

HANNAH (Busy) Yes. What?

BERNARD Nothing.

HANNAH (Having found the place) Here we are. 'A letter we have seen, written by the author of *Headlong Hall* nearly thirty years ago, tells of a visit to the Earl of Croom's estate, Sidley Park—'

BERNARD Was the letter to Thackeray?

HANNAH (Brought up short) I don't know. Does it matter?

BERNARD No. Sorry.

*But the gaps he leaves for her are false promises—and she is not quick enough. That's how it goes.*

Only, Thackeray edited the *Cornhill* until '63 when, as you know, he died. His father had been with the East India Company where Peacock, of course, had held the position of Examiner, so it's quite possible that if the essay were by Thackeray, the letter . . . Sorry. Go on. Of course, the East India Library in Blackfriars has most of Peacock's letters, so it would be quite easy to . . . Sorry. Can I look?

*Silently she hands him the Cornhill.*

Yes, it's been topped and tailed, of course. It might be worth . . . Go on. I'm listening . . . (Leafing through the essay, he suddenly chuckles.) Oh yes, it's Thackeray all right . . . (He slaps the book shut.) Unbearable . . . (He hands it back to her.) What were you saying?

HANNAH Are you always like this?

BERNARD Like what?

HANNAH The point is, the Crooms, of course, had the hermit under their noses for twenty years so hardly thought him worth remarking. As I'm finding out. The Peacock letter is still the main source, unfortunately. When I read this (the magazine in her hand) well, it was one of those moments that tell you what your next book is going to be. The hermit of Sidley Park was my . . .

HANNAH

BERNARD Peg.

HANNAH Epiphany.

BERNARD Epiphany, that's it.

HANNAH The hermit was placed in the landscape exactly as one might place a pottery gnome. And there he lived out his life as a garden ornament.

BERNARD Did he do anything?

HANNAH Oh, he was very busy. When he died, the cottage was stacked solid with paper. Hundreds of pages. Thousands. Peacock says he was suspected of genius. It turned out, of course, he was off his head. He'd covered every sheet with cabalistic proofs that the world was coming to an end. It's perfect, isn't it? A perfect symbol, I mean.

BERNARD Oh, yes. Of what?

→ HANNAH The whole Romantic sham, Bernard! It's what happened to the Enlightenment, isn't it? A century of intellectual rigour turned in on itself. A mind in chaos suspected of genius. In a setting of cheap thrills and false emotion. The history of the garden says it all, beautifully. There's an engraving of Sidley Park in 1730 that makes you want to weep. Paradise in the age of reason. By 1760 everything had gone—the topiary, pools and terraces, fountains, an avenue of limes—the whole sublime geometry was ploughed under by Capability Brown. The grass went from the doorstep to the horizon and the best box hedge in Derbyshire was dug up for the ha-ha so that the fools could pretend they were living in God's countryside. And then Richard Noakes came in to bring God up to date. By the time he'd finished it looked like this (the sketch book). The decline from thinking to feeling, you see.

BERNARD (A judgement) That's awfully good.

*Hannah looks at him in case of irony but he is professional.*

No, that'll stand up.