

(A)
 'What's this place?'

'Summer Street, of course,' said Lucy, and roused herself.

The woods had opened to leave space for a sloping triangular meadow. Pretty cottages lined it on two sides, and the upper and third side was occupied by a new stone church, expensively simple, with a charming shingled spire. Mr Beebe's house was near the church. In height it scarcely exceeded the cottages. Some great mansions were at hand, but they were hidden in the trees. The scene suggested a Swiss alp rather than the shrine and centre of a leisured world, and was only marred by two ugly little villas – the villas that had competed with Cecil's engagement, having been acquired by Sir Harry Otway the very afternoon that Lucy had been acquired by him.

'Cissie' was the name of one of these villas, 'Albert' of the other. These titles were not only picked out in shaded Gothic on the garden gates, but appeared a second time on the porches, where they followed the semicircular curve of the entrance in block capitals. Albert was inhabited. His tortured garden was bright with geraniums and lobelias and polished shells. His little windows were chastely swathed in Nottingham lace. Cissie was to let. Three noticeboards, belonging to Dorking agents, lolled on her fence and announced the not surprising fact. Her paths were already weedy; her pocket-handkerchief of a lawn was yellow with dandelions.

'The place is ruined!' said the ladies mechanically. 'Summer Street will never be the same again.'

As the carriage passed, Cissie's door opened, and a gentleman came out of her.

'Stop!' cried Mrs Honeychurch, touching the coachman with her parasol. 'Here's Sir Harry. Now we shall know. Sir Harry, pull those things down at once!'

Sir Harry Otway – who need not be described – came to the carriage and said:

'Mrs Honeychurch, I meant to. I can't, I really can't turn out Miss Flack.'

'Am I not always right? She ought to have gone before the contract was signed. Does she still live rent-free, as she did in her nephew's time?'

'But what can I do?' He lowered his voice. 'An old lady, so very vulgar, and almost bedridden.'

'Turn her out,' said Cecil bravely.

Sir Harry sighed, and looked at the villas mournfully. He had had full warning of Mr Flack's intentions, and might have bought the plot before building commenced; but he was apathetic and dilatory. He had known Summer Street for so many years that he could not imagine it being spoilt. Not till Mrs Flack had laid the foundation stone, and the apparition of red and cream brick began to rise, did he take alarm. He called on Mr Flack, the local builder – a most reasonable and respectful man – who agreed that tiles would have made a more artistic roof, but pointed out that slates were cheaper. He ventured to differ, however, about the Corinthian columns which were to cling like leeches to the frames of the bow-windows, saying that, for his part, he liked to relieve the façade by a bit of decoration. Sir Harry hinted that a column, if possible, should be structural as well as decorative. Mr Flack replied that all the columns had been ordered, adding, 'and all the capitals different – one with dragons in the foliage, another approaching to the Ionian style, another introducing Mrs Flack's initials – every one different.' For he had read his Ruskin. He built his villas according to his desire; and not till he had inserted an immovable aunt into one of them did Sir Harry buy.

This futile and unprofitable transaction filled the knight with sadness as he leant on Mrs Honeychurch's carriage. He had spent money, and yet Summer Street was spoilt as much as ever. All he could do now was to find a desirable tenant for Cissie – someone really desirable.

'The rent is absurdly low,' he told them, 'and perhaps I am an easy landlord. But it is such an awkward size. It is too large for the peasant class, and too small for anyone the least like ourselves.'

Cecil had been hesitating whether he should despise the villas or despise Sir Harry for despising them. The latter impulse seemed the more fruitful.

'You ought to find a tenant at once' he said maliciously. 'It would be a perfect paradise for a bank-clerk.'

'Exactly!' said Sir Harry excitedly. 'That is exactly what I fear, Mr Vyse. It will attract the wrong type of people. The train service has improved – a fatal improvement, to my mind. And what are five miles from a station in these days of bicycles?'

'Rather a strenuous clerk it would be,' said Lucy.

- 1 By the 1880s it was agreed that London was 'as to its greater part, a new city'. It had become, in the words of the *Building News* in 1900, a 'huge overgrown metropolis' largely comprised of a 'tide of small houses'. This was the paradox – that a vast capital could be constructed out of small individual units. It was almost as if London had, by some strange act of intuition, taken on the visible shape of
- 5 burgeoning social democracy. New forms of mass transportation, such as the deep-level Underground system, had helped to create a new city; in turn that city was now creating the context for evolutionary social change. 'Where will London end?' asked *The Builder* in 1870, to which the only answer was, 'Goodness knows.' The question might have been asked at any time over the last six centuries, and received a similar answer. In 1909 C.F.G. Masterman also described the growth of the suburbs – as a
- 10 London topic, it was on everyone's mind - as 'miles and miles of little red houses in little silent streets, in numbers defying the imagination'. For him it represented 'a life of Security, a life of Sedentary Occupation; a life of Respectability'. At a later date, in *Homage to Catalonia*, George Orwell in similar vein remarked upon 'the huge peaceful wilderness of outer London ... sleeping the deep, deep sleep of England'.
- 15 Yet the denigration and the tone of limited contempt, implicit in these descriptions, were not shared by those who lived in the suburbs. Sleep and respectability may have been precisely the conditions required by succeeding generations of new Londoners; the population of the city had for many centuries been characterised by its violence and impetuosity, its drunkenness and ill health. The suburbs represented a new urban civilisation which would flourish without any of the familiar urban
- 20 attributes. When Ilford was developed in the 1900s as a middle-range suburb for clerks and skilled workers, the speculators refused to permit the construction of any pubs in the vicinity. Their concern was to render a new suburb as little like London as possible. In the same period the London County Council shifted its emphasis from the refurbishment or redevelopment of 'inner-city' areas to the erection of 'cottage-estates' on the fringes of London. The idea of the cottage was itself much abused
- 2 in the process, but the introduction of two-storey terraced houses with small rear gardens changed the reputation of council housing and in fact changed the image of the Londoner. The Cockney need not necessarily be a product of the slums.
- In the mid-1930s it was estimated that, each day, two and a half million people were on the move in London. That is why there was a large increase in private, as well as public suburbia. It was the age of
- 30 'Metroland', which began life with the Cedars Estate in Rickmansworth and spread outwards to include Wembley Park and Ruislip, Edgware and Finchley, Epsom and Purley. The importance of transport in effecting this mass dispersal is emphasised by the fact that the very notion of Metroland was created by the Metropolitan Railway Company, and heavily endorsed by the London Underground. Their booklets and advertisements emphasised the resolutely non-urban aspects of what
- 35 were effectively great housing estates.
- 'Metroland beckoned us out to lanes in beechy Bucks', according to John Betjeman who had a tenacious if ambiguous affection for the suburban terrain – for 'gabled gothic' and 'new-planted pine', for the 'pear and apple in Croydon gardens' and 'the light suburban evening' where a vast and welcoming security is so much to be hoped for. In a poem entitled 'Middlesex' Betjeman invoked
- 40 another form of permanence – 'Keep alive our lost Elysium - rural Middlesex again' – and the advertisers of the Metropolitan Railway and the Underground exploited this ache, or longing, for continuity and predictability. According to the brochures – displaying, once more according to Betjeman, 'sepia views of leafy lanes in Pinner' – the new inhabitant of the suburbs will dwell beside 'brambly wildernesses where nightingales sing'. One advertisement prepared by the London
- 45 Underground showed three rows of grey and mournful terraces, with the words 'leave this and move to Edgware'. A sylvan scene presents itself accompanied by a quotation from the seventeenth-century poet Abraham Cowley, who himself retired to Chertsey after the Restoration in 1660. In a single sentence he expresses the wish that 'I might be Master of small House and a Large Garden, with moderate conveniences joined to them'. Once more the new suburban vision, in accordance with the implicit antiquarianism of London itself, took refuge in an appeal to an ill-defined and ill-explained
- 50 past.

Peter ACKROYD. *LONDON. THE BIOGRAPHY*. (2000) . Chapter 75 "Suburban dreams" p732-733. London: Vintage, 2001.



ELE 7

The Edwardian Era, Edited by Jane Beckett and Deborah Cherry.
 Phaidon Press and Barbican Art Gallery
 London 1987 p39.

Golders Green, 1908. London Underground Poster . London Transport Museum.

'Tis pleasant, through the loopholes of retreat
 To peep at such a world: to see the stir
 Of the great Babel, and not feel the crowd:
 To hear the roar she sends through all her gates
 At a safe distance, where the dying sound
 Falls a soft murmur on th'uninjured ear.

William Cowper.