

## CHAPTER I

## AN OBSESSION WITH TIME

MARGARET and I quarrelled because she would not let me sink her makeshift boat in the marsh pool, in which a fine steep sea could be worked up by hand in a few seconds. More exactly, I quarrelled with Margaret about it, for my sister always remained passive in the many disagreements we had when I was getting on for eleven and she was nine. It is hard, as it always is with vivid childish memories, to know how much of the incident is recollected from the time of its happening, and how many suitable details the mind has added afterwards in reconstruction. The whole trivial occurrence seems clear in retrospect, but so objectively seen that it might be happening to any two other damp and dirty shrill-voiced children, playing on a strip of marsh ground much bigger than I now know it to be. The Lallie in the picture, who is myself, is as visible as the Margaret, so that probably most of my memory of what followed hangs on my mother's re-telling of the story she heard from Margaret two days afterwards.

I do definitely remember, though, stretching my ankles ecstatically to straining point as I knelt, resting back on my heels, so that the spongy ground should make long black stripes of dampness, like those on the beech-boles just behind us, all the way down the front of my brown stockings, and not only patches on the knees and toes. This was luxury: no other children, we had gathered, were encouraged to get as wet as we were – who else would have been allowed to play in February on the marsh by the river? – Certainly none of our friends.