

2 She wore a rainbow-coloured skirt and a white T-shirt. She had a big black straw hat . . .

This is the only time in the story that clothes are referred to. Why are they mentioned here, do you think?

3 Helen saw from her upstairs window a look of irritation cross the younger woman's face.

What is the significance of that look?

4 Debbie tells Helen that her husband left with 'a series of clichés': 'You're a survivor; You have a good job; You won't miss me', and so on. What purpose did these clichés serve for Mr Kennedy when he told his wife he was leaving her? Why do you think these expressions are described as clichés? Would they still feel like clichés if said to Debbie by a different person, for example, by a friend, or her mother?

ACTIVITIES

1 Helen decided to follow Debbie's suggestion to hold a gardening party. What other positive actions could she take to begin to rebuild her life? Write a paragraph of advice for her, as though for a 'problem page' in a magazine.

2 Imagine that you are one of Helen's sisters, writing one of the letters about the new house that Helen read with 'mute rage'. Use the information in the story to write the letter, full of hearty and insincere enthusiasm for the 'consolation' of gardening.

3 Mr Kennedy's second wife shows some irritation at her daughters' readiness to visit Debbie again the following day. Imagine that you are the girls' mother and write your diary entry for that day, describing how you feel about Debbie Kennedy and the girls' attitude towards her.

4 Is *The Garden Party* a good title for this story, do you think? Is it appropriate, and if so, in what way? What other suitable titles could you suggest?

ROMAN FEVER

THE AUTHOR

Edith Wharton was born in 1862 into a wealthy, upper-class New York family. She was educated privately at home and in 1885 married Edward Wharton. The marriage was not a success and in 1907 she left him to live in France, where she had a wide circle of writer and artist friends, including Henry James, the famous novelist. Wharton wrote novels, short stories, and several travel books. Her major novels include *Ethan Frome*, a tragic tale of passion and poverty, and *The Age of Innocence*, for which she won the Pulitzer Prize in 1920, the first woman to achieve this honour. A recurring theme of her writing was the struggle between social and personal fulfilment, which can often lead to tragedy. She died in France in 1937.

THE STORY

In the New York society of the early 1900s, the only career usually available to girls from upper-class families was to make a good marriage. Mothers kept a watchful eye on their daughters, and once a suitable young man had proposed, been accepted, and a formal engagement announced, there was an end to the matter. It was considered disgraceful behaviour to break off an engagement just because you had changed your mind.

Mrs Slade and Mrs Ansley, two upper-class American ladies, have known each other since childhood. Now both widows, each with one daughter, they meet by chance in Rome. The girls are out for the afternoon, and their mothers linger on a restaurant terrace, admiring the glories of ancient Rome spread out below them. As the evening light descends, they recall the courtship days of their youth. But it can be unwise to look too closely at the past . . .

ROMAN FEVER

From the table at which they had been lunching two American ladies of ripe but well-cared-for middle age moved across the lofty terrace of the Roman restaurant and, leaning on its parapet, looked first at each other, and then down on the outspread glories of the Palatine and the Forum*, with the same expression of vague but benevolent approval.

As they leaned there a girlish voice echoed up gaily from the stairs leading to the court below. 'Well, come along, then,' it cried, not to them but to an invisible companion, 'and let's leave the young things to their knitting'; and a voice as fresh laughed back: 'Oh, look here, Babs, not actually *knitting*—' 'Well, I mean figuratively,' rejoined the first. 'After all, we haven't left our poor parents much else to do . . .' and at that point the turn of the stairs engulfed the dialogue.

The two ladies looked at each other again, this time with a tinge of smiling embarrassment, and the smaller and paler one shook her head and colored slightly.

'Barbara!' she murmured, sending an unheard rebuke after the mocking voice in the stairway.

The other lady, who was fuller, and higher in color, with a small determined nose supported by vigorous black eyebrows, gave a good-humored laugh. 'That's what our daughters think of us!'

Her companion replied by a deprecating gesture. 'Not of us individually. We must remember that. It's just the collective modern idea of Mothers. And you see—' Half-guiltily she drew from her handsomely mounted black handbag a twist of crimson silk run through by two fine knitting needles. 'One never knows,' she murmured. 'The new system* has certainly given us a good deal of time to kill; and sometimes I get tired just looking — even at this.'

Her gesture was now addressed to the stupendous scene at their feet.

The dark lady laughed again, and they both relapsed upon the view, contemplating it in silence, with a sort of diffused serenity which might have been borrowed from the spring effulgence of the Roman skies. The luncheon hour was long past, and the two had their end of the vast terrace to themselves. At its opposite extremity a few groups, detained by a lingering look at the outspread city, were gathering up guidebooks and fumbling for tips. The last of them scattered, and the two ladies were alone on the air-washed height.

'Well, I don't see why we shouldn't just stay here,' said Mrs Slade, the lady of the high color and energetic brows. Two derelict basket chairs stood near, and she pushed them into the angle of the parapet, and settled herself in one, her gaze upon the Palatine. 'After all, it's still the most beautiful view in the world.'

'It always will be, to me,' assented her friend Mrs Ansley, with so slight a stress on the 'me' that Mrs Slade, though she noticed it, wondered if it were not merely accidental, like the random underlinings of old-fashioned letter writers.

'Grace Ansley was always old-fashioned,' she thought; and added aloud, with a retrospective smile: 'It's a view we've both been familiar with for a good many years. When we first met here we were younger than our girls are now. You remember?'

'Oh, yes, I remember,' murmured Mrs Ansley, with the same undefinable stress. 'There's that headwaiter wondering,' she interpolated. She was evidently far less sure than her companion of herself and of her rights in the world.

'I'll cure him of wondering,' said Mrs Slade, stretching her hand toward a bag as discreetly opulent-looking as Mrs Ansley's. Signing to the headwaiter, she explained that she and her friend were old lovers of Rome, and would like to spend the end of the afternoon looking down on the view — that is, if it did not disturb the service? The headwaiter, bowing over her gratuity, assured her that the ladies

were most welcome, and would be still more so if they would condescend to remain for dinner. A full-moon night, they would remember . . .

Mrs Slade's black brows drew together, as though references to the moon were out of place and even unwelcome. But she smiled away her frown as the headwaiter retreated. 'Well, why not? We might do worse. There's no knowing, I suppose, when the girls will be back. Do you even know back from *where*? I don't!'

Mrs Ansley again colored slightly. 'I think those young Italian aviators we met at the Embassy invited them to fly to Tarquinia for tea. I suppose they'll want to wait and fly back by moonlight.'

'Moonlight - moonlight! What a part it still plays. Do you suppose they're as sentimental as we were?'

'I've come to the conclusion that I don't in the least know what they are,' said Mrs Ansley. 'And perhaps we didn't know much more about each other.'

'No; perhaps we didn't.'

Her friend gave her a shy glance. 'I never should have supposed you were sentimental, Alida.'

'Well, perhaps I wasn't.' Mrs Slade drew her lids together in retrospect; and for a few moments the two ladies, who had been intimate since childhood, reflected how little they knew each other. Each one, of course, had a label ready to attach to the other's name; Mrs Delphin Slade*, for instance, would have told herself, or anyone who asked her, that Mrs Horace Ansley*, twenty-five years ago, had been exquisitely lovely - no, you wouldn't believe it, would you? . . . though, of course, still charming, distinguished . . . Well, as a girl she had been exquisite; far more beautiful than her daughter Barbara, though certainly Babs, according to the new standards at any rate, was more effective - had more *edge*, as they say. Funny where she got it, with those two nullities as parents. Yes; Horace Ansley was - well, just the duplicate of his wife. Museum specimens

of old New York. Good-looking, irreproachable, exemplary. Mrs Slade and Mrs Ansley had lived opposite each other - actually as well as figuratively - for years. When the drawing-room curtains in No. 20 East 73rd Street were renewed, No. 23, across the way, was always aware of it. And of all the movings, buyings, travels, anniversaries, illnesses - the tame chronicle of an estimable pair. Little of it escaped Mrs Slade. But she had grown bored with it by the time her husband made his big *coup* in Wall Street*, and when they bought in upper Park Avenue had already begun to think: 'I'd rather live opposite a *speakeasy** for a change; at least one might see it raided.' The idea of seeing Grace raided was so amusing that (before the move) she launched it at a women's lunch. It made a hit, and went the rounds - she sometimes wondered if it had crossed the street, and reached Mrs Ansley. She hoped not, but didn't much mind. Those were the days when respectability was at a discount, and it did the irreproachable no harm to laugh at them a little.

A few years later, and not many months apart, both ladies lost their husbands. There was an appropriate exchange of wreaths and condolences, and a brief renewal of intimacy in the half-shadow of their mourning; and now, after another interval, they had run across each other in Rome, at the same hotel, each of them the modest appendage of a salient daughter. The similarity of their lot had again drawn them together, lending itself to mild jokes, and the mutual confession that, if in old days it must have been tiring to 'keep up' with daughters, it was now, at times, a little dull not to.

No doubt, Mrs Slade reflected, she felt her unemployment more than poor Grace ever would. It was a big drop from being the wife of Delphin Slade to being his widow. She had always regarded herself (with a certain conjugal pride) as his equal in social gifts, as contributing her full share to the making of the exceptional couple they were: but the difference after his death was irremediable. As the wife of the famous corporation lawyer, always

with an international case or two on hand, every day brought its exciting and unexpected obligation: the impromptu entertaining of eminent colleagues from abroad, the hurried dashes on legal business to London, Paris or Rome, where the entertaining was so handsomely reciprocated; the amusement of hearing in her wake: 'What, that handsome woman with the good clothes and the eyes is Mrs Slade – *the* Slade's wife? Really? Generally the wives of celebrities are such frumps.'

Yes; being *the* Slade's widow was a dullish business after that. In living up to such a husband all her faculties had been engaged; now she had only her daughter to live up to, for the son who seemed to have inherited his father's gifts had died suddenly in boyhood. She had fought through that agony because her husband was there, to be helped and to help; now, after the father's death, the thought of the boy had become unbearable. There was nothing left but to mother her daughter; and dear Jenny was such a perfect daughter that she needed no excessive mothering. 'Now with Babs Ansley I don't know that I *should* be so quiet,' Mrs Slade sometimes half-enviously reflected; but Jenny, who was younger than her brilliant friend, was that rare accident, an extremely pretty girl who somehow made youth and prettiness seem as safe as their absence. It was all perplexing – and to Mrs Slade a little boring. She wished that Jenny would fall in love – with the wrong man, even; that she might have to be watched, out-manoeuvred, rescued. And instead, it was Jenny who watched her mother, kept her out of drafts, made sure that she had taken her tonic . . .

Mrs Ansley was much less articulate than her friend, and her mental portrait of Mrs Slade was sligher, and drawn with fainter touches. 'Alida Slade's awfully brilliant; but not as brilliant as she thinks,' would have summed it up; though she would have added, for the enlightenment of strangers, that Mrs Slade had been an extremely dashing girl; much more so than her daughter, who was

pretty, of course, and clever in a way, but had none of her mother's – well, 'vividness', someone had once called it. Mrs Ansley would take up current words like this, and cite them in quotation marks, as unheard-of audacities. No; Jenny was not like her mother. Sometimes Mrs Ansley thought Alida Slade was disappointed; on the whole she had had a sad life. Full of failures and mistakes; Mrs Ansley had always been rather sorry for her . . .

So these two ladies visualized each other, each through the wrong end of her little telescope.

* * *

For a long time they continued to sit side by side without speaking. It seemed as though, to both, there was a relief in laying down their somewhat futile activities in the presence of the vast Memento Mori* which faced them. Mrs Slade sat quite still, her eyes fixed on the golden slope of the Palace of the Caesars, and after a while Mrs Ansley ceased to fidget with her bag, and she too sank into meditation. Like many intimate friends, the two ladies had never before had occasion to be silent together, and Mrs Ansley was slightly embarrassed by what seemed, after so many years, a new stage in their intimacy, and one with which she did not yet know how to deal.

Suddenly the air was full of that deep clangor of bells which periodically covers Rome with a roof of silver. Mrs Slade glanced at her wristwatch. 'Five o'clock already,' she said, as though surprised.

Mrs Ansley suggested interrogatively: 'There's bridge at the Embassy at five.' For a long time Mrs Slade did not answer. She appeared to be lost in contemplation, and Mrs Ansley thought the remark had escaped her. But after a while she said, as if speaking out of a dream: 'Bridge, did you say? Not unless you want to . . . But I don't think I will, you know.'

'Oh, no,' Mrs Ansley hastened to assure her. 'I don't care to at

all. It's so lovely here; and so full of old memories, as you say.' She settled herself in her chair, and almost furtively drew forth her knitting. Mrs Slade took sideways note of this activity, but her own beautifully cared-for hands remained motionless on her knee.

'I was just thinking,' she said slowly, 'what different things Rome stands for to each generation of travelers. To our grandmothers, Roman fever; to our mothers, sentimental dangers – how we used to be guarded! – to our daughters, no more dangers than the middle of Main Street. They don't know it – but how much they're missing!'

The long golden light was beginning to pale, and Mrs Ansley lifted her knitting a little closer to her eyes. 'Yes, how we were guarded!'

'I always used to think,' Mrs Slade continued, 'that our mothers had a much more difficult job than our grandmothers. When Roman fever stalked the streets it must have been comparatively easy to gather in the girls at the danger hour; but when you and I were young, with such beauty calling us, and the spice of disobedience thrown in, and no worse risk than catching cold during the cool hour after sunset, the mothers used to be put to it to keep us in – didn't they?'

She turned again toward Mrs Ansley, but the latter had reached a delicate point in her knitting. 'One, two, three – slip two; yes, they must have been,' she assented, without looking up.

Mrs Slade's eyes rested on her with a deepened attention. 'She can knit – in the face of *this*! How like her . . .'

Mrs Slade leaned back, brooding, her eyes ranging from the ruins which faced her to the long green hollow of the Forum, the fading glow of the church fronts beyond it, and the outlying immensity of the Colosseum*. Suddenly she thought: 'It's all very well to say that our girls have done away with sentiment and moonlight. But if Babs Ansley isn't out to catch that young aviator – the one who's a Marchese* – then I don't know anything. And Jenny has no chance

beside her. I know that too. I wonder if that's why Grace Ansley likes the two girls to go everywhere together? My poor Jenny as a foil—!' Mrs Slade gave a hardly audible laugh, and at the sound Mrs Ansley dropped her knitting.

'Yes—?'

'I – oh, nothing. I was only thinking how your Babs carries everything before her. That Campolieri boy is one of the best matches in Rome. Don't look so innocent, my dear – you know he is. And I was wondering, ever so respectfully, you understand . . . wondering how two such exemplary characters as you and Horace had managed to produce anything quite so dynamic.' Mrs Slade laughed again, with a touch of asperity.

Mrs Ansley's hands lay inert across her needles. She looked straight out at the great accumulated wreckage of passion and splendor at her feet. But her small profile was almost expressionless. At length she said: 'I think you overrate Babs, my dear.'

Mrs Slade's tone grew easier. 'No; I don't. I appreciate her. And perhaps envy you. Oh, my girl's perfect; if I were a chronic invalid I'd – well, I think I'd rather be in Jenny's hands. There must be times . . . but there! I always wanted a brilliant daughter . . . and never quite understood why I got an angel instead.'

Mrs Ansley echoed her laugh in a faint murmur. 'Babs is an angel too.'

'Of course – of course! But she's got rainbow wings. Well, they're wandering by the sea with their young men; and here we sit . . . and it all brings back the past a little too acutely.'

Mrs Ansley had resumed her knitting. One might almost have imagined (if one had known her less well, Mrs Slade reflected) that, for her also, too many memories rose from the lengthening shadows of those august ruins. But no; she was simply absorbed in her work. What was there for her to worry about? She knew that Babs would

almost certainly come back engaged to the extremely eligible Campolieri. 'And she'll sell the New York house, and settle down near them in Rome, and never be in their way . . . she's much too tactful. But she'll have an excellent cook, and just the right people in for bridge and cocktails . . . and a perfectly peaceful old age among her grandchildren.'

Mrs Slade broke off this prophetic flight with a recoil of self-disgust. There was no one of whom she had less right to think unkindly than of Grace Ansley. Would she never cure herself of envying her? Perhaps she had begun too long ago.

She stood up and leaned against the parapet, filling her troubled eyes with the tranquilizing magic of the hour. But instead of tranquilizing her the sight seemed to increase her exasperation. Her gaze turned toward the Colosseum. Already its golden flank was drowned in purple shadow, and above it the sky curved crystal clear, without light or color. It was the moment when afternoon and evening hang balanced in mid-heaven.

Mrs Slade turned back and laid her hand on her friend's arm. The gesture was so abrupt that Mrs Ansley looked up, startled.

'The sun's set. You're not afraid, my dear?'

'Afraid—?'

'Of Roman fever or pneumonia? I remember how ill you were that winter. As a girl you had a very delicate throat, hadn't you?'

'Oh, we're all right up here. Down below, in the Forum, it does get deathly cold, all of a sudden . . . but not here.'

'Ah, of course you know because you had to be so careful.' Mrs Slade turned back to the parapet. She thought: 'I must make one more effort not to hate her.' Aloud she said: 'Whenever I look at the Forum from up here, I remember that story about a great-aunt of yours, wasn't she? A dreadfully wicked great-aunt?'

'Oh, yes; great-aunt Harriet. The one who was supposed to have sent her young sister out to the Forum after sunset to gather a night-

blooming flower for her album. All our great-aunts and grandmothers used to have albums of dried flowers.'

Mrs Slade nodded. 'But she really sent her because they were in love with the same man—'

'Well, that was the family tradition. They said Aunt Harriet confessed it years afterward. At any rate, the poor little sister caught the fever and died. Mother used to frighten us with the story when we were children.'

'And you frightened *me* with it, that winter when you and I were here as girls. The winter I was engaged to Delphin.'

Mrs Ansley gave a faint laugh. 'Oh, did I? Really frightened you? I don't believe you're easily frightened.'

'Not often; but I was then. I was easily frightened because I was too happy. I wonder if you know what that means?'

'I — yes . . .' Mrs Ansley faltered.

'Well, I suppose that was why the story of your wicked aunt made such an impression on me. And I thought: "There's no more Roman fever, but the Forum is deathly cold after sunset — especially after a hot day. And the Colosseum's even colder and damper."'

'The Colosseum—?'

'Yes. It wasn't easy to get in, after the gates were locked for the night. Far from easy. Still, in those days it could be managed; it *was* managed, often. Lovers met there who couldn't meet elsewhere. You knew that?'

'I — I dare say. I don't remember.'

'You don't remember? You don't remember going to visit some ruins or other one evening, just after dark, and catching a bad chill? You were supposed to have gone to see the moon rise. People always said that expedition was what caused your illness.'

There was a moment's silence; then Mrs Ansley rejoined: 'Did they? It was all so long ago.'

'Yes. And you got well again — so it didn't matter. But I suppose

it struck your friends – the reason given for your illness, I mean – because everybody knew you were so prudent on account of your throat, and your mother took such care of you . . . You *had* been out late sight-seeing, hadn't you, that night?

'Perhaps I had. The most prudent girls aren't always prudent. What made you think of it now?'

Mrs Slade seemed to have no answer ready. But after a moment she broke out: 'Because I simply can't bear it any longer—!'

Mrs Ansley lifted her head quickly. Her eyes were wide and very pale. 'Can't bear what?'

'Why – your not knowing that I've always known why you went.'

'Why I went—?'

'Yes. You think I'm bluffing, don't you? Well, you went to meet the man I was engaged to – and I can repeat every word of the letter that took you there.'

While Mrs Slade spoke Mrs Ansley had risen unsteadily to her feet. Her bag, her knitting and gloves, slid in a panic-stricken heap to the ground. She looked at Mrs Slade as though she were looking at a ghost.

'No, no – don't,' she faltered out.

'Why not? Listen, if you don't believe me. "My one darling, things can't go on like this. I must see you alone. Come to the Colosseum immediately after dark tomorrow. There will be somebody to let you in. No one whom you need fear will suspect" – but perhaps you've forgotten what the letter said?'

Mrs Ansley met the challenge with an unexpected composure. Steadying herself against the chair she looked at her friend, and replied: 'No; I know it by heart too.'

'And the signature? "Only *your* D.S." Was that it? I'm right, am I? That was the letter that took you out that evening after dark?'

Mrs Ansley was still looking at her. It seemed to Mrs Slade that a slow struggle was going on behind the voluntarily controlled mask

of her small quiet face. 'I shouldn't have thought she had herself so well in hand,' Mrs Slade reflected, almost resentfully. But at this moment Mrs Ansley spoke. 'I don't know how you knew. I burnt that letter at once.'

'Yes; you would, naturally – you're so prudent!' The sneer was open now. 'And if you burnt the letter you're wondering how on earth I know what was in it. That's it, isn't it?'

Mrs Slade waited, but Mrs Ansley did not speak.

'Well, my dear, I know what was in that letter because I wrote it! 'You wrote it?'

'Yes.'

The two women stood for a minute staring at each other in the last golden light. Then Mrs Ansley dropped back into her chair. 'Oh,' she murmured, and covered her face with her hands.

Mrs Slade waited nervously for another word or movement. None came, and at length she broke out: 'I horrify you.'

Mrs Ansley's hands dropped to her knee. The face they uncovered was streaked with tears. 'I wasn't thinking of you. I was thinking – it was the only letter I ever had from him!'

'And I wrote it. Yes; I wrote it! But I was the girl he was engaged to. Did you happen to remember that?'

Mrs Ansley's head drooped again. 'I'm not trying to excuse myself . . . I remembered . . .'

'And still you went?'

'Still I went.'

Mrs Slade stood looking down on the small bowed figure at her side. The flame of her wrath had already sunk, and she wondered why she had ever thought there would be any satisfaction in inflicting so purposeless a wound on her friend. But she had to justify herself.

'You do understand? I'd found out – and I hated you, hated you. I knew you were in love with Delphin – and I was afraid; afraid of

you, of your quiet ways, your sweetness . . . your . . . well, I wanted you out of the way, that's all. Just for a few weeks; just till I was sure of him. So in a blind fury I wrote that letter . . . I don't know why I'm telling you now.'

'I suppose,' said Mrs Ansley slowly, 'it's because you've always gone on hating me.'

'Perhaps. Or because I wanted to get the whole thing off my mind.' She paused. 'I'm glad you destroyed the letter. Of course I never thought you'd die.'

Mrs Ansley relapsed into silence, and Mrs Slade, leaning above her, was conscious of a strange sense of isolation, of being cut off from the warm current of human communion. 'You think me a monster!'

'I don't know . . . It was the only letter I had, and you say he didn't write it?'

'Ah, how you care for him still!'

'I cared for that memory,' said Mrs Ansley.

Mrs Slade continued to look down on her. She seemed physically reduced by the blow – as if, when she got up, the wind might scatter her like a puff of dust. Mrs Slade's jealousy suddenly leapt up again at the sight. All these years the woman had been living on that letter. How she must have loved him, to treasure the mere memory of its ashes! The letter of the man her friend was engaged to. Wasn't it she who was the monster?

'You tried your best to get him away from me, didn't you? But you failed; and I kept him. That's all.'

'Yes. That's all.'

'I wish now I hadn't told you. I'd no idea you'd feel about it as you do; I thought you'd be amused. It all happened so long ago, as you say; and you must do me the justice to remember that I had no reason to think you'd ever taken it seriously. How could I, when you were married to Horace Ansley two months afterward? As soon as

you could get out of bed your mother rushed you off to Florence and married you. People were rather surprised – they wondered at its being done so quickly; but I thought I knew. I had an idea you did it out of *pique* – to be able to say you'd got ahead of Delphin and me. Girls have such silly reasons for doing the most serious things. And your marrying so soon convinced me that you'd never really cared.'

'Yes. I suppose it would,' Mrs Ansley assented.

The clear heaven overhead was emptied of all its gold. Dusk spread over it, abruptly darkening the Seven Hills. Here and there lights began to twinkle through the foliage at their feet. Steps were coming and going on the deserted terrace – waiters looking out of the doorway at the head of the stairs, then reappearing with trays and napkins and flasks of wine. Tables were moved, chairs straightened. A feeble string of electric lights flickered out. Some vases of faded flowers were carried away, and brought back replenished. A stout lady in a dust coat suddenly appeared, asking in broken Italian if anyone had seen the elastic band which held together her tattered Baedeker*. She poked with her stick under the table at which she had lunched, the waiters assisting.

The corner where Mrs Slade and Mrs Ansley sat was still shadowy and deserted. For a long time neither of them spoke. At length Mrs Slade began again: 'I suppose I did it as a sort of joke—'

'A joke?'

'Well, girls are ferocious sometimes, you know. Girls in love especially. And I remember laughing to myself all that evening at the idea that you were waiting around there in the dark, dodging out of sight, listening for every sound, trying to get in – Of course I was upset when I heard you were so ill afterward.'

Mrs Ansley had not moved for a long time. But now she turned slowly toward her companion. 'But I didn't wait. He'd arranged everything. He was there. We were let in at once,' she said.

Mrs Slade sprang up from her leaning position. 'Delphin there? They let you in? – Ah, now you're relying!' she burst out with violence. Mrs Ansley's voice grew clearer, and full of surprise. 'But of course he was there. Naturally he came—'
 'Came? How did he know he'd find you there? You must be raving!'

Mrs Ansley hesitated, as though reflecting. 'But I answered the letter. I told him I'd be there. So he came.'

Mrs Slade flung her hands up to her face. 'Oh, God – you answered! I never thought of your answering . . .'

'It's odd you never thought of it, if you wrote the letter.'

'Yes. I was blind with rage.'

Mrs Ansley rose, and drew her fur scarf about her. 'It is cold here. We'd better go . . . I'm sorry for you,' she said, as she clasped the fur about her throat.

The unexpected words sent a pang through Mrs Slade. 'Yes; we'd better go.' She gathered up her bag and cloak. 'I don't know why you should be sorry for me,' she muttered.

Mrs Ansley stood looking away from her toward the dusky secret mass of the Colosseum. 'Well – because I didn't have to wait that night.'

Mrs Slade gave an unquiet laugh. 'Yes; I was beaten there. But I oughtn't to begrudge it to you, I suppose. At the end of all these years. After all, I had everything; I had him for twenty-five years. And you had nothing but that one letter that he didn't write.'

Mrs Ansley was again silent. At length she turned toward the door of the terrace. She took a step, and turned back, facing her companion.

'I had Barbara,' she said, and began to move ahead of Mrs Slade toward the stairway.

NOTES

the Palatine, the Forum (p20)
 the Palatine is one of the seven hills of Rome; the Forum is the ruins of what was once the commercial and political centre of ancient Rome

the new system (p20)
 possibly a reference to the 'modern idea of Mothers', in that mothers no longer spent a lot of their time monitoring and supervising their daughters' social lives

Mrs Delphin Slade, Mrs Horace Ansley (p22)

the custom of referring to a married woman by both her husband's surname *and* his forename used to be quite normal, but is less so now

Wall Street (p23)

the financial centre of New York

speakeasy (p23)

an illegal club or shop where alcoholic drink could be bought during

Prohibition (the years 1920–33, when alcohol was banned in the USA)

Memento Mori (p25)

a warning or reminder of death (a Latin phrase meaning 'remember you must die')

the Colosseum (p26)

one of the most famous ruins of ancient Rome, an open-air theatre which could seat 50,000 people

Marchese (p26)

the title of an Italian nobleman

Baedeker (p33)

a famous guidebook used by travellers at this time

DISCUSSION

1 What effect do you think Mrs Ansley's revelation will have on Mrs Slade?

The author describes them as 'intimate friends', but what is the nature of their friendship? Do you think that the friendship, such as it is, will survive after these revelations?

2 Which of the two women do you feel more sympathy for? Why? The quiet Mrs Ansley gets her revenge on Mrs Slade in the end. Do you think she was justified in doing that? In your opinion, are there any situations in which revenge can be justified?

LANGUAGE FOCUS

- 1 The word 'fever' in the story's title has two meanings, one literal and one figurative. What are they? Do you think *Roman Fever* is a good title for this story? What other titles could you suggest?
- 2 Mrs Ansley's hands lay inert across her needles. *She looked straight out at the great accumulated wreckage of passion and splendor at her feet. But her small profile was almost expressionless. At length . . .* Why do you think Mrs Ansley stops knitting at this moment? And what is all this about 'accumulated wreckage'? And why the pause?
- 3 Explain, in simple everyday English, the following expressions:
a good deal of time to kill (p20)
It made a hit, and went the rounds (p23)
they had run across each other in Rome (p23)
In living up to such a husband (p24)
the spice of disobedience thrown in (p26)
how your Babs carries everything before her (p27)
I shouldn't have thought she had herself so well in hand (p31)

ACTIVITIES

- 1 The story is told mostly from Mrs Slade's viewpoint, and we are given only a few insights into Mrs Ansley's thoughts. During the conversation about the letter her responses often show some hesitation, as though she were having an internal debate with herself. Imagine that you are Mrs Ansley and write down your thoughts as you listen to Mrs Slade.
- 2 What clues are we given to the characters of both daughters? Suppose that after the end of the story both mothers decide to tell their respective daughters the truth about Barbara's parentage. Write two short dialogues, one for each mother and daughter, giving the reaction you think each daughter might have on discovering the truth.
- 3 Mrs Ansley's last three words change most of our assumptions about that Roman night twenty-five years ago, but, tantalisingly, we are told very little about the attitudes of the two illicit lovers. Did Delphin want to break his engagement to Alida and marry Grace, or did he feel that he should honourably keep his engagement? Did Grace try to persuade Delphin to marry her or not? Write a new ending for the story, describing what Delphin and Grace said to each other on that night.

THE LEGACY

THE AUTHOR

Virginia Woolf was born in London in 1882, where she lived for most of her life and was a member of the avant-garde 'Bloomsbury Group'. In 1912 she married Leonard Woolf, with whom she founded the Hogarth Press in 1917. Her first two novels were realistic in form, but *Jacob's Room* (1922) was unusual for its indirect narration and poetic impressionism. Her experimental techniques in other famous novels – *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, and *Between the Acts* – have greatly influenced modern fiction. She was also a distinguished literary critic and journalist; the long essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929) is a classic of the feminist movement. Throughout her life she suffered from bouts of mental illness, and the last attack in 1941 caused her to take her own life.

THE STORY

It is possible to live with someone for years, and to think that you know everything about them. You might be right; on the other hand, that person may have hidden depths, secrets that never see the light of day. Perhaps it is better that way. There is an old saying that 'What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve over.'

Gilbert Clandon is a prominent politician, a successful man with a good understanding of his own worth. His wife Angela recently met a tragic death in an accident, and now Gilbert sits at home, waiting for her secretary, Sissy Miller, who is coming to collect the brooch which is her legacy from Angela. On the desk behind Gilbert sits his own legacy from Angela, fifteen leather-bound volumes – the diary that she kept during all the years of their marriage, and which she would never allow him to read . . .