Till the proofs of *Ivy Gripped the Steps* came, I had not re-read these stories since they were, singly, written. Reading the stories straight through as a collection, I am most struck by what they have in common. This integrates them and gives them a cumulative and collective meaning that no one of them, taken singly, has by itself. *Ivy Gripped the Steps* is an organic whole: not merely a collection but somehow—for better or worse—a book. Also, the order in which the stories stand—an order come at, I may say, casually—seems itself to have a meaning, or to add a meaning, I did not foresee. We begin with a hostess who has not learned how with grace to open her own front door; we end with a pair of lovers with no place in which to sleep in each other's arms. In the first story, a well-to-do house in a polite square gives the impression of having been organically dislocated by shock; in the last, a pure abstract empty timeless city rises out of a little girl's troubled mind. Through the stories —in the order in which they are here placed—I find a rising tide of hallucination.

The stories are not placed in the time-order in which they were first written—though, by chance, "In the Square," placed first here, *is* the first in the book I wrote, in a hot, raid-less patch of 1941 summer, just after Germany had invaded Russia.

The hallucinations in the stories are not a peril; nor are the stories studies of mental peril. The hallucinations are an unconscious, instinctive, saving resort on the part of the characters: life, mechanised by the controls of wartime, and emotionally torn and impoverished by changes, had to complete itself in some other way. It is a fact that in Britain, and especially in London, in wartime many people had strange deep intense dreams. "Whatever else I forget about

the war," a friend said to me, "I hope I may never forget my own dreams, or some of the other dreams I have been told. We have never dreamed like this before; and I suppose we shall never dream like this again."

Dreams by night, and the fantasies—these often childishly innocent—with which formerly matter-of-fact people consoled themselves by day were compensations. Apart from them, I do not think that the *desiccation*, by war, of our day-to-day lives can be enough stressed. The outside world war news was stupefying: headlines and broadcasts came down and down on us in hammerlike chops, with great impact but oddly little reverberation. The simple way to put it was: "One cannot take things in." What was happening was out of all proportion to our faculties for knowing, thinking and checking up. The circumstances under which ordinary British people lived were preposterous—so preposterous that, in a dull way, they simplified themselves. And all the time we knew that compared to those on the Continent we in Britain could not be said to suffer. Foreign faces about the London streets had personal pain and impersonal history sealed up behind the eyes. All this pressure drove egotism underground, or made it whiten like grass under a stone. And self-expression in small ways stopped—the small ways had been so very small that we had not realised how much they amounted to. Planning fun, going places, choosing and buying things, wondering and wandering, dressing yourself up, and so on. All that stopped. You used to know what you were like from the things you liked, and chose. Now there was not what you liked, and you did not choose. Any little remaining choices and pleasures shot into new proportion and new value: people paid big money for little bunches of flowers.

Literature of the Resistance is now steadily coming in from France. I wonder whether in a sense all wartime writing is not resistance writing? In no way dare we who were

in Britain compare ourselves with the French. But personal life here put up its own resistance to the annihilation that was threatening it—war. Everyone here, as is known, read more: and what was sought in books—old books, new books —was the communicative touch of personal life. To survive, not only physically but spiritually, was essential. People whose homes had been blown up went to infinite lengths to assemble bits of themselves—broken ornaments, odd shoes, torn scraps of the curtains that had hung in a room—from the wreckage. In the same way, they assembled and checked themselves from stories and poems, from their memories, from one another's talk. Outwardly, we accepted that at this time individual destiny had to count for nothing: inwardly, individual destiny became an obsession in every heart. You cannot depersonalise persons. Every writer during this time was aware of the personal cry of the individual. And he was aware of the passionate attachment of men and women to every object or image or place or love or fragment of memory with which his or her destiny seemed to identified, and by which the destiny seemed to be assured.

The search for indestructible landmarks in a destructible world led many down strange paths. The attachment to these when they had been found produced small worlds-within-worlds of hallucination—in most cases, saving hallucination. Writers followed the paths they saw or felt people treading, and depicted those little dear saving illusory worlds. I have done both in the *Ivy Gripped the Steps* stories.

You may say that these resistance-fantasies are in themselves frightening. I can only say that one counteracts fear by fear, stress by stress. In "The Happy Autumn Fields," a woman is projected from flying-bombed London, with its day-and-night eeriness, into the key emotional crisis of a Victorian girlhood. In "Ivy Gripped the Steps," a man in his early forties peers through the rusted fortifications and down the dusty empty perspectives of a seaside town at

the Edwardian episode that long ago crippled his faculty for love. In "The Inherited Clock," a girl is led to find the key to her own neurosis inside a timepiece. The past, in all these cases, discharges its load of feeling into the anæsthetised and bewildered present. It is the "I" that is sought—and retrieved, at the cost of no little pain. And, the ghosts—definite in "Green Holly," questionable (for are they subjective purely?) in "Pink May," "The Cheery Soul" and "The Demon Lover": what part do they play? They are the certainties. The bodiless foolish wanton, the puritan "other" presence, the tipsy cook with her religion of English fare, the ruthless young soldier lover unheard of since 1916: hostile or not, they rally, they fill the vacuum for the uncertain "I."

I am sorry that the stories in *Ivy Gripped the Steps*, now going to readers on the other side of the Atlantic, do not contain more "straight" pictures of the British wartime scene. Such pictures could have been interesting: they *are* interesting in much of the brilliant reportage that exists. I know, in these stories the backgrounds, and sometimes the circumstances, are only present by inference. Allow for the intensely subjective mood into which most of the characters have been cast! Remember that these impulsive movements of fantasy are by-products of the non-impulsive major routine of war. These are between-time stories—mostly reactions from, or intermissions between, major events. They show a levelled-down time, when a bomb on your house was as inexpedient, but not more abnormal, than a cold in your head. There was an element of chanciness and savageness about everything—even, the arrival at a country house for Christmas. The claustrophobia of not being able to move about freely and without having to give account of yourself—not, for instance, being able to visit a popular seaside resort, within seventy miles of London, between 1940 and 1944—appears in many: notably,

in "Ivy Gripped the Steps." The ghostly social pattern of London life—or, say, the conventional pattern one does not easily break, and is loth to break because it is "I" saving—appears in the vacant politeness of "In the Square," and in the inebriate night-club conversation, and in "Careless Talk." These are ways in which some of us did go on—after all, we had to go on *some* way. And the worthless little speaker in "Pink May" found the war made a moratorium for her married conscience. Yes, only a few were heroic purely: and see how I have not drawn the heroic ones! But everyone was pathetic—more than they knew. Owing, though, to the thunder of those inordinate years, we were shaken out of the grip of our own pathos.

In wartime, even in Britain, much has been germinating. *What*, I do not know—who does, yet, know?—but I felt the germination; and feel it, here and there, in these stories now that I read them through. These are received impressions of happening things; impressions that stored themselves up and acquired force without being analysed or considered. These, as wartime stories, are at least contemporary—twenty, forty, sixty years hence they may be found interesting as documents, even if they are found negligible as art. This discontinuous writing, nominally "inventive," is the only diary I have kept. Transformed into images in the stories, there *may* be important psychological facts: if so, I did not realise their importance. Walking in the darkness of the nights of six years (darkness which transformed a capital city into a network of inscrutable canyons) one developed new bare alert senses, with their own savage warnings and notations. And by day one was always making one's own new maps of a landcape always convulsed by some new change. Through it all, one probably picked up more than can be answered for. I cannot answer for much that is in these stories, except to say that I know they are all true—true to the general life that was in me at the time. Taken

singly, they are disjected snapshots—snapshots taken from close up, too close up, in the middle of the *mêlée* of a battle. You cannot *render*, you can only embrace—if it means embracing to suffocation point—something vast that is happening right on top of you. Painters have painted, and photographers who were artists have photographed, the tottering lacelike architecture of ruins, dark mass-movements of people, and the untimely brilliance of flaming skies. I cannot paint or photograph like this—I have isolated; I have made for the particular, spot-lighting faces or cutting out gestures that are not even the faces or gestures of great sufferers. This is how I am, how I feel, whether in war or peace time; and only as I am and feel can I write. As I said at the start, though I criticise these stories now, afterwards, intellectually, I cannot criticise their content. They are the particular. But through the particular, in wartime, I felt the high-voltage current of the general pass.

Elizabeth Bowen
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In the Square

AT ABOUT nine o'clock on this hot bright July evening the square looked mysterious: it was completely empty, and a whitish reflection, ghost of the glare of midday, came from the pale-coloured façades on its four sides and seemed to brim it up to the top. The grass was parched in the middle; its shaved surface was paid for by people who had gone. The sun, now too low to enter normally, was able to enter brilliantly at a point where three of the houses had been bombed away; two or three of the many trees, dark with summer, caught on their tops the illicit gold. Each side of the breach, exposed wall-papers were exaggerated into viridians, yellows and corals that they had probably never been. Elsewhere, the painted front doors under the balconies and at the tops of steps not whitened for some time stood out in the deadness of colour with light off it. Most of the glassless windows were shuttered or boarded up, but some framed hollow inside dark.

The extinct scene had the appearance of belonging to

some ages ago. Time having only been thrust forward for reasons that could no longer affect the square, this still was a virtual eight o'clock. One taxi did now enter at the north side and cruise round the polish to a house in a corner: a man got out and paid his fare. He glanced round him, satisfied to find the shell of the place here. In spite of the dazzling breach, the square's acoustics had altered very little: in the confined sound of his taxi driving away there was nothing to tell him he had not arrived to dinner as on many summer evenings before. He went up familiar steps and touched the chromium bell. Some windows of this house were not shuttered, though they were semi-blinded by oiled stuff behind which the curtains dimly hung: these windows fixed on the outdoors their tenacious look; some of the sashes were pushed right up, to draw this singular summer evening—parched, freshening and a little acrid with ruins—into the rooms in which people lived. When the bell was not answered, the man on the steps frowned at the jade green front door, then rang again. On which the door was opened by an unfamiliar person, not a maid, who stood pushing up her top curls. She wore a cotton dress and studied him with the coldly intimate look he had found new in women since his return.

By contrast with the fixed outdoor silence, this dark interior was a cave of sound. The house now was like a machine with the silencer off it; there was nothing muted; the carpets looked thin. One got a feeling of functional anarchy, of loose plumbing, of fittings shocked from their place. From the basement came up a smell of base-

ment cooking, a confident voice and the sound of a shutting door. At the top of the house a bath was being run out. A tray of glasses was moved, so inexpertly that everything on it tinkled, somewhere in the drawing-room over his head.

"She's expecting you, is she?" said the sceptical girl. He saw on the table behind her only a couple of leaflets and a driver's cap.

"I think so."

"You know I'm expecting you!" exclaimed Magdela, beginning to come round the turn of the stairs.

"Sorry," said the girl, stepping back to speak up the staircase. "I didn't know you were in." Turning, she disappeared through a waiting door, the door behind the dining-room, which she shut. "Do come up, Rupert," said Magdela, extending her hand to him from where she stood. "I'm sorry; I meant to come down myself."

Of the three drawing-room windows two stood open, so she must have heard the taxi: her failure to get to the door in time had been due to some inhibition or last thought. It would have been remarkable if she *had* yet arrived at the manner in which to open her own door—which would have to be something quite different from the impulsive informality of peacetime. The tray of glasses she had been heard moving now stood on a pedestal table beside a sofa. She said: "These days, there is no one to . . ." Indeed the expanse of parquet, though unmarked, no longer showed watery gloss and depth. Though it may have only been by the dusk that the many white lampshades were discoloured, he saw under

one, as he sat down beside her, a film of dust over the bulb. Though they were still many, the lamps were fewer; some had been put away with the bric-à-brac that used to be on the tables and in the alcoves—and these occasional blanks were the least discomforting thing in the dead room. The reflections in from the square fell on the chairs and sofas already worn rough on their satin tops and arms, and with grime homing into their rubbed parts.

This had been the room of a hostess; the replica of so many others that you could not count. It had never had any other aspect, and it had no aspect at all to-night. The chairs remained so many, and their pattern was now so completely without focus that, had Magdela not sat down where she did sit, he would not have known in which direction to turn.

"How nice it was of you to ring me up," she said. "I had no idea you were back in London. How did you know I was here? No one else is."

"I happened to hear. . . ."

"Oh, did you?" she said, a little bit disconcerted, then added quickly: "Were you surprised?"

"I was delighted, naturally."

"I came back," she said. "For the first year I was away, part of the time in the country, part of the time in the north with Anthony—he has been there since this all started, you know. Then, last winter, I decided to come back."

"You are a Londoner."

She said mechanically: "Yes, I suppose so—yes. It's so

curious to see you again, like this. Who would think that this was the same world?" She looked sideways out of the window, at the square. "Who would have thought this could really happen? The last time we—how long ago was that? Two years ago?"

"A delightful evening."

"Was it?" she said, and looked round the room. "How nice. One has changed so much since then, don't you think? It is quite . . ."

At this point the door opened and a boy of about sixteen came in, in a dressing-gown. Not only was his hair twisted in tufts of dampness but a sort of humidity seemed to follow him, as though he were trailing the bathroom steam. "Oh, sorry," he said, but after a glance at Rupert he continued his way to the cigarette box. "Bennet," said Magdela, "I feel sure you ought not to smoke—Rupert, this is my nephew, Bennet; I expect we sometimes talked about him. He is here just for the night, on his way from school."

"That reminds me," said Bennet, "would you very much mind if I stayed to-morrow?" Rupert watched Bennet squinting as he lighted a cigarette. "They say everyone's smoking more, now," said Bennet. "Actually, I hardly smoke at all." He dropped the match into the empty steel grate. "I took a bath," he said to Magdela. "I'm just going out."

"Oh, Bennet, have you had anything to eat?"

"Well, I had tea at six," he said, "with an egg. I expect I'll pick up something at a Corner House." He stooped to pull up a slipper on one heel and said: "I didn't know

you had visitors. As a matter of fact, I didn't know you were in. But everyone seems to be in to-night." When he went out he did not shut the door behind him, and they could hear him slip-slopping upstairs. "He's very independent," said Magdela. "But these days I suppose everyone is?"

"I must say," he said, "I'm glad you are not alone here. I should not like to think of your being that."

"Wouldn't you?" she said. "Well, I never am. This is my only room in the house—and, even so, as you see, Bennet comes in. The house seems to belong to everyone now. That was Gina who opened the front door."

"Yes," he said, "who is she?"

"She used to be Anthony's secretary, but she wanted to come to London to drive a car for the war, so he told her she could live in this house, because it was shut up at that time. So it seemed to be quite hers, when I came back. She is supposed to sit in the back dining-room; that was why I couldn't ask you to dinner. But also, there is nobody who can cook—there is a couple down in the basement, but they are independent; they are only supposed to be caretakers. They have a son who is a policeman, and I know he sometimes sleeps somewhere at the top of the house—but caretakers are so hard to get. They have a schoolgirl daughter who comes in here when she thinks I am not about."

"It seems to me you have a lot to put up with. Wouldn't you be more comfortable somewhere else?"

"Oh," she said, "is that how you think of me?"

"I do hope you will dine with me, one night soon."

"Thank you," she said, evasively. "Some night that would be very nice."

"I suppose the fact is, you are very busy?"

"Yes, I am. I am working, doing things quite a lot." She told him what she did, then her voice trailed off. He realized that he and she could not be intimate without many other people in the room. He looked at the empty pattern of chairs round them and said: "Where are all those people I used to meet?" "Whom do you mean, exactly?" she said, startled. ". . . Oh, in different places, different places, you know. I think I have their addresses, if there's anyone special . . . ?"

"You hear news of them?"

"Oh yes; oh yes, I'm sure I do. What can I tell you that would be interesting? I'm sorry," she said suddenly, shutting her eyes, "but so much has happened." Opening her eyes to look at him, she added: "So much more than you know."

To give point to this, the telephone started ringing: the bell filled the room, the sounding-box of the house, and travelled through windows into the square. Rupert remembered how, on other summer evenings, you had constantly heard the telephones in the houses round. It was to-night startling to hear a telephone ring. Magdela stared at the telephone, at a distance from her—not as though she shared this feeling that Rupert had, but as though something happened out of its time. She seemed to forbid the bell with her eyes, with that intent fixed

warning intimate look, and, seeming unwilling to leave the sofa, contracted into stone-stillness by Rupert's side. At a loss, he said: "Like me to see who it is?"

"No, I will; I must," her voice hardened. "Or they will be answering from downstairs."

This evidently did happen; the bell stopped an instant before her fingers touched the receiver. She raised it, listened into it, frowned. "It's all right, Gina," she said. "Thank you: you needn't bother. I'm here."

She stood with her back to Rupert, with her head bent, still warily listening to the receiver. Then: "Yes, it's me now," she said, in an all at once very much altered tone. "But . . ."

After Gina had let in Rupert she went back to continue to wait for her telephone call. *She* always answered from the foot of the stairs. Before sitting down again, or not sitting down, she went through from the back to the front dining-room, to open the window overlooking the square. The long table and the two sideboards were, as she always remembered them, sheeted up, and a smell of dust came from the sheets. Returning to the room that was hers to sit in, she left the archway doors open behind her, so that, before the black-out, air might pass through. The perspective of useless dining-room through the archway, the light fading from it through the bombed gap did not affect her. She had not enough imagination to be surprised by the past—still less, by its end. When, the November after the war started, she first came to sleep in the closed house, she had, as Anthony's

mistress, speculated as to this former part of his life. She supposed he had gained something by entertaining, though it did not seem to her he had much to show. While she stayed faithful to him she pitied him for a number of reasons she did not let appear. Now that she had begun to deceive him she found only that one reason to pity him. Now she loved someone else in a big way, she supposed it was time to clear out of this house. She only thought this; she did not feel it; her feelings were not at all fine. She did not know how to move without bringing the whole thing up, which would be tough on Anthony while he was in the north.

As to her plans for to-night—she never knew. So much depended—or, she might hear nothing. She wondered if she should put in time by writing to Anthony; she got out her pad and sat with it on her knee. Hearing Bennet's bath continue to run out she thought, that's a funny time for a bath. Underneath where she sat, the caretaker's wife was washing up the supper dishes and calling over her shoulder to her policeman son: the voice came out through the basement window and withered back on the silence round.

She wrote words on the pad:

"Since I came here one thing and another seems to have altered my point of view. I don't know how to express myself, but I think under the circumstances I ought to tell you. Being here has started to get me down; for one thing it is such a way from the bus. Of course it has been a help; but don't you think it would be better if your wife had the place

all to herself? As far as I can see she means to stay. Naturally she and I do not refer to this. But, for instance, if she had two nephews there would be no place for the other to sleep. . . ."

. . . And looked at them with her head on one side. She heard Bennet come down the flights of staircase, rigidly dropping his feet from step to step. He pulled up with a jingle of the things in his pockets and thought of something outside her door. O God, don't let him come bothering in here, you see I might get this done. But he did: leaning his weight on the door handle and with the other hand holding the frame of the door he swung forward at her, with damp-flattened hair.

"Sorry," he said, "but shall you be going out?" She kept a hold on her letter-pad and said fiercely: "Why?"

"If not, I might have your key."

"Why not ask your aunt?"

"She's got someone there. You mean, you might go out, but you don't know?"

"No. Don't come bothering here, like a good boy. What's the matter with you: have you got a date?"

"No," he said. "I just want some food in some place."

He walked away from her through the archway and looked out at the square from the end of the dining-room. The lampless dusk seemed to fascinate him. "There are quite a lot of people standing about," he said. "Couples. This must be quite a place. Do you suppose they go into the empty houses?"

"No, they're all locked up."

"What's the good of that, I don't see?"

"They're property."

"I should say they were cracked; I shouldn't say they'd ever be much use. Oh, sorry, are you writing a letter? I say, I thought they were taking the railings away from squares; I thought the iron was some good. You think this place will patch up? I suppose it depends who wants it. Anybody can have it as far as I'm concerned. You can't get to anywhere from here."

"Hadn't you better push off? Everywhere will be shut."

"I know, but what about the key?"

But her head turned sharply: the telephone started ringing at the foot of the stairs. Bennet's expression became more hopeful. "Go on, why don't you," he said, "then we might know where we are."

Gina came back to him from the telephone, with one hand pushing her curls up. "So what?" said Bennet.

"That was for her," she said. "It would be. I got my head bitten off. No place for me on that line. You'd think she was the only one in the house." She picked up her bag and gave him the key out of it. "Oh, all right," she said. "Here you are. Run along."

He thumbed the key and said: "Oh, then it wasn't your regular?"

"Nothing of mine," she said. "Regular if you like . . . Look, I thought you were going to run along?"

Just before Bennet shut the front door behind him he heard a ghostly click from the telephone at the foot of the stairs—in the drawing-room the receiver had been put back. Whatever there had been to say to his aunt must have been said—or totally given up. He thought, so what was the good of *that*? Stepping down into the dusk of the square, that lay at the foot of the steps like water, he heard voices above his head. His aunt and her visitor stood at one of the open windows, looking down, or seeming to look down, at the lovers. Rupert and Magdela for the moment looked quite intimate, as though they had withdrawn to the window from a number of people in the room behind them—only in that case the room would have been lit up.

Bennet, going out to hunt food, kept close along under the fronts of the houses with a primitive secretiveness. He made for the north outlet of the square, by which Rupert's taxi had come in, and at last in the distance heard the sound of a bus.

Magdela smiled and said to Rupert: "Yes, look. Now the place seems to belong to everyone. One has nothing except one's feelings. Sometimes I think I hardly know myself."

"How curious that light is," he said, looking across at the gap.

"You know, I am happy." This was her only reference to the words he had heard her say to the telephone. "Of course, I have no plans. This is no time to make plans, now. But do talk to me—perhaps you have no plans, either? I have been so selfish, talking about myself.

But to meet you after so much has happened—in one way, there seemed nothing to talk about. Do tell me how things strike you, what you have thought of things—coming back to everything like you have. Do you think we shall all see a great change?"