

# ***JUST POOR***

By Stefan Molyneux



## PART ONE

# COUNTRY

## CHAPTER ONE

### *An Introduction*

THE TABLE WAS LAID FOR MORE THAN A FEAST. It had all the outward appearance of a feast; the birds had been freshly killed, the pigs slaughtered, the calves had bubbled their last breath. Cakes had been summoned from scarce flour, sugar for a year's tea had been poured into fantastic meringues, and the liquor hoarded for many Christmases had been poured into tall bottles for one expected evening.

Farmer Jigger regarded the bowed table. He tugged his ear and scowled. Everything looked up to scratch, but one could never be too sure... He moved a plate. His wife snorted. He shifted it back again.

“What do you think?” he asked finally, turning to her.

Wife Jigger frowned. She was a short woman, fast crossing the line between pleasantly stout and demandingly obese. She had produced eleven children before the age of thirty, and her body still appeared to be in shock. She had had a brief bloom of beauty, somewhere between the age of eleven and her second child, but the endless demands of work and babies had scraped the glow from her cheeks like a neurotic painter raging at a portrait of youth. Her purpose was production, but her purpose remained largely unfulfilled. Of her eleven pregnancies, only four came to term, and only the last had survived. Her husband had turned from an enthusiastic champion of virility to a sad spectator of fading hopes.

The Jiggers had given up naming their children, calling them only “Lad” or “Lady” in the hopes that death would have a harder time tracking the nameless. The trail had ended with the last baby, and the name had stuck for good luck. Lady was a pretty child, precocious, flirtatious,

and her mother had regarded her with wondrous suspicion. She turned rather hysterically to religion, forgetting the line of tiny graves behind her in sudden joy. “We’ve passed some test, Husband,” she cried over and over, hugging her child in her meaty arms.

Lady blossomed into a young beauty, with lustrous fair hair and skin so soft that, the villagers said, one could sand mist by rubbing it against her cheeks. Her possessive father shielded her from all demands of labour. She milked a little, cooked some, and spent a large amount of time walking country lanes and tossing her hair in the sunlight. Farmer Jigger watched her with a fierce, almost malevolent pride, elementally aware of the rarity of beauty in a land of want. His wife was unrestrained in her sacrifice; he made no complaint when she came to bed after midnight and rose long before dawn to make up for the lost labour.

This nurturing side went almost entirely unrecognized by Lady. In the world of the village, Lady was Queen. Her ragged court paid homage to her in countless ways. Flowers were laid at the Jigger door, little gifts hung from branches where she walked, and the village scribe (a grubby altar-boy of nine) had even turned his hand to poetry, which she constantly found tied to milk pails or cow’s udders. She had never learned to read, and so turned to her best friend Mary for translation.

Mary was the polar opposite of Lady; an almost elemental fusion could be seen when they were together. She was an orphan, the discharge of a distant relative who died of scarlet fever when Mary was an infant. A passing tinker brought her to the Jigger farm. The note tied to her foot could not be read, but she was accepted into the household without question. It was a harsh world, and irregular castaways, while they could not always hope for love, could usually find shelter of some kind.

Mary was a silent child who accepted praise and punishment with the same unblinking stare. She made people uneasy; her hands were always wandering and her face always still. When she was picked up, her little fingers would run over the smiling faces, exploring, tugging, caressing, storing sensations and textures. Wife Jigger was worried that the infant was mute, until one day, when she was carrying Mary through a field, the child had pointed and said “cow” quite clearly. Wife Jigger had gasped, almost dropping her in shock. Mary was six months old.

By the time she was two, she could repeat the Sunday sermon back word for word.

Mary’s mental abilities were sharpened by a willpower so savage that, for a time, she became the terror of the household. One evening she was nowhere to be found, and the whole house had been roused in a frantic effort to locate her. When the cook tore open the pantry door, Mary was sitting, staring intently at a curious arrangement of peas she had placed on the floor. There were two rows of three peas, and underneath, a row of nine more. The cook, understanding nothing of the mysteries of multiplication, had, in her frantic anxiety, aimed a blow at the child. Mary had raised a thin arm and warded off the hand with surprising strength, and taken one pea from the top row and three from the bottom. Then she had picked up the peas and eaten them, gazing up imperturbably at the shocked cook.

Mary and Lady regarded each other at a strange distance for a time. They were almost the same age, but seemed worlds apart. As they grew up together, they grew apart physically. While Lady seemed to spread into a gentle caricature of voluptuousness even before puberty, Mary grew up ramrod straight and unnaturally thin. She had an enormous appetite, but her mind

seemed so demanding that it merely tossed leftovers at her body. Her hair was kept short, because she kept taking knives to it when it interfered with her vision, while Lady's hair lengthened like a blond shadow at sunset. Mary never seemed to change her clothes – and the cook gave up trying to change them after discovering several biological specimens stuck in the pockets – while Lady seemed a clotheshorse for her mother's endless alterations and inventions. While Lady's hair was always adorned with flowers, Mary's was adorned with the material they grew in.

Both girls were teased mercilessly. Boys pulled Lady's hair longingly; they grabbed her shoes so she would chase them; they threw water at her to reveal her form. Their teasing of Mary spoke little of subverted attraction. They threw sticks at her, punched her arms and pushed her into the ponds she studied. Mary took these insults without comment, waiting until the jeers faded in the distance before resuming her inspections. As time went by, she earned a sort of grudging respect from the boys. They never asked her to play, but whether that was due to hatred of her habits or fear of her indifference was never clear.

One spring, two boys were climbing a tree to get at a bird's nest when they suddenly realized that they could neither climb further up nor go back down. After a short span of trying to brave it out, they began crying piteously. Mary arrived and spent a few moments inspecting their dilemma, ignoring their cries for help. She reached down, picked up a stone and flung it at the bird's nest. The nest wobbled, toppled, and a tiny blue egg fell out, right past the two boys. They both grabbed at it, the motion dislodging them from their precarious perches. They fell with a scream, but since the distance was only about ten feet, scrambled to their feet, then burst

into shocked tears. Mary muttered something under her breath, pocketed the egg she had caught, and strolled off whistling.

One boy, on hearing this story, began trying to frighten Mary. One morning, John Mudder stole up on her while she was reading in the barn and dropped a spider on her. She blinked, picked up the wriggling thing and studied it.

“Do you know it’s name?” she asked, looking up at him.

“Sure,” he said scornfully, “‘Billy’.”

“You’re wrong,” Mary replied. “It’s an arachnid. Part of the arachnid family, anyway. Thank you.”

“Huh?”

“I had one, but it escaped.”

“Yer weird.”

“It’s true.”

“So if you’re not a-scared of spiders,” the boy said, throwing himself down in the hay and sneezing. “What are you a-scared of?”

Mary frowned. “You frighten me.”

“There’s nothing to be a-scared of about me, girlie,” said John, looking pleased. “Why would I scare you?”

“Because the only thing that frightens me is stupidity,” Mary replied, shaking her head slightly and walking off.

John frowned, chewing on a stalk, then rolled off the hay and ran after Mary. Suddenly she found herself flung forward onto the ground.



“What was the point of that?” she asked, standing up and brushing her ragged dress. “You’re bigger than me, but we already knew that.”

“Yer just a little girl,” the boy had said, scowling suddenly.

“So why did you push me over?”

He blinked. “Why not?”

“I’ll tell you why not,” said Mary with a rare smile, stepping forward. “Because if you don’t push me over, I’ll teach you all about spiders.”

“Yuck! Who’d want to stick around with a girlie poking at bugs?”

Mary’s smile disappeared – it was not replaced by anything, it simply vanished from her face, like a shadow under a passing cloud.

When she turned to go, of course, he leapt after her and threw her down again.

Whether Mary was beginning to understand anything other than spiders and peas was unclear – her face remained strangely stable. But a change slowly overcame her. She began to give the odd impression of shrinking as she grew. Her eyes became less curious and more intense. An intense, waiting energy hung around her, like the mutterings of an impatient line-up. Sometimes, while the household was at dinner, there would be a clatter of cutlery at the rough-hewn children’s table, and they all would turn to see Mary staring into space, her cheeks reddening, and the room would grow silent, as if fading in the sound of distant thunder. While they watched, Mary would blink, pick up her fork in a trembling hand and attack her food once more. Conversation was always a little limp after such occurrences, despite Lady’s near-constant giggling.

Wife Jigger became a little afraid of Mary, but took extra care to hide it. She was a powerfully instinctive woman, whose maternal perceptiveness seemed designed for an immense family. The depth of her perceptions, being focused on only two children, grew almost supernaturally acute, and she was prone to scolding them for transgressions they were only starting to contemplate.

When they were twelve, Lady sat with Mary on a fence out by the back fields and listened to her first talk of the future. It was a beautiful day; they had finished their chores early in expectation of miracles. They sat, gazing at the endless spread of the land, the men toiling in the distant fields, the jackdaws wheeling and diving to the rutted earth. The sight gave a luxuriously contemplative air to the unfolding young minds. Well, one of them anyway.

“That Jack – he’s your boyfriend!” giggled Lady, pointing at the hunchback passing like a whale through the wheat.

Mary didn’t reply, but sat with her hands folded in her lap, staring out over the waving fields.

“That Todd, in the village, he sent me another poem,” said Lady, tugging at the pocket of her dress. “Read it to me.”

“Not now, Lady,” murmured Mary, her eyes distant.

Lady pouted. “Oh poo. You said: let’s go to the back fence and watch the clouds. Well now we’re here and I want you to read to me!”

“Why? You don’t even like him.”

“He’s – you know. He’s funny. It’s funny what he writes.”

“Not to him. He loves you.”

“Oh, don’t they all?” giggled Lady.

“And that’s all they’ll ever do, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“All their lives, they have so few true feelings, and here they are wasting them on one spoiled little girl.”

“Who’s spoiled? And I don’t see it’s such a waste,” said Lady.

“Don’t you imagine that there’s a great army over that last hill?” said Mary suddenly, pointing at the horizon. “Don’t you think that they’re kneeling in a field, swords glittering and muskets raised, just waiting for the signal to charge?”

“You silly – what would they charge for?”

“Because everyone has a farthest hill. Even an army. They’re probably looking over here and thinking: *there is a fabulous kingdom, rich in gold and open for plunder!* Can’t you almost see them, trembling, waiting, their metal shivering, shaking the sun’s rays? Oh, how I wish they would come and take me away!” she cried.

“A fine figure you’d cut in an army,” said Lady, stroking her golden locks. “You’d be set to carrying water and washing their feet when they’d been marching all day.”

“That would be all right,” murmured Mary. “As long as I could march with them.”

There was a short silence.

“John Mudder was mean about you yesterday,” said Lady after a while.

Mary shifted. “What – did he say?”

“That you are nothing, with no family, and that someone has to teach you what that means.”

“Oh.”

“He said it many times, that someone had to teach you what that means. What does he mean?”

“He means that he thinks himself something, and he hates anyone who disagrees. Because he’s not much of anything.”

“He’s very strong. He hung from a tree branch for the longest time.”

“Yes,” whispered Mary. “He’s very strong.”

“Does that frighten you?” asked Lady, turning to look at her friend.

Mary didn’t answer for a moment. Her thin face was pale, taut, and her hands slowly clenched in her lap.

“No,” she said finally, “not that he’s strong, but that he may be right. Maybe I am nothing...”

“Well looky here! It’s the girlies!” cried a frighteningly exuberant voice. Mary whipped her head around and saw John walking along the fence, his arms wagging from side to side.

“Well, well!” cried John. “The spider and the princess – what a pretty fairy tale!”

A sudden shove from behind sent Mary spinning off the fence. She landed in the dirt with a thump, tasting blood from her lip. She turned around and saw Clive standing on the other side, his hands stuck in his pockets, grinning madly.

“Quite a wind today, hey girlie?” he said.

Mary stood up silently and dusted her dress. Clive was John’s shadow, a weak boy who only needed the permission of a stronger soul to become darker.

“What did you do that for?” asked Lady.

“Because we takes a notion,” said John, leaping off the fence and walking forward. A piece of wheat jutted out from his mouth, wagging as he spoke. “And what is the weight of this little girlie?” he asked, sneering at Mary. “A wind blows, and she flies off the fence – fat head and all!”

“Oh, leave her alone, John. You’re so mean!” cried Lady.

He turned to her and grinned. “You, my pretty, you don’t know what’s good for you. Hanging around with this ‘un when there’s already those that’d show you what’s what.”

“I know what’s what!” cried Lady. “I know that it’s mean to push a girl. And not very gentlemanly.”

*No, thought Mary, don’t say that...*

John’s cheeks flushed. “Is that what you say?” he demanded. “I don’t push no nice girls, but those that ain’t nice gets no protection from me. I know what a gentleman is. It’s not all in yer picture-books. A gentleman is him that takes the time to set things right. And when someone steps out of line then *wham!* – he let’s ‘em have it. For their own good. This ‘un,” he said, jabbing a finger at Mary, “this ‘un, she don’t know what’s what. She’s parading all airs, when she don’t have no brothers, no father, no mother. She’s making out like she’s better than the rest of us put together, a-cause she can read and talk back. But that’s not what’s what. What’s what is that don’t make anyone better than anyone else, a-cause she don’t have no family that makes her not talk back. Because she doesn’t know what’s what.”

“You leave her be!” cried Lady.

“She needs to know what’s what. And, as a mere favour, I might see my way clear t’showing her!” leered John, rising to full height.

“Let me!” cried Clive, leaping over the fence.

“That’s as we’ll see fit to say,” replied John. He walked over to Mary and stood with his hands bunched in his pockets. “So, missy-girl, are you going to tell me what’s what?”

She stood there silently staring at him.

John took a step back, *tsk-ing* between his teeth. “Hard to tell what’s what, ain’t it, ‘specially when you’ve no family to tell you. I’ll tell you some though, an’ we’ll see if you’re smart enough to figger out th’rest.” He leapt forward suddenly, pinning Mary’s head in the crook of his elbow. She did not resist; her eyes narrowed. Lady gasped and leapt forward, but found herself pinned by Clive.

“Here’s a sample of what’s what,” growled John, his lips very close to her ear. “When someone tells you what to do, you do it, with no ‘words’, no ‘books’, no ‘whys’. When I tells you something, you just nod and say ‘that’s very clever, master John; I wish I’d ‘uv thought of it!’ Can you do that, girlie?” he asked, grabbing her hair tightly with his free hand. “Can you nod for yer Uncle John?” Mary closed her eyes. “Can you nod for yer Uncle John?” he repeated, yanking her head back and forth. “There! Y’see – I’ve already got you started! It’s not so hard when y’think about it! And y’know,” he said, continuing the motion, “since I know you like the ‘whys’, I’ll give you some. You nod because you’ve got no family. You nod because there’s no-one and nothing looking out for you. You nod because you’re a girlie, and that’s what girlies do when someone tell’s ‘em what’s what. And the simplest is why you nod for me! You nod for me a-cause I say so, and if you think that’s not good enough, I’ve no choice

but to take it as a very – personal – insult!” he finished, using the rhythm of his last words to yank her head even more viciously. Then he released her and let her fall in a heap on the ground.

“And that,” he whispered, bending over her in mad glee, “is what’s *what!*”

Mary rose slowly, welts rising on her neck. She looked at John, and suddenly he felt unsteady, as if she were not looking at him, but rather through him, or beyond him to some vast puppet-master who controlled his every move. It was a moment he was to remember for a long time; as an adult, when the true scope of what Mary was capable of was becoming clear, he often woke from a dream of that gaze, his sheets soaking wet.

“I know what’s what, and what is not,” she said slowly, distinctly, with the simplicity of great clarity, “– and you are not!”

He exhaled in a great whoosh, taking a step backward. His eyebrows knotted together. Suddenly, with all the might of his sturdy young frame, he lashed out and punched Mary full in the stomach. She doubled over, tottering on thin legs, then fell over sideways, her face slamming into the ground. There was a shocked silence, broken only by the strangled sounds of Mary labouring for breath. Lady turned her pale face aside.

“Never say that again!” screamed John, dancing around nervously. “If you even think it, I’ll know, and I’ll make you pay, you nothing! You think you can say that to me? I am everything! You are nothing but doing what you’re told, and you’d better do nothing but what your told, nothing else your whole life long! Your mummy and daddy gave you away because they didn’t want you, and that means you keep your mouth shut! No-one steps aside! Do you understand me, you nothing? None step away! Everybody stays right where they are! And that’s with me

up here, and you down there in the dirt! Do you hear me, girlie? Don't try to change nothing, or this is what you'll get – and more!"

John's face was flushed; he panted as he spoke. His words roused him to a frenzy, and he drew his foot back for a kick. Mary watched him from the ground, and slowly closed her eyes.

An odd shadow suddenly drifted over the tableau. A large flat rock came out of nowhere and landed with a dull *whap* on John's cheek.

"Go-wan, you little bullying crumb," cried a raspy voice. The children turned and saw Knotted Bob standing on the other side of the fence.

"Go-wan, you milkmaid, you side-order, go back to your hovel and leave the ladies in peace," cried Knotted Bob, "or I'll toast you both sides, inside and out!"

John put a hand to his cheek and stared at the old man, a supernatural horror in his eyes. He turned without a second thought and sprinted away over the fields, falling, scrambling and running again, only slightly behind his shadow, who had released Lady at the first sound of the old man's voice and bolted too.

"Are you all right, younger?" asked Knotted Bob, opening the gate and levering his twisted frame over to Mary.

"Just – nothing. We were playing," said Mary, wiping the blood from her lips.

"Hah, yes, but you can't gaf a gaffer," rasped the old man, helping her up. "That sort of play the world can live on less of. You, sunshine, go-wan and get some water and a rag and tail it like a rabbit!" he added to Lady, who turned and flew away only slightly less rapidly than the two boys.

When Mary had composed herself, she turned to her saviour.



Knotted Bob leaned over her, his rough face softened in concern.

Knotted Bob was a sort of living monument to the idea that human beings are capable of being indecently exposed to time. His nickname came from the strange gesticulations that erupted from his passionate need to be understood despite his crippling arthritis. He was in charge of the milkmaids; having grown too old to be a shepherd, he had been put out to pasture with those considered even more domesticated than sheep. Knotted Bob had no last name – even the thought that he had once been fathered caused misty visions of eternity to rise in people’s heads. He had never married, which to some was further evidence of his oddness, for it was whispered that no man should have the wisdom to make such an intelligent decision before reaching the age which made it redundant. Others argued that he had not married because his arthritis had struck young, for even Wife Jigger could not remember a time when Knotted Bob had been able to strike the dinner-gong without the odd creaking sound his joints made being audible from the kitchen.

For all that, though, Knotted Bob had retained a savage desire for life, as if he had accepted the burden of his physique only on the condition that he would be required to worry about nothing else. His still-active convolutions at the county dances made him a local celebrity, and he was the recipient of much attention from the younger women, who greatly valued the chance to practice their charming arts on a disposable canvas, so to speak. His gallant ease with women was the natural result of a man who has never had to raise his voice to one; were it not for his kaleidoscopic body, Knotted Bob would have been the recipient of a good deal of resentment from other men. As it was, fortunately, they saw him as the only kind of gentleman they

admired – a harmless one. Only a few of them realized that Knotted Bob was in fact the last revenge of romantic bachelorhood, which is to raise the expectations of wives to the point where their husbands were open to attack if they did not traipse through the fields with flowers for their lovelies at least once a month. The few who had the sensitivity to realize this, of course, were little troubled by it, for they were also smart enough to pre-empt such chivalric demands by regular maintenance of the romantic ideals of their wives. The women, in turn, met them halfway, greeting their gifts of meat, wheat and news of new piglets with the air of those who receive French chocolates procured by long and hazardous journeys.

Mary had been aware of Knotted Bob's attention for a long time. One of her earliest memories was of the creaking of her crib as he rocked it far into the night. (It wasn't until she was much older that she realized that the sound actually came from his elbow.) During one of her dinner-time revelations, he looked at her a long time after the others had resumed conversation, gazing at her with the air of one who waits for understanding – not his own, but of the object of his observation. She was intensely embarrassed by his scrutiny, by her youthful inability to answer his silent question, but when she saw him he held her gaze for only a moment before turning back to his food with a shrug that said only: *not yet*.

As she grew, Mary began to withdraw from her life. Knotted Bob was the first to notice, but it wasn't long before her gradual diminishment began to be evident to all. The demands of her intelligence could not be slowed or vanquished – it was as if, seeing her surroundings in such a blazing way, the only survival she could find was to turn her wick down to its lowest level. Her

eyes grew at once hysterical and listless, and she often seemed to sort of halt, as if waiting for something. She became careless and forgetful; sometimes she would stare at her bucket of milk for hours, as if awaiting a vision. This slowness began to be combined with an almost supernatural irritability – many times, as she was ascending the steps to yet another pre-dawn breakfast, she could be heard muttering under her breath, and she would become distracted at the table by the shape of her food, or the colour of her plate, and would suddenly look up, her cheeks red, to discover that everyone had left.

To many she appeared almost simple. The tales of her early prodigality were all but forgotten, and she began to be regarded as someone who had squandered her life's ration of common sense in premature displays of pointless ability. She irritated those around her; she had to be forced to do her chores, and went about them with a resentfully hesitant air. Whenever external pressures ceased, she fell slack at once, her eyes turning dull and introspective. She became sullen, furtive, and stole knick-knacks on occasion. Wife Jigger caught her once, when she had stolen a goose-egg, and had been utterly perplexed as to why someone would steal something so worthless – and keep it under her pillow besides, until it cracked and betrayed the stench to the whole house. Mary did not respond to Wife Jigger's persistent questioning, sitting on her bed and picking at her blanket, face red and voice low, relaying in a monotonous tone preposterous lies and justifications for her theft. The absurdity of the girl's replies drove the woman to distraction – and almost to violence – but when she finally raised her hand to the girl, Mary stared up with such vengeful spite in her eyes that Wife Jigger positively shuddered.

Her vast spread of maternal feeling began to flow around Mary, as if the girl were a sharp rock in a wide river; the more she tried to apply love, the more Mary seemed to resent her. One night, when she came up to tell Mary a bedtime story, the youngster pulled her blanket up to her eyes and stared at the older woman, her eyes wide and red.

“To think of stupid stories – in the midst of this!” cried Mary, her lips trembling.

“In the midst of what, dear?” Wife Jigger asked with the cloying concern that comes from resisting an urge to smack.

“All this! All of you!” Mary said, turning her face to the cracked white wall.

“Whatever is the matter with you?” asked Wife Jigger. “You have a good home, which is more than most orphans can hope for.”

“There is no good home,” Mary replied, her hands wandering over a mottled and much-mended blanket..

“What are you saying? You have enough to eat – Lord knows you aren’t burdened by many chores, and there is enough cheer in this house to brighten a Russian! How can you be so murky about it all?”

“Because,” replied Mary, still staring at the wall. “Because – it is boring!”

“Well – if it’s time you have on your hands, there’s the south fence to be mended, the cattle to be bled, the well-rope to be replaced...”

“Better not send me there. Like as not, I would throw myself down,” said Mary with an strained laugh.

“But – why?” asked Wife Jigger.

“Why not?” cried Mary. “Why – because for the rest of my life I have little more to look forward than pricking cattle and weaving ropes!”

“Oh, my girl! That’s scarcely all!” exclaimed Wife Jigger. “You’re growing up a strong lass – you have a whole life of children and husband ahead of you. You’re thirteen already. It’s not all chores, you know...” she said with a wink.

But she stopped, all of a sudden, because Mary shuddered in an almost-tangible revulsion.

“Pah! You’ll make me sick!” she cried. “The boys here! To be a drudge for the stupid, to breed stupidity and answer stupidity with nods and smiles! Ugh!”

Wife Jigger took a deep breath. To her view of life, Mary had just committed blasphemy.

“Then what is it you want to be?” she asked finally. “Sure enough – there’s not a mess of choice. We must be content with our lot.”

“I know that,” said Mary. “I know what I am built for, what I was born for. I don’t have to like it.”

“What else would you have?”

But the young girl did not reply. She just stared at the wall. “Then perhaps there is nothing to do,” she said softly, “but nothing...”

“That’s your spite talking,” said Wife Jigger, rising to leave. “This world may not fit all who wear it, but there’s no use in fighting the seams, else soon that’s all you’ll see.”

“To some, that’s all there is,” replied Mary, biting on her thin sheets.

“Then that’s all they look for,” said Wife Jigger decisively, leaning over and turning down the lamp. “Now get some rest. It’s a big day tomorrow.”

“Why? Sun rising earlier?”

“No, child,” sighed Wife Jigger. “Lord Laurence is coming to dinner!”

Mary’s eyes lit up at once. She started up feverishly, her fists knotting over her covers.

“Is it true what they say?” she asked. “Is he very rich?”

“Richest I’ve seen, which is none too rich, mind you, but then they tell of wealth, and so I think. Rich enough for you, no doubt.”

“Why is he coming?”

“Every year he came, since he was a little boy. You were too young to remember. Now, though, the past four years he’s been abroad.” She grinned excitedly, her hands on her cheeks. “Abroad, child! And now he’s come back to take over his lands, which have been run by his mother since his good father died – oh, six years ago now.”

“Where has he been?” asked Mary, her eyes wide.

“Where has he been?” exclaimed Wife Jigger, sitting down again on the bed and sighing happily. “Overseas, over many seas! To Italy, to France and other such countries. Four years of travel he has under his belt. I saw him the other day in the village – gosh but what a fine figure he cut! I remember his father when he was young, and young Laurence is the spitting image – spitting! Just as a Lord should look, I dare say. He’s been up to some adventures abroad, that much I can guess! His cheeks are so fair, and his eyes dance like faeries! It’s a God-given vitality, no question. Some of the upper folk get all plumpy and angry, but not him! He’s lost weight – used to be quite a chubby lad, not that I’d remind him now, except as a joke, but he’s grown so straight and tall that you’d never know he once had trouble getting over a fence! All the women have a new pillow-mate, I dare say – all worship him like the good Lord,” she said, crossing herself, “and though it may be blasphemy, it’s hard to complain. Just the other day I

heard how he had rescued a girl from the rain – he put her in his carriage and danced alongside it – it’s quite tiny, you see – just danced alongside it in the rain, laughing and making jokes! That girl, she can live forever on that day, though God have mercy on her husband, who has no carriage, nor even a horse. Still, there’s life here now. Our Lord has returned! The girls all put a bounce in their step, and they look so pretty – they wear flowers in their hair and rub themselves with sweet herbs. Listen to me, getting quite out of breath, but Husband isn’t around, so it’s all right to be out of breath!” laughed Wife Jigger, patting her heaving bosom. “So listen, child. You put aside your frowns for one day, and come to dinner dressed in your best – we’ll see what we can find, one of Lady’s old frocks perhaps – and you laugh when he does and maybe we can put in that you can read, and perhaps this will do some good. I know Clem’s full of talk about some farming methods the good Lord picked up abroad, in Holland I think, and perhaps something can come for you there.”

Wife Jigger’s excited speech was cut short by a bellow from downstairs.

“Wife!”

“Oh – that’s me!” giggled Wife Jigger, standing hurriedly and brushing her hair from her flushed cheeks. “Good night, sweet child. Sleep well – and look forward to the future!”

Mary lay staring up into the darkness long after Wife Jigger had gone. Unrealized greatness – how it worships the pomp of privilege! Her heart pounded in her throat, like a beaten horse glimpsing the barn door ajar. *He will know!* she thought rapidly, visions of halos and crowns dancing in her head. *He will be beautiful, he will look past my grubby dress and trembling hands and see my true soul, my hidden heart!* Her intelligence, roused like a snake after a long

slumber, fastened its fangs on the image of the Lord's outstretched hand. *Such a mansion he will have, she thought, such trinkets hidden in the library, where one might live, quiet and unheard as a mouse, scurrying from book to book in the midnight hours. So many rooms, one might get lost in the cobwebs, hidden deep among old furniture and dust. Occasionally he will ask me to dinner and ask me what I have learned, and I will talk him to the moon, and the wine will sparkle in our glasses and I will leave him polishing his spectacles and shaking his head in wonder at his hidden guest!* Outside, an owl hooted, deep in a tree. Mary pulled her blanket over her head. *And sometimes I will be in the garden, resting from my studies, pruning peach trees and wearing a big white hat. And he will ride up on a horse, with another beside him, and we will go thundering through his woods and then there will be no talk of books or deep thoughts, only the thudding of wild hooves and ducking of branches as we fly past. And once in a very great while, we will come to a clearing with a big, wide pool, and under the shade of the leaves his laughing passion will get the better of him, yet so gently, and he will kiss me softly on the lips, and on his lips I will taste all the admiration I deserve, all the wonder that is myself, and the future will widen like avenues of fire parting before a shudder of spring wind. How his hair will slip between my fingers; how the leaves it has gathered will fall about us; how he will bear me down on the soft heather and open me to the skies above...*

Mary's breath was coming short. A sudden elemental restraint cut through her wild thoughts, slicing like a dark knife through her web of soft pictures. *How shallow he could be, she thought; how his laughter might be nothing more than the froth on a rivulet, a gaudy spinning heartiness around a tiny narrow parcel. And what of his looks, and all these other women? (and with that her breath almost stopped.) What of his clothes and hair – what if he should he care about them?*



*What if, lost in lies, he sees nothing but falsehood in others? What if – and this was the worst – what if tomorrow night his eyes barely slide over the ragged little girl at the children’s table?*

She felt an awful sinking sensation in her stomach at the last thought. *If I could only grow two feet by morning, it would be a start... Or have Lady’s hair... He will surely notice her hair, even pass his hands through it and remark what a wonderful bedspread it would make if woven... Mary shuddered, closing her eyes tightly.*

All through the night she watched the shadows shifting over the ceiling, wondering what movements he would have to make in the garden to produce such shapes.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *A Son Returns to a Different Home*

LORD LAURENCE CARVEY WAS A CREATURE OF BOUNDLESS ENERGY, whose every gesture sprang from the kind of certainty that can only come from taking too many things for granted. When he leaned against the wall and talked, it was with such ease that weaker wills seemed to fall in line like salmon before a strong current. His eyes were focused, sharply kind, and radiated such a sense of purpose that one could find oneself agreeing that the world was indeed flat, and moreover, one could repeat such observations with the same subtle earnestness – and find oneself oddly irritated if they were opposed.

Laurence was raised by his mother and sister; his father had been a great traveler, and his son had become the focus of those odd kinds of feminine obsessions that naturally unfold when the expected roles of wife and daughter remain unfulfilled. His childhood was a long stretch of bidding and lazing, of days lying on couches with picture-books and finger-puppets and nights of breathy abandon with the wilder boys of his clan. Such a coalescing of all that is pleasurable, so few demands and so much desire, so much the center of cloaking femininity – is it surprising at all that Lord Laurence had grown up with such an ease of manner?

In many men such pampering would have decayed their sense of purpose to feeble sequences of pale demands and flushed rejections, but Lord Laurence had grown into a beautiful young man who impressed all he met, a theoretician of social ills and earnest devotee of the new philosophies, a man who diagnosed his class and performed verbal post-mortems on social ills with pale-cheeked matrons whose tea cups rattled with the soft intensity of his speeches. *Here is*

*a man of conscience!* they thought with daring admiration; *here is such an improbable amalgam of power and possibility that he is capable of anything he sets his mind to!*

The young god of the oldest pantheon was tall, with dark hair that hung in tight curls. His cheeks swept in flowing ridges from ear to hollow, his lips were precise and relaxed, and his hands wonderfully expressive – when he talked they fluttered quickly, outlining plans and thoughts like racing doves. He was quick, but not quick-tempered. He was an aficionado of Plato (Aristotle had bored him immensely), and like that old master, he had developed the art of erecting ideas on clouds with such breathtaking elegance that they seemed more real than the dessert-plates which trembled in his listener’s hands.

For all that, Lord Laurence was a man who prided himself on his practicality. Taking his cue from the integration of the Greeks, he applied his intellect to practical problems with the same energy he used to sculpt abstractions. First and foremost he learned the arts of agriculture for, as he often said, if masters were not to earn their keep by education, then servants had every right to cut their throats at night. (Such observations, uttered with an intensely earnest air, made his female listeners positively shudder – though perhaps more at the thought of the young Lord entering their rooms at night than murderous servants beating down their doors.)

Relations with his father had been strained but not unpleasant. The elder Lord Carvey had been a rambler who had long mourned the final discoveries of the known world. Rather than waste his time exploring discovered geography, he had plunged into a hearty but confused study

of Eastern religions, producing an impressive tome shortly before his death, a work universally admired for its ability to show well on a bookcase. Lord Carvey had devoted the majority of his work to graphic descriptions into Eastern sexual mysteries. These sections were written with just enough departure from objective opinion to give the impression of a man whose interests as a scholar had succumbed to his enthusiasm as a tourist during his surveys of the fleshy realms. His book was always kept on the third or fourth shelf, for the sake of the children, which had the effect of turning it from a work of investigative theology to a handbook of practical physics, so earnestly did youngsters devise ways of reaching it. A favourite trick of young wags was to take the book from the shelf while visiting relatives and let it fall open in their hands – since it inevitably widened to rather vivid prints of ritual sensuality it created good opportunities to wiggle eyebrows and say ‘mmm’ and ‘ahah’.

Laurence’s mother, Lady Barbara Carvey, had found the book quite disgusting, because it gave the erroneous impression that she was an enormously fortunate woman. She found herself forced to meet the inevitable question of “does he *really?*” with acute and stony stares. To her profound relief, her husband had not approached her in that way for many years – he actually seemed quite relieved that his firstborn was such a spectacularly healthy boy, for it absolved him of the responsibility of grunting his way through the indignity of future “sowings of seeds”. This had been no great loss to Barbara; although initially quite curious, had been quite disappointed by the awkwardness of it all. That, and the odd desire of her husband to keep his hat on during the act, had quite snuffed any latent desires she may have had.

They had married as a matter of course, to avoid stigma and make entertaining easier to organize. Their bond had been one of companionship; they had made their aims clear from the beginning, and would have regarded any attempt at passion vague distaste of watching someone embellish a white lie. Barbara had always been a solitary woman who enjoyed reading and vigorous walks, and her marriage suited her perfectly. Those of her companions who threw themselves into stormy affairs seemed to Barbara to be rather missing the point of life, which was to live quietly and pleasantly. She regarded the endless soul-searching and torrid impulses that constantly shook her friends with the complacency of a large vessel that watches rowboats smashing against rocks during a violent storm. *Why ride the silly things?* was her constant (though silent) question.

The third part of the Carvey family was Laurence's sister, Lady Kay. She was two years older than Laurence and had an appearance that combined the demandingly hesitant impositions of a live-in spinster with the unbearable sensitivity of a poetic child. Her face was long, pale and drawn – a “white skinny horse” was how Laurence had described her in a rare moment of cruelty. Her hair was flat to the point of paint, and hung below her ears like a broken awning. Her eyes, however, did a lot to make up for such defects – they were sensitive without being sappy, and were prone to wonderful shifts of mood that almost seemed to change their hue.

Kay's favourite word was “kind”, and she had spent most of her young life lamenting its absence. Certain souls have the misfortune to adhere to ideas that act as a constant friction against their natural state, and Kay was one of those. She was by nature quite uncomplicated,

but had a romantic streak, and so found herself torn between common sense and self-dramatization. She believed that passion was the unconscious pursuit of dark secrets and undefined longings, and so spent a good deal of her teenage years yearning after various things. She had yearned for travel, gotten seasick going to France, yearned for the continent before being robbed in her *Pensione*, yearned for Frenchmen before discovering they smelled, yearned for freedom before discovering that most suffragettes were rude, yearned for poverty before discovering it was dusty, and was now believed herself to be in a sorry state of suspended desires and denied expectations.

Kay spent an oddly dreamy four years while Laurence was away. Plans came and went; inspiration trailed off into lassitude, and she began marking off her calendar over a year before he was due home. If she were questioned long and hard, Kay would have admitted that everything she did was for the sake of her brother's return. *I read Gibbons to talk with Laurence about Rome; I study father's book to talk about religion; I learn about architecture to argue the merits of the Taj Mahal (he had visited it, of course – she had filed his letters alphabetically, by location). I know where he stands, the progress and evolution of his thought, the impressions of his visitations, and when he returns we shall talk far into every night...*

At the same, though, a strange dread began growing in her. As her brother's return grew imminent, she became confused and nervous. The sudden reality of his inevitable question – and what have you been up to? – began to haunt her. Her diary sprang fascinating backwards pages as Kay frantically attempted to live her life retroactively. Here we went to the old ruins, and oh yes! – there we went to Land's End, and I had the most fascinating talk with an old lighthouse

keeper – such stories he had of storms and imagined invasions! So much to tell you, Laurence.

And by the way – how was your trip?

Of course they would laugh, sitting there on the couch, and there would be lazy curtains swaying in the breeze... Still, Kay could not repress the dread in her heart. A crushing tension seemed to take hold of her, and she spent many hours sitting by the window of her room, gazing out over the hills to the distant forests, and at such times she could have sworn with her whole soul that there was not another person in the entire world, that they had vanished and she waited only for a phantom that would never come. Tears came to her strangely, tears that seemed to course from the tearing of an endless fabric, tears with no sense or purpose or release. And at times she would find herself in the grip of a soaring exultation, and an urge to shout would rise in her breast. But again – to what purpose?

Yet for all Kay's hopes and fears, Laurence's return would effect most the girl who learned of it last: Mary O'Donnell.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *A Fatal Banishing*

LAURENCE WAS TO DINE AT EACH OF THE FARMHOUSES; the schedule was sent out as soon as he returned, and Farmer Jiggers was to be his first stop. The old farmer was a central pillar of village life, and Laurence knew that his plans could only succeed if they met with the old farmer's approval.

When the young Lord finally arrived – after a week of frantic preparation on the part of Wife Jigger – he was met by Farmer Jigger at the front gate. The girl's faces were all squeezed into the narrow window of their communal room – except for Mary's. She was sitting in a corner, frantically knotting the threads of a hastily-repaired dress given to her by Wife Jigger. Lady had trimmed Mary's hair savagely short – of necessity, since she was always hacking it off. Mary's face was tight and nervous, and she kept casting frightened glances at the girls squeezed around the window.

“Lord, I bet he's as handsome as he's spoken of!” gushed Gwen, who was a short and slightly plump girl given to excessive – albeit utterly untested – flirtation.

“We are the luckiest around,” agreed Lady, brushing back her hair. “Some Lords have pimples and big behinds, and thunder around pinching maids and shouting ‘where's my grog?’” she said, lurching around and making the other girls giggle. Lady had been carefully arranged for the evening, and was aware of her looks enough to keep from tugging at her clothes. Wife Jigger had given her a whole plate of berries to eat to redden her lips, and had brushed the girl's hair incessantly, vaguely indicating that “you never know”.



Everyone was standing at the table by the time Farmer Jigger showed Lord Laurence in. The long, low table was bright with polished, ancient silverware, and thick tallow candles glowed in rows between the steaming bowls of meat and potatoes. The impressiveness of the young man's demeanor caused a half-second pause in the rising of the girls, and the shift of air was almost palpable as they all drew a breath. Lady stood at the adult's table, and she gazed at Laurence through a low fringe of hair. Laurence's gaze hung on her for a brief moment, then he grinned, as if sharing a secret joke.

"Girls," said Farmer Jigger, yanking up his trousers (he had his good pair on, but no belt), "say hello to Lord Laurence Carvey."

The room gusted with breathy greeting.

"What a splendid spread!" cried Laurence, taking his seat and gazing around with a broad smile. Everyone sat down. "There's great pleasure in foreign food, but to return to native cooking is a joy beyond compare!"

"It's certainly the best we have to offer," laughed Wife Jigger, "but barely good enough for you, I'll say!"

"There is a pleasure in homely hospitality that even the finest foreign meal cannot touch," said Laurence, buttering a hunk of thick bread, yellow in the candlelight. "And to experience it again, after four years – such a pleasure! I see no unfamiliar faces here – except, hello! – who is that young lad?"

Mary paled. She had been trying to catch Laurence's attention since the moment he entered, her eyes fairly itching with the intensity of her gaze. Now he sat, smiling at her, and suddenly

she felt a vast chasm of shame open within her, the tallest girl at the children's table. She turned for a moment, feeling old eyes upon her, and saw Knotted Bob staring at her from the adult's table.

"I should be ashamed to be a boy," she said coldly, looking at her plate, her heart throbbing painfully.

"That's young Mary," said Farmer Jigger with an easy smile and warning glare. "Y'might not remember her – she was just a whipper when ye left."

"Mary?" exclaimed Laurence, frowning. "Ah yes – the clever one. Well, even clever girls can let their hair grow, hm? Now, as I was saying," he continued, turning to the room at large, "I have been gone for four years, and in that time I have traveled much of the world this side of the Pacific Ocean. Through France, Spain, down to Italy, Turkey, north into Russia and Poland and Holland. I came back across the North Sea, over Sweden, and arrived in London two weeks ago. Most of what I saw would mean little to you, but a few things – with luck – will affect you greatly. That's what I want to talk about tonight, here, over this wonderful feast with you. With your permission," he said to Farmer Jigger with a smile.

The farmer grinned and spread his hands. "If it affects 'em with something more than laughter... ye're welcome to try!"

"Thank you," said Laurence gratefully, spooning some mortar-like mashed potatoes onto his plate. "Now, I want to say a few things before we start. Some of what I say might seem confusing, or even frightening, but if you will have the patience to hear me – or are just curious about what is happening in the world – I will forever be in your debt."

Laurence took a sip of water and smoothed his sideburns. He took a moment to consider his words, then started speaking. “I will start with something dramatic which is bound to get your attention. The world you have known, the world you have inherited, the world that has existed as long as men remember, is coming to an end. For thousands of years we have consumed almost a third of what we grew. But in various places around the world, men have found ways to change that. In Holland, ordinary farmers have discovered ways to harvest ten times what they need to eat. Ten times – I say it again because I didn’t believe it myself at first!” laughed Laurence. “The land is our friend, but she is a fickle friend, who cannot be trusted to reward hard work. We all know those who have starved for want of food, though they planted well and harvested quickly. We are nature’s slaves, not her master. An early frost, a dry summer, a rainy autumn or simply too many hungry birds and we’re all gnawing the bark off the trees come Lent.”

The young man smiled. He could have been talking of the moon for all the milkmaids cared, for all his eyes gleamed. Wife Jigger wanted to tell him to keep passing the potatoes, but didn’t dare interrupt.

“I have come to tell you,” he continued, “that we can now do better – if we work for it. I’m not going to get into the why’s and wherefore’s of how all this is achieved – let it suffice to say that it involves using better breeds of crops, rotating them to use the land differently each year, using the new seed drill, adding limestone to the soil to reduce acidity, using more cover crops in the winter, building irrigation and so forth. All that you can understand – probably better than I can, but what I desperately,” – he put great emphasis on the word – “need is your courage and commitment to the changes I want to make.”

The girls all leaned forward, brushing their cuffs from their hands and baring their thin wrists.

“You all remember my father with respect and love – as I do. But my father was from the old world. His ways were shortsighted; he spent more than he made. He was what is now called an ‘absentee landlord’, which means he spent more time in his study than in the fields, and as a result this is the only prosperous farm in all his lands. I’m sure you know the others, the Mundy’s and the Brackenborn’s; you know that they have crust for breakfast and dinner and pray with all their might to last through to spring. I want you to be generous enough to share some of your good fortune by leading the way to wealth. I have seen enough of your generosity to know that it will be an easy choice to make. I know that you give of your food and clothes freely, and that no unchristian thought stands between your bounty and the needs of your neighbours.” Laurence leaned forward. “I also know that if I ask you to trust me, you will do so. I know all this because together we can become the pride of England and the envy of all other countries – and who knows? Perhaps we can all do our small part in making the world a better place.”

“What the boy is saying,” said Farmer Jigger easily, “– and what he ain’t mentioning in all his stirring talk – is that he’ll expect ye to break yer backs for him on his say so alone. If I may.”

Laurence laughed. “Yes, well thank you, Farmer Jigger, for making the point clearer and my task harder. Yes – like all good things what I ask will be hard – at first. You will have to learn some of what I know, for I don’t want you labouring in the dark. Otherwise I couldn’t complain if you threw stones at me.”

Giddy laughter, the laughter of girls who wanted to throw more than stones at him.

Mary did not join in. Strange passions were rising in her breast; she found it difficult to breathe or concentrate. Something about the young man, something about his easy certainty and hearty appetite, something... She could not say what, but her whole soul revolted against him, and she clutched her cutlery tightly, afraid of her desire to do damage.

As the meal got underway, an image rose in her mind as she sat at the hated children's table, a bloated, terrible figure which loomed in her mind's eye like a heavy eclipse.

Mary had read of the elephant once, a huge beast which terrified all who beheld it. There was no picture of the frightful beast, but Mary felt that it was among them, hanging over the beautiful dinner table like an enormous, fleshy storm-cloud. The girl's hands swerved slightly to avoid its legs as they passed plates of sweets to Laurence; they let their bangs hang forward as if to ward off the glare of its terrible eyes. It was the invisibility of the elephant that terrified Mary the most – it hung as silent as the carved channels of the conversation, the burning isles of truth that friendly words parted to leave in peace. The elephant was fear, fear of Laurence and his power, but everyone laughed and joked as if he were a beloved friend, a bright courting youth. Mary shuddered, unable to swallow. He was a fine looking man; crumbs of bread hung like scraps of pale gold in his tailored beard, and as he wiped his laughing mouth, the skin stretched over his prominent jaw. She saw through his finely-hollowed cheeks to the rows of sharp teeth within, teeth that chewed the food he was offered in tribute, but the food was not for him. It was for the elephant, whose appetite was endless...

Mary blinked and took a deep breath, her heart beating fast. The conversation swam back into focus. Laurence was grinning at Lady, who squirmed under his gaze like a young willow writhing in the wind.

“Why yes, young lady, there are wonderful pictures in Rome,” he smiled. “Where did you learn that?”

“From Mary,” mumbled Lady excitedly, sweat glistening on her smooth forehead. “She’s read me from hundreds of books – hundreds! The things she says, I laughed at first, but there were pictures as well...”

“There is a statue in Rome, the statue of a naked man – did she show you that?” asked Laurence, winking.

“Oh!” cried Lady, clasping her hands to her throat. “No – none such pictures did I see!”

“Good thing too,” scowled Farmer Jigger, despite his wife’s elbow in his ribs.

“That is what I mean,” smiled Laurence, glancing at him. “How can we want to change the world and be afraid of a statue?”

“Is it true that they dance in the streets in Rome?” asked Wife Jigger hurriedly. “I was shown the dance by a tinker once – he was a rascal, he shook his bottom at me, though I gave ‘im a pie. He says, ‘that’s what they do in Rome!’ But I can’t imagine it, being the home of the Pope and all. But those Italians – I’ve never met one, but I’ve heard they’re dark as night and wear their hair in bundles, even the men, and they think nothing of marrying twice or more, and they go to church only if it’s sunny and bring a picnic to eat in the aisles. And the pastors – Lord mind them but they don’t give a care but say all gives to God in our own way (although they’re very fat, of that I’m certain), and there are children running around that none knows the parents

of, but no-one minds because it's always sunny and they don't barely have to touch the ground because it just up and flings the food on their plates. And they sleep during the day with hats on – is that true? – and they sail in ships a mile wide – some of 'em live there all the time, and the seas are so full of ships that the pirates hang around the market and pinch girls.”

“To go through your list would be too exhausting,” smiled Laurence, waving his hand playfully. “Yes – they are blessed in their climate. But their girls – their girls could not hold candle to our English lasses!”

“How I would love to go to Rome!” sighed Lady explosively, tossing her hair like a golden sail.

“Well you play your cards right, and you just may,” winked Laurence. “You just may.”

“Did you play your cards right, Laurence Carvey?” demanded a voice from the far end of the room. All turned their heads, but none faster than Knotted Bob. Mary sat with her head held tensely erect.

“Did you play your cards right?” she repeated coldly, her eyes fixed on a void over Laurence's head. “Or did you use your father's money – the money you admit he took from us without giving anything in return?”

“Hold yer tongue, whipper!” hissed Farmer Jigger, his eyes narrowing. “Ye just remember yer place!”

Laurence held up his hand, his eyes strangely sharpened. “No no – let the girl speak! This is most surprising. What on earth do you mean?”

“Nothing but what you know,” replied Mary.

“What do I know?” asked Laurence quietly.

“That this dinner could have lasted three families through the winter,” said Mary with effort. “That you are not here because you have wonderful ideas about the future, but because we are all afraid of you!”

“Afraid!” cried Wife Jigger. “Afraid of our good Lord?”

“Yes – afraid!” cried Mary, her eyes flashing. “Afraid because he has the King behind him – as they all do. Afraid because he holds our lives in his hands. Afraid because if we don’t show him the proper respect he might get angry and throw us off his land. The land we work!”

“What strange nonsense you talk!” cried Laurence. “I came here in good faith!”

“As if ye work!” growled Farmer Jigger. “She is the laziest creature in the wurld, yet she dares to rail!”

“Work for what?” shouted Mary. The other girls drew back from her. “Work so he can see the world and tell us we can have it if we play our cards right? If we are good girls? His cards! I won’t sit and listen to such evil!”

“By God, this is too much!” cried Laurence.

“Ye, my girl, had better apologize and leave the room if you want to stay on my farm,” said Farmer Jigger.

“Apologize?” cried Mary, her breath labouring. “Apologize for courage? No – I will have none of it. Turn me out as you like, but I will never apologize!”

“You, long lady, would be wise to learn your station,” said Laurence with a grim smile.

“Learn from the pleasant ladies at your elbow.”

“Say ye’re sorry, ye vicious, ungrateful whelp,” growled Farmer Jigger. “Or ye’ll sleep under th’moon tonight – and every night forward!”



“Do as you like!” shouted Mary. “I speak the truth!”

“Can you not control her?” asked Laurence. “Is she mad then?”

“Nay, by heaven, she’s not mad!” cried the farmer, rising. “You, whelp, stand straight and listen! Your time here is done! Go get your things – your own things, mind – and be gone!” he shouted, standing and folding his massive arms.

“If I may,” said Knotted Bob suddenly, raising an arm and flapping it wildly.

“What?” demanded Farmer Jigger.

“If I may,” said the old man, “It was I what put such thots into th’lasses mind.”

“What?”

“She’s barely big enough to know her toes fr’ m her fingers,” croaked Knotted Bob, standing and bowing. “I says one day, sort of casual, nothing in it, that I’m all confused at how big ye house be, master, an’ how hard we work. She was quiet when I said it, but I espose she thot on what I was saying. I was older, I had no right. She’s just confused is all. I di’nt help.”

“This ain’t nothing to do with you!” snarled Farmer Jigger. “She’s got no prop in this house – she ain’t worth the food she eats, she’s allus troubling us, lazing and nicking things. And this is her gratitude? I say she finds her own way, and I will not be contraddited! You hear me, miss – ye get out!” he thundered.

“Out! Out!” screamed Mary, grabbing her knife and hurling it to one side, narrowly missing Gwen’s head. “Out – out – and happier too!”

She half-stumbled from the room; all could see the spring of tears and the awkwardness of her movements, and all felt an unclean sort of pity, as if watching the death-throes of a foal born with two heads.

Knotted Bob followed Mary's footsteps upstairs. Evading her father's eyes, so did Lady.

He found her sitting on her bed, mechanically stuffing her few clothes into a ragged little pillowcase, her breath coming in short gasps, her eyes red. She looked up at him, startled into sudden hostility, then immediately cast her eyes back down, her back so rigid it seemed a tap would shatter her.

"Wait a scant," murmured Knotted Bob to Lady, closing the wooden door behind him. He watched Mary struggling with her self-control.

"That wasn't too shiny," he said softly. Her eyes flew up again like startled spears.

"I should have known that you, too, would betray me," she snarled.

He sighed. "I have my own thots on that. And I should have thot afore muttering aloud in your presence. But now the damage is done."

Mary smiled grimly. "Yes – the damage is done. But not by you."

"There's no pride in that!" he said. "Ye act ahead of yer time!"

"Yes – chastise me now! Good. Very good!"

"You have no idea what ye've done," said Knotted Bob, cracking his knuckles. "Ye cannot live alone out there. You have no idea what a haven it is here."

"Not for me. This is poison – the air is so poisoned that I burn when I breathe! You – you have no idea..."

"I do," he murmured. "I do."

"Why?" she demanded. "Because you are a cripple?"

"Because that is the last thing I be. What do ye think ye will do?"

“I will walk, and see who will have me. And if none will have me, I will die like a dog and rob the world!”

“Ye be too proud!”

“What would you know of it?”

“Ye be proud but unwise.”

“You think I am unwise?” she shouted, leaping up, her fists in tiny knots. “You think I am unwise? Because I do not ask for these visions. I do not ask for them, but they come unbidden, from the devil, it seems, and make me speak!”

“Ye are not possessed!”

“Then why is it that when I walk past the church or see pictures of cathedrals I cannot admire the structure of the stones? Why is it I only hear the voices of the men who died building them? When I hear Father Jones speak power of the faith that builds such monuments, why can I only hear the voices and see that the church is built on blood, that it rises on graves, that it is a false tombstone without even the honesty to admit its corpses?” Mary pressed the heels of her hands to her eye-sockets, her voice breaking painfully. “I see everything with two eyes...” She lowered her hands and looked up at the old man. “Lord Carvey is young, he is beautiful, but he deserves to suffer, but he will never suffer, and that is the worst injustice!” Her voice was tight; her hands fluttered madly before her eyes. “What am I to do with such visions? I cannot deny them, for even if they come from the devil I have never heard such beautiful truths. For I love my visions, even though I shall be cast out for them!”

“Ye shall be cast out,” growled Knotted Bob, his voice suddenly harsh. “Ye shall be cast out, and perhaps in the wilderness ye will find the wisdom to know that there is a time and a

place for honest words, that the truth is not a sword to be drawn at all costs, that silence and preparation is sometimes its best service – and that dying like a dog is not!”

Mary lowered her head, like a penitent child. “If that is what is demanded, it will be done. Having lived as I do, I am not afraid of death. But if you had spoken before...” she said, with such yearning that his heart almost broke in two.

“I had no idea,” he whispered. “I saw yer silence, and I thought ye had much to wrestle with a-fore we talked. Much wrestling to do with hatred, with bitterness. A-cause although I believe hatred is the first sign of thought in evil times, I also believe that there are often lessons to be learned that cannot be taught, and that hatred must run its course – even to destruction – to be purified. To turn to love.”

Mary’s face twisted. “Love? Love of what? Of my life, of my circumstances, of the fact that I should be cursed with nothing but ability, nothing but staring at what I could be without the means to make it so? Should I love God for this?”

“Yes – if that is what God demands. Perhaps He has a plan, and He gave ye this vision to see beyond what is. Perhaps ye may also do your part to sooth the evils of this world. Perhaps ye should not be so eager to lay claims of understanding – for understanding of this world ye may have, but of your place within it you have not at all!”

“Then if He should choose to test me,” she cried, “then I shall say: ‘I shall go further than You dreamed of, and I shall make You ashamed of my suffering, of the suffering of us all!’ To give this young elephant wealth, power and love while forcing me on my knees to stare at a milkpail for eternity is a sin, and I care nothing for those who say it is a sin to say so, for I charge God with the errors of this world! And if He chooses not to inflict suffering on men like

Laurence, if He grants them the illusion of power in the midst of poverty, than I will act as the agent of His better self, and I shall make them suffer! I shall make them suffer – though He sits on His hands, I shall be His sword!”

“This is a kind of evil,” said Knotted Bob, backing away, his face pale.

“Then let it be so for those that call it thus!” Mary shouted. “But until you can show me a better world, you shall never convince me that opposing this one is wrong! And you who say – who say that there is a time and a place for truth shall be proven wrong – even if I die like a dog, you shall be proven wrong by the fact that I lived. And I shall laugh at you from the face of eternity – as I shall laugh at God, and make Him hide His face in shame!”

“Yer life will end in destruction...”

“I go with joy if I take one lie with me. And that whore downstairs, with the beard, he had better be the first one to watch his back, for I will consider him in the wilderness, and find his weakness, and then I shall enter his life and rend him limb from limb! Yes – I see your eyes, they think I am mad. All who are committed are so, because they live beyond these fat tables and shiny little curtsies, and they see that these well-dressed whores have blood on their frilly cuffs, that they defile any well-laid table sticking knives into their hosts as they charm the dresses off their daughters!”

“Enough!” cried Knotted Bob, raising his hands. “Enough. Ye may not be mad, but ye have convinced me that I was right to keep my distance. If some day ye be cleansed of this, I shall love ye for it, and talk with ye through the night, but for now ye must go through the fire.”

“Mary?” whispered Lady, opening the door a crack and peeking in. “Mary – father is threatening to throw you from the window if you don’t go at once!”

“None of this is for you,” said Mary, instantly subdued. “None – for you are power without harm. Come here.”

Lady almost ran into the room, into Mary’s open arms, and the two girls wept together. Mary clutched Lady’s hair, her young face distorted and wet.

“I shall be gone for a long, long time,” she gasped, stroking Lady’s blonde locks rapidly. “But some day I will return, and will you remember that we were once innocent, and sat on the hill and held hands like lovers?”

“I will remember,” whispered Lady.

The parting was hastened by a banging on the door. Farmer Jigger strode into the room, his eyes burning.

“Get away from my lass, ye beast!” he shouted, tearing Mary away from Lady. He picked up some of Mary’s old clothes and threw them out the window. “Ye wants yer things, they be on the ground! Now get out, or you’re next!”

Mary snatched up her pillowcase, her head lowered, and staggered out the door. Knotted Bob followed her closely, hoping to stave off any further attacks. The other girls were all clustered at the foot of the stairs. Laurence stood among them, his face pale.

“I meant to take no such offense,” he said in a low voice that was drowned out by another bellow from the old farmer. Laurence caught at Mary’s arm as she passed, and she turned suddenly to look him full in the face. It was a gaze he was long to remember, long after everything had been made clear to him.

Laurence glanced at Farmer Jigger, then leaned into Mary. “If you need anything – come to me,” he said, his eyes averted. But she turned away, pulled her arm from his hand and, without a backward glance, walked through the doorway into the night.

Laurence leaned against the wall, suddenly exhausted. Farmer Jigger stood panting on the stairs. His wife tried to caress him, but he threw off her hand.

“And none the worst for wear!” he shouted. They all stared at him. “Now – th’boy was saying something, if I’m not quite mistaken. Well? Well?”

“Well – yes,” said Laurence, standing up straight and attempting a grin. “Yes – let us continue dinner. There are many things to talk about.”

“Well – in ye go!” cried Farmer Jigger, shooing the shaken girls back into the dining room.

Laurence followed them all, and as he passed the half-open doorway, he turned his head slowly as he imagined the silver eyes of some oblong beast staring malevolently at him from the pillar of night outside.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *A Merchant's Mourning*

SUCH IS THE CONTINUITY OF CERTAIN FEELINGS THAT, four years later, Laurence felt the same sudden chill when Mary's name came up again.

They were all in the sunroom, Laurence, his mother and his sister. Laurence sat at his mahogany writing desk, going over the latest accounts. Lady Barbara sat on a sofa, reading some letters. Kay lay on the carpet (lurid, Moroccan, brought back by their father), reading the newspaper. Going over his accounts was a Sunday morning ritual, one that gave Laurence great pleasure. The mounting returns on his initial investments had begun to exceed his wildest expectations. *It was funny*, he often thought, *how it all began with turnips*. Such a simple little vegetable, so shy that the earth barely noticed its presence, shrugging it off with such contempt that it welcomed the next year's crops with barely-restrained fertility. But the turnip – ah, it went straight to the mouths of cows, cows that no longer faced the falling of leaves with nervous lowing, cows that grew fat on turnips through the winter, cattle that had grown from scrawny sacrifices barely worth their keep to herds of fat breeds, rich in milk and meat. The cattle, too, had only been a starting point. For more than milk flowed from them – gold, too, as if they were magic geese, for they could be sold for a good profit at the market. The market had changed as well, from a scrawny throw-off of shoddy goods to the pride of the county. Farmers traveled for scores of miles, eager to trade and learn. Butchers, no longer the scavengers of autumn, had become respectable, almost revered, for the magic of meat hung firm in the bellies of the townsfolk, granting them health and strength beyond their wildest dreams.



Laurence's boyhood memories of the village were vague and confused. The sight of the thin children, forever begging, the haggard steps of hungry women and baleful stares of under-used men had frightened him. Now, as he walked through the market and heard the vigorous cries of strong men, he felt a benevolent strength and faith in the proper order of intelligence – and gratitude, for he knew how lucky he had been, blessed with both the desire for change and the wealth to enact it.

He occasionally took the day-carriage to London, to the dissolute clubs where other young Lords squandered the excess of their tenants' sweat, and spoke of his ideas. Scowls and mutters greeted his exhortations for change; he found himself feeling like a preacher in a land of war. A few arguments almost escalated into fistfights. They called him a "tradesman" and "hawker" in an attempt to portray him as a sly seller of sordid goods.

"But we are custodians of the land," he cried. "We can only justify our existence by working to enrich the land and all it produces. If we shirk this responsibility, all talk of revolution is justified – and will be proven so in action before long."

"What a custodian!" the jeers would return. "Yet he manages his trips to London and abroad, he manages silk shirts and cognac while telling us we must work for the poor."

"Not only for the poor," he said. "For ourselves. To have a purpose in life. A reason for being."

“Purpose is for the poor, fool! Our purpose is to eat drink and be merry. And if it be at their expense, then so be it. We didn’t make the world. And when it benefits us so tangibly – why should we sweat to change it?”

“There is wealth in it!” Laurence replied. “Ten acres sensibly managed can produce more crops than a hundred farmed the old way. Look at me – you know the history of my family. Overspending nobility since day one – barely able to afford our place in the registry. And why were we there in the first place? Because some ancestor bowed properly to the King and helped put down a rebellion. More power to him – I applaud that. But now – for myself – how can I imagine that I have such virtues that I deserve to reap the fruits of a man’s labour hundreds of years dead? Where is my justification? Where is yours?”

“Ours is that we are here. Yours is fading fast – merchant!”

“I shall outstrip you!” Laurence shouted, driven beyond all patience. “Does that mean nothing to you – if nothing else does? How much do your lands produce? More than mine – perhaps. But acre for acre, I outstrip you all! Your ways are dead, or soon will be. The time will come when the King no longer says: ‘who was your grandfather?’, but rather: ‘what is your yield?’ And ultimately his favour will be proportional to that!”

“That kind of wealth is not for us,” they laughed. “To say: ‘plant this because it is better’ – how many can do that? All who are told. But to be born into rank, to have the blood of ancient victors in your veins – that, my boy, is granted to a very few. You think you can threaten us? You don’t threaten us. You threaten the King – and so yourself!”

He found them turning away then, turning back to their dicing tables and women, and Laurence felt a sudden rush of contemptuous indifference, as well as a certain sense of freedom. It wasn't for him to change men's minds. Changing the crops was far easier – and far more productive.

There was one noble he was attracted to, however, whose name was Lord Cerbes. Laurence met him at a recital given by his daughter, Lady Lydia. Lydia was the focus of many youthful desires, but all such aspirations were tainted with a certain fear, for she was a woman much given to speaking her mind – a source of much criticism from Lord Cerbes' peers, who maintained that such habits should be rigorously checked at youth. She was a superb singer, and Laurence responded strongly to her passion and energy during the recital but, since she had vanished at its conclusion, had to content himself with approaching her father.

Lord Cerbes seemed quite aware of the direction of Laurence's interests, and listened to the young man's tales of agricultural renewal with a faint smile that indicated he knew exactly what sort of seed Laurence was actually selling. They discussed the ramifications of sheep, which Lord Cerbes' had recently introduced in great numbers in his lands in Yorkshire. The older man's pointed observations showed that he possessed a first-rate mind, and his watchful silence during Laurence's speeches indicated that he was not a man to be offended by originality. They parted after only a quarter of an hour, but exchanged cards and promised to keep in touch. Laurence walked out of the recital hall on a cloud, his whole sense of purpose renewed.

This sense of renewal proved difficult to maintain, especially during the Sunday morning breakfasts with his mother and sister.

Lady Barbara's reaction to the long process of change was somewhat surprising, given her intensely patrician upbringing. She still held the whole process in disdain, but believed that, while disgrace would surely be the result of such agricultural tampering, bankruptcy would not add insult to injury. "If we are to end our days as petty merchants," she was given to saying, "we shall not be poor ones to boot." Thus, though deriding the process at every step, she also disciplined herself to become as well-informed as possible, and had argued Laurence out of some disastrous decisions. She had read Smith's "The Wealth of Nations", numerous tracts of Ricardo's, some of 'Turnip' Townshend's eclectic literary mutterings, and even managed to procure some books written in the last century about England's "Treasure by Forraign Trafficke" – a decidedly distasteful endeavour, as she mentioned several times, since she had to send her servant Edith in disguise to London to retrieve it.

All this was because of a patently obvious case of that most pagan of maternal religions: son-worship. She regarded Laurence as little short of the Second Coming, though took great pains to hide her regard behind a relentlessly critical demeanor. All his decisions were opposed, all expenditures were examined microscopically, and she even kept a chart called "Returns on Expenditures" on the wall of the sunroom wherein all his mistakes were highlighted in bright red ink. It was only at his insistence that she began to pencil in his successes, though she preferred a hard gray pencil for those.

And, as is so often the case in families, as Laurence's fortunes grew, those of his sister dwindled.

His return made her acutely nervous. During the four years since, that nervousness had grown, fluctuating a little depending on the success of her various "projects".

If Lady Barbara had had her way, Kay's "projects" would have been outlined in a special graph of their own, all red and brightly lit. Laurence supplemented her meager allowance from his own stipend for these projects; he did not especially believe in them, but he granted that there may be divisions of ability within every family, and that his sister's incessant desire to do good might be her own area of competence.

An example often quoted to her detriment was the debacle of the shoes. One day, Kay came home in tears because she had seen a barefoot boy cut his foot while running. "Can you believe it?" she asked, her eyes wide, "in this age, to court infection and death, to be robbed of the chance to help in the harvest – for the sake of a pair of shoes!" She had been so insistent on the point, and so obvious in her desires, that Laurence had given her money to buy shoes for the unfortunates. Kay had gone round to every farmhouse and asked whether they had shoes. Naturally, word had traveled far faster than she could, and as a result, shoes disappeared from cottages and dirt was rubbed into the feet of the children. One family even pulled the horseshoes off their horse, and Kay arrived to find them lamenting and weeping over the thorns they had stuck into the poor beast's unshod hooves. The result of Kay's investigations was that over two hundred pairs of shoes were found wanting in the Carvey lands. Kay, of course, was not naive

enough to think that everyone was being totally forward with her, and so began paying surprise visits to households in the hopes of finding soled footprints in the yards or suspicious bundles in the children's pockets. This approach quickly degenerated into a game of hide-and-seek which forced even those with many pairs of shoes to walk about barefooted, in order to keep up appearances. Children – on orders from parents, perhaps – began staggering past the gates of the Carvey household, gripping their feet and crying out most piteously. A few men ceased showing up for work, complaining of their lack of shoes, and generally the pace of village life began to wind down as the issue of footwear grew from a dim hope of a freebie to a moral crusade; the affair becoming so mixed up in everyone's mind that Kay found herself unable to venture into the village for fear of being accosted with the demand to produce “th'shoes that was promised us!”

In the end, Laurence had to personally go down to London to order two hundred pairs of shoes, wait for the week it took to make them, and drive them back to his estate. The volume of the purchase had to be paid for dearly, and the net result of Kay's project was that a good deal of money was wasted in order to provide inferior shoes to those who already had better ones.

This was Kay's most notorious escapade, and it was made all the worse by her inability to contribute much to the cost of the shoes. She begged her mother to ask for the release of a hundred pounds of her dowry, but the late Lord Carvey had so ordered his will – knowing more about his daughter's habits than even his wife suspected – that she was unable to collect until she was married, or until the age of thirty, still four years hence. Kay had stayed in her room for a week, unable to face her family's anger.

To give Laurence credit, “anger” was too strong a word – he felt more of an impatient incomprehension that lacked the grudging respect of true anger. He didn’t pretend to understand his sister, but gave her the money in the hopes that it would keep her occupied. Laurence was a man who loved activity; he spent dawn to dusk solving problems: convincing recalcitrant farmers to try yet another innovation, reading the latest agricultural treatises, doing the books... It wasn’t for lack of love or concern that he found himself ignoring his sister, but rather that he felt he didn’t have the time to cater to her. When she came to him with that earnest, pleading look, he found himself strangely irritated, and felt an urge to shake her and demand that she face something – though what that something was, he had no idea.

Still, it was Kay who first brought Mary’s name up again – and that wasn’t something he was likely to forget in the years to come.

It happened on a Sunday morning. He was going over the books in the sun room. His mother sat at a table answering her correspondence, and his sister was on the floor, cutting articles out of the newspaper.

“Heavens,” Lady Barbara said, “Here’s another one. Listen to this:

I find it hard to comprehend, though word comes from a trusted mutual acquaintance, that your lovely parlour has been transformed from a place of civilized tea into a quaint little banking room where your son chews the ends off

his pencils in the hopes of raising your family's fortunes by dint of hard – though we shan't say gritty – labour. Margaret says that a family's fortune must have fallen far prior to the desire to raise it in such a manner, but I poo-poo that idea as positively out of step with modern times. No no, I say patiently, we shall all become bankers soon, and it is most proper that the venerable Carvey's (who have been quite trend-setting ever since the late Lord's strenuously stimulating book) should be so kind as to blaze the trail for the rest of us. Charles says that it shall all end in disaster, that we are seeing the end of civilization and all things Christian etc. etc., but then he is still in the throes of his battles with Bacchus, and we pay no heed to his millennial mutterings. Only say, my dear Barbara, that if we come to tea in the near future, we shall not be obliged to pay an entrance fee or leave a tip, for we do not carry coins ourselves, and that would require bringing extra servants.

Lady Barbara scowled, and tapped the paper, wrinkling her nose. “This from a woman who sees it fit to address me by my first name in a letter – though we have met only thrice – and does not care a fig that her insults show appallingly plainly.”

“Why you finish these letters is beyond me, Mother,” muttered Laurence. “And the fact that you let yourself be bothered by such vapid jabs is more credit to them than you.”

“Oh, it's not that I expect our flying plunge into the future to be arrested by such slights,” replied his mother. “But rather that you give a thought for the other side of the world, the world whose only concern with work is one's distance from it.”



“Mmm,” murmured Laurence, tabulating rapidly.

“Now this is horrible,” exclaimed Kay, propping her chin on her elbows. “Can you believe it? A woman in Battersea tied her children in a burlap sack and threw them into the Thames. She was about to follow suit when she was restrained by passers-by. All three children drowned. When asked why she did it, she said it was because she couldn’t stand her husband hitting them any more. She says that he had beaten them all with a table-leg – she was quite bruised herself – and she had only survived because the weapon hit the doorframe, bounced back and knocked him out. The police went to her room to find the husband, but he had cleared out. There was a terrific chunk torn out of the doorframe, and they found a table-leg on the floor with a little blood and some hairs stuck to it. They showed it to the woman and apparently the hair belonged to one of her children, because she tore the table leg from the policeman and hasn’t let go of it since.” Kay frowned. “She’s to be hung Saturday.”

“Mmm,” said Laurence distantly. “Awful.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Lady Barbara, throwing down another letter. “Now, this is too much! Lady Wadsworth has declined our invitation to supper because she says that they ‘lack the necessary apparel, it all having been recently cleaned’! This is absurd! It doesn’t even pass for wit!”

“Do you know, I met the oddest girl on the road yesterday – remember, I went to Tottenham for the day,” said Kay, turning on her side towards her brother. “She gave her name and asked about you, Laurence. She stopped my carriage for directions, and had the strangest look in her eyes. I took her for a mystic of sorts; she had such an intense... something. ‘Where is the ‘innovator’?’ she asked, I was very surprised – such words do not easily fall from the mouths of

our hapless poor. ‘What innovator?’ I asked. ‘I am looking for a certain gentleman,’ she replied. ‘I want to offer my services in his honour.’ I didn’t let on that I was your sister, for fear that she would ask for a ride, so I told her: there’s a man answering that description about fifteen miles from here, and I described our house and how to get here. She seemed bone-tired, so I don’t think she’ll be here today, but please satisfy my curiosity if you ever see her, for she looked like a most interesting person.”

“This girl – did she seem swollen in places?” asked Lady Barbara.

“No – on the contrary; it seemed that the wind was having difficulty finding her shape, she was so thin.”

“I haven’t been having affairs with peasants, Mother!” snapped Laurence. “What a sordid suspicion!”

“Half suspicion, half hope,” replied his mother. “It would be a relief to know that your desire for planting extended beyond the agricultural.”

“In time, in time – how many times do we have to have this conversation? I am a young man, with many things to do.”

She shrugged. “Other men are acting, other decisions being taken that will limit your choice when his majesty considers himself ready for marriage.”

“Then I shall have eliminated the unnecessary, for the woman I will love will also have had many things to do before marriage,” replied Laurence, rising from his chair and stretching. “And I honestly do not appreciate these ancient intrusions into what is, essentially, a modern life.”

“You see, Kay? Modern men have no time for wives – or mothers.”

“Modern men are driven by more than the need to maintain the bloodline. I do not condemn you for these beliefs, for we are all constituted partly of ourselves and partly of our circumstances, but my patience for these constant hints is wearing thin.”

“Hints!” cried Lady Barbara. “As if I do not speak plainly! Perhaps you are a ‘modern man’, and perhaps there is much in you that I will never understand, but all men – modern or otherwise – still need wives, and if they do nothing but grub in the earth until the world catches up with their lofty expectations, they will end their lives very sorry, and very alone!”

“I have tried explaining this before, Mother,” scowled Laurence. “If you took the half-hour to walk into town on market day you would see that I am doing far more than ‘grubbing in the earth,’ that what I have achieved is of tangible benefit to a great number of people. I have doubled our income since returning, and I plan to do a great deal more.”

“Yet one has to ask: will it ever be enough?” asked Kay, peering up through her hair.

Laurence shrugged. “I know of your beliefs as well, Kay. And if by some stroke of genius you find a better way to benefit the poor than I have, you shall find me an instant convert. But diminishing the family fortune for the sake of redundant footwear doesn’t hold much water in my book.”

“That is so unfair!” cried Kay, leaping to her feet. “Did you personally invent all these schemes of yours?”

“No, of course not, but...”

“Yes! You see – it was a process of trial and error, of which you are a mere beneficiary. Am I not to be allowed the same latitude, because I take a – a – different approach?”

“It is not a question of approaches, but of...”

“Effectiveness! I know!” she cried, her breath short. “And yes – you do your part to feed the bodies of the poor. Congratulations, you have discovered the turnip! But there is a lot more to human life than a full belly, Larry. Do you know that the Mundy boys have been terrorizing the cottagers who’ve turned to weaving? Why? Are they just bad – or have they been raised so? You can throw them in jail, and then their parents will starve, because Papa Mundy lifts his fingers only to scratch his head. What are their chances in your modern world? Everything for the middle, that’s what you offer: food and tiled roofs for the hard working and unimaginative – but there are those who cannot work that hard, either because they are above it, or below it, or have so many dreams in their heads that they feel like spitting on your offers of ploughs and cattle and brave new schemes!”

“Wait!” cried Laurence, raising his hands. “You have raised about five hundred objections in as many syllables. I can’t follow them all, let alone answer them properly. I work to create opportunity, yes, because that is what I do best. And I say again what I’ve said before: when you come to me with a better plan, you shall have my full energies at your disposal. But until then I shall work as I see fit, and will not be damned – by you or anyone – just because the advances I create are not spread as evenly as you would like. Or because I refuse to waste my time on Sunday brunches with vapid women. If you want the truth, I believe that these ideas come from a certain inactivity on both your parts – and I have no wish to step in this particular bed of nettles at this moment – but if you found something more productive to occupy your time we might find your constant desires to manage my life pleasantly diminished.”

“And what would you suggest?” demanded Kay, her voice trembling. “Needlepoint?”

“I can’t tell you how to occupy your time!” replied Laurence. “That is your business. But I repeat my offer to become more actively involved in the changes going on around you. Learn the books, learn the theories and practice, and I will willingly take your input. God knows I am having a hard enough time doing all of it alone!”

“You were born to do all this,” cried Kay. “Raised from day one as the family visionary. Yet I – every time I walked into the room, Daddy left it. It wasn’t as if I was looking for it. But it happened. Don’t look at me like that, so polite and sympathetic! You will never understand what it means to live in the shadows!”

“Kay – I am talking about agriculture,” reminded Laurence.

“Yes – all right, yes! Let’s talk about agriculture! Let’s talk about nourishment and light and the proper soil! You went away to school, you got to travel, you rose to your challenges naturally, because more and more was demanded of you. That was your light, your soil. And I am happy for you. I hold no resentments – except – except that I wish it had been so for myself!”

Lady Barbara sat silently, watching her daughter.

“Look,” said Laurence. “Perhaps I cannot understand. I don’t know what it is you are after, but if there is anything I can do to help, I am at your service.”

“It’s not for myself!” Kay’s face was pale. “I at least had pleasant surroundings and good food – and still do. But the poor... What are we to do about the poor?”

“I’m doing what I can,” replied her brother. “There are fewer poor now than when I started.”

“In a way, yes – but those who have escaped poverty in your way were never really poor. I want to be able to help the poor who will never have a chance, even under your way. The poor

who are so wretched that they don't even see the point of escaping their poverty. The poor who destroy their lives because they have no riches in themselves, no dreams or hopes or aspirations or thoughts of a better life. The poor who have had their humanity stripped from them and do not even know of their loss. How will you help them?"

"I don't know," shrugged Laurence.

"I don't either," replied Kay. "But when I do, there will be no stopping me."

"You will never know," said Lady Barbara suddenly. "And that will be your downfall. Both of you."

"I thought you had fallen asleep," remarked her son.

"As well I might have, given the redundancy of your conversation. So serious, so full of concern for weighty matters. But so ridiculous!"

"Yes, you have always thought so, haven't you?" said Kay.

"My dear child, we are not put on this earth to assume responsibility for all its problems. I find the view quite incomprehensible, actually. If, by all miracles, you found yourself able to make this little corner of England a paradise, what then? Why, then you must take on more responsibilities, for surely there are hungry children in Yorkshire, in Scotland and Ireland. And let us not forget the continent, for when England is perfect we have only scratched the surface. France, Holland – oh, Holland of course is already perfect – and further, for surely people need food in Turkey and Russia and China. Such a scope this new world sets for itself, while surprisingly enough life chugged along fairly tolerably before such lofty aspirations came along! If you want my advice – and, being young, you won't, for you believe all age is prejudice – you will get married, raise a happy family and leave the world richer by five or so pleasant people."

Kay's face went as white as a sheet. "That is to be the sum of my life? Procreation and sing-alongs?"

"It has done for many before you. And if you think that motherhood is a kind of song, then you are greatly mistaken. Learning what to plant from books is child's play in comparison. You are both proof of that."

"It's so easy to say so after the fact," said Laurence.

"Laurence, you are a strange kind of idealist – and rather simple-hearted too – so I will tell you this plainly: without happy families, the world may be well fed, but it will still be unhappy. And that is all I shall ever have to say on the matter." With that, she rose and left the room.

"How strange," murmured Laurence, taking his seat and gazing through the glass walls.

Kay looked up. "What?"

"Do you remember much of growing up, Kay?" he asked suddenly, turning to her.

She smiled, her cheeks red. "A little."

"Everything I remember is about being schooled, about learning this and that or fighting over nothing at all. I remember coming home, but I don't really remember what it was like."

"You were out a lot. I always wished I were even a little – forceful. Your friends were so loud. Do you remember when you were going back to school once, and I kissed you goodbye at the carriage and you shooed me off because you were so embarrassed?"

"No – I don't remember that. Sounds like me, though."

"That's something I've never understood about you. Always admired it, but never understood it."

"What?"

Kay's hands fluttered. "Oh, it's odd... You've just always had something about you, a kind of certainty. A force. You think for ten seconds and go on without a moment's doubt. I think for a month and still feel unsure."

Laurence shrugged. "I never thought about that. What can you do? Life is short. Decide."

"But don't you ever get this feeling that you are living in absolutely the wrong way, and that some day you will be revealed as an utter fraud?"

Laurence smiled. "That's a strange idea. What kind of fraud?"

"It's sort of that – when you're young, you have a certain type of momentum – everyone does, I think. An energy. But have you ever noticed how many older people seem unhappy? Not unhappy, but sort of – gray. I've always thought that if you don't take good care of that simple sort of basic energy, you will become very unhappy in time. Or just gray. I can't figure out what that means."

"Gray..." mused Laurence. "Yes – I know what you mean. I've never really thought about it. Perhaps it's because people get bored of their youthfl habits, the socializing and so forth, and have nothing to replace it with later on." He laughed. "That's rather stupid, but it's what sprang to mind."

"There are people..." Kay coughed a little, then cleared her throat. Her voice quivered as she spoke. "There are people, political madmen, who believe that we are parasites, that we can do all the good we want but we are still parasites, and always will be. I don't know if you've seen the pamphlets, in London..."

Laurence nodded slowly. "I've seen them."



“They’re quite hysterical, but very earnest. They... frighten me more than I can say. Things seemed so content for so long. I don’t know why there is such anger now. I know – yes, there had to be a change, but what kind of change will that be? Are we all to become farmers?” Kay shuddered. “It’s not that I would mind the work. But I feel so sort of – fragile – that if it weren’t just an experiment, if it were something that I had to live with every day, my whole life long – I honestly think I would kill myself!”

Laurence frowned. “Hm. You know, I’ve had a hard time understanding you. If you don’t mind the frankness, I’ve always thought you were rather – flighty.”

“Of course! But think of it, Laurence! If something were to happen, if we lost our fortune or were turned out of this house – what would happen to me?”

“That will never happen. We are too valuable.”

“But if it did? You would be all right – you could join the army or manage someone else’s estate. But without a proper dowry – where would I go?”

“I would take care of you.”

“That’s a frightening thought.”

“Why?”

“How would you feel if I said the same thing to you?” asked Kay.

Laurence laughed. “Oh, but...”

“Yes – you see? It would be humiliating beyond words.”

“Yes, but that is, after all, the way of the world. Women are at the mercy of fortune. But it has its advantages. Mother has led a very happy life.”

Kay shuddered. “I wonder. But you see – I know you have always scorned my desires to do good. Don’t frown – I know it’s true. But really, Larry, anyone can plant better. The act of kindness, however... The poor are quite a brutal lot. That is their life, I think. I have had leisure enough to develop a certain type of – sensitivity, let’s say. I feel positively wounded when I see a poor man wandering the road. That sounds extreme, I know, but it’s so. But it may be the only thing we have to offer when everything else becomes – general. If we can just find a way to ease people’s burdens – those who cannot ease their own, I mean – then our lives, our way and means of life, will be justified. Perhaps not forever, for perhaps even sensitivity will not be ours alone forever, but, at least for now, it gives us an answer to those who say we are parasites. In America there is no aristocracy, and they believe that is all for the better. If America does well, it will not be long before we are called to account. If all we have to offer is easily-shared knowledge about agriculture or art, then I fear we will go the way of the dodo.”

There was a pause after Kay’s lengthy speech.

“That’s very interesting,” said Laurence finally, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “I understand your position, and appreciate your concerns, but I have no idea how to turn this – sensitivity – into practice.”

“Yes – I know. It is to me nothing more or less than a jumble of fears and hopes,” admitted Kay, glowing inwardly.

“You know, speaking of sensitivity, I remember one thing I am very ashamed of.” He turned to look at her. “When I had just returned from traveling, I went to dinner at Farmer Jigger’s. There was an odd little girl there – I don’t think you ever knew her. Mary, her name was. She had – the most intense eyes. I was showing off a little – I was very enthusiastic, I remember –

and she said some very strange things. Insulted my position, as it were, as if anything I could do was in the wrong. Of course, I didn't take offense; she was just a little girl, and obviously overwrought in some way, but Farmer Jigger lost his head completely. Threw her out of the house. Her home. You know, I did nothing." His forehead wrinkled. "I just stood there and watched it happen. I knew I needed Farmer Jigger's approval to start changing things, and I thought: it is a small sacrifice for a greater good. I offered to help her as she left – God she looked pitiful, with her little pillowcase of clothes – and as she looked at me, I knew she knew I didn't mean it. Her face haunted me – there was such a depth of vengeance in her eyes that I half-expected to be murdered in my sleep for months afterwards." He laughed sadly. "It was quite silly. I used to wonder what had happened to her. She's probably dead by now. But I think I lacked that – sensitivity you spoke of. I might act differently now."

"That girl – her name was Mary?"

"Yes."

Kay's face was pale.

"What?" asked Laurence, standing suddenly.

"It's probably nothing but the most absurd coincidence... That woman I met on the road yesterday – the thin one – I think she said her name was – Mary."

Her brother's eyes widened. "Really?"

"The intensity of her eyes – that's what reminded me..."

Laurence turned away from Kay abruptly, and began pacing the carpet.

"Larry – what?"

“Your talk has moved me, Kay,” he said rapidly. “Perhaps I have forgotten something, in my drive to improve everything.” He turned to her, his face flushed. “Listen: if you can think of something that makes sense – if you can come up with a plan to help her or people like her – then you have my full, unqualified support. Yes – I have been missing something... It’s not everyday one gets to atone for an old sin. I hope it is her.”

“Yes,” said Kay fervently. “I hope so too.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *A Fading Flower's First Feast*

KAY ROSE QUITE EARLY THE NEXT DAY, WHICH SURPRISED EVERYONE. Her desire to laze about in bed in the morning was well known. She often demanded to know the reason why the hours between six and ten in the morning were automatically considered more valuable than the time between ten and two at night, when she stayed up late reading or writing in her journal.

She got out of bed at seven, dressed with care, choosing a simply-cut dress and low shoes from her scant wardrobe. She tied her hair back in a tight bun, and applied only the bare minimum of powder, and was downstairs by eight.

“You’re up early,” commented Lady Barbara when Kay came down to the drawing room. The older woman slept very little, and was sitting on the sofa, reading a slim volume in the dim light of early morning, dressed impeccably. *Where does she get the time?* Kay wondered.

“Expecting someone?” asked her mother.

“Yes and no.”

“You should always inform the other members of the household if guests are expected,” she said sternly, peering over her glasses. “Those are the simple rules of co-existence.”

“Co-existence,” muttered Kay, walking up to the window and pulling the lace back a little.

“What are you reading?”

“A rather sordid little piece called...” Lady Barbara checked the spine. “‘Songs of Experience’. It’s a new form of art, quite in keeping with these modern times. Sordid, self-aggrandizing and reeking of emotion. Won’t go very far. Who are you expecting?”

“Is Laurence around?”

“He went out early to check on the Jiggers. Said they were worried about rot in the seed-crop. A shame he wasn’t here to see you in this light.”

“I’m surprised he left so early.”

“Why?”

“There’s a woman he was expecting. The one I spoke of yesterday.”

“The peasant.”

“We spoke of her after you walked out yesterday. He knew her years ago.”

“Well?”

“What?”

“Well? He knew her well?” snapped Lady Barbara.

“No – not really.”

“I see. Stop fidgeting, child. Are you so eager for this girl’s appearance?”

“You know – I think I am,” she said, gazing out the window. “I think she will be very interesting.”

“Really?”

“Her eyes yesterday... I have never seen such intensity.” Kay turned to her mother, leaning back against the windowsill. “Do you know, I’ve wondered for years how to help the poor; they can’t tell me because they lack the knowledge to look at themselves objectively. But someone who was born poor and has risen from the pit of ignorance by her own fingernails – what a perspective she must have! Do you think – I know this sounds daft, Mother – but do you think that it might be possible to have her stay with us for a time?”

“I beg your pardon?” said Lady Barbara, closing her book with a little bang. “Have you utterly lost your mind? We know nothing about this creature.”

“Oh, I know we will have to be careful,” said Kay, examining her fingernails. “But I’m thinking – what if she is a nice girl, knows her place and all that.”

“We have more than enough servants. Have you had breakfast?”

“I’m not hungry. But mother...”

“I have said no.”

“But...”

“Kay. No.”

Kay jerked her head and stared out the window, her eyes suddenly brimming with tears.

*Damn it! she cried silently, why am I such a child? She caught a glimpse of her mother from the corner of her eye, and felt a sudden stab of hatred. Sitting there pretending to read, she thought, as if she were a rational creature who has made a reasonable decision! And why is it she should show me so little respect? Is it because I am unmarried and striving for something better? Perhaps it is true that her generation is nothing but a barrier to progress, because they are so impressed by station and bearing and a thousand other stupid things! And how ridiculous it is for me to become upset by her idiocies! I am twenty-six, many years an adult, and seething because of a stupid slight! But perhaps there should come a time where I shall cease to be injured by pettiness, cease to be enraged by insults – and perhaps that time will only come if I stand up to them, to all of it – to her!*

“Mother,” she said suddenly, a little frightened by the authority in her voice.

Lady Barbara looked up.

“Daughter.”

“I think it is very unfair of you to dismiss something that I ask for without even considering the question properly.”

Lady Barbara nodded. “I see.”

Kay blinked, frowning. “So, I would like you to consider it properly.”

“Properly. You mean: agree with you.”

“No! Just – if it’s a bad idea, I want to know why!”

Lady Barbara sighed. “Days may be long, but not long enough for this kind of foolishness.”

“Why is it foolishness?” cried Kay. “Why?”

“Daughter – control yourself!” ordered Lady Barbara. “I see no point in elaborating on a fairly obvious and rather inconsequential decision. And that is final.”

Kay shook her head, seeking self-control. *Why am I so enraged?*

“All right,” she said, her voice trembling. “If you are not willing to discuss it I shall take your answer as yes!”

Lady Barbara closed her book and thrust it down on a little lacquered side-table. “If this is how you act when you rise early, I would rather you slept late! If you want to attack my authority, you must wait until you come of age, at which point you may make all the stupid decisions you like!”

“But what makes it so...”

“Oh, do be quiet!” snapped Lady Barbara. “Ridiculous child! Do you have nothing better to do than bother me? Leave me in peace!”

“I shall ask her to stay, nonetheless.”



“And I shall turn her out. Nonetheless.”

“You are such a...” cried Kay, trailing off. “What right do you have...”

“To your room!” shouted Lady Barbara, rising from the couch imperiously.

Kay burst into tears. “What right? Just because you hold the purse-strings?”

“To your room, evil child! Out of my sight!”

“So sad!” Kay shot back, her cheeks blazing. “Your whole life – so sad!”

The two women froze as a knock sounded on the door.

“Enter,” said Lady Barbara, as Kay hurriedly wiped her face with the curtain.

Edith, the maid, entered the room quietly and stood by the door. Kay and Lady Barbara stared at the maid for almost full minute before Lady Barbara gave her permission to speak.

“Lady without calling card, madam,” she said, curtsying.

“Her appearance?”

“Poor.”

“Wait outside,” Lady Barbara commanded the maid, who nodded and left. She stared at her daughter for a long time, then spoke.

“I am not in the habit of granting permission to exercise whim, young lady, and I do not wish this capitulation to be a sign of free license on anyone’s part.”

“Thank you, Mother,” sniffled Kay, terribly excited.

“Edith!” The maid entered. “Send her in. Give her some slippers. See she doesn’t touch anything. And take these curtains down for cleaning.”

The maid curtsied again and left, and the two women stood immobile before the door was gently pushed open.

The young woman who stood in the doorway had a strange appearance. She was thin, of medium height, her face was wide, focused, yet there was something about her, a shadow perhaps, that seemed to dwarf the room; her body seemed to sway like a thin curtain before a wondrously distant and fantastical view. Her dark eyes gleamed like the night sparks of a distant volcano. She raised her gaze to Kay and Lady Barbara, and they almost shrank back, as if this thin woman were leaping at them.

“Your name was not announced,” said Lady Barbara, narrowing her eyes.

“Good – morning,” said the young woman. “My name is Mary. Mary O’Donnel.”

“Neither was your business here explained.”

“I have business – with the gentleman of the household.”

“Lord Carvey is not at home at the moment.”

“Oh!” Mary looked to Kay. “I met you yesterday – on the road...”

“Excuse my reticence at that time,” smiled Kay, stepping forward. “I had many things to do, and somehow guessed that we would have ample time to talk. And we will – you may be sure of that.”

Mary flushed violently. Her hand wandered for the support of a nearby chair. “Yes – thank you,” she whispered.

“Please – sit down,” ordered Lady Barbara. “Are you hungry?”

“No,” said Mary. “But some tea – if it’s not too much trouble...”

“See to it, Kay,” said Lady Barbara. “Personally.”

Kay hesitated, unable to tear her eyes from Mary, then left the room, almost bumping into a sofa. “Excuse me,” she said, then laughed loudly.

“Are you his mother?” asked Mary, taking a seat.

“I am. But, more importantly, I am the mistress of the household. And as such, you will forgive me for asking exactly what you desire of my son.”

“Oh!” laughed Mary. “That’s nothing mysterious. I was at a – placement – near Sheffield when I overheard – quite by chance – that Lord Carvey had embarked on some remarkable experiments. He and I met – again, quite by chance – some years ago, and he offered me some aid, with no specific time limit attached. No no; I haven’t come for any aid, but rather that I have spent some time learning things that I believe would be of use to him, and I wanted to come and offer my services. To his honour.”

“Services? As what?”

“It’s, erm, very silly,” blushed Mary, “and perhaps it will come to nothing, but I believe, from what I’ve heard, that there are certain improvements that he may not have paid full attention to, that I could help him understand. Not that he’ll need much help, because he seems like such an intelligent – fellow – but I thought I might be of use to him. In that area.”

“I see. And this will take how long?”

“Oh, I see. A good question. No, I am not planning to move in, but I think that he would do well to take on a sort of – research assistant. Not permanently, because there is still such a limited amount of material, but for a few weeks at least. Or so.”

“Lord Carvey has many friends – brilliant friends, I’m afraid,” said Lady Barbara. “Thus I find it hard to imagine that he would have any need for the scholarly services of an obviously-  
uneducated peasant.”

Mary swallowed, her face pale. “Yes – of course, I understand. Yet it may be that there are very few in this world who have a full grasp of what he is attempting to do. It’s probable that he doesn’t in fact understand it fully himself – though that sounds silly, I know, because, as I said, he is so clever. I may have – er – that to offer.”

“And what is this – ‘full grasp’ of which you speak?”

Mary pursed her lips tightly, then nodded. “Yes – well, this may not put me in your good books, for I see that you are an uncommonly determined lady, but it is something I would rather pursue with Lord Carvey, if I am to be allowed.”

“He won’t be returning until after lunchtime. What would you propose doing in the interim?”

Mary blinked. “Um – well – waiting?”

“I’m afraid that is quite impossible, if you expect to sit in my drawing room for some four hours...”

“No no,” said Mary rapidly. “I could wait outside. It’s all the same to me. Although this room is very beautiful.”

“Some tea!” cried Kay, kicking the door open and striding in with a tray. Lady Barbara shot her a savage look.

“So tell me,” said Kay, setting the tea down and turning to Mary, “How was your trip? Come a long way?”

“Is our guest to help herself?” asked Lady Barbara. Mary regarded at her carefully.

“No – of course not,” laughed Kay, leaning forward. “Sugar?”

“A hint,” said Mary.

“There.”

“Thank you.”

Kay stretched back on the couch, raising her arms over her head. “You’re welcome. Where are you from?”

“I came from a farm near Sheffield,” said Mary, sitting back in her chair. “I have been walking for little over a week.”

“How did you hear of Larry?” grinned Kay, drawing another venomous look from her mother. “You lived near here before, you said.”

Mary nodded. “At the Jigger Farm. Four years ago.”

“Why did you leave?” asked Lady Barbara sharply.

“Because I was unhappy,” replied Mary softly.

“Bosh! Few have that luxury – at any level. Why?”

“I was thrown out.”

“Yes,” said the old woman, casting a triumphant glance at her daughter. “More like it. On what grounds?”

“I was full of hatred for the appearances of this world.”

“And this led you to what?”

“Bitterness. Spite. Anger. A feeling of injustice.”

“Yes, yes,” said Lady Barbara. “But why exactly were you evicted?”

“Because I insulted Lord Carvey when he came to dinner,” replied Mary.

“Oh – you remember, Mother!” said Kay. “When Laurence first came back, he went on his tour of the farmhouses, when it all started. Was that when it happened?”

“Yes – he talked of his reforms that night.”

“How did you insult him?” asked Lady Barbara.

“I suggested – though perhaps stated would be a more appropriate term – that he was not the rightful owner of his wealth.”

“A freethinker.”

“Not really, if I may. I was very young at the time. It was not me speaking, but a kind of devil.”

“How strange!” exclaimed Kay. “Are you superstitious?”

“No,” replied the young woman evenly, looking straight at her. “Not in the way you mean.”

Kay leaned forward. “How do I mean?”

“That’s enough!” said Lady Barbara. “I have come to a decision.”

“Really, Mother – we were just talking!”

“Oh do be quiet! Young lady, you are not to stay here. In fact, you are never to speak to my son, unless you are willing to incur my wrath, which shall make being cast out of a farmhouse at tender age a country picnic in comparison. And now I would appreciate it if you would leave, immediately, without finishing your tea, and never set foot near my house or its lands again!”

Mary stared at the old woman for a moment, her face white and still, her eyes radiating a strange kind of chill. She shivered, a delicate peal ringing from her teacup.

“I hope I have done nothing to offend you,” she said softly. “I will of course respect your wishes.”

“Mother! This kind of rudeness is utterly uncalled for!” cried Kay, her eyes flashing. “I find no offense in the young lady!”

“Which is precisely why I do,” replied Lady Barbara, rising and ringing the bell. “Edith!” There was an agonized pause as they listened to the maid’s footsteps approaching the room.

“Yes, madam?” said Edith, opening the door.

“Please escort the young lady out,” she ordered, her face set.

Edith, to whom Lady Barbara was the model of moral perfection, assumed a rather similar expression as she approached Mary.

“There is no need for this. I know the way,” said Mary, standing suddenly. The sixth sense which seemed awakened by her presence detected a dismal haze of confusion and terror coming from the young woman, an unstable shimmering of conflict and desire. Lady Barbara found the sensation almost unbearable.

“Make haste, creature!” she cried.

Mary almost fled the room, closely followed by the maid, who made shooing motions with her hands as she pursued her out the door.

“Not a word, daughter,” said Lady Barbara, taking a deep breath, rubbing her face and almost dislodging her glasses. “I am going to dress for a walk.” With a last stern look, she walked out, head erect.

Kay stood for a moment, agonizing at her indecision, then rushed to the window, flung back the lace and threw the pane wide. She thrust her head through the opening like a caged bird

nosing a loose wicker door. Craning her neck, she saw Mary wandering down the path to the front gate of the house, her back held erect by an inhuman act of will. Suddenly Kay felt a chasm of sympathy, seeing in her mind's eye the struggle of a lost child with a blazing mind, a creature out of sorts with every waking moment, a soul whose future loomed like a shark, widening to snap every opportunity and shred every means of momentum. To be granted a mind, she thought – not mindless prejudice or blind conformity – and to have to beg charity from those who in freedom would be distant spectators to one's brilliance... Kay felt a sudden soulful inrush of breath as she glimpsed a very different view of the human horizon... *Yes, she thought rapidly, there are many divisions in our lot, many who work and create with their hands, many who think clearly and steadily and go from A to B as if the learned alphabet were the only possible letters, many who go to church and worship stained art in a kind of second-hand reverence... And why not?* she also thought – *we do not all have to reinvent the wheel to build a new carriage; we are not all born to view life first-hand, to see its essence, otherwise we should starve in the pursuit of perfection, for who would till the fields in the span between what is, and what is to come? But those who are?* Kay was not so distant from the hub of thought to be unaware of the changes overtaking the wide fields of philosophy; she too knew the names of Locke, Bacon, Smith. She had read some of their works, her head spinning, rootless and fearful in her excitement of the future. Yet these men were born and educated within the narrow crown of privilege, and Kay had a sudden vision of those with similar brilliance, those who laboured over the broken shoes of horses, dreams of a better world finished to the last dotted “i” knotted under the cover of their grimy foreheads; all those scattered by the divinity of intelligence in a blind scatter-shot over the face of the world, regardless of means or privilege or possibility, like



fertile seeds dropped from a blind wandering crow, falling even faster on the harsh rocks of poverty than on the lush earth of privilege.

All this passed in rapid succession through Kay's mind, and she felt a wrenching of perspective that spun her from repressed daughter to agent of change, an acolyte of intelligence whose only job was to unlock the door, to scatter straw in the pews and stand in the darkness as the priests performed their rituals, the salvation.

*Yes*, she thought with absolute finality, turning and running from the room. *We all have a purpose!*

Reaching the gate, she saw Mary wandering up the narrow road towards the village. Kay ran after her thin form, heedless of her slippers.

"Miss O'Donnel!" she cried, panting, unused to exercise.

The young woman turned, and Kay saw that her cheeks were lined with tears, like streaks of chalk against a gray board. *What pale skin she has*, thought Kay.

She stopped before the young woman and waved a hand, bowing her head to her knees in an attempt to regain her breath.

"Did I leave something behind?" asked Mary. "It's unlikely."

"No – no – listen," gasped Kay. "I think – if I am right – that you will know what I mean when I say – I understand..."

Mary gazed at her, her eyes deep and startled. She took a step forward, then back, wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand, smudging her tear-tracks.

"What do you understand?" she asked finally.

“Whooo!” exhaled Kay, standing and fanning her face. The sun was hot; the shielding leaves dissolved the fierce light into deep green shimmers. “That’s better! Can we sit?”

“On the road?”

“There’s a log,” said Kay, indicating a skinned trunk beside the path.

They sat for a few moments in silence. Mary’s hand caressed the bare wood. She turned to look at Kay.

“Do you know, I saw many trees like this, when I was young. I wondered why men would strip the bark from trees like this. When I was nine, I saw why.”

“Why?”

“Just after Lent. A man, barely more than skin and bone, was caught at the Jigger farm tearing the bark off the trees with his bare fingers. ‘I have responsibilities’, he cried when caught. He was hoping to make a kind of soup with the tree bark, because his family had nothing to eat since they were turned off their land. It was quite a common practice until very recently. Still is, beyond these lands.”

“That’s – awful.”

“We have had so little grace in our history,” said Mary, rubbing the bark and looking up at the leaves. “So little justice. The aristocracy got theirs, those with the strength to work got enough, and the rest got – bark soup and broken fingernails. Can you imagine that?”

Kay paused, looked at Mary, then gazed down at her own shoes. “I can imagine something worse,” she murmured.

“Yes – I think you can,” said Mary, gazing at her. “And that is why you say you understand.”

“When did you first know?”

Mary shrugged. “There was never a time of not knowing,” she replied.

“It must have been awful.”

“It was.”

“And I think it is over.”

She looked at Kay quickly, carefully. “Is that in your power to say?”

“My mother is – of the old school,” said Kay, “if that makes any sense. Alone, I might not have the ability to change her mind. But Laurence – he feels he owes you a great debt.” Kay laughed nervously. “That’s privileged information, of course, but somehow I trust you. I’m not sure I should be telling you this, because you may use it wrongly. I don’t think so, but I have been trained to caution.”

Kay saw her words disappearing into Mary, like birds into a deep well.

“I didn’t think such reflections existed any more. Or such memories,” said Mary.

“Not all who have wronged you are wrong.”

“No, perhaps – but when some chance incident has had such an effect on your life, it is hard to imagine the perpetrators remembering it, let alone acknowledging their fault. Yet I can be very useful to your brother,” said Mary with a sudden, unhinged smile, “and perhaps to you too. These – accomplishments of his – they are a stage, and an important stage, but only the beginning.”

“What do you mean?”

Mary laughed shakily. “I will tell you when I have fully absorbed your kindness. I owe you a debt, both for having the empathy to see, and the courage to defy your mother and wind

yourself running after me. And to sit and listen to a grimy peasant-girl, barely worth her keep in material terms.”

“It’s no struggle to listen,” smiled Kay, reaching out and touching Mary’s thin forearm.

“And there are things I shall want from you too, in time.”

“That is beyond wonderful to hear...” said Mary, her eyes brimming. She turned and looked at the path for a moment, startled at a sound. There was a figure walking up the path; his high whistling was faintly audible. Mary leapt up violently, and her gaze shot like an arrow towards the distant figure.

“What is it?” asked Kay, standing as well.

“Look at that man!” said Mary breathlessly, pointing.

“What about him?”

“He’s an ally,” cried Mary. “Never mind – one learns to see such signs.”

“What signs?”

“The way he walks – he is eager, unafraid.”

As they watched, the man leaned over, picked up something from the road, and popped it in his mouth. Straightening, he saw the two women, waved and walked towards them. Startled by the flurry of movement beside her, Kay turned and watched as Mary beat her tattered dress, smooth her wild hair, lick her palms and rub her face violently.

“Ah – ladies!” called the man pleasantly, waving. “Best of the morning to you! I am looking for the Carvey mansion! Is this the right path?”

“Yes, but they don’t see peddlers!” called Kay. “You will be turned away at the door.”

“Quite right!” grinned the man, stopping in front of them. He was tall, slender and quite young. His cap was pushed far back on his head, and his fair hair lay in lank strands over his broad forehead. His face was handsome in a rough sort of way, his brown eyes merry and open. “Sensible precautions in these uncertain times,” he said, spitting a pebble onto the path and smiling apologetically. “For the thirst. Were I a mere hawker of wares, I would heed your warning and turn my heels immediately, right smart. Yet I see before me a strange sight – a woman who obviously belongs to a regal house sitting in the woods with a peasant girl of uncanny appearance. Things I would like to know more about, as my name is Adam Footer.” He extended his hand towards Kay. Mary grabbed it tightly, then Kay found herself also shaking it.

“Yes – quite a beautiful day,” continued Adam, staring at Mary and rubbing his fingers. “A day when a man yearns for the lazings of his betters to enjoy it properly. I have been walking since before dawn, and thinking many strange thoughts on the beauty of this world. For that is my trade, if trade you want to call it: the beauty of this world!”

“What exactly do you sell, Mr. Footer?” asked Kay, intrigued despite herself.

“Ah – what do I sell? There it is, in a nutshell, although the answer cannot be contained in such a space!” laughed Adam. “I sell marriage and the reflection of fair cheeks. I sell freedom from disease and ugliness, golden traps for happily eccentric gentlemen and earthy traps for sun-baked lads of fourteen. I sell bounty and pleasure for the things of the flesh – along with visions of angels and spotless dreams for those aspiring to divinity. I sell magic, in a word, and those that call me a liar are the unimaginative few.”

“A strange pitch,” observed Kay. “Opaque, although pleasantly expressed.”

“Yes – well expression is the heart of the matter. Look at you, young pretty,” said Adam, regarding Mary with twinkling eyes. “I see none of the glow of good marriage about you (and I do not for a moment believe that you would settle for anything less). But then it would take nothing less than an eagle to see your loveliness behind your apparel. This dress is – how old? Three years? Five?”

“I don’t remember,” said Mary, blushing fiercely.

“And why should you have to?” cried Adam. “That’s my question! That cut comes from the Sheffield area, or take my hair. A shilling if it was a penny. Rough to the skin – I am surprised you are not sanded to a skeleton. Greek statues cased in burlap come to mind when I behold such incongruities. And why should it be so? Is there not a new world dawning? Have not sheep now multiplied tenfold for the beautification of women? Are not these new fabrics a godsend, an admirable canvas on which to hang eternal pictures of loveliness? For, since you asked,” he said, turning to Kay, “that is what I sell – and proud I am of it too!”

“Cloth?” asked Kay.

Adam smiled. “No – not me. That is for those with agile fingers, not agile minds. I sell the ‘means to cloth’ (if you’ll excuse the phrase). I sell power-looms – or rather rent them, for to sell them would be to give them, given the means of most peasants.”

“Then why are you going to my house?” asked Kay. “Are you expecting us to set up shop in our drawing room?”

“Oh, no!” smiled Adam. “A new world is dawning, but one sun is rising while the other has yet to set, if you catch my meaning. Young Lord Carvey is the master of all he surveys – and it has not escaped my attention that he is also master of certain changes, a master which has drawn

me here like a bee to honey. I will go to him and say: I carry the new world in my rucksack, but if you wish to stay with the old I shall depart unoffended, for not everyone is born to rebel against scarcity – and there is precious little understanding in this land about the value of sheep, for many believe that the wool market has turned sheep into wolves, into rabid beasts that hound the worthy off their lands and drive them to the woods to live on berries. Such is not my opinion, not by a long shot, but only the power of persuasion lies between dreams and achievement.”

“Lord Carvey has looked into the matter of sheep,” said Kay. “It has not proven viable, despite your eloquence.”

“Yes – and this time he looked – it was when?”

“About a year ago.”

“Ah,” said Adam with a deep sigh of relief. “That was before landowners became acquainted with a certain device, a device whose power it was to fulfill their wildest dreams. A device called a ‘power loom’. You have heard of it?”

“Yes,” said Mary, leaning forward. “Yes – I have heard of it. Do you have one?”

“I am not so tall that I can carry two hundred pounds on an afternoon stroll,” grinned Adam, unslinging his rucksack. “I find the conveyance of certain drawings far more convenient.” He pulled out a wide sheet of vellum from his pack, untied it carefully and spread it out on the path.

“There she is,” said Adam proudly as they knelt over the drawing. “I can get you five in the span of a week – more if you need – and in the wink of an eye your fortunes will rise as you had never thought possible. You’ll get ten, twelve times more cloth than doing it by hand. With industry, she’ll pay for herself in a single season. Lord Carvey has been a wizard with the crops,

but there's nothing to do with such bounty but grow more, and transport is still spotty. With this, he can grow enough for want, and turn the rest to weaving. Two directions, boom boom, nothing to come but gold, piles of it, and no end in sight!"

"Go – go up to the house!" whispered Mary reverently. "But – wait until after lunch."

"Who are you to say?" asked Kay sternly, then regretted it immediately. "Mr. Footer – I will broach the subject with Lord Carvey, for he is my brother, as you have doubtless guessed."

"Lady!" said Adam with a bow. "I am eternally in your debt, but I would be a liar if I didn't broach one small hesitation."

"What is that?"

Adam frowned and pulled his cap forward a few inches. "You are a worthy lady, lovely as spring and smart as summer – but I am indeed called a fair seller, and would be most happy to be given the opportunity to state my case and reasons in person. For, though you are marked with intelligence, you lack the knowledge to answer all possible questions; that is my livelihood, as it were, and for the betterment of all I should appreciate the chance to exercise it."

"Yes, perhaps, but..."

"And, though I would welcome nothing more than a world where you alone had the power of purchase, such a world must be won by bounty, and if such a world appeals to you as well, you will let me aid you in this way."

Kay smiled. "Mary – what do you think?"

"I think," said Mary, "that your brother will thank you greatly if you let Mr. Footer speak to him."



“And it would more than make up for the shoes,” murmured Kay. “All right, Mr. Footer. Come midafternoon and I shall guarantee you an audience with my brother.”

Adam smiled, rolling up his paper. “Then you are indeed a worthy lady. And if I might trouble you for a few syllables more, I would ask if there is not a pleasant spot near here to drink and nap where the sun is mild.”

Kay smiled. “Of course – if you follow this path for a half-mile more, you will see a smaller one going towards the west. Follow it for a hundred yards or so and you will come to a swimming hole. Just take care to thrash around as you approach, for some of our maids have been known to swim there on such a day as this.”

“I shall be doubly careful,” said Adam. “Good day, then.” He nodded, touched his cap, and walked off down the road. Insects drifted around his head like dandelions; shadows shifted over his creasing shirt as he walked away.

“You shouldn’t be so obvious, you know,” said Kay – and it felt strange to talk to her in this way, almost as a comrade, and she suddenly felt the absence of a female friend, of things whispered, and a pang rang through her heart.

“Was I obvious?” asked Mary dreamily. Kay saw in a glance that the depth of her vision indicated a starvation of friendship that she would scarcely have believed possible.

“Perhaps ‘obvious’ is not the right word,” she commented. “‘Fanatic’ may be more apt.”

“There are so few of them – these good souls – have you ever noticed?”

“Come to one of my dances sometime!” laughed Kay, then swallowed. “Never mind. The thing to do is find you a place to stay until Laurence and I can change mother’s mind.”

Mary shuddered, shaking her head. “Please don’t suggest the Jigger’s.”

“No – is there anyone else you remember?”

Mary frowned, as if struck by a sudden memory. “Tell me – is Knotted Bob still alive?”

“Knotted Bob? Who’s that?”

“He’s a cripple, a rheumatic. Ancient.”

“Oh – I didn’t know that was his name. He used to work at the Jigger’s, yes?”

“Yes.”

“He has a little cottage. Laurence gives him some money, on occasion. He’s up the road a ways. Towards the village. Where the Mundies used to live. You know the way? Can you make it alone?”

“Oh yes,” replied Mary. “Listen – I want to thank you. I had no idea that such a wild scheme would meet with such luck – such goodness.”

“Don’t thank me,” smiled Kay. “I plan to put you to good use. But you’re welcome anyway.”

“I have the feeling that we may become some sort of friend to each other,” said Mary, blushing. “As far as that is possible.”

Kay clasped her hand warmly. Mary turned her head, overcome.

“I’m sure of it, Mary,” said Kay. “Call on me tomorrow morning. We will try to make some arrangements.”

“Thank you – Kay...” whispered Mary.

After they parted, Kay turned for a moment to watch Mary's thin form walking towards the bright haze of high summer. She felt a sudden rush of pity, and found herself quite sick at heart when she finally mounted the steps to her own home.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *A Meeting of Memories*

KNOTTED BOB WAS NOT SHOCKED WHEN THE DOOR OF HIS COTTAGE OPENED and he saw Mary standing in the doorway. He was not jaded, of course, nor senile, but he had lived quite long enough to realize that the number of coincidences in one life should never be underestimated. Mary stood in the doorway, thin, erect, her eyes blank and impenetrable. Knotted Bob sat in his chair, the steam of fresh tea rising before him, obscuring his view of her.

“Come in, Mary O’Donnel,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said, entering and taking the only available seat.

The room was the whole cottage. The floor was hard earth, the cracks in the walls had been covered with mud and there were soot-stains on the hole in the roof over the fire. An iron pot stood on an old table in the corner, next to a pile of straw on the floor covered with a tattered blanket whose brown colour did not suggest aesthetic choice. Few people ever came to visit Knotted Bob, but those who did inevitably flinched as they entered, some sixth sense telling them his walls were unlikely to survive a violent sneeze. The tiny window was crowded by tree branches in a manner that suggested subtle threat rather than pleasant view. Nature seemed to be waging war in inches; under the threatening embrace of the trees, the cottage was changing from proud shelter to shrinking hostage. The crushing intimacy of nature was also evident in the scurrying of beetles and flies in the narrow room; creatures so used to indifferent liberty that they turned beady eyes to Mary’s entrance only for a moment before returning their scant attentions back to the incessant quest for food.

“Good afternoon, Knotted Bob,” said Mary finally.

The old man nodded. “And fair aft to ye, Mary O’Donnel.”

“How have you been?”

“Creaking over the horizon. And ye?”

“Well,” laughed Mary. “Well.”

“Why have ye returned?” asked Knotted Bob.

“For good,” replied Mary. “To offer my services to Lord Carvey.”

“Aye,” he said, holding her gaze. “What services?”

“I am here to show him a better path. As you remember, he offered me aid when I last saw him.”

“I remember,” said the old man. “I also remember that ye swore bloody vengeance.”

“Is that a concern of yours? Even if it were still true?”

“I do not believe that such spears as ye raised that night can ever be lowered.”

“Why is it your concern?”

“Because we be doing very nicely here, thank ye. He is kind enough to give me a little, and the reforms he is master of have given the villagers enough leftovers to toss me a few scraps. And, if ye hain’t noticed, there be plenty better off now than four years ago. All a-cause of Lord Carvey. So I also ask ye again: do ye plan vengeance?”

Mary shook her head slightly. “What possible threat could I be? A little orphan girl?”

Knotted Bob scowled. “Don’t be dark. We both know there is more to the world than just what can be seen.”

“Will I destroy his fortune, rend his family and rule in his nest? Poor Bob. Is it not enough that I am willing to take any position that will allow my mind some spread?”

Knotted Bob clasped his hands and looked at her evenly. “No,” he said finally, “I do not believe for a moment that ye be to limit yourself to what is only possible. And I also believe that, if ye applied yourself fully, ye would be able to devise a terrible vengeance, a vengeance in which ye would also destroy yourself if need be.”

There was a tiny creak as Mary took his ancient hand in hers. “Do you remember?” she said softly, searching his eyes. “I was an angry child. But I swear upon God that I have made my peace with my fate. Please accept my word of honour – for I swear by all the intelligence I possess – that I intend no evil here.”

He looked at her for a long moment, then nodded.

“Thank you,” said Mary. “You spoke of patience at our last meeting; I have taken what you said to heart, and intend to apply it fully. Soon, I hope to have secured a place in the Carvey household. If I can stay with you for a short while, I will forever be in your debt.”

The old man looked at her for a long moment. Her eyes were clear. Sunlight streamed past him from the tiny window, brightening his white hair.

Then, he whispered involuntarily: “God help him!”

Mary smiled, and dropped his hand. “He had his chance.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *A Capital Seduction*

LAURENCE GRUMBLED ALOUD AS HE RODE TOWARDS HOME. Water obsessed him; water, and the mold it always bred. *Damn it*, he thought repeatedly, grinding his teeth, *we have so much bounty! We have wrestled nature to the ground, now we stand back and wipe her spittle from our face, for she is having the last laugh.* The word – ‘progress’ – had begun to jeer at him in a strange way, and he began to realize what complexities accompany any forward-thrusting of human possibilities. *If only we had better roads*, he thought, *if only we had faster horses or richer neighbours, then none of this would be happening!* Piles of wheat and barley (twice as much of the latter, for Laurence’s county was a hard-drinking one) lay in the fields, each grain a jewel, a possible barrier between life and death, all lay in heaps, emitting the kind of odour that caused even the pigs to turn up their noses and waddle off.

Yet the cows had become so stuffed with forage crops that they walked about on unsteady legs and lowed so plaintively that one feared that, if they stumbled, they would burst. Geese no longer had to have their wings clipped, for all laws of airborne physics bowed to their immense girth. Sows had to be regularly felt to discover pregnancy, for they gave evidence of piglets only by dropping them in the dirt. Even the cursed scavengers of agriculture – the crows, jackdaws and sparrows – found it laborious to make the journey from their creaking nests to the full fields of wasting plenty.

“Yet what is to be done?” muttered Laurence for the thousandth time, shading his unprotected eyes from the blinding sun. *Half of England may be starving by next Lent*, he

thought, grinding his teeth in frustration, *and here is food enough for a thousand rotting away for lack of transport! It is enough to drive a man mad!*

Through the trees he caught a signal of sorts, a reminder of one of nature's kinder profiles. The gleam of sunlight on water rippled through the hanging branches, and Laurence found himself smiling at the memory of a hundred bathes.

"Well – why not?" he muttered, swinging his horse off the path and heading towards the swimming pond. "There's no more to be done today."

Laurence was quite surprised at the sight of the man – the last nearby residents had died years before, and since that time he had never seen another soul near the pond. Lady Barbara had forbidden the maids to bathe there, hinting at dark conspiracies of peeping village boys. Thus, he did not expect to see a naked man lying beside it, fast asleep, his feet immersed in the cool water, his head resting on a little backpack.

Laurence was startled, but this did not shake his sense of proportion – or of ownership.

"Excuse me!" he cried, in no mood for trespassers.

The man opened his eyes lazily, obviously struggling to remember where he was. He sat up, propping himself on his elbows, squinting towards the voice.

"Excuse me – this is private property, my man, and it would be best if you took yourself off immediately," ordered Laurence.

"Oh! Excuse me, sir," said the man, standing up with neither haste or modesty. Laurence could not help but admire the leanness of his form.

"You are a traveler?" he asked.



“Yes, sir,” said the man, pulling on a pair of trousers. He leant over the water and splashed his face vigorously. “I’m sorry if I have caused any inconvenience – the young lady of the house suggested this spot.”

“Did she?” asked Laurence. He didn’t think Kay even remembered the pond, it had been so many years since she had used it. “And what business did you have talking with the lady of the house?”

“She was kind enough to promise me an appointment with the master of these lands, the young Laurence Carvey.”

“To what end?”

“Why, to both our ends, to be sure,” said the man, shaking his wet head violently and fitting his cap over his ears. “She’s a lovely temperature, good sir,” he said with a grin, indicating the rippling water. “I hope you enjoy your bathe.”

“Wait just a moment,” said Laurence. “I am Lord Carvey. If you have business with me, state it now.”

The man stared at him for a moment, then struck his head comically, almost knocking his cap off. “Bless me, sir!” he cried. “What a misfortune! Here I was thinking how lucky I was to have a good bathe before meeting you! I was thinking: here, my good Adam, here’s a chance the like of which you’re not likely to see twice; here’s your chance to talk with a man who half-agrees with you already, who is of a like mind about the beauty of this world, who is wise enough to take no offense when you point out a better way. I was thinking all this – and more, too, sir – when I happened to drop off. The next thing – what else? I wake up without even my skivvies between myself and the object of my quest – and a trespasser to boot! – and I don’t even

know enough to think whose land this stranger might be ordering me off of! Damn me for an unthinking fool sir, and don't hold it against me. This is the first leisure I've had this last month."

Laurence stared at him for a moment. "Unless you are more than your appearance suggests, I think it best if you take whatever goods you have in your bag and be off, for I have no time for peddlers."

Adam lowered his head and shook it slowly. "Then I have really shown my lesser side, for if I leave now, we shall both be left the poorer. For I couldn't help but notice an odd odour in the air as I walked here this morning, milord."

"What odour?" snapped Laurence.

"Why – the stench of lost crops, sir," said Adam, as if surprised at the question. "Certain that is the scent of death for most communities, for it means they will have only empty hands for seed-crops come spring. But here, I thought, it may well be the scent of overabundant life, the scent of a productivity whose planning has been of great concern and whose disposal very little."

"What – and you plan to rid me of such results? You plan to wave a wand and transport my crops?" demanded Laurence.

"No, sir ..."

"If you have a better solution, out with it – and quickly too!"

"It's not I who can help with your loss sir," said Adam, making a small bow, "but a device I would desire to acquaint you with."

"And what might that be?"

“I keep it in a bag, sir,” grinned Adam, opening his knapsack and pulling out the sheaf of drawings. “A power loom is what it’s called, and it may be the answer to what seems to be irritating you so greatly.”

Laurence scowled. “I am not unaware of this device. In fact, I have seen one myself, at a fair in Coventry. It interests me not at all.”

“Certainly,” said Adam easily, smoothing the drawings over a dry patch of earth. “I saw the same version myself, and I thought: that’s an exhibit for some future museum, for sure as God that’ll be the only use it will ever have in this world. Makes the wool a little straighter, and if you are making for export alone it might be a little helpful, but for those seeking to improve the earth they walk on it’s little more than extra wood to dry clothes on. But this treasure is worlds apart from that device. Look here,” he pointed. Laurence leaned forward. “The wool comes in here, you don’t need anyone to feed it or keep it straight. You can change shuttles without stopping the loom. Here – these devices stop the loom if the warp or filling breaks or the shuttle don’t make it all the way across. Built solid – you can see the iron reinforcements here – and the market is fresh and ripe for the taking. America is still shy of these devices, and with Holland back to Spain they’re gone as major competitors. Strike one for the English merchants, care of God Almighty. This is the future, Lord Carvey, this is the grace of God opening the door of plenty a crack, just enough to wedge our way through. You want a glimpse of the new world? Who needs to go to America? Here it is, lying on the ground in front of you!”

“How many does it take to operate it?”

“One, sir,” cried Adam. “Just one. And at the end of the day you have a pretty pile of cloth lying at your feet, fit to clothe the cold and comfort the humble, ten times the amount hands

alone could make. Ten! – and if that isn't magic, I am a pagan! Save in Scotland, heep have never known such love! I can help you in many areas, Lord Carvey – you need shearers, scissors, dips or transportation, I can help you.”

“Who do you represent?” asked Laurence, his mind racing madly.

Adam straightened slowly. “Represent? I represent myself, sir.”

“Perhaps you don't understand,” said Laurence slowly. “Which firm do you represent? What is your market?”

“The firm of Adam Footer, sir. There's none I report to, save my own ambition. I have my own contacts; it was a friend of my father's who first came up with such a device – or the idea at least. ‘Sir,’ I said, ‘you hold the salvation of poverty in your hand, but if it sits there untended, you may as well have been born an idiot!’ I made the first model, tested it and rendered it sound. I journeyed to London to discover if there was a market for such a device – and discovered that I needn't consult anyone. I saw the whole market in London – I was there in January of this year – I saw them huddled in old doorways, warming their babies' toes over little ash-pots and burning the hair of the dead to stay warm, their poor bodies trembling under torn blankets. And I thought to myself: why do I need to consult experts in trade? I can sell my woolens to these poor souls; I can sell them for the price of a loaf, for two hour's labour, and give them the strength to earn much more. The market, sir? The market is wherever the wretched have a penny to their name or arms willing to work. I can give a man a coat if he's willing to push the shuttle for a week – and there's more than enough of them! He doesn't have to be strong; he doesn't have to hoist forty-pound sheaves of wheat or wrestle sows to the ground. All I ask is a steady hand and

the ability to stay awake. That's all, and in return I can give him warmth enough to last a lifetime!"

Adam's eyes were aglow, and all merriment had left his face. Laurence watched him carefully, trying to determine if the man was a gifted entrepreneur or hopelessly insane. *The former is probably contained in the latter*, he thought.

"I find your claims outlandish, Mr. Footer," he said finally, "but can find no structural faults in your design. If it works, it is a most remarkable device. Yet the fact that you have shown me its workings – workings that are more a leap of intuition than engineering genius – along with the admission that you are working alone – leads me to suspect that you are having great difficulty selling your device. This puts me in a certain position, a position I want to make very clear. If you are looking for an investor, you will have to look elsewhere. The majority of my family's funds – and here you will note that I am being exceedingly open – are tied up in the agricultural improvements that no doubt drew you to me first. Yet the question arises: why have you not gone to one of the great merchants with this idea? They have capital enough to fund you to your heart's content."

"Yes sir, that is true," nodded Adam. "Yet they are competitive men, and have competitive concerns. A few were willing to buy a few of my machines as long as I agreed to build no more. Others feel that their most noble course is to earn enough to put their mercantile past behind them and become members of the aristocracy. They fund enough ships to obtain titles and retire to the country to ape their betters. The rest were not enthusiastic about the possibilities of the poor having liberty to think about greater things than poverty."

Laurence smiled. “I can imagine that. Thus I would be in the position of privileged buyer; I am perhaps the only man in this part of England open-minded enough to see the value of your device.”

Adam closed his eyes. “That was my hope, sir.”

“Tell me: how long does it take to make one of these contraptions?”

“Two men, three days, sir. Four if you want to add the iron supports, which you need if you want to transport them safely.”

“How many do you have?”

“One, sir.”

“One! Only one?”

“It has been an uphill struggle, sir,” admitted Adam. “I don’t have the means to commission more.”

“I see,” said Laurence. “I’m sure you understand that I cannot act alone in such a decision. Mine is a family concern, and if I decide to look further into this opportunity, it will have to be approved by my mother and sister.”

“Yes – your sister,” said Adam with a grin. “A most worthy lady. She was quite a tyrant with your time.”

Laurence smiled. “I can imagine. And what strategy did you use to pass her vigilance?”

“I’m not sure, sir,” said Adam, “although she did mentioned shoes, the relevance of which escaped me.”

“Shoes – oh, yes!” said Laurence, laughing despite himself. “Well, that would explain it. All right. Secure yourself a place in town, Mr. Footer, and call on me tomorrow afternoon. I want you to present your case to my mother.”

“Certainly, sir. I would be glad to. I assume a more appropriate dress would be in order, for if there is anything I have heard about your venerable mother, it is that she is the heart and soul of correctness.”

“Quite true. Assuming that you have no means to procure such finery – unless these are only your traveling clothes which, judging from the size of your sack, they are not – I will have some clothing sent to you tomorrow morning, care of the inn.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Adam, putting his drawings away and picking up his knapsack. He slung it over his shoulder, bowed and strode off towards the path. Laurence watched him go, his mind racing.

“Oh – sir,” called Adam from the far side of the still pool. “One other thing – just for personal curiosity. What is the ratio of yield to seed on your lands?”

“Eight to one,” replied Laurence proudly. “Eight to one.”

The sum struck Adam like a blow. He stared at the young Lord, his eyes burning. “Eight to one – yes, that’s a pretty sum to be sure! Though the hordes that feed on the poor may bar our way – yours for the future, my lord!” he cried, then waved and disappeared through the trees.

Laurence sat down on a span of bare earth, rubbing his beard and staring out over the water. Tiny mites sprang on delicate legs over the surface tension, chasing, circling, their movements radiating in tiny ripples of water. From the murky world of lilies came the guttural bleating of

frogs. He picked up a stone and flung it high over the water, then leaned back his head and laughed loudly.

“For heaven’s sake!” he cried. “‘Privileged buyer’? From what recesses did that spring from? Well, from whatever recesses, let it spring – for better or for worse!”

The stone fell with a throaty splash. The mites panicked, then scurried off to worship it.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *A Frowning Temple*

KAY WAITED UNTIL THE CIVILITY OF FAMILY BREAKFAST before broaching the subject of Mary again. The image of the girl had kept her up all night. Drifting through the endless corridors of considered dreaming, she kept bumping into Mary's face, a face that was wild and pleading; pleading because it knew no other way, wild because it had to plead. She sat down for breakfast with a strange sort of certainty; the certainty that Mary would never find peace in this life

"You seem uncommonly absorbed this morning, Laurence," commented Lady Barbara, thinly buttering a slice of toast. Her ability to exist on toast and tea was a source of constant amazement for her family; both Kay and Laurence often exhorted her to expand her culinary horizons, but she still regarded fruit as an exotic tidbit best reserved for visitors, and refused meat to protest her late husband's penchant for a good hunt.

The breakfast table was in the sun room ('To keep me in touch with the land,' Laurence's father used to say) but that morning's view was of a land one would be better off keeping a civilized distance from. The old trellis sagged like the broken bones of an old crossword; the faint drizzle seemed determined to erase all memories of sunlight from the world. Lady Barbara had little time for gardens; she considered anything to do with the earth quite undignified, and since Laurence had fired the last gardener for uprooting what he thought was garbage – but was in fact an experimental dandelion mulch – the garden had fallen into a state of rather depressing disrepair.

“I had a right old scare at the Jigger farm yesterday,” said Laurence reluctantly, in answer to his mother’s comment. “We are producing too much...”

“As I warned you last year, if you recall,” said Lady Barbara.

“Yes, as you did, thank you,” he said. “It’s all going to waste out on the field. Damn, but I wish we had some decent roads! I’ve been racking my brains all night, but I can’t wish it from here to anywhere, so it will just have to rot where it lies!”

“Yet you are still absorbed, despite your obvious failure in this matter,” commented his mother.

“Again, thank you again, Mother, but I am absorbed because I was ‘pitched’ to yesterday – and a most unusual pitch it was, too.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Kay, her face reddening. “Was that Mr. Footer? I forgot to tell you...”

Laurence waved a hand and turned to his mother. “No matter. He’s quite a salesman, Mother. Seems all afire with a sort of mission. He’s got a new kind of loom – one that requires only one person to operate it, and, so he claims, can produce ten times what can be made by hand. Given the sorry state of our harvest, he set me to thinking.”

“And so?” asked Lady Barbara.

“Well – I was thinking that – what if we turned some of our fields over to sheep? We have more than enough to feed our inhabitants with, say, half the land we now use, and if we turned the other half over to sheep we would, with this new loom, have scads of wool to process. Perhaps we could even set up a factory here, somewhere on the lands, perhaps out by the Mundy’s; the road that way is quite good. Or send it to Wharton – it’s only ten miles as the crow

flies – we could extend the road – and ship it overseas. But I don't think that will be necessary, for there's demand enough right here in England, in London and the other major towns."

"Yes yes," interrupted Lady Barbara. "Very expansive. And what, pray, were you planning to use as capital for these expenses? As I see it, you've listed off a King's ransom of improvements; the sheep, the factory, the roads, extra horses and carts for transportation, insurance and..."

"All right," said Laurence, raising a hand. "All right – they're just ideas. For now."

"Well, if it's ideas you're after!" she said suddenly. "I have a far better one: *let things be!*"

Laurence blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"Yes, I thought you might have trouble with that one," said his mother. "Let me explain slowly. Observe that your initial reforms have led you to require more. Observe that the excess crops you worked so hard to achieve have now filled you with visions of being the grand-shepherd of all kingdom come – and if there's a dirtier, smellier beast, I have yet to encounter it! To be fair, I have shown a great deal of patience with this idea of 'progress' – though to be truthful I expected such an outcome – but some time all of this has got to stop, else the whole world will wear itself out running after a future with faster feet." Lady Barbara put down her fork with a slight clatter. "Look at you – when was the last time you opened a book with something other than turnips in the title? Your father spent a small fortune on a good education for you, if you recall. What is the Greek word for 'culture'? You've forgotten, of course." Lady Barbara's eyes were like twin drills boring into her son. "Laurence, I have seen this fantasy of yours through a certain distance, but if you do not see – and soon – that there is more to life than more and more, I shall be forced to cancel the allowance I have released for your experiments.

You have produced more food – well good! Now people have enough to eat. Last time I looked, they also had clothes on their backs, yet now you want to give them better clothes, and that means disturbing their certainty of a good meal at the end of the day. Well I for one say that there is more to man than a desire for better clothes. There are such things as art, culture and beauty – even for your farmers. The last play was staged over a year ago. No – now they are restless and reading that damnable Mr. Paine and I don't know what nonsense! 'If we have more,' they say – 'why didn't we have more before? How much more can we have? Why does my neighbour have more – and how can I get it?'"

"Mother..." started Laurence, his face pale. Kay watched him, fascinated.

"Not just yet, young man," interrupted Lady Barbara. "I have held my peace for four years – you will listen to me for five minutes. Father Jones was here yesterday afternoon in quite an agitated state – he was here to talk with you, but you had forgotten his appointment in your haste for business. Have you ever given thought to the fact that while you are stuffing your farmers full of all sorts of goodies, their souls may well be wasting away? But of course not – that doesn't show up on your ledgers!"

"Please – mother – for heaven's sake..!" cried Laurence.

"Well you might say!" exclaimed Lady Barbara, "although not in vain. Listen well: the conceit of wisdom is in your generation – in both of you. Man does not live by bread – or wool – alone. Have you looked at the parish register lately – or does that ledger leave you unmoved as well? Church attendance has plummeted since the beginning of your reforms! Why is that? Is this not the lure of Satan, that Christ should have the world for his dominion? No – He made the right choice. He gave loaves and fishes so that people may sit and hear a truth which contained

something greater than more loaves and fishes! Yet that has no meaning for you – you say that to have more is to have enough, that it is all a matter of quantity, not quality, that man is all belly and no soul, and has no need to strive for something beyond this world, no need to care for his immortal soul! And that belief shall be your downfall – mark my words! That belief shall overturn the world, over from the regard of heaven to the grasping actions of this earth, and none shall be the happier or wiser! All shall be discontent, all shall clamour for the satiation of physical desires and wonder why nothing they consume feeds their deeper hunger, their hunger for beauty and truth and a meaning for this life! Is this what you have to offer? I say enough! Enough dreams of more sheep and roads and ships and factories! Leave it be! Leave it be!”

Lady Barbara finished her speech, a speech delivered with the passion of long and silent deliberation. Her children sat dumbfounded, staring at her, their tea long gone cold before them. Kay suddenly glanced at Laurence, and was astounded to see a glimmer of doubt in his eyes. She felt a dark thrill in her belly – that he of all people should doubt.

“This – about the church – is it true?” he asked.

“I do not argue for argument’s sake!” snapped his mother. “Father Jones has shown me the figures. Less than half, if you have a mind to hear. Half! Tell me: why is that?”

Laurence rubbed his beard. “That is quite – unexpected.”

“It shouldn’t be, if you had a smattering of intelligence about something other than crops. And what sort of example are you offering? When was the last time your able frame darkened the chapel door? Two years ago? Three? I am forced to go on my own and say, oh no, my son is praying hard on his own, hard for the knowledge that keeps your congregation from their

rightful place! And what of this strange irritation that has become your habit of late, hm? To what do you ascribe that?”

“Have I been bad-tempered lately?” asked Laurence.

Lady Barbara snorted – and this breach of etiquette impressed on her children the true depth of her feeling. “Bad-tempered, irritable and downright rude! But you know the answer to this far better than I.”

“It’s true,” murmured Laurence. “I have been feeling strangely uneasy of late. It’s funny – I didn’t even think about it until you brought it up. But over the last few weeks, one thing after another has kept me up at night – almost as if I were afraid of going to sleep.”

Kay raised a hand tentatively. “I think you are overworked. And – you have taken on a great deal of worries that – to me at least – would be quite unmanageable.”

Strangely enough, they didn’t seem to hear her. Lady Barbara stared at her son, but the harshness in her eyes was fading.

“This – that you can admit your troubles so openly – shows your nobility well. And your path to redemption clear.”

“Redemption!” exclaimed Laurence. “Redemption – for what sin?”

“For the sin of this world,” replied his mother. “For the sin of living for this world.”

“Here is where we part ways,” replied Laurence. “For I have never believed in a God who demands suffering from his flock.”

“Yet you are suffering,” said Lady Barbara. “I can see it in your eyes. No – not a lot, not yet. But it will come. It matters little what you believe now. It will come.”

Laurence rose and walked over to the window, staring out at the faint rain. He stood for a long time, and Kay felt an utter stranger to the currents passing between her brother and their mother's watchful gaze. Laurence suddenly shook his head, as if trying to clear water from his ears, and turned around.

"There is a man coming here this afternoon," he said quietly. "I was originally going to have him speak to us – even you, Kay. This Mr. Footer. But I find myself at a sort of crossroads. Yes – I understand you, Mother. Yet we are two different people, and I have never believed in your God. I think there is a value in the wisdom of this world. I think that God gives a vision to certain souls out of love for the rest, souls which are able to create a faint vision of heaven in the here and now. Of course, you will call it a blasphemy, but I also think it is a blasphemy to live a life of luxury in a land of want, and give no thought to the lives of those without our natural advantages. I believe that people went to church partly to escape the horrors of their lives, and now they have left God behind in the joy of the present. But I think the time will come when they turn from fearful worship to worshipful love. Yes – we are enthusiasts of plenty, and we turn to this earth to wrestle more from its bosom and perhaps in the process we forget many higher things. But that is only now. Only for now!"

"You honestly believe I give no thought to the lives of the poor?" demanded Lady Barbara.

"Yes – I know you do. But the poor should not pray because they have been starved to their knees," replied Laurence, standing before the window, his face framed by the drizzle beyond the glass. "The idea of more – yes, I don't know where it will lead. And yes – perhaps my soul, for want of a better word, has languished in my concern for the things of this world. But I will still speak with this man – with reservations."

“That is as you see fit, son,” said Lady Barbara, rising and patting her cheeks with a napkin. “But have a care for the future, Laurence, for distance from God is also distance from reverence of many things; privilege, nobility, morality and yes, perhaps aristocracy as well. Have a care for the future, and for your children who will have to live there.”

“I will,” said Laurence.

Lady Barbara looked at him for a long time, then nodded and left the room.

“Laurence?” said Kay. “Laurence?”

“What?”

“That woman – Mary O’Donnel – she came here yesterday.”

“Yes?”

“She is the woman you wronged years ago.”

Laurence turned to her, his face still.

“Mother wouldn’t let her stay. I asked – I was quite firm – but sometimes I think that she doesn’t hold me in the same regard as you. She got really vicious, Larry,” said Kay, her voice faltering. “I wish I had the certainty you do.”

“No, you don’t – trust me,” he replied. “It’s not the secret you’re after.”

“What – do you mean?”

“Never mind. What did she want?”

“She wanted to – help you, she said. She was quick to point out the absurdity of that, of course –she seems to know her place. She also seems religious, though in an odd way.”

“What do you mean?”



“She spoke of being possessed by a kind of devil when she – last spoke to you. I asked her if she was superstitious – I was quite surprised – and she said ‘No – not in the way you mean.’ Then mother threw her out, and I never got a chance to ask her what she meant. Well – I ran after her, but I forgot about it. That was when we met Mr. Footer...”

“How odd,” mused Laurence.

“She’s very well-spoken. She knows all about your agricultural reforms.”

“Intelligent?”

“Very intelligent, or a little unbalanced.” Kay shivered and laughed. “I got such a sense of – vastness from her. As if she were regarding me from a great distance at the same time as talking quite intimately.”

Laurence ran his fingers through his hair. “I don’t know if I can take on another...”

“I would say – talk to her. It will do no harm.”

He hesitated, then nodded slowly.

“Yes,” he said, turning back to face the rain again. “I can do that much, at least.”

## CHAPTER NINE

### *A Sunrise*

LORD CERBES WAS A CITY MAN. He was so much of a city man that all thoughts of his lineage seemed vaguely anachronistic, for it was utterly unimaginable that his ancestors should have done anything other than live fashionably in the heart of London. Their profiles before the invention of beaver hats were unimaginable, and their conversation before the Age of Reason unfathomable; it was supposed that the ancestors of Lord Cerbes had spent the entire middle ages in complete silence, waiting for the dry weight of theological scholasticism to surrender to the civilized pleasures of rational discourse.

Lord Cerbes was also a man of his age – an age of individualism, of skepticism, of endless questioning and deep self-reliance. No longer was a man's height measured only by the stretch of ears he could command at the King's court. European Man had stumbled over the corpse of Greek antiquity, and the part of him that had fallen was the part that had formerly drawn him upward, to God and King and murderously fashionable favour. What remained was the often perplexed but rarely vanquished faculty of reason, a faculty that relished stripping the gilded cloth from habitual certainty, that answered every 'yes' with a 'why', and had little patience for the stern scowlings of tradition.

It was an age of paradoxes, of contradictions and conundrums so complex that philosophers rose above them like balloons over a frenzy of warring armies. It was an age of clarity and myth; clarity attempted to encircle myth, blocking off the avenues of miracles and magical favours;

myth spat back the poisons of sin and mortal indifference. God was cast from his seat of miracles to a distant watchmaker's bench, the spectator of a machine set in motion and cast aside. Wealthy philosophers viewed the distant horizons of nature with impartial and confident eyes, evicting from the clogged recesses of cause and effect the fairies and goblins they saw as the messy tenants of an ordered house. 'Down with superstition!' they cried through their lofty trumpets, never questioning the source of their volume. 'Down with the subjugation of man!' they cried, forgetting the piles of poor who gave them such height. 'Down with religion!' they cried, unheeding of the necessary myths of appropriated wealth.

Such were the times, and such was the person of Lord Cerbes.

He was a tall man, slender and well-formed. His cheekbones, jawline and chin all spoke of a passionate asceticism, a commitment to knowledge and life that broke all divisions between thought and action.

Of his youth it could be said that all was struggle, but that would be a patronizing view of his efforts. His early teachers found their desire to develop fresh minds sorely tested by the young Lord, for he was rabid in his pursuit of truth, and did not take kindly to the ticklish prodding of his masters.

He grew into a veteran dabbler. In this he was lucky, for his was one of the last generations able to vault specialization with genius. Most fields of knowledge were so new that a man could race through them at a sprint, casting suppositions and conclusions like wild seeds, and be sure that at least some of them would take root. Astronomy, geology, physics, economics, chemistry,

art – all these and more flew through Lord Cerbes’ acute vision, and he wrote and published books that strained even the generalist nature of the age. He was deemed a wonderful writer, and his faculty of expression often gave him a wider readership than the integrity of his reason – a fact that left several ploddingly logical thinkers quite embittered.

Yet, he replied easily, was this not the natural result of the best of all possible worlds?

This theory – of which he was not the only author – was quite an astounding shift from the prior religion of the future. ‘Heaven is not for death,’ they cried – ‘heaven is in the here and now! How admirably it has all been ordered! Note how the Thames rises just enough to allow modern ships to enter – how that must have been foreseen by the venerable old watchmaker! Note how each animal is admirably designed to eat and be eaten! Note how the presence of stars aids navigation, how the earth holds treasures expressly designed for our use – coal, iron and gold! Note how the severity of storms in the North Sea has taxed the ingenuity of our shipwrights – as if it were expressly designed to test them! Note how for every problem there is a solution! What more can we ask for? Problems enough to solve, reason enough to solve them!’

Thus reason, ever the handmaid of reality, was turned into its abject slave, its purpose not to identify, but to worship. In the century-long Christmas of this newest toy, was it surprising that such liberated perceptions should make an altar of every nuance? Just as a youngster’s first toy is the best of all possible toys, the world newly identified by man released such a wave of benevolent relief that reason became a sort of epileptic Midas.

And yet... it was natural that those viewing life from the summit of force found the world an easy thing to praise. As their carriages swept through the streets, racing from this recital to that debate, the poor who shouted from cellars seemed to pass by like beasts from another world. None of the rich were so naive as to believe that poverty in itself was a virtue (save an inconsequential group of white-lipped fanatics who acted more from loathing for their station than love for the poor), yet a few did recognize that what is often called evil is usually nothing less than rebellion against a world gone mad. The poor's obsession with drink, they argued, was perhaps the result of the need to stumble through the demands of a harshly mechanical life that required nothing but obedience and silence, silence before tyrants whose only claim to power was the difference between ancient blood spilled or saved. The very instability of this claim was what required, they said, the savagery of privilege. To crush a man, to rob him of his future for the sake of ancient history, and then, when he lies gasping and bloody in the mud, to hack off his hand for reaching for a trifle, a shilling or a loaf of bread – that is the weakest sham of morality that ever was – and also the most potent. To drive a man mad requires very little – tell him to dig a hole and fill it, over and over. Who could survive such torture? The mindlessness of repetition, of striving as hard for the next bite as for the last, forever, and to raise one's children without a hope that they shall have a lesser struggle – this is the means to madness, and madness was precisely what the privileged required, the eccentricity they feasted on, the madness of this 'best of all possible worlds'.

Such was the sprawling madness of London. None of the nobility could escape the knowledge that they danced and drank on a boiler whose bursting steam kept their feet flying and

their throats parched. Yet they continued regardless, because, drugged by the mantra that ‘all that is, is right’, they found themselves far from the reality of their times – and, like drugged puppets, flew blindly on in the hopes that some miracle would allow them to dance their way to eternity, never believing that many of them would indeed do so, but at the end of a stout rope.

For there were two eruptions in their world, two silent explosions that churned across the wide and narrow waters, unhinging all expectations and thoughts of the future. One was a piece of paper called America; the other a volcano called France. On the piece of paper were certain scrawls that had reshaped the soul of man in the body of man. The shapers of those thoughts had known that the quintessence of man is not open to the vain scribblings of idealists, and that most societies which spring from mad desires for different sort of creature would rather see man dead than man himself. Man has an essence, they said, the essence of rationality, and the proper role of State is to protect that freedom. France disagreed, and vented her disapproval by violating the physiques of many of her luckless citizens. ‘All is the state,’ cried the French revolutionaries; ‘all are atoms of the social body; the leaders of the state are the arbitrators of the general health. The essence of man is subservience, subservience to ideology, to the needs and desires of others.’

And so the world was pulled in two directions, man free or men unified, and throughout Europe many countries teetered on the edge of either camp. On the one hand lay tradition and the twitching fingers of the elite; on the other lay the reasoned beliefs of a few philosophers – and the shining portrait of their rationality: *America*.

Thus it was not strange that those Londoners who called themselves philosophers – and who did not? – were ablaze with sudden ferment, that even in the parlours of the most refined, teacups often trembled before the force of argument. Rarely does it happen that the visible results of theory elevate thought to the center of civilized discourse. Such were the times, and the times was not soon seen again.

To Lord Cerbes, all this made for a rather heady life. All his ingredients heralded the attainment of high stature; he married young and was widowed early, and his chaste devotion to his late wife gave him that thrilling combination of fidelity and unavailability that has won the hearts of young girls since the dawn of the teenage race.

Lydia Cerbes was in many ways a sign of a more potent awakening than her father. Her mind found little to shrink from in conversation, and her agility in discourse was so powerful that some men actually wandered away from her without even knowing the colour of her eyes or the texture of her hair. Not that she was wanting in either regard – she was by any standard a beautiful woman – but the ridiculous appellations that usually accompanied female beauty in the circles she moved – “exquisite creature”, “picture of loveliness” etc., seemed utterly inapplicable. She was, quite simply, neither picture nor creature. Like her father, she was famous for both desirability and unavailability; unlike him, she was also known for her scorn.

No, not “scorn”, perhaps... “Disappointment” would be a more accurate term. Raised by a man so completely in his time that he was far ahead of its general application, so trained in rationality that breaches of integrity were like leprosy to her, so studied in art that a harsh voice

or sagging shoulders were signs of spiritual deformity, Lydia measured all men by a yardstick beyond their comprehension and found them wanting in almost all regards.

The feeling Lydia left in her wake was a strange combination of resentment and worship. Every ugly man holds in his heart the belief that controlling a beautiful woman will control his own ugliness. Homely young men followed Lydia around like dogs chasing carriages – and with the same intent, which is to chase but never catch. This rather unnerving bunch even formed an unofficial club that tracked her movements. They met in dismal clubs and discussed her life as penniless men discuss auctions.

The Cerbes lived in a sumptuous mansion on the Finchley edge of London. It was a three-story mansion, broad, glittering and almost completely rectangular. Inside, the house was immaculate. Ornaments were sparse, but exquisitely chosen. Corridors flowed in many directions, toward rooms emitting faint chemical odours and occasional flares of magnesium. At the center of the house was the doorway to an immense library, with a small inscription over it: ‘A Humble Shrine to Alexandria’. Lord Cerbes was most often found in this room, making notes and calculations. His daughter would be practicing scales on the piano in the corner or studying Italian nuances. It was a picture of purpose, and visitors had been known to stand at the doorway for upwards of five minutes, both afraid to disturb such mutual concentration and finding rare pleasure in such a civilized portrait.

One morning, Lord Cerbes was buried deep in Newton’s ‘Principia’. His visitor had stood for a quarter of an hour in the doorway to the library before venturing to clear his throat. He



stood another ten minutes before repeating the sound, and with a reluctant sigh Lord Cerbes slowly drew his head up from Newton's brilliant maze. Seeing a rather earnest-looking young man in the doorway, he gestured for him to approach.

"Your business, sir?" he asked.

"Good morning, Lord Cerbes," said the young man, removing his hat with a sudden blush. He hesitated for a moment, obviously hoping for a glimmer of recognition to cross the Lord's face. It did not.

"Were you expected?" asked Lord Cerbes, rising. "I don't recall, if you will forgive me..."

"No sir, not expected," said the young man, blushing so fiercely that it looked as if he had sneezed a nosebleed backwards. "We last spoke two years ago... I answered your advertisement in the paper, and you sent me to manage your lands in..."

"Ah!" cried Lord Cerbes, snapping his fingers. "You are Thomas – er..."

"Thomas Doveset, sir. Yes – I apologize for coming here in a rush, but the mail must have been held up... Oh!" he said, glancing at a pile of unopened letters on Lord Cerbes' desk. "That is, I assumed my letters had been held up, but it appears that... Have you been away, sir?"

"Away? No, no. You are from my lands, yes – I recall now. You have been writing to me, and I have not read your letters. To have forced you to make such a journey. Criminal. Please – accept my apologies."

"No, sir – that's no matter," replied Thomas. He stared fixedly in front of him, standing so still that he looked as if he had been stapled to the air.

"Please – unlock yourself and sit down," said Lord Cerbes, gesturing. "Would you like a sherry?"

“No, thank you,” said Thomas, taking a hesitant step towards a chair.

“And what is so crucial that you have been forced to supersede my appalling correspondence?” asked Lord Cerbes, pulling up a chair for the young man.

“Um,” said the young man, sitting down. He shook his head. “I wanted leave of a certain sort, sir. To – well, that is – your lands are very good, sir, good soil and good people, and the sheep are multiplying like flies, so that we have a right shortage of land on which to keep them.”

“Are they?” said Lord Cerbes.

“Oh yes, sir. And, since we last met I have taught myself to read – better sir. And, well it has come to my attention that, if it were desirable, in a way, that the border of your arable lands – what they call the Glenn Fens – that they could be – well, drained, sir.”

“What’s that? Drained?”

The young man swallowed, then nodded. “Yes, sir. It’s after the experiments written about in the Low Countries, sir. It’s a certain procedure – you dig a long ditch – well, very long, actually – or a deep hole quite wide; it’s like a process of de-irrigation, if I make myself clear, and the water drains off the fens, or the marshes, and collects itself in a sort of man-made lake or river. This you can channel to the sea, sir, if you have the manpower – and I think we do. I’ve made the calculations, sir.” The flustered young man pulled out a long sheet of paper from a satchel and laid them on the table. “Here – you can see, sir, that the ditch – if we want – need only be two miles long, if we dig it nine or ten feet deep, or likewise we can dig a shallower hole about a quarter-mile round – but then we have to drain the water further off, towards the sea, which is twelve miles from the fens. And we won’t have to till much – the ground is so waterlogged that planting alone should air it enough!”

“These – hm – who taught you these calculations? Quite remarkable,” said Lord Cerbes, peering at the document.

“It’s a plane-geometry calculation, sir – there are books, even there, and some of the men – the farmers – have made a sort of hobby out of mathematics; they bring it to dances, sir, and sit in the corners while everyone flies about, and they argue about the new ideas, the calculus and differentials. They even tried a new kind of windmill – an experimental one, of course, but you’ll be pleased to hear that it works quite well. Jim Croyden, he’s the local bright spark in these matters – quite a wonder, sir, he can multiply three figures in his head; I kept him close by while drawing these up, that’s for certain. He’s the one who thought of this draining business.”

Lord Cerbes laughed suddenly, gazing at Thomas. “Far from the heart, the mind still beats!” he murmured in a kind of wonder. “Tell me – are there many up there like this Jim fellow?”

“Many, sir?” cried Thomas with great spirit. “Scads, if I may. There’s Clem’s Weather Society, the Astronomy Stars of Mr. Blenks, the Chemical Formulaes up at the Edswell Farm. That’s just the tip of it, too. Harry Jenkins, he’s called himself the animal doctor, and he can whip out a calf like a fifth ace from a card-sharp; Jenny Cutters, she’s a rare midwife, sir – she’s got a brew that’ll loosen the muscles of a straining lass so’s the baby’ll shoot out like a rocket, straight into her hands!”

“Astounding,” said Lord Cerbes, rubbing his hands. “But – where do they get their information?”

“Information?” frowned Thomas. “I’m not sure as I follow you, sir.”

“Information – as in where do they get these ideas from?”

“Well – we all live in the same world, sir. All’s have got eyes and a mind, sir.”

“All the more, it would seem,” murmured Lord Cerbes. “All the more than were guessed. By heaven! What an age we live in, Mr. Thomas!”

“Yes – an age it is – and then some, sir!” agreed the young man, wiping his brow.

Lord Cerbes folded his hands under his chin and gazed at his immense bookshelves for a moment, lost in speculation. Then he gestured at the sheet of paper.

“These plans or what have you – they are not my specialty – what would you call it, geology or geography. I shall consult a friend or two, and find out if your plan is truly feasible. If it is, then we shall calculate the cost, dust off a few account books and see if we can’t muster the funds to do it right.”

“Yes, sir – the worth of the lands will...”

“That is of no concern to me,” said Lord Cerbes. “They could be on the North Pole for all I care about their value. The thing is: is it possible? That is all.”

“Yes sir,” said Thomas.

“Now: be of good cheer. Have you seen London before?”

“Not properly, sir.”

“You require funds?”

“I have brought...”

“Never mind – here,” said Lord Cerbes, taking a wad of notes from his cash box and passing them to the startled young man. “Find a room in town and spend yourself silly, if you have a mind. Consider it pay for a journey you should have never had to make, but one I’m very glad you did. Come back in two days, prepared to burn the midnight oil!”

“Yes – thank you, sir,” said the young man, almost somersaulting in his haste to bow and exit at the same time.

“By God,” reflected Lord Cerbes when Thomas had left, “but you are a wretched excuse for a writer, if you cannot even read.” He picked up the thick pile of letters and began leafing through them.

“No – no – oh no! – Squire Pounder, of course – no – hello? Who’s this? Sounds familiar...” he muttered, tearing open a letter dated three weeks before. “An invitation – to the country – how quaint. ‘Lord Laurence Carvey’ – Laurence. Larry? Not that reformist!”

Lord Cerbes laughed as his daughter came into the library. He tossed the letter on the table.

“I think this one is more for you than for me, Lydia.”

## CHAPTER TEN

### *Strange Pursuits*

*IT SEEMS STRANGE, THOUGHT LYDIA, HOW I AM GIVEN TO SUCH FITS OF LASSITUDE.* She lay in a

She had indeed overdone it at the previous night's recital. It was funny how – how possessed she had felt. Lydia had been raised in an atmosphere wherein to feel competitive was tantamount to failure, but the woman she had sung with last night – what a grim battle it had become! The madrigals they had sung were not terribly arduous; moreover, the kind of interpretation they had thrust upon them had was not viewed as terribly civilized among the listeners. “Quite strenuous” was the general verdict, and most of the company had patted her on the arm as if she were an amateur who had strained a muscle racing a seasoned athlete.

*But that is the galling thing!* thought Lydia, shifting in the hammock. This Penelope woman was far from a seasoned veteran. She was an upstart – there was no nicer word for it. Of course the madrigal had been about lost love, and Penelope was a legendary – if temporary – conqueror of aristocratic hearts, while Lydia could only draw on imagination and tonal acrobatics, but still... Her own technique had been flawless – at first. But that showy woman had begun scaling up and up in such a crudely dramatic manner – what could Lydia do but try wresting the stratosphere from her powerful voice? And of course Penelope was singing again tonight, while Lydia was forced to speak in a whisper and pendulum in a hammock.

She shifted again, and felt a sharp poke in her waist. Frowning, she pulled the offending object from her pocket – reclining in trousers was one of her lesser-known habits – and stared at the letter, trying to remember.

Oh, yes – the letter her father had smiled so broadly at... Lydia opened it, and read:

Dear Lord Cerbes:

You may recall that we spoke at your daughter's recital in March, pursuing a lively conversation about the agricultural reforms that your Lordship was kind enough to have noticed. I found your observations very astute, and your offer of mutual visitations most enticing. I have instituted several changes in my lands since we spoke, which I think would interest you immensely.

If your Lordship pleases, I would be greatly honoured if you would consider accepting my hospitality this August.

I also extend the same offer to your daughter who, as I recall, is a musician of some talent. With your help, perhaps we can persuade her to sing at our church which, though no Westminster, is noted for its history and unique acoustics.

I look forward to your reply.

Yours most sincerely,

Laurence Carvey

Defender of the Realm, Lord of Dorset etc.

Glancing at the postmark, Lydia saw that the letter had been sent in July. *Visiting Dorset late in the summer season is quite a ridiculous prospect*, she thought, turning the letter over and over in her hand.

Her maid's voice startled her. Asquith, often chastised for interrupting, had developed the art of creeping around so completely that Lydia sometimes expected to see her slithering under the carpets.

"Visitor, madam," said Asquith with a hesitant curtsy, a difficult motion which required the balance of a gymnast.

"Yes – who?" croaked Lydia, turning on her side on the hammock.

"Squire Pounder, madam. Says it's very urgent."

"Isn't it always, though?" asked Lydia. "Give me ten minutes with him and then interrupt us to remind me of a recital – no, not a recital. A piano lesson, then. No – Mr. Rebeck is away, that's common knowledge. Think of something – but ten minutes, no more!"

"Yes, madam."

"I have to change," she said, trying to extricate herself from the hammock, but succeeding in only sort of spilling herself on her feet. "Tell him I will be with him shortly."

"Yes, m'lady," said Asquith, turning and slinking on lowered legs back toward the house.



*Squire Pounder is an unequivocal nuisance*, thought Lydia for the thousandth time as she dressed. *Such an ungainly man, so obvious in his emotions – yet he saved my father’s life, so I cannot be too unkind...*

The establishment of Mr. Pounder in the bosom of the Carvey household was a strange tale. Lord Carvey had been seriously compromised while traveling through France during the Reign of Terror. He was compiling a book on political observations, and had been revealed to the authorities by an unknown enemy. Trumped-up espionage charges had been leveled against him, and Lydia had spent the winter in utter agony before deciding to venture to France and plead for his release (to ransom her father was utterly out of the question, as he had repeatedly stressed in his letters). On the morning of her departure, a letter had arrived from her father reporting that he had safely landed in Dover. Through her tears of relief she had read that a certain Mr. Pounder had secured his release, but it wasn’t until Lord Cerbes had arrived home that she had received the full story.

Mr. Kevin Pounder was an inveterate opportunist who, reading of the appalling state of Gallic agriculture, quickly surmised that a tidy profit could be made out of providing the Provisional Government with a steady supply of wheat. He had traveled to France and offered his services. The government, desperate to supply even its own tables, had agreed rapidly, and Mr. Pounder was given the contract to supply them with a hundred tons of grain annually. A small part of this bounty was reserved for the needs of their more illustrious prisoners, whose immense ransoms were integral to their fiscal plans, and so Mr. Pounder had access to some of

the French prisons. It was while he was delivering a shipment to the Bastille that he first heard of Lord Cerbes. Struck by a sudden desire, he had promptly transferred the majority of his bounty to the willing hands of a prison official (who promptly sold it and vanished to America) in return for Lord Cerbes' release. They had traveled together towards Calais, with Lord Cerbes disguised as Mr. Pounder's accountant. After several close and rather nasty brushes with the authorities – which they only survived by strewing good English gold about them, which the various officials had plunged after like famished dogs – they stole a small vessel and navigated their way to Dover, Lord Cerbes at the helm.

Such was the story – a story which did not have as clean an ending as Lydia would have liked due to Mr. Pounder's absolute refusal of remuneration for his efforts. The regard of such an illustrious family was his only motive, he insisted (mixed with a smattering of good old-fashioned patriotism). It also transpired that the merchant had read some of Lord Cerbes' writings, and considered himself a saviour of 'honest scholasticism' (as he put it). The result was that Mr. Pounder had lost a lucrative business and gained the endless obligation of Lord Cerbes.

This troubled the good Lord not at all. "What cost is obligation when the alternative was nothing at all?" he said, and set about providing Mr. Pounder with all the education the merchant desired. He tutored him both in abstract science and the physics of correctness that suited the social heights to which the ex-merchant so obviously aspired. "Squire Pounder" was his preferred term of reference, as Lord Cerbes had also bought him a minor title.

Squire Pounder was quite a young man, slightly shy of thirty, who had started life as a manual labourer. He spoke well, and his knowledge was sound, but his odd gestures and inflections – along with his slightly desperate air – betrayed his origins as surely as if he had handed out his mauled and scrawled parish record. He strove mightily, and this very striving was strong evidence of his perceived inability. His hair had a habit of rising in odd directions when he argued, and his practice of keeping his hands in blinding motion could not hide the fact that they were of a breadth and texture that spoke of rough labour in the not-too-distant past. His lack of invitations did not deter him in the least, and it quickly became known that a request for Lord Cerbes' presence would often bring Squire Pounder in tow. This did not diminish the demand for the good Lord; Squire Pounder was accepted much as a close friend's unkempt lover is overlooked, but it often brought a certain uneasiness to social occasions, for he had not mastered the art of subtle penetration sufficiently to avoid becoming an unwelcome center of attention at social gatherings.

Lydia finished dressing, flicked her hair off her forehead, and made her way downstairs. Squire Pounder was waiting for her in the sitting room.

The sitting room was a monument to the preferences of Lord Cerbes' late wife, whose tastes ran so lavish that they made the baroque look positively Spartan. "Space was meant to be used!" was her constant refrain, and she had set about using it in a manner that seemed designed to stretch the unity of space and time to the breaking point. Every shelf, every mantelpiece (there were seven) and every small table was laden with an amount of ornamentation that, if sensibly distributed, would have been adequate for four houses, two churches and a good portion of a

major cathedral. Lamps were the late Lady Cerbes' special fetish, and if all the wicks in the room had been lit at once, sailors lost in the North Sea could have breathed a solid sigh of relief. Even the ceiling had not escaped her desire to turn the art of decorating into a kind of kaleidoscopic assault; the paintings adorning its bracketed surfaces seemed to have used enough brushes to have consumed the hides of a small herd of camels.

Occupants of the room were usually identified by the fact that, unlike its aggressive contents, they were found huddling in a corner, their eyes averted in horror. Usually, but not always – when Lydia came into the room she saw Squire Pounder studiously regarding the paintings on the ceiling, his hands clasped behind his back.

“Quite a remarkable education in these,” he said, turning as she entered. “Do you know, I cannot recall a single Greek myth that does not find expression in these small squares. Well – perhaps one, but taste forbids its description!” he said with a sudden laugh.

“How are you, Squire Pounder?” said Lydia in a rather gravelly voice.

“Quite well,” he said, rubbing his hands. “Invigorated, actually. I heard a most pleasant bird in song last night. Not the usual kind of bird, for they sing for their mates, or so I'm told, while this bird was singing for a purpose quite magically her own. I have come to compliment that bird on its efforts. Yet I hear from its voice this morning that it would perhaps have been better off singing for a mate in soft and lilting tones than abusing its tender throat in such a manner,” he finished with a wink.

“If that is a compliment, I appreciate the sentiment,” she said, reminding her teeth that it was impolite to grind in the presence of a guest.

“And your mother,” continued Squire Pounder, gesturing at the room, “– she seemed another kind of bird, a magpie or crow, such was her predilection for collecting shiny articles. What a nest this should make for future students of the past – one glimpse would be like a tour through the aesthetic history of the past few centuries! It should be opened as a sort of museum for the more artistic accumulators of these sorts of eggshells – though I am sure that those with the eye for eggs would be far more interested in the hatchling your good mother left behind in her pretty nest!”

“Yes – well don’t tread the metaphor to death, Squire Pounder,” sighed Lydia, hoping he was only in a good mood.

“You gave a very inspiring recital last night,” he said slowly, abandoning his merry appraisal and staring at her with a strange, penetrating openness.

“Thank you.”

“And this – conflict between you and Penelope – was also most inspiring,” he continued. “I have often thought you and I were mere acquaintances of Lord Cerbes’ misfortune, with little more in common than witnesses to a bank robbery. But just as spectators to an event sometimes find a certain familiarity in the similarity of their reactions, I thought last night that this – striving side of your nature had a happy concordance with my own personality, and I vowed that I should spend just a little time finding out more about it. For surely you have observed my inability to penetrate this aristocratic aquarium that you swim in so nimbly,” said Squire Pounder, standing stiffly and holding his hands behind his back. “And I’m cursed if I can see the point of pursuing such a course, were it not for the promise wrung from me by my dying mother. Yes – such things do occur beyond the bounds of the stage, Lady Cerbes. Died, she did, in what the

imagination of your poets calls a garret and what the majority of the fleas in our fair city called home. Died with her hands on my cheeks, her face wasted and pleading. *Have no daughters,* she cried, dear Lydia, *and swear you shall have no sons until we are free of this dog-like life!* And I swore, I swore in good faith because I believed that England was the land of hope, because I saw men lying in the lap of luxury all around me like babes stuck to honey. And so I worked. I slaved and swore and bent my back to the wheel. I sold good food to murderers and prayed every day for forgiveness. But it mattered little what came into my hands; the King took some, the Church more and I was swindled of the rest, and God help the man who tries to find justice in our modern courts. So I helped your father, from the goodness of my heart, from my childish belief that from gratitude would spring security. But it wasn't so, my Lady," he said, shaking his head. "It wasn't so."

"That is not true!" cried Lydia. "My father has done more to help you than most would ever dream of!"

Squire Pounder held up his hand. "No – please – I hold no quarrel with Lord Cerbes; indeed, I hold him the most generous of men, bar none, and will forever honour his name – and those who bear it. But he is not all the world, and for the rest I see nothing but scorn when I speak my mind. Yet I am assuming that, as his daughter, you are prone to hold the same values as he does, and will be free of prejudices."

"Yes – I was raised a rational woman," said Lydia. "And I hold no man more or less worthy for the accidents of station."

He nodded silently, staring at her. The suddenness of his movement caught her quite by surprise, and it wasn't until his minty lips impacted on her own and his arms snaked round her

back that she found herself able to step back. The first slap was more of a shocked reaction; the second slap – far harder – came from genuine rage.

“Leave at once!” she shouted in shock, feeling a spasm of pain in her throat.

“Yes,” he muttered, taking a step back. “Quite rational. Yet a young lord with golden gifts would find more than your lips at his disposal!”

“Ugly man!” she cried.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his eyes suddenly widening. “I’m sorry. I meant no offense!”

“Meant or not, offense was given. Now leave!”

“I have slaved for my position, paltry though it is,” he demanded. “I am an admirable man in my own way. Why am I always treated with such contempt?”

“That is not for me to answer,” she said.

“It is nothing but prejudice!” he cried. “Why should a man be derided for earning his livelihood by those who have never lifted a finger for theirs? Yet last night,” he said softly, “when I saw you striving for a certain note, I felt closer to you than anyone. I felt that we were one and the same.”

“I can understand that,” she said, swallowing painfully. “But all attractions are not formed on such a basis. It is not mere prejudice to desire common ground.”

“Yes, I suppose,” replied Squire Pounder, lowering his head. “I will take my leave now.”

She stepped aside to let him pass, but he remained where he was.

“One foot on the pier, one in the boat...” he muttered, cracking his knuckles. Raising his eyes to hers, he grinned. “If such is to be my fate, I will not go quietly!”

Lydia blinked and, finding no response, turned and left the room. She found Asquith lurking in the library with a duster, told her to make sure Squire Pounder left quietly, then went up to her room and sat on the bed.

“Well,” she said with a sudden smile, standing and walking to her writing desk. “A sojourn in Dorset – what a pleasant prospect!”



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### *Two Salvations*

A STRANGE THING PASSED BETWEEN LAURENCE AND MARY when they first laid eyes on each another again. It was strange because the incident of four years past seemed so innocuous in a way, just a small ugly incident, but there are people in this world who have insight enough to recognize pivotal moments – no matter how trivially expressed – and remember them for the rest of their lives. There are also people who form such natural opposites that, if they come in contact, they have the power to shake certainty to its all-too-habitual core.

Laurence felt this the instant Mary came into the room, preceded by his sister, who looked for his reaction with an odd fascination. He felt it only for an instant, because Mary seemed to shudder slightly and a certain concentration came into her eyes and body, rendering her taut as a bowstring.

“Lord Carvey,” she said softly, bowing.

“Miss O’Donnel,” he said with an expansive gesture, his rehearsed apology drying on his lips.

She raised her eyes to him, and he suddenly felt as if he were the only thing she had regarded for long, long time.

“And my sister reports that you have come to me not for charity, but for a lawful exchange of values, so to speak.”

Mary nodded. “That is true.”

Frowning, Laurence indicated for her to take a seat. She hesitated.

“Is your mother at home?” she asked.

“No,” he replied. “The dragon has gone to feed on sunshine and fresh air.”

Mary took a seat, then turned to gaze at him with a sinuous sway of her neck.

“Kay mentioned that you seem to know a good deal about agriculture,” said Laurence, feeling an shiver run down his spine.

“I know a good many things, Lord Carvey,” said Mary. “I read of agriculture at first, but it was always a means to a greater end.”

“We have spoken of that a little,” said Kay excitedly. “She has a great many interesting things to say, Larry. A great many.”

“Interesting ideas are always welcome in this household – and are often the only rent required!” said Laurence, thinking: *why am I being so pompous?* “I want to put your mind at ease, Miss O’Donnel,” he continued, unable to shake his lofty tone. “There are no prejudices here. Station waits on practicality, for we live by Benjamin Franklin’s admirable doctrine: ‘Call to Reason’s court every thought, every opinion, every observation, and let Her judgment be final’ (or something to that effect). I believe that education is not secured in university alone, and if you have taught yourself all you know, that shall not be held against you.”

Mary smiled. “It is...” she said, clearing her throat. “It is against practicality that I have come to speak,” she said.

“I’m sorry?” asked Laurence.

“Did you hear that, Larry – against it!” cried Kay.

“Hush up,” he said, waving his hand and watching Mary. “I don’t understand.”

“May I stand?” asked Mary.

“Don’t be... Please.”

Mary rose, and Laurence saw faint red blotches moving across her cheeks, like creeping sunsets. “I have spent the last two days walking your lands, Lord Carvey...”

“You must... Laurence, please,” he said. “There are no prejudices.”

Mary smiled quite dazzlingly, and Laurence felt slightly dizzy at her shift of mood. “Then Mary will also do – Laurence.” She gestured at the window. “Your lands here... Your achievement is quite remarkable. No – more than remarkable. It is a kind of Renaissance, a Renaissance of this world. Your people are unlike any I have ever seen; they walk about with their heads high. This time of year as well – in the places I have been, the end of summer is a sick time, a time when grains are counted like miser’s gold and figures are scratched on bark to determine how many will live to see spring.” Mary looked straight at him. “There is none of that here. Here you have excess, the kind of excess that makes the journey through this world more than the bitter fording of an endless river. As you have been submerged in this change, you may have missed its true significance, but I want to tell you, Laurence: you have done good, more good than you can possibly imagine. I applaud you for that.”

He stared at her, realizing in his emotion that the simple praise of good work had been too scarce in his house. “Thank you,” he murmured.

She stared at him, for a moment; he almost seemed to hear an echo. “That is only the beginning,” she continued. “What you have created, the application of intelligence to the problems of this world, is not just fuller bellies, but a twisting of the perspective of man from empty heaven to the gifts of this earth! Materialism, if you like; the art of consumption for the

sake of consumption, for the pleasure of the body alone. I applaud that too, for I think this kind of materialism is an insult only to those who hate this world in their hearts.”

“Yes – she said that too,” interrupted Kay, taking a seat quickly and leaning towards Laurence. “Don’t you think that could be true? Doesn’t that remind you of...”

“For God’s sake, Kay!” said Laurence. “Let the girl speak!”

Mary cast an apologetic look at Kay, who smiled bitterly and averted her eyes, leaning back in her seat.

“Laurence,” said Mary slowly. “To love this world should not be to disregard any other. I shall not say ‘God,’ for that means many things to many people. I shall say ‘ethics,’ for that is something one can discuss in rational terms.” She took a deep breath. “There is a hunger in men that cannot be silenced by the bread alone, a hunger for goodness, for a life that leaves the world a kinder place than it finds. To have excess is to also have leisure, and I think that this is the most important change you have brought about: the possibility of rest from endless scrabbling. But what are men to do with their leisure? One of two things, I think. They either follow the demands of the flesh into drunken oblivion, groping and dicing their lives away, or they turn the tide of history from want to goodness. They either worship this world as it appears – or they make their own appearances, bending it to the good, to kindness and charity. You have created excess, Lord Carvey, now the time has come to ask: what is to be done with that excess?”

Laurence leaned forward, his heart pounding. “Go on,” he said.

“I have nothing more to say,” said Mary, taking a seat.

Laurence stared at her for a moment, then smiled suddenly. “I don’t believe that for an instant.”

Mary returned his smile. “I don’t want to snare the whole conversation. What do you think? These are just thoughts that have flitted through my mind.”

“But they lead somewhere,” he murmured. “They certainly lead somewhere.”

“Yes!” insisted Kay. “Where do they lead?”

Laurence nodded slowly. “My mother spoke of something like this at breakfast. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you two were in league. This – drinking; yes, I have noticed it. I didn’t think it would last very long. But – it may. It may be that there are these two possibilities. Heavens,” he said, rubbing his eyes. “It’s all so new. I didn’t expect any of this.”

“It is rare that only one door opens at a time,” commented Mary.

“Perhaps,” said Laurence. “Yet I am ill-equipped to act on any of this. I only know agriculture and crops.”

“I know people,” said Mary softly, leaning towards him. “I know how they will change.”

He shook his head, as if to escape her perceptiveness. “How?”

“However you want them to! They are drifting on their excess, Laurence. They have been too used to scarcity to use their surplus rightly. A tribe dying of thirst will drink the oasis dry if they can reach it – but we are not there yet. We are a group of thirsty travelers who have spied an oasis in the distance; it is not enough for all, but it is more than we had before. Those with strong legs will race forward to drink, but the stragglers, the old and the helpless, will falter and die of thirst in the dunes. You have made the oasis, but only the strong are sated. What you have done is only the beginning. There is enough to go around – finally – provided it is managed intelligently.”

“Managed?” he said suddenly, raising his eyes.

“Yes – managed!” cried Kay. “Managed!”

“Kay has had the right approach,” said Mary, smiling at her, “but she wanted to manage the effect, not the cause. Goods are the effect, leisure is the cause. It is in your power to distribute this leisure, Lord Carvey. Spread it more or less evenly, and the poor shall not want for shoes. Give them the leisure to make their own, and you shall not have to go running to London for more.”

Laurence frowned. “How am I supposed to give this ‘leisure’?”

“Ah – there it is.” Mary nodded her head and rose. She walked over to the window and gazed out, tapping her fingernails on the glass, the sunlight streaming over her. She turned to them. “I will do something unusual. In the midst of reason, I will speak of a dream, a dream I had last night, after I saw your lands. I saw all the poor in a desert, all standing in an endless line. And they were passing an object between them, and I saw that this object changed its appearance every time it came to a new pair of hands. Sometimes it was a child, sometimes it was a painting, sometimes it was a book. And each time a poor man held this object in his hands, he became transformed with joy, and his shoulders burst into wings, and he loved his life. But every time he held the object, it was only for an instant, for his neighbour, seeing his joy, tore the object from his hands, and he turned into a kind of plaster, and his wings dried and crumbled, his sorrow all the more horrible for the joy that had preceded it. And suddenly I was standing in the line, and the object was passed into my hand, but it didn’t turn into a child or a painting, for there was a wide light and every man had his own wings, and the desert bloomed with flowers and there was such rejoicing that I thought my ears would burst. But the woman next to me grabbed the object from me, and suddenly all was as it was before, and the object was

snatched from her as it was from me, and suddenly I understood that the object was dreams, and dreams came from a kind of excess, and without that excess there are no children, no paintings, no joy, and everyone is destined to stand in line and taste the happiness of life for only a moment, for there is not enough to go around.”

Mary shook her head sadly. “And I also thought – when I awoke – that where we are in history is a turning point. We have the chance to end the dependence of man on nature, and if we allow this to continue uncontrolled we will have missed an opportunity that will never come again. The able will become rich, the sad will remain poor, and all we will have done with the greatest opportunity is make the oldest divide a lot wider.”

There was a silence in the room that seemed terrible; terrible because of the thoughts it contained, terrible because they demanded an answer, terrible because no answers were forthcoming, and terrible because the thoughts were that a life lived rationally was not enough, that the answer of ‘more’ does not answer the questions of ‘how much?’ and ‘to whom?’ And whether it was now possible to question such questions, to uncover the premises that gave them life, after such a skeletal millennium of want – were questions that held little weight against the luminosity of Mary’s dream.

“I have no more answers,” said Mary quietly.

“Well, I do,” said Kay loudly. “And if anyone tells me to be quiet I shall smack them sharply on the head!”

Laurence turned to her slowly, as if in a daze.

Kay smiled. “Mary, you are brilliant,” she said, blowing her a kiss. “But you live too much in the world of dreams to make them real. The solution is really very simple – it’s as if God were throwing opportunities our way! Here’s what I propose. Larry – you have about a hundred tons of food rotting in the fields. Mr. Footer is hovering around with looms that require willing hands...”

Laurence started up from his chair, almost knocking it over. “Of course!” he cried. “By God, Kay, all sins are redeemed!”

Kay’s face flushed. “Thank you, but let me finish! All we have to do is invest in Mr. Footer’s looms, give the poor the food to get their strength up and work properly – and somehow work a few thousand sheep in.”

“Leave the sheep to me!” said Laurence, pacing the room and tugging at his beard. “God – Lord Cerbes has plenty of sheep, and problems enough keeping them all. I will go to London and arrange for three thousand to be brought down. Damn, but it will take a lot of money! We’re so tied up in agricultural investments... But we can make arrangements, to pay over a period of time, hopefully overlapping with the profits from the poor... If they produce decently, we can turn the excess crops into good clean gold, and – God, we can think about processing the wool here, turning it into clothing, taking a ship or two – the possibilities are endless!”

“If I may...” said Mary.

“What? What?” said Laurence, looking at her almost fearfully.

“We must – remember their leisure a little. It may be quite cruel to turn them from drudges of poverty into drudges of looms. Make a profit, by all means, but try to ensure that they have a little leisure, that they are not completely consumed by the progress of capital.”



“Yes – of course,” said Laurence. “I was a little carried away, if you’ll excuse me. By all means – we shall ensure that they get good wages for their work. It will encourage them... Yes – God Almighty – do you know, I was beginning to feel rusty! I thought I had run out of challenges larger than the ledger!”

“Your problems are just beginning,” smiled Mary. “But I have no doubt you shall rise to every challenge, for you are a decent person. It was your very decency that drew me here.”

“And good for us that it did!” said Kay. “Otherwise who knows how long we might have blundered about in a muddle!”

“Oh no,” said Mary, staring at Laurence, her eyes lit by a strange joy. “There is to be no muddling now.”

Adam Footer was quite surprised at his reception when he arrived a few minutes later. He had expected black looks from the maid, scant minutes with a very distracted Lord Carvey, and no small share of disappointment. As it was, he was met personally by the good Lord, almost pulled into a room by two very excited woman, thrust into a chair and barraged with questions.

Had he slept well? Yes, with great thanks. Was he serious about his proposals? Why yes, of course. Had he troubled himself to make calculations based on the best possible scenario? He wasn’t sure he understood. What if the demand were for a hundred looms, within a month? Well, sir, those calculations were a little beyond his expectations, but with a pen and paper...

Pen and paper were bought, and Mr. Footer was surrounded by three glittering points of a triangle as he worked. It seemed as if the logistics of such rapid manufacturing depended on the availability of certain resources, especially wood – given the rash of shipbuilding lately, the price

was quite high – but most of all it was the labour to build them that was in question. Hiring a man for three months and training him to build looms was a premium business, it seemed, unless one was willing to keep him on as a loom-operator. What level of woodcraft was required? Nothing religious, sir, just the ability to measure thrice and cut once; some knowledge of planing and sanding, how to apply lacquer evenly and so forth. Could it be taught to novices in two weeks? Perhaps, for some of it could be deemed common handiwork. And could one undertake to teach a group of untutored men such skills? What level of ignorance are we talking about, sir? The very lowest – put in Mary – beggars, vagabonds and even some women. That’s quite a task of education, if you’ve had any experience with such folk, sir – Adam was becoming quite bewildered at this point – and he would prefer those that have had a little work kneaded into their hands, so to speak. No, apparently that was not the point; the meek were to inherit the looms, or something to that effect.

Mr. Footer was instructed to look into the matter very thoroughly, and given a credit note for the wood and other materials. He was to take up residence in the village and hire some lads to speak of the opportunities outlined, stressing that only the poorest need apply. His various objections were quite openly ignored, and in short he found himself hurried out of the house while his wits still lingered in the drawing room.

“Well, that’s quite a business,” Adam muttered, staring at the closed door in confusion. “A very hasty business, but an opportunity not likely to come twice. They want a hundred looms and scavengers to work them, then by God that’s what they’ll get! All the stranger in my mind, but they’re paying the bills, and they shall be the ones to find value in it!”

Shrugging his coat a little higher, Adam walked down the path towards the front gate. When he reached it, he turned for a last look at the house. Through a distant latticed window, he saw Laurence and Kay gesticulating frantically. Mary stood before them, looking out at the merchant. She waved, and if Mr. Footer had had the eyes of an eagle, he might have spied a wink that would have given him some pause.

But he did not, and turned to the gate and laid a hand on its latch, his mind churning with facts and figures and speculations – and the idea that this was all a sort of mad dream.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### *The Hard Ride of Nature's Knight*

“NO, NO, MY DEAR, IT IS QUITE IMPOSSIBLE THAT YOU SHOULD TRAVEL ALONE,” said Lord Cerbes, plucking an enormous tomato from the vine. “The roads alone make it out of the question, let alone the fact that Lord Carvey is an attractive young man whose interest in you goes quite beyond the aesthetics of your voice. You shall have to take a companion.”

“To drag some woman to this man’s house, as if we were bidding on the merchandise. That would look utterly ridiculous!” replied Lydia, pulling back a branch so he could dig for the potatoes.

“The interpretations of the world are not my concern,” replied her father. “It is unsafe to travel alone, and we know little about your host. That is the problem; solve it as you see fit. Though why you cannot wait a fortnight is still beyond me. My business in Yorkshire will be done by then. Look at that,” he said, holding up a twisted and bulging potato. “Thrice the size, but quite unappealing. Would you eat that?”

Lydia wrinkled her nose. “I’d have someone mash it first.”

“Not if you were hungry enough. What about Jonathon? His family is about to disown him again, so you might as well tow him along until they calm down.”

“He’s bit of a fop, isn’t he? He always preferred his sweat to glisten, not smell.”

Lord Cerbes smiled and shook his head. “No, no. Now he has discovered Rousseau, and you couldn’t get him to bathe at swordpoint. Not that you’d want to get that close.”

“He’s quite interesting, but one tires of him rapidly.”

“Take him out there, and you won’t see him for days,” said Lord Cerbes, digging another vegetable out of the earth. “He’ll be too busy trying to throw off the veneer of civilization by lurking in the undergrowth in his undergarments.”

Lydia laughed. “That’s quite a picture.”

“He’s lost a good deal of weight since his Epicurean days.”

She smiled. “All right. I’ll take him.”

“And what is this?” asked her father, holding up a strangely bloated monstrosity. He stared at it, clucking his tongue. “Ah well – science marches on!”

“Ah, nature...” sighed the young man in question, leaning against a tree trunk, shivering at the knotty tingle that ran up his spine and gazing at the wildness before him. Nature stared back at him with corseted malevolence, as if she were a chained barbarian gazing at a taunting child, thinking only: *you can taunt me now, but in time, young one, in time...*

Jonathon flexed his chest mightily – an action possible only to those who believe that manhood is a grim fire one must swell by squeezing one’s muscles like a pair of bellows. He felt a terrible sensuality running through his veins, an elemental connection with the dangerous days of yore.

“Do not think that I esteem you lightly, my goddess,” he murmured, running his hands up the bark. “I see you lying in wait behind our roads and windmills. That such upstart children should take your power of terror and turn it to their own comfort – what your desire for vengeance must taste like!”

He sank down from the trunk and squatted, thrusting his hands into the earth. “But recall,” he said softly. “Recall that there are sons of civilization who scorn the comforts you have so begrudged them, who stare at your harsh face without fear, who wish for nothing less than the chance to face you on your terms, far from towns and cries for help, and who will wrestle you with nothing more than will – and win!”

Nature beheld the latest embodiment of Mr. Jonathon Eddsworth, prior aspirant to the title of gourmand, craftsman, artist and decadent – to mention only a few. If Nature felt any qualms at all about him, it was only confusion in the face of his rapid reincarnations, for his soul was like a bloodhound in a slaughter-house, sniffing infinite trails of true scents, forgetting each prior aroma as the breeze brought a new one its way. His concentration was like a compass in an electrical storm, quivering in its random certainty. Every way he pointed was absolute in its transience, and his friends and family found in his shifting certainties new proof for the revolutions of Galileo, that a body was prone to movement unless impeded. Only some proof, alas, for he fulfilled only half the equation. Movement he had; inertia none at all.

Jonathon Eddsworth was a hero to the rebellious dreams of underutilized youths. In his childhood, at boarding school, how he had wormed his way into the hearts of those wayward rebels dying to fight the wealth that placed them there! The brief time of youth when justice is the only obsession – how it coalesced around the person of Jonathon Eddsworth! He was the one who dropped inkwells on attendance books and made rude noises during mass. He faced his endless punishments with fearless bravado, wearing a white scarf to his canings which he flicked

jauntily as he winked past the silent rows of admiring boys. His brilliance allowed him to scorn his studies, and who laughed as duller boys crashed in shallow flames trying to follow his example. He posted lavish drawings of naked women in the water closets, then defended his actions by stating that he was a biologist, and had the marks to prove it. Momentum being his only motion, he flew on through the barriers of adulthood like a runner whose every finish line is a starting block; he flew through the continent, flew through the rooms of intellectuals and priests like a mad devil, scorning others for their contemplative inaction, crying out that ‘to do was to be!’, and proceeding to even greater speed, through the spinning doors of cultural whims, always plunging into the latest, always a step ahead of the horde, always turning his head to scorn them – and in the turning finding a new direction, and sprinting in new pursuit. Greyhounds with great futures have been shot for lesser transgressions, for ignoring the hare in favour of the sunset, but Jonathon was no greyhound. He was a ‘Romantic’; passion was his only hare, and if it led to the sunset, there he would go, though he fell past the edge of the world in hot pursuit.

He scorned Aeschylus for failing to substitute will for wax, for will, he said, was a greater substitute than any pale law of blind reality. He was no hypocrite in this view, for he lived what he spoke. Various mentors told him that to follow passion is to follow the residue of thought, and in that he was a greyhound whose only hare was its own tail, but he scorned that view as utterly bloodless – blood being the only justification for action, a justification he invoked constantly whenever his motives were questioned. “For the blood! For the blood!” he cried repeatedly, like a visitor to Transylvania quite taken by the local customs.

His parents were not only driven to distraction; they were pushed quite past it. The elder Mr. Eddsworth deemed creation a library so impressive that one's highest tribute was to sit in a large chair and peruse it quietly. A little cognac, a yellowed page and the serenity of contemplation undisturbed by interpretation or action – what greater pleasure could a man ask for? His complexion had gone the way of the tallow candle, as if his skin had reflected so many amber pages that it had become one. His wife matched him perfectly; she was a sublime knitter and presser of leaves who considered her post-reproductive duty to consist of quieting the excitements of nature to the point of, in Jonathan's eyes, near-catatonia.

Such families are stiff portraits that many a frantic life has been spent escaping. The magical ability to accept leisure without complaint seemed to have utterly died out within the span of a single generation, leaving Jonathan's parents quite confused. Believing that the waning of life was a time of hard-earned quietness, they faced the tumults of their offspring with the deeply offended gaze of rudely-awoken afternoon nappers. They found Jonathan's life utterly incomprehensible, and had odd visions of strapping him down and sedating him into serenity.

Yet such serenity was never to be their lot; neither Jonathon nor the times would allow it. Everything that had gone before was wrenched from often-dusty trunks and exposed to the kind of light that finds the slightest tarnish cause enough for the rubbish-heap. *You believe that the planets fly in perfect circles?* How quaint. It is not so. *You believe our lords and masters are placed in palaces by a preferential deity?* Interesting – let us see if it is so. *Illness is an imbalance of humours?* Prove it. *We are all born slaves of an ancient crime?* How so?



*Station?* Ridiculous. *Faith?* Laughable. *All the accumulated lies and inertia of history?* Out with it! Out with it – and out with you, too, if you do not correspond, for we are all open to change if we so desire!

Jonathon was strongly built, in the knotty manner of one who has recently escaped the bulbous straightjacket of corpulence. He drilled his body endlessly, wheezing through gritted teeth, whipping himself into the image of his new perfection, the Natural Man. The Natural Man – naturally – disdained all civilized softness; he was a rugged engine of primordial passions, an avid consumer of barely-warmed meats and harsh native breads. All his readings pertained to the miraculous ability of the body to survive hardships, all its movements exalted in its capacity of healing (if not health); all mirrors were records of sinewy strength, carefully cultivated. Jonathan's thick hair was allowed to go natural, and rose in long and carefully untended knots on his head. His face was clean-shaven (for the Natural Man could only stake his claim as lord of all creation by maintaining a prominent jawline) and he perfected the art of the piercing stare so completely that mothers flocked to shield their daughters when his eyes started carving through their blushing cheeks.

Yet those who called him a mere creature of the flesh maligned him in their ignorance, for Jonathon was strangely chaste; when he met with a lady after midnight, he was given more to rhapsodizing about the stars than earthy groping. Such women rarely had stars on their mind, and often left him strangely wounded. His reputation, marred by his aborted encounters, left him shorn of the fairer sex almost completely, for those who dallied in the wee hours soon learned of

his “blood” (one even asked him why his cry for ‘blood’ could not flow in a more productive direction) and those that did not were alienated by his strange talk.

Lydia was an exception to this rule. She was originally quite fascinated by her cousin Jonathon’s odd combination of strenuous manhood and piercing dreaminess. They spent a good deal of time together, but she soon found his endless stream of words quite tiring. She considered him very intelligent, but his perceptiveness was disordered to the point of chaos. Like many gifted with both observation and eloquence, what he most required was an audience, and Lydia did not have the patience to play such a role for long. She also found herself concerned about his future to the point where further involvement in such mad plunging seemed only a recipe for purposeless pain.

Jonathan’s soliloquy to the Earth Goddess was cut short by a trampling in the undergrowth that thrilled his heart. He spun around just in time to see Lydia draw back from a branch that had rapped her smartly on the cheek.

“Lydia!” he cried, stepping forward.

“No sweaty hugs, for heaven’s sake!” she snapped, gesturing at the tiny garden. “I asked your mother to send for you, but she only sighed and said she didn’t want to lose any more maids to the undergrowth. What have you been doing with them? Sacrificing them to the druids?”

“What are you doing here?” he said carelessly, throwing on a shirt. “I thought I’d lost you.”

“Lost me?”

“To them; to the city. You have avoided me lately. Have I offended you?”

“No,” laughed Lydia. “I was worried about you.”

“What of it? If I had a farthing for every busy-body who considered my life a personal affront to their universe, I would be the lord of copper! Yet has it ever occurred to any of you that I might in fact be happy with my situation – or, to go further, that I may in fact be bursting with joy?”

“Please – contain yourself,” she smiled. “I have come with an offer to see the country.”

“Which country?”

“Here. England.”

“No no,” he said, leaping up and hanging off a low branch. “Which country? The country of little inns and pleasant fields, or the country of dark trees and hungry beasts?”

“Well – there is an inn, I believe,” remarked Lydia, “but I hear it has a dog that doesn’t eat as regularly as it would like. Would that do?”

“Where is it?” he asked, twisting slowly in mid-air.

“Dorset – close to the sea.”

“Why? Where are you going?”

“Father met a man at a party – you may have heard of him – Lord Laurence Carvey.”

“Oh – Nature’s venerable jailer, Mr. Carvey! Of course I have heard of him. I think I argued with him once.”

“Yes, but that’s true of everyone.”

“No – it was a matter close to both our hearts. It is not often that such palpable enemies come one’s way. He was my dream opponent. I remember him well.”

“Oh, I suppose because he’s chaining poor nature to man’s softer needs...” said Lydia.

“Christ no! I applaud that. It’s just that he was doing it so kindly! By not fighting, he never gave nature a fighting chance. What do you think – would you rather die in battle or be taken prisoner in your sleep?”

“Never mind that,” interrupted Lydia. “I’ll be open with you. I have to take a companion. Father suggested you. Now you are a wearying beast, but I’ve always enjoyed you in small doses. I’m leaving in the morning. Are you coming?”

Jonathon turned, hanging from the branch, his feet trailing on the ground. “And we shall become reacquainted on the way?” he asked, turning his head over his shoulder to look at her.

“As much as you like – provided I get a word in edgeways.”

“For how long?”

“Not long. A week, maybe two.”

He dropped from the branch suddenly and rose, shaking his hands. “I have been languishing a little, you know. Most shameful. It seems as if everyone and their aunt has been barking at me to be more useful. ‘To whom?’ I ask. But I have been thinking – for you know I believe you have more than a few pence of sense jingling in your pockets – I would like to talk to Mr. Carvey, for it has struck me of late that my observations have been somewhat dulled by the repetition around me. Do you know that he is the most interesting man of our age? I have often wondered how he lives with his benevolence. It is the most dangerous trait – more men have fallen on their own swords that way than have ever been skewered by a tangible enemy. It shan’t do any harm to ask.”

“If you could distill such ramblings into a simple yes or no,” observed Lydia shortly, “you would be a far more pleasant companion.”

“Some are put on earth to desire companions, some to escape it by being them. I am neither, I think,” said Jonathon lazily.

“Tomorrow morning. Seven. Yes or no.”

“Oh – all right. But...”

“Thank you.”

“Are you going now?”

“Small doses, if you remember,” she said, turning to leave.

“A week, you say – though I think it shall be a lot longer. We shall discover each other, you and I.”

“You shall always be open to me, for you have so much to hide,” said Lydia.

“And you to me,” returned Jonathon, “for you perceive all openness as artifice. And mark my words: I shall live to see you in love. In Dorset.”

“If only you knew what drove me there!”

“You shall find love in Dorset,” repeated Jonathon, suddenly serious. “And that will be a most interesting thing to see. You are greater than your father, and so will forever remain in his shadow.”

Lydia stared at him, and they both laughed suddenly. “I’ve missed you, but not that much,” she grinned. “Tomorrow morning. Seven o’clock. Be ready,” she said, and walked off.

“Readiness is all!” he murmured to himself, turning back to the glade. A crow suddenly propelled itself at him, and he threw up his arms.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### *A Friendship Tested*

HAPPILY, JONATHON DIDN'T SLEEP MUCH THAT NIGHT. Such was his custom, for he believed that waking reality was dulled by satisfying dreams. *Far better to face the world with one's recesses clamouring for softer colours*, he thought, *a world one could repaint at will with the driving laziness of fatigue*. He packed sparingly, and was out by the back lane fifteen minutes before Lydia arrived in her carriage, a span of time he filled by trying to command various birds with piercing whistles.

“Good morning,” cried Lydia, leaning her head out of the window as the horses snorted to a stop.

“And a very pretty one it is, too,” replied Jonathon, stepping on the rail and hoisting himself up. “And pretty in here, too,” he continued, gesturing at the bulging cushions. “They look like fat silk faces with one missing eye.”

“I slept well,” she said, “and so have no need of such wayward observations. Walk on,” she cried, rapping the ceiling.

The carriage lurched onwards. “Someday all roads will be smooth,” he muttered, rubbing his face with his hands, “and men will grow sick of motion, for the last trace of hard travel will be lost.”

“How have you been?” she asked, watching him.

“I did not sleep well, since you ask,” he replied.

“Why?”

He shrugged and looked out the window. “Tell me – do you think all youth must decay into the solemn gravity of staring wisdom?”

“It’s impolite to answer a question with a question.”

“Exactly that sort of staring. Do you think?”

“If what you’re asking,” replied Lydia, grabbing at her hat as a pothole yanked the carriage’s wheels from under it, “is whether your mad emotional experimentation must give way to a more rational approach to life, then I would answer in the affirmative, though more in hope than expectation.”

“That’s what had been nagging at me, putting me to sleep at night,” he answered.

“Rationally speaking, I hate the idea.”

“Of what? That passion should not be destined to be your sole responsibility?”

“I hate this ‘reason’ business,” said Jonathon suddenly. “I feel as though I am infected by it.”

Lydia blinked. “What?”

“Of late, I have begun to feel sort of staggered and stretched; my feelings are becoming more like the salvos of blind archers than the pleasurable darts I used to feel.”

“You are lonely,” she said quietly.

He shook his head and grimaced. “I am not the company to myself that I once was. Yet why should that be?”

“Why should that not be? You should have paid more attention to your lectures in school.”

“This is a lost age,” said Jonathon. “An age where feelings are seen as the poetry of a mad servant. What is the capital sin? Enthusiasm. ‘No, no,’ say the philosophers, ‘feelings will only hamper my objective view of the world’, so they disown their souls in the calm pursuit of this or

that cure, without realizing that their approach is a case of the cure being worse than the disease. You know, I saw a friend die of cholera a few weeks ago. He died with his cheeks thin and stretched. But he met his death completely, with all his soul; without regrets. Yet these scientists, these merchants, they may have added to the knowledge of this world, but only at the cost of never having fully lived within it! It is too early to tell what death will do to these rational souls, but I believe they will not go quietly; they will rail against their endings because, in the most essential way, they never begun.”

“And would you say the same of me? Of my father?” asked Lydia.

“You are rather mutant exceptions,” replied Jonathon. “But yes – even you. Where are the rational artists? Where are the objective poets? There is no answer to that question, for to answer the question of beauty with objectivity is to call the sunset dust in the air and the rotation of certain orbs. But to feel the sunset is to see it totally differently, as a celebration of the essence of beauty, of truth, of life.”

“Yet only to feel it is to be alone,” said Lydia.

“That is not for emotion alone,” said Jonathon, staring past the swaying curtains. “Look at all these rational houses,” he said, nodding at the grim brick shapes beyond the little window. “Each stone, each doorway positioned for the precise needs of its inhabitants. Lives are lived within three feet of each other, yet none know their neighbours. Children are made and born within spitting distance, children whose wailing wails are nothing more than an irritant to the ordered lives of their neighbours. Of course that is right, for rational men need peace and quiet to pursue their thoughts, but they never congregate to worship sunsets, for each is studying his own calculations of beauty, alone and undisturbed in his study.”



“And what would you have them do?” asked Lydia with a smile. “Eat together and embrace in tears over their pork chops?”

“‘Pork chops’,” smiled Jonathon. “Yes, that is ever the way with rational people. They always attach the shadow of petty things to beautiful images – and one wonders why they are not poets. ‘Pork chops’ – yes, men must eat them, but only as food. Embracing together over black bread may make men happier than nibbling pork chops alone in their studies. This ‘objectivity’ is another excuse for the observation of life (so favoured by our priests) rather than the risk of living it. I know – I can weigh my alternatives sensibly and logically conclude that, to profit from the flow of the world, I must invest in knowledge and facts rather than experience and life. But this dry profit – have you noticed how little there is between modern men but dry calculations of mutual utility? I see them at the market (for the market is a fascinating place to watch; there are so many spectators), and in each of their eyes, beneath the bright lights of haggling and argument, lies a squalid form of grasping, as if they have surrendered their desire for intimacy in the hopes that profit can take its place. Profit for what? More coins? But they don’t unleash their profits on life – they only invest them in more profit! And the heaviest at the end is the winner. But what have they won? Profit – not life! I loathe the leeches!”

Jonathan’s face was unnaturally heavy; his breathing sounded laboured. Lydia regarded him almost in horror, and was only with an effort that she remembered him laughing.

“This is a terrible sort of intimacy,” she said involuntarily.

“Why?” he asked, raising his eyes to her. “Because it is real?”

She shook her head, attempting to smile. “No – because there is no profit in it.”

He laughed, but it was a harsh sound. “I understand – I am not as reactionary as that. There are no answers in it.”

“No – but that is what you have always championed, isn’t it?”

“This business of life,” he said slowly, “is a devilishly drawn-out affair.”

“That’s – I don’t understand that.”

“No,” said Jonathon softly. “And I suspect you never will.”

“Because I have a purpose.”

“And what is your purpose?”

“I will be a singer. A great singer.”

“Yes – and when you are not singing, you shall be a human being. And what will you be then?”

“When I am not singing I shall be practicing. And when I am not practicing I shall be enjoying the fruit of my labours, happy and content in the warm bath of earned reward.”

“Purpose – for others,” said Jonathon. “Reward – from others.”

“No,” replied Lydia shortly. “For myself.”

“Then you plan to sing along in Scottish hills? No?”

“You seem to despise the fact that success in this world requires interaction with human beings, Jonathon. Why is that?”

He grinned, and the heaviness of the conversation suddenly vanished. “Because there is too much of profit in it,” he said. “But that matters little if anything. Tell me – I hear you surprised the local nestlings with your startling impersonation of a bird protesting the bandaging of its broken wing.”

“What review did you pluck that from?” she asked.

“Such tortured prose can only be found in the ‘Times’ – and in those who read it.”

“What did it say?”

“‘Incalculably demonstrative’,” quoted Jonathon.

“What – the prose or my style?”

“Both. My favourite phrase pertained more to social analysis than aesthetic criticism. The reviewer seemed quite slighted at the air of competition he sniffed between you and Penelope. *How unseemly*, he wrote, *that one of our fairest daughters should find it necessary to mutilate several perfectly innocent madrigals to prove her superiority over a member of the lower classes – almost as if she did not believe in it herself.* Then he went off on a right rampage about the rising insouciance of the lower orders, the end of all distinction and privilege – and rounded it off by portraying your concert as a metaphor for the coming destruction of all social order. He didn’t title it ‘The Sopranist Manifesto’, but I think he should have.”

“Father laughed about it,” said Lydia, shifting in her seat. “‘Good for you to be challenged – by her as well as anyone,’ he said.”

“‘Damnably freethinking!’” laughed Jonathon, imitating the martyred tone of injured aristocracy. “You know, your father has fascinated me for quite a long time.”

“Yet you have rarely spoken with him,” smiled Lydia. “Been observing him from your study?”

He waved off the comment. “Perfectly acceptable to study souls from a distance. There’s life in that! Do you know – I think he’ll go to his grave convinced he’s right. I’m not sure whether to call that petty resistance or blind ignorance.”

“Well – as long as there’s a good opinion somewhere,” said Lydia. “I don’t think you fascinate him.”

“No – I suppose not. Yet that is because I am far closer to understanding him than he is to me.”

“Not true. He already understands you.”

“Does he? Ah – the modern disease. Understanding. Nature is hard enough – but a human being?”

“You posit a dichotomy. Never mind,” said Lydia.

“What does he understand about me?” asked Jonathon, leaning forward. “This should be interesting.”

“Not really,” retorted Lydia. “He says you are an emotionalist – and that’s about all.”

“Yes – but the connotations...” murmured the young man. “What does it mean?”

“It means that you have the habit of exploring your inner life at the expense of achieving things in the real world – and that such exploration is a way of avoiding the dangers of tangible achievement – and so criticism.”

“Interesting,” murmured Jonathon, steepling his fingertips under his chin.

“He also said that, were I ever to tell you this, you would steeple your fingers under your chin and say: ‘interesting’,” smiled Lydia.

His fingers twitched, but remained, and his cheeks reddened. “No doubt that is because he believes me to follow the same structures of cause and effect as himself,” he said.

“As all men do – and women,” said Lydia. “But if he is so wrong, tell me: what are you planning to achieve with your life?”

“Oh dear – have I strummed a sensitive nerve? Refused to order my life to your father’s off-the-cuff wisdom?” remarked Jonathon.

“Have I?” demanded Lydia. “For you are not answering the question.”

“Well – to put it simply – what I wish to achieve from my life is the living of it,” he said.

“To experience every moment as if it were my last, and taste all the fruits this world has to offer, without regrets, reservations or prior calculations.”

“And at the end – to become what?”

“Oh, child!” laughed Jonathon. “To ‘become’ is precisely what I reject. To ‘be’ is all I desire!”

“Don’t you think – religious matters aside – that the fantastic improbability of matter rising, walking, regarding and thinking is so incredible that to regard the chemicality of mood and impulse alone does it scant justice? For it may be that our thoughts are the initiators of passion, and that to regard the effect at the expense of the cause is to revel in the habitual, the pre-conceived – the banal!”

“Yes,” replied Jonathon, “to regard passion and beauty as the chemical residue of life would be to see any intensity as a rather unpalatable dreg of noble thought. How easy that is – Shakespeare wasn’t a genius of the soul – he was just a good chemist!”

“Yet Shakespeare did not regard his own soul alone,” retorted Lydia. “He wanted to write and act, and by God he did! He didn’t stare myopically around him and say: ‘it’s all in the soul, folks – I am regarding the sunset – so don’t bother me with your expectations’. He planned, thought, felt and acted!”

Jonathon stared at her. “Are you trying to imply that I have ever failed to act?”

“Yes! You have done things, you have reacted. But acted? No.”

“Then what have I been doing?”

“Running after the starting block,” said Lydia.

Jonathon paused for a moment, his eyes narrowing. “That’s a decent metaphor – for a rationalist,” he said with a sudden smile, settling back into his seat. “And now – if you’ll excuse me – I will take a nap in the hopes of achieving something beyond criticism.”

As he settled his head against a cushion, Lydia stared out the window.

“Going to be a long fortnight,” she muttered.

“What’s that?” asked Jonathon, opening one eye. But she didn’t answer.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### *The Poor Feed*

WHEN THEY CAME, THEY SEEMED WEIGHED BY CHAINS forged from the very depths of their histories. There could be biologists who would be hard-pressed to call them members of the same species, so different did they appear from those they staggered towards. Yet there would be little risk of such ambiguities, for those with the education to classify had won their knowledge at the expense of a certain set of eyes, eyes which saw legless beggars sitting by the road or mothers with dry breasts and unmoving bundles wandering the fields. Such blind spots rendered the dissection of mute abstractions far easier than the recognition of simple human misery, and in the slow dawn of the modern world, the amount of misery would quite have buried any who dared stare at it openly. The vast tribe of the forgotten, who have left no footprint in history or men's minds, where should they show up in the chronicles of the age? The privileged skimmed the surface of their comfortable existence, unable to see beyond the powder of their noses – unable, not unwilling, for if there is a soul that can look upon the gaunt face of poverty and survive the insanity of such suffering, it has yet to see the light of this earth.

The POOR were ghosts treading the uneasy halls of speculation. The POOR were invoked in many an erudite speech, as if there existed a vast group of humanity with no existence save four letters and two legs. ‘What is to be done?’ was asked in profound boudoirs and sunwashed parlour rooms. ‘What is to be done?’ was asked by tender ancient souls and bitter young minds. ‘What is to be done?’ was asked by those who breathed sherry-fumes and those who renounced

them in blind protest. ‘What is to be done?’ was the central question of the age, but it was an interrogation that could not be answered through the blinkered habits of the questioners. A new age – or none at all – seemed the only possible answer.

When they came, on the morning of that clear day, it seemed as if the earth had opened wide and spat out its most bitter seeds, seeds retched forth for their failure to bloom. The trails of these seeds, these *POOR*, were littered with unnamable losses, as if they cursed their movements by dropping all limbs that might propel them. Here a man rises from drinking and stumbles out into the street; he tries to scratch his nose, but raises his stump in vain, for his hands have remained clinging to the bottle. There a woman rises from a thickly-companioned bed and tries to walk, but falls on the floor; her legs have remained between the covers, the mobility they offered amputated by the growing seed in her belly. Here a child rises from the wreckage of a sunken family, tries to grasp the light he projects before him, but his eyes are gone, sold for respite from horror and memory, and he gropes alone in the dark. So many limbs; it should surprise the world to cross the street without tripping, without falling and regarding the right-angles of human destruction through the corner of a propped elbow. All the avenues of escape, all stripped from the hapless poor like the uniform of a cowardly soldier, stripped by the Sergeant of choice and circumstance. His sword finds the seam binding hope to effort – and rip!, they fly apart, to be lost on the empty battlefield. The Sergeant spits and says ‘No salute, boy: you are a disgrace to your uniform!’ And what of the medals of labour, hope and expectation? Off with them – throw them on the ground, grind them to dust! This war was fought long before your time; your father’s father ran from the battlefield, these medals do not belong to you! This



cap – what is this cap? Do I finger an inscription marked ‘ambition’? Ambition for what, woman? Do you wish to become a queen? You are the daughter of a gambler, a thief, a drunkard, a poor man! No, no – you shall walk bareheaded and fall by the road under a hard sun. Your hair shall fly in your face when the winds of adversity strike, and your flesh shall chill on your bones, for you have been part of the darkness at the corner of men’s eyes – and if they see you, they shall see your trail, see where you came from, and shall be blind no longer. Compassion, girl – have compassion for those a little less unfortunate than you!

And whether the haughty Sergeant who hacked at the ranks of life was appointed by God, by society or by the poor themselves was of little consequence to the age. The effect was clear. Four letters, two legs – and entirely too much of the whole business! Something should be done, but what? Ah – an interesting question, very complex! Compassion, yes; generosity, naturally; but not too much – wouldn’t want the unwashed getting lazy, hm? Perhaps also a sprinkling of legislation, for what better way to undercut the dictatorship of the Sergeant than with good old-fashioned political clout? Tell them how long to work, where to work, what pay to receive, what to eat and where to sleep! Discipline, by God! Get them to see the link between work and food! Yank them from their habits, away from this damnable humility; this lack of faith that keeps them down! Show them a better way – our way, for they are the POOR, and they must no longer be POOR if we are to sleep peacefully in the afternoon!

Laurence watched them come, this skeletal army, and some of these thoughts, half-remembered scraps of heated arguments, floated through his mind. He stood in a field south of

his house; Kay, Mary and Adam stood beside him. Tables of food were laid before them, and a few stout lads stood ready to quell any disorder. The autumn day was blazingly hot, and the lightly rolling hills, the distant smoke of the village, the far trees soaring between the lawful divisions of land, the sparrows being shooed from the trays of food, the wheat and heat and shimmering blue sky, all this seemed to be a sumptuous table laid for a feast of beasts, for as Laurence saw them coming, he could scarcely think of them as human.

“By God!” he whispered, for he was not an unimaginative man. His lands were no longer poor, and the distance between himself and his poorest subject could still be reckoned in a degree of sorts, but these – *God!* he thought, *where are these coming from? The meek are not among us, for the meek are self-bowed, and these wrecks before me have not even the shy dignity of meekness!*

There were less than two hundred, and they walked on stiff legs that seemed to have forgotten even the pain of motion. Their eyes were fixed on the ground, as if they expected the sun to strike them down for defiling its vision; their arms hung thin and useless by their sides. The effects of true starvation had never before been fully apparent to Laurence; he blessed their rags in fearful relief, for when their tatters passed aside, they revealed bodies that seemed a child’s sketch of life. Muscle, the food of toil, had itself been consumed in their desperate attempt to cling to life, and the hopeless habits of their existence appeared nothing more than a brutal joke. *What keeps them going?* wondered Laurence. *What keeps them from ending it all?* He imagined himself briefly in the prone position of abject poverty, shorn of education, of

health, of opportunity, each day less than the one before, the future a dark descent into more want, more horror, more self-peeling and self-erasure... He stood there watching, then the sight overwhelmed him and he averted his eyes.

“Send them – God – let them have the food! Now!” he cried. One of the lads looked up at him.

“Not the right idea, sir,” he said, hefting his stick.

“Let them have it. Let them have it all!”

“They’ll go wild, sir. None of us’ll be able to hold ‘em.”

“I don’t care. People!” he shouted suddenly, standing tall on his podium. “People! This food is for you! Eat! Eat! Come and eat it all!”

The march of the poor stopped all of a sudden. Heads were raised; scabrous faces and red eyes regarded the tables of bread and cheese, the pitchers of cider and mead, and the impact of such a sight seemed to strike the crowd like a silent fist. The slow blow could be seen from afar, as though a rock had been dropped at the far end of a deep, dark pool. A few at the front began edging forward, some scrambled from the middle, and suddenly everything was in motion.

Laurence was startled by the silence of the charge. People leapt and crawled over one another, thrust and kicked their way to the front, and the sudden advance of the mass was like the charge of an army too panicked to flee. Laurence took a step backwards, almost falling off his podium, as the horde rushed forward. The onrush seemed like an unstoppable tide, a rush that would bury him in a madness of trampling. The lads jumped back, the tables were overturned, the cider and mead sprayed beyond the reach of scrabbling hands and the ground turned into a squirming mass of cloaked beasts, digging and burrowing, chasing a crumb or a drop, tearing and gouging into

whatever came in its way; earth, food, neighbour... It was a mad sight, and Laurence turned his eyes to his sister, sickened, as the stout lads advanced with their sticks.

It was not long before the food was gone. Hands raised and stuffed faces mechanically, then a hundred communal bellies seemed to feel the impact of food all at once, and the poor fell to the ground and lay their faces on the torn earth, such ecstasy radiating from their closing eyes that they looked like a rapturous congregation of satisfied addicts.

“Lord – the sight of it!” whispered Adam. “They’ll never work for it, sir,” he said, turning his pale face to Laurence. “They’ll see it and eat it, but they’ll never work for it. It’s not in their bones.”

“That’s a lie,” said Mary, walking past the podium. “They will work harder than any to escape the savagery of such an existence. You there,” she said, kneeling and touching a prostrate form with her fingertips. “You there – look at me.”

A red-bearded face turned to her from the ground. “Lea’ me alone!” it hissed.

“I will not leave you alone,” she said. “Ever been a leader?”

The man croaked an abysmal laugh, clutching at his belly. “Leader, sure, we’ve all led at one time r’another. Meself, I’ve been queen of the Tartars. And a damn good time I had of it too. Me left eye’s a real diamond...”

“Get up, you fool,” said Mary.

The man twisted around and stared up at her. “What d’ye want? Thanks? I thank ye.”

“The food was good?”

“Not as good as the Tartars could cook, but not scratchin’ bad,” he scowled, gripping his belly. “Ai, God!”

“You know where it came from?” asked Mary. Kay stood a few feet behind her, fascinated. “Eh? Do you know where it came from?”

“Most’v mine came from the hard claw of a woman,” he said with a savage grin. “Wrestled it free an’ clear, didn’t I, Mavis?” he said, laughing at the woman who cowered beside him, feeding a baby.

“The food came from the hands of men well fed, men able to put a roof over their heads and food in their children’s bellies,” said Mary slowly. “Men the likes of whom you have never known. Men who would spit at you if you passed them in the street.”

“Yah – go on! Good for them!” glared the bearded man.

“Would you like to be such a man?”

“Who says I ain’t? I’ve spat at a few in my time,” he said, proving it by performing said action at Mary’s feet.

“Ever dreamt of being a man?” asked Mary, leaning over his face.

“Who’re you to axe?”

“I am someone who can offer you that chance.”

“How? Y’need a model for a pretty picture?” mocked the bearded man, turning his face and touching his filthy locks. “I ‘uz counted a fair lad in my youth!”

“You want to use those hands?” asked Mary, leaning deeper. “You want to use those hands for something other than pilfering and grabbing? You want to use them to put a roof over your head and take a wife?”

“What? And give up me freedom? I’ve seen the guts of the poorhouse, an’ have no use fer such do-gooders. Thank-ee kindly though.”

Mary reached down and grabbed his ragged coat. The cloth parted like butter, both in ease and consistency. “I am offering you honest work. Say what you like, this is no life. You have a little courage, a little anger, because your belly is full and you have been cheated all your life. But I am an honest woman. I am offering you,” she said, straightening and raising her voice. “I am offering to all of you, to every man, woman and child here, gainful work. I don’t care who you are, where you’ve come from, or what you’ve done. If you can sit straight for a few hours and move your hands a little – just as if you were begging – then you will have meat and shelter every day for the rest of your lives!”

Other heads began turning towards her, faces lank with the heavy weight of suspicion and despair – yet underneath, beneath the hooded vacuum of the eyes, lay a deeper gleam, a half-forgotten gleam, a gleam of what it meant to be human.

“Don’t listen!” shouted the bearded man hoarsely, struggling to his feet. “This life’s a beggar’s life, they’re the fool one’s, that say we’ll get our reward! Spat on since day one, and here we be dropped scraps of labour and ‘bend your back and be a man!’” He turned to Laurence. “Well I say t’hell with yuz! My manhood was several lives past!” His voice rose hysterically, and Kay stepped back, her heart pounding. “My manhood is in the gutter, and ye’re a fine lot to say well goddamn, but we’ve forgotten something, let’s throw ‘em a scrap or two. Y’want t’give me sommat? Well I’ll tell ye sommat! I wuz ne’er even robbed, ye scurvy bastards! So I say t’hell with ye – t’HELL!” he screamed the last word, his face contorted with rage – and spat at Laurence, striking him on the cheek with a thick splat of spittle.

Laurence stared at the man, his face turning dead white. He strode forward and raised his hand. Kay cried out, staring at Mary, and in the sudden silence, another sound arose, a sound that froze motion and stilled hearts.

From the woman at the bearded man's feet, an infant's cry rose shrill and shivering in the still air, trembling, tenuous, infinitely mournful. It cut through the sudden spasm of violence like a lost cry from another world, a world that was to be, the world of the future. It was an awful cry; it sounded as if the infant suddenly saw the choice before its elders, the lives that hung in the balance. The woman rose from the mass, clutching the wailing infant to her breast.

"Stop – please," she whispered. Her face was streaked with grime; tears ran down her cheeks. "Please – please – I will work."

The infant took a shuddering breath and another thin cry rose from its tiny lungs.

"Please – let me work," repeated the woman. She began stepping forward over the bodies, holding her baby tightly, her blue eyes supplicating.

Laurence let loose a long sigh. The crying continued, the only sound.

"Who else?" he called, stepping back from the bearded man.

A few women rose, and another man.

The red-bearded man raised his hands. "Don't listen! Who is this man? Is he the law? Are we to be bound in chains for stealing his food?"

"I am Lord Laurence Carvey," said Laurence, stepping forward. "I stand behind what she says."

"Not for long," muttered Adam, but no-one heard him.

“We ask for no charity,” said a man, walking forward. Behind him, someone burped. “All right – no more charity.”

“Who’s talking about charity?” asked Laurence. Mary turned to watch him, deeply excited. “I have no time for charity. I want to put your muscles to work. For pay.”

“How?” demanded a man.

“Making cloth. On a new loom. An easy loom.”

“Why us?” demanded another.

“Because you are poor,” said Kay suddenly. “Because we have a responsibility.”

“No,” whispered Mary, shaking her head quickly.

The bearded man scowled, averting his face. “Damn right time to find it!” he muttered with infinite bitterness.

“Who cares that you’re poor?” asked Mary suddenly, turning to them. “Forget that – that’s gone! Already you speak like civilized people. Take it – take more! Work for it! Take it all!”

“What I plan is this,” said Laurence, holding up his hand. “I want two hundred more or less able bodies. I am willing to pay ten shillings a week for ten hours work a day. Room and board shall be found for you, and taken from your pay at the rate of three shillings a week.”

“What’s ten shillings?” asked a young boy.

“Well – er – it’s what you pay for a side of beef about four or five pounds,” said Laurence. “Or a decent cask of beer.”

“Beer!” muttered several voices in awe. A few more men stood up.

“What about the children?” asked another woman.



“Those five and up can work, those under will have enough to eat until they are old enough,” replied Laurence.

“Are ye going t’preach at us?” asked an old man, shaking his head. “I cain’t abide preachin’.”

“Your lives are your own. There is a church if you want it. Mr. Footer,” said Laurence, stepping aside. “Perhaps there are a few questions you want to ask these people.”

“Surely,” scowled Adam. “Why are we doing this?”

“Never mind that. Go on.”

Adam shook his head. “Well, if that’s the shape of things, so be it,” he muttered, turning to the crowd. “Listen – any of you lot ever held a hammer? Yes – hello? What about a saw? Ever hefted a saw? File? Plane? Ever sanded wood? Ever seen wood – you know, grows on trees – come on, you must have been beaten with it once or twice!”

“Mr. Footer,” warned Laurence.

“Well sir, I can’t see the sense of shaping the future with such a shabby lot,” he said. “You give me a week, and I can dig up a hundred fine souls who know more about wood than which end receives it.”

“We are using these people,” said Kay angrily. “Or not at all.”

“Damn it,” muttered Adam, turning back to the crowd. “All right!” he cried. “Please and thank you – raise your right arms!”

The faces stared at him blankly. Sighing, he turned around and raised his right hand. “Like this,” he said over his shoulder. “Now move your hands up and down – like so, yes that’s it. Good. That’s called ‘sanding’. Now bend your elbows. Like this. Wonderful. Now straighten

them. Again and again. That's 'hammering' – well, a little faster anyway. Lower your hands – watch me, don't get confused, and keep the motion going, put a little shoulder in it – no, the other shoulder. Yes – that's the kind of sawing that'll make for splendidly sturdy looms. Oh yes, sir, we've got a fine lot here. Born carpenters, all of them, in about a thousand years."

"Mr. Footer!" said Laurence. "You are free to find other investors, if you have a mind."

Adam held the Lord's eyes for a moment, then turned away, his face flushed.

"All right – next time we try it with tools," he called to the crowd, his voice tight. "Try to remember this part."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### *Risible Women Speak*

ON RETURNING HOME, Laurence found two events had occurred that threw considerable spanners in the works. First, his mother had discovered that Mary had not been banished, and second, she held a letter that made him regret his plans for more than a moment.

“You – stay!” snapped Lady Barbara, staring at Kay as Laurence entered the drawing room. “You – into the sunroom.”

Kay started speaking, but Laurence cut her off with a wave of his hand, following his mother.

“Sit down,” commanded Lady Barbara. Laurence sat. She turned her back on him and stared out the window.

“I would ask for explanations if I thought there was anything more than willful disobedience on your part,” she said, flicking her fingers behind her back. “However, since you have declared yourself in action, I have no choice but to simply say: this will not be!” She turned to him, and he almost flinched at the depth of anger in her gray eyes. “One raises children sternly in the hopes that they will recognize sensible limitations to their actions. One watches them grow and slowly loosens one’s command in the hopes that they will find the maturity to behave in a responsible manner. One expects mistakes, one expects disobedience, but one does not expect them to act like unprincipled madmen at the age of twenty-four! However, this has been your decision, and as such, I shall reply to it as I would to any wayward child: this will not be! This Mary creature will leave our lands; Mr. Footer will depart at once, and you and Kay shall spend

the winter deprived of income in the hopes that you shall in your leisure come to understand the sin of disobedience. That is all,” she said, turning to go.

“A harsh fate,” said Laurence, standing slowly. “Considering that tomorrow is my birthday.”

His mother hesitated for an instant. “That should have been considered prior to action,” she said.

“Who says it wasn’t?” asked Laurence.

Lady Barbara stopped short and turned to him. “Excuse me?” she asked, her jaw set.

“Father knew a good deal about you, Mother,” he said. “Being married to someone for twenty-eight years gives even scholars some wisdom in human affairs. And my childhood was not only spent learning how to obey you. It was also spent nurturing certain dreams, dreams that I often told Father about. He, too, had an aspiring side – though I shouldn’t have expected you to have noticed that, since you spent most of your time avoiding his company. He listened quite attentively as I outlined my plans. ‘Good for you,’ he said, ‘though I don’t expect it will get past your mother’. ‘Well’, I said, ‘what can we do about that?’ And do you know, we came up with something.”

“You two conspired against me?” whispered Lady Barbara, her cheeks like white lava.

“Such are the perils of living in a dictatorship,” replied Laurence.

“That is enough! I want you out of my house!” she cried.

“You have about six hours to enforce that order, Mother” he said, “for after midnight, you will have to learn how to persuade rather than command. For that is when I turn twenty five, and the title, the lands and the money all pass into my name.”

Lady Barbara stared at him, eyes narrowed, and took a deep breath. “I am well aware of your birthday. Yet you must be married for that to occur. And, since you have chosen to spend your time running after peasants in the fields, that is unlikely to occur – unless you are willing to marry one.”

“No – not married, Mother,” said Laurence. “Father understood my plans very well. I explained to him that marriage would have to wait until they are well underway. That clause was changed the day before he died.”

“Without prior notification? That will never stand!”

“Unfortunately, it was signed, sealed and delivered. You were busy, receiving visitors. It escaped your attention. We’ll look for it tomorrow.”

Lady Barbara stood against the window stiffly, her willpower straining, adamant. She stared at her son, and he could see bitter flashes scurrying deep in her eyes. They strove to find mastery, but against the wall of law scabbled in vain. Their colour seemed to fade slowly, as if a cloud passed over the room.

“Then it has all been ironed out, hasn’t it?” she said slowly, “and you are aglow with pride at having outwitted your mother. Yes – I know little about the law; I trusted in openness and was rewarded with deceit. Such were your underhanded plans; such was the respect you showed to me. It is no matter. It is you who will have to live with it, not I.”

“Such noble soundings ill befit one who has controlled her family with her husband’s money,” said Laurence.

Lady Barbara pursed her lips, nodding slowly. “That is exceedingly harsh. There are scant recourses to my sex, even in this modern age. We were born privileged, and the maintenance of

our position has been the driving force of my life. You are of another generation, and today it has been my rude awakening today to discover that family loyalty means very little in the face of such differences. You have your ideas; I have mine. If you believe that deceiving me puts you in the right, I cannot dispute you.”

Laurence frowned. “Yet – you drove me to this.”

“Yes – and I was also driven to certain things,” replied his mother. “Due to your father’s spending habits, I have had to resort to petty manipulations of money and discipline, because that is the only language my children understand. Like their father, they care little for the imploring of culture or honour, history or tradition. It has been a losing battle, of course, for your generation seeks creation only in rejection. We are wrong, you say, for we do not toil for our wealth. But wealth is the least important factor in our lives. The retention of nobility is the essence of what we are, Laurence. Take that away and we are nothing – and the world has lost a great treasure besides.”

“What treasure?” he asked.

“Your merchants are wealthy,” replied his mother, “but they have no soul. They betray their station and ape their betters by wearing gold. But the only gold is in the soul, Laurence. Tamper with that, and you debase humanity. What can I say to convince you? Nothing – for, to you, I am a parasite. And you’d like me to think that is true. But I swear to you on my eternal soul that you will in time learn that there are many kinds of parasites. There are parasites who hoard knowledge and culture and pass on graciousness and civility to their children – and there are parasites who reject such gifts and slave to burn wealth in the bellies of the ignorant. We live on the backs of the poor, you say? Yet you also ride them in your own way, and in the rush to fill

their bellies, you turn from the world you were born to enrich. You have turned from golden souls to ragged backs, and the time may come when you will rue what you have lost.”

Laurence stared at her for a moment, then shook his head. “Never.”

“Then there are no more lessons to be taught,” replied his mother, “only to be learned.” She nodded once, very slowly, then turned and left the room.

Laurence exhaled mightily, thanking his stars once again that, unlike Kay, his presence of mind did not desert him in moments of crisis. He sank into a chair and rubbed his face, his head spinning. He blew out the candles and sat in the dark for a very long time.

Eventually, the door to the sunroom opened carefully, and Laurence turned his head. Kay stood in the doorway, her hands closed on a piece of paper.

“Larry?” she said hesitantly. “Mother told me to give this to you.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“A letter for you. Sealed by one ‘Lady Cerbes’. Do you know her?”

The name seemed to galvanize the young man. He stood up quickly, as if shaking off a great weight, and ran his fingers through his hair. “Lydia – why is she writing to me? Are you sure it’s not from her father?”

“No – it’s from her. Do you know her?”

“By God yes!” he said, taking the letter from her unwilling hands. He tore it open, and read:

Dear Lord Carvey:

Thank you for your kind invitation. Please excuse my penmanship; never my greatest virtue, it lies utterly dormant in moments of haste, and this letter is compelled to such brevity that it borders on the rude. Father sends his best wishes, and has asked me to inform you that he will gratefully accept your hospitality for the last week of September. For myself, I am both writing and posting this note hastily in the hopes that it will reach you before I do. I hope the suddenness of my visit is not an absolute breach of decorum, but father mentioned that his invitation extended to myself too (for which I thank you). We had planned to come earlier, but something arose on our lands in Yorkshire, and he is compelled to go and straighten the matter out. I should be arriving on the afternoon of the 20th (and please, if this is not to your convenience, I shall not be offended).

I look forward to singing in your little church, and, hospitality permitting, gazing first-hand on the All Saint's Eve celebrations, rumoured to be rather legendary in your lands.

Yours with many apologies and much anticipation.



Sincerely,

Lady Lydia Cerbes

Laurence stared in wonder at the letter, his heart racing.

“By God!” he muttered. “At such a time!”

“What? What is it?” asked Kay,

“She is coming – dear Lord – tomorrow!” he cried, clapping his head.

“Who? This Lydia person? Who is she?”

“Only one of the most talented artists of this or any other realm!” said Laurence in a kind of panic. “Not to mention a learned lady not wanting in beauty!”

“Though perhaps wanting in tact,” remarked his sister, “giving as she does so little notice.”

“There is some reason... but never mind that. It’s enough that she’s coming...” said Laurence. He started for the door then stopped, lost in thought.

“If I can intrude on your frenzy for a moment,” said Kay, taking a slow step towards him, “you have to travel with Mr. Footer to Dover tomorrow to buy wood, and you had also planned to talk to the Jiggers about using their barn for the moment, and there was that business of training – you were going to use Knotted Bob to train them in carpentry while Mr. Footer was gone. Laurence – remember? We talked about this all afternoon. Mary is coming later to help us organize things.”

Laurence stared at her, then sat down heavily, clutching his head in his hands again.

“Well – some of that will have to wait,” he cried. “No – don’t look at me like that – you don’t know what it means! Mr. Footer knows what to buy – I’ll give him access to funds – that’ll mean going to the bank, curse it. Mary can – I’ll write her a note, that should...”

“And what about the fifty-odd poor souls sitting in a field tonight?” asked Kay. “Don’t worry yourself – I’ll just tell them that you are very sorry for getting their hopes up, but their new lives will have to wait because you want to woo a singer! They’ll understand – I’m sure many of them have been in the same predicament.”

“Oh – damn it all!” cried Laurence, rising and pacing again. “Of all the times..! Should be perfect: the harvest’s mostly in, the cattle away, but no – I had to go play crusader! Give me a moment, Kay – don’t interrupt!” He clucked his tongue rapidly. “Here – I’m sure you and Mary know what to do – damn, you just told me. I’ll write it all down – Mary is sharp enough, she’ll understand... It’s only for a day or so. If Lydia is who I think she is, she’ll appreciate what I’m doing. But she doesn’t look or sound like the kind of woman who appreciate arriving at an empty house – with Mother in it.”

“For heaven’s sake, Larry!” cried Kay. “Listen to yourself – if you can hear your conscience over your... nerves! Write and tell her to delay for a few weeks. That will be all right.”

“I can’t!” cried Laurence. “She’s on her way.”

“That’s her look out, not yours.”

“It’s just so unexpected – I didn’t even expect her to come at all, and here she is, coming alone! One’s only chance to make a first impression – no no, it will simply have to wait. I have my own life, after all.”

“Laurence – I’m not sure that giving Mary free rein is such a good idea,” said Kay, edging closer to him.

“What – why?”

“I don’t trust her,” she whispered.

“What? Why are you whispering?”

“Hold on a moment. I know it sounds insane, given all she’s trying to do. But when she was looking at you, when that man spat in your face, I saw a look in her eyes that I hope to never see again. There was a kind of relish in it – yes, I know, it’s just a kind of intuition, but you did wrong her once, long ago, and it’s quite possible that she intends you harm. That’s just my instinct.”

“Instinct,” snorted Laurence, shaking his head. “And were I to haul you in front of a jury, what evidence would you give?”

“None at all,” replied Kay. “It’s just a feeling – don’t tell me, I know, the bane of the age. But have you ever asked yourself just what her motives are?”

“Oh, of course! An orphan who has experienced blinding poverty comes to the only man of power who owes her a debt and convinces him to take a little responsibility for the poor – and make a pretty penny to boot. Yes – she’s obviously out to ruin me. Unquestionably.”

“No – there’s something in her that I can’t explain,” persisted Kay,

“and maybe never will, but there’s a terrible intensity to her, and I believe that every thing she does, everything she says, has more than one purpose.”

“Yes, well perhaps you’re right,” said Laurence. “I’ll be sure to keep my eyes open. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have about ten thousand things to do.”

Kay sat down after he left and stared out of the window, twirling a strand of hair. *That was utterly out of proportion*, she said to herself, *– yet I cannot but wonder if there’s not a grain of truth in it.*

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### *Two Swans, One Fluttering*

GRAINS OF TRUTH HAVE LITTLE WEIGHT IN A STRONG WIND, and the span between Kay's misgivings and Lady Cerbes' arrival was torn with such gales of preparation that all grains went right out the window. Laurence roused the maids long before dawn, commanding them to apply every energy to making the house a paradise. Every cottage within three miles found its garden suddenly stripped of its brightest flowers, their owners staring stupidly at the pile of silver in their hands as Laurence's carriage churned away, six horses at the fore. The rooms of the Carvey mansion were aired, dusted, festooned with flowers; the carpets were beaten with inquisitional fanaticism; even doorframes and the tops of picture-frames were wiped clean. The garden was stripped of all errand weeds and cluttering plants, and great bonfires erupted to consume the endless succession of prunings and evicted undergrowth. Lady Barbara kept to her room during the upheaval, writing streams of letters intended to bring the full weight of conformity back to her household, feeling both spy and prisoner in her own home.

Laurence issued streams of directives and commands. Mary found herself invested with the kind of latitude that she had only dreamed of, and spent the morning in a kind of daze, her mind racing with mad plans. Adam was dispatched to Dover with a promissory note to procure the necessary lumber, and Kay went to negotiate with the Jiggers about the use of an extra barn.

It was about four o'clock when the outermost scouts raced back to report that Lydia's carriage was about two miles from the house. Laurence quickly gave orders to conclude all cleaning, and dismissed the barber who had been snipping and perfuming him for the past hour. After the man left, his watering eyes convinced him that it would be wise to wait for Lydia's carriage on the front porch, in the hopes that the evening breeze would strip some of the extremities of scent from his skin.

Laurence fidgeted on the front steps as the carriage came up the front path, the servants lined up behind him. He took off his hat as Lydia descended, her radiance quite undimmed by the rigours of her journey. The light was fading fast, and she untied her bonnet and held it out. *She's expecting a servant, dear God why didn't I bring one?* thought Laurence, then took the cap himself, bowing deeply. *Too much cologne – my eyes – they sting!*

"Lady Cerbes – welcome!" he said, then blushed at the pretension in his voice.

"Good evening, Lord Carvey," she smiled, then stood to one side as a young man stepped down from the carriage and stretched expansively, yawning. Laurence blinked, staring at him. The young man's eyes were oddly merry, and Laurence found himself calculating the distance between the stranger and Lydia, trying to determine...

"Lord Carvey, this is my cousin, Mr. Jonathon Eddsworth, Esquire," said Lydia, as if discerning his thoughts. "I hope you don't mind the presumption, but my father was concerned about my traveling alone."

"No no," said Laurence, grinning in relief and shaking the young man's hand. "You are more than welcome, Mr. Eddsworth."

“I’m sure,” grinned Jonathon, glancing about. “I must say, Lord Carvey, when I agreed to come with Lydia, I expected to find the house abuzz with primal agriculture. Yet this looks all very civilized.” He smiled at Laurence. “Although perhaps we have not discovered you in your truest lair, for unless I miss my guess, much of what we perceive is in honour of us. But what am I saying?” he laughed with a bow. “You had no idea I was coming! The honour is yours alone, Lydia.”

“Oh, do be quiet!” said Lydia. “Where are we to put our carriage, Lord Carvey?”

“Oh – er – just... Wait – coachman! Take it round the back, to the left. Please. Servants will show you to the stables.”

The driver touched his cap, grinning at Laurence’s blushing face.

“Ho – hup!” he cried, cracking his whip.

As the carriage trundled away, a kind of strangled silence descended on the trio. Laurence’s brain raced, imagining all sorts of fascinating openings, but his tongue seemed frozen in his mouth. He noticed Jonathon grinning at him, and almost scowled.

“Shall we – erm – retire to the house?” he said, waving his hand.

“Let’s,” said Lydia.

They stood still a moment longer, until Laurence realized they were waiting for his lead. Crimsoning frantically, he turned and walked towards the house, imagining for a moment that they would stand where they were and giggle, but they followed close on his heels.

He slowed for a moment to walk beside Lydia, opening his mouth for a riveting introduction to his brilliance.

“I say, old man,” cried Jonathon, “don’t drag it in the dirt!”

Laurence frowned, then glanced down and saw Lydia's bonnet hanging from a strap.

"Excuse me," he muttered, snatching it up. "I shall clean it. Have it – cleaned..."

"Here – let me," said Lydia, taking it from his hand. The touch of her fingers was shocking; his heart failed him.

"You said – your father would be here in five days," he said.

"Yes – he is taking care of some business in Yorkshire, and will come down directly afterwards," replied Lydia.

"That's a shame," said Laurence. "I wanted to contact him before that."

"Why?"

"I wanted to buy some sheep – well, talk to him about it anyway. There are – er – are there a good deal of sheep? Up there?"

"Three thousand seven hundred and twenty two, last count," replied Lydia.

"Well – that's most interesting... I shall have to, um, revise my estimates," said Laurence, wondering at the fool who had his tongue. "You see, I have started a most interesting experiment in the last few days. You shall see some of it, I'm sure – if you have a mind."

"What sort of experiment?" said Jonathon.

"It's to do with the redemption of poverty – though 'redemption' may be too strong a term. To take the lowest and give them a chance, that's the object."

"And sheep are involved?" asked Jonathon. "Teaching the poor to ride 'em before you give them horses and trim?"

"No," replied Laurence. "It's a long story, and not one I want to embark on first thing. We can talk about it at dinner, if you like."



They had reached the front door. “You are welcome to rest before dinner,” said Laurence, opening it and allowing them to enter, “and change if you like. We eat in one hour. Edith!” he called.

There was a moment’s pause, and a maid appeared at the head of the stairs.

“Scuse me, sir,” she said, “but Edith is waiting on Lady Barbara, and will not come down.”

“Oh. Well – please show our guests to their rooms, Joyce,” said Laurence.

“Yes sir,” fidgeted Joyce, who was not constructed to impress visitors. “But – which ones exactly?”

“Top two, first at the left on the landing. Give the lady the first one.”

Joyce blinked. “Er – only one room is made up, sir.”

“Yes, well, take off the covers and plump the cushions in the first, and make up the second. It’s your job, you know,” replied Laurence shortly, acutely aware of the impropriety of the reception.

“Yes, sir. Please – come this way,” she stammered, curtsying to Lydia and Jonathon so abruptly that they all flinched, expecting her to topple down the stairs.

“Our clothes are in the stable – would you like us to change there?” asked Jonathon.

“Yes – well I will have them sent to your rooms,” said Laurence, impaling him with many mental spears. “And I will see you at dinner,” he finished.

“I’m going out for a smoke until my room is ready,” said Jonathon. “With your permission.”

“Please,” said Laurence.

Lydia ascended the stairs as Jonathon went outside. Alone, Laurence turned and pressed his forehead into the coolness of the wall.

“Come on,” he muttered. “You’re an aristocrat – act like one!” He felt unaccountably fearful, and strove mightily to master himself. *The tension I feel with Lydia is quite foolish*, he told himself sternly. *She is an attractive and accomplished woman, but I am an intelligent and ambitious man*. But still... something nagged at him. Being spat at by beggars one day and entertaining a pearl of nobility the next was a ragged transition. His mother’s warnings hung in him, like an jangling set of chandeliers. *I have nothing to hide*, he told himself sternly – yet the statement itself admitted a subterfuge of sorts.

The wall felt smooth on his forehead, and the onset of a dreamy lassitude kept his head pressed there. It was only with a twist of will that he eventually raised his head and closed the front door. *You are experiencing what it means to act consistently*, he lectured himself sternly; *you wanted to help people, and Mary showed you how. You have sown souls, and if that frightens you when sowing crops did not, that is because you have much to learn, child of privilege...*

Thus collecting himself, he went upstairs and knocked on his mother’s door. Edith answered it, opening the door only slightly.

“Yes?” she asked.

“I want to speak to my mother, if you don’t mind,” said Laurence.

“She has asked not to be disturbed.”

“But surely she will attend dinner!”

“No, she is dining in her rooms. And she has asked me to tell you that she will not trouble you as long as there are guests in the house. She has asked me to inform you that she is an

unwanted tenant here, by your own declaration, and she will not soil the dinner table with her unwanted presence.”

“What?” cried Laurence. “Let me in.”

Edith firmly blocked the doorway. “No, sir. She is not to be disturbed.”

“Damn it – well tell her that I expect her to fulfill her obligations, as a member of this family at least. She will come to dinner tomorrow.”

“I will relay your message, sir,” said Edith, looking him up and down distastefully.

“Excuse me – what is that look?” demanded Laurence. “You would be wise to remember my mother’s words. I run this house now, and I will not take kindly to any insubordination!”

“Yes sir. Excuse me, sir,” replied Edith.

Laurence turned on his heels and strode down the stairs. He tore open one of the back doors and went out on the veranda. The sun was halfway to the horizon; the crimson light hung lazily in the ragged nets of clouds. The breeze was soft and cool. Laurence closed his eyes, enjoying the tickling of his beard.

The back gate closed with a clang, jerking his eyes open. A distant figure leaned against it, obviously exhausted. Laurence squinted and walked down the steps. Kay walked towards him stiffly, her head erect, her fists clenched.

“Kay – good evening – how are you?” he said. His sister walked right past him and up the steps, her eyes fixed on the ground.

“Oh, Lord,” he said, closing his eyes.

“Well come on then!” she snapped, opening the back door. “You’ve made your point!”

“What point?” he asked, turning around.

“I have been thoroughly humiliated, and shoved neatly back into the slot my sex was designed for. I apologize for having required the lesson.”

Laurence followed her up the steps. “What happened?”

“Strange to say, but the road to charity is not paved with gratitude. Farmer Jigger is very angry. He has a bone to pick with you.”

“What? Why?”

“Well, you know, he’s a funny creature,” said Kay. “Seems that losing three prize pigs and half a barn rubs him the wrong way.”

“What? Come in,” he said, holding the door open, “and tell me exactly what happened.”

“All right,” said Kay. “But if I catch the least gleam of satisfaction in your eyes, I shall thrash you senseless!”

Laurence led Kay into the drawing room. She plunked down on a sofa and folded her hands on her laps with the significant slowness of cold anger.

“So,” said Laurence, leaning against the edge of a table. “Tell me.”

“I arrived a little after noon,” said Kay. “Mary hadn’t shown up yet. It was just me and – them. The meal we gave them had quite renewed them. They had procured a good supply of beer from somewhere, and were in a very chipper mood. I didn’t really know what to say, so I began talking to them of the need for self-discipline now that they were to be saved. Didn’t go over like a kettle of roses, I can tell you. They jeered at me. I tried taking their beer away – and I can honestly say that I empathize with your desire to skewer that red-bearded man. ‘If we is to be workin’ folk’, he said, pushing me away, ‘we is to be allowed workin’ vices.’ Then they started teasing me quite brutally, offering me beer and dance lessons. There was no reasoning

with them. I fled and took refuge in the Jigger's kitchen. After about an hour, I commented to Wife Jigger that she may be overcooking something. 'No, Lady Carvey, there's no cooking going on here,' she said, quite perplexed. Just then one of the farmhands came bursting through the door and shouted something about a fire. We rushed out and saw great gouts of smoke pouring from the barn. I got shoved aside, and there was a good deal of running and flinging of water and hissing of steam, and when the smoke cleared, so to speak, it was discovered that some of our more enterprising subjects had stolen three prize pigs and tried to roast them on a fire they started using wood torn from a wall of the barn. Good deal of straw in there, of course – it caught and smoked them all out. They all put the blame on the ones who'd run away, jabbering and pointing incessantly. Farmer Jigger left two men to guard what was left on the barn, and told me in no uncertain terms that our good poor souls would kindly leave his land or face the consequences. 'Where should they go?' I asked him. 'You want 'em, you keep 'em!' he replied in no uncertain terms. Not having the strength to argue, I told them to come here."

"Here!" exclaimed Laurence, turning pale.

"Yes, here!" snapped Kay. "Of course, *you* in your infinite wisdom would have found a better solution, but since it was only me, I told them to come here."

"But Kay – we have guests!"

"I know. So I thought another fifty or so wouldn't make much of a difference. We can put them in the greenhouse." She paused, calculating. "And shed."

"This is awful!" cried Laurence. "Mother's tournament plants are in the greenhouse! What are they going to do – eat them too?"

"Glass walls are harder to burn, though," said Kay.

“That will never do. We’ll put them in the stables.” Laurence stood quickly, then sat and took a deep breath. He spread his hands and gazed at his sister. “Look – I know you’re angry. I understand that. But I want you to know – I think you did the right thing. And I also apologize for having put you in such an awful spot. I don’t think I could have handled it better.”

“Really?” demanded Kay. “You’re not just... patronizing me?”

Laurence smiled. “We’re both new to this. We have only our instincts to go on, and I’m sure yours are as good as mine. Don’t think I want to delegate you to the fringes.”

“Would you say the same if everything had gone swimmingly?”

“Of course! Look – we’re both enthusiastic about this; we’ve had a setback, but we can learn from it. We must solve this together; we must be as one. I had a terrible row with mother this morning – she is now our declared enemy.”

“Really?” Kay’s back sagged, a distant look coming into her eyes.

“She could make things very difficult for us,” said Laurence.

“You’re not joking... We can’t feed them with good intentions.”

“Don’t worry about that – the finances are taken care of. But she will use every weapon she has to bring us back in line. We’ll really need each other’s support to survive that.”

“What weapons does she have other than the purse strings?” asked Kay, the distant look leaving her eyes in a flash.

“I have said that money is no longer the issue. There is no choice to it: we must survive our respect for her if we are to do the right thing.”

“How? How are the finances taken care of?” demanded Kay, sitting up.

Laurence tugged at his beard. “It is my birthday tomorrow, you know.”

“I hadn’t forgotten, though I don’t have a present. I…”

“Never mind that,” he said, taking a deep breath. “Father and I arranged his will so that the entire estate reverts to me on my twenty-fifth birthday.”

Kay paused. “But you’re not married.”

“That clause was struck just before he died.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“So you have it all now?” exclaimed Kay, leaping to her feet. “All?”

“Yes. Except for mother’s allowance. And your portion, when you marry.”

Kay started for the door, then stopped in her tracks and turned around. She frowned, scowled, then smiled in sudden hope.

“By God, Larry – that’s wonderful!” she cried, clapping her hands.

He blinked. “I’m glad you think so.”

“No – it’s more than wonderful! It’s amazing! What we can do, you and I, with the fortune at our disposal!”

Laurence studied his sister’s face for a moment. “There shall be virtually no limits, that’s true.”

“That has always been her strength – and now she is… And you control it all?”

“In a few hours, yes.”

“And we are to be equal partners in this?”

“Equal, for we…” replied Laurence, then stopped abruptly.

“Equal,” echoed Kay. “Or is it to be in words alone?”

“What – what do you mean?”

“What you have already surmised, judging from your hesitation,” said Kay, placing her hands on the table and staring at him.

“That will – take some time to think on.”

“What ‘thoughts’ are required?” asked Kay. “The thought that an offer made to pacify should never be made real? The thought that I am your equal in rhetoric only? The thought that you trust me enough to be your partner in this, but not enough to let me control any money?”

“How much do you want?” he asked, dread in his heart.

“What a horrible way of putting it!” cried Kay. “We are not grasping merchants. We are family. Larry. I cannot help you in any real manner unless I have some say in how our funds are to be used. But I won’t nag you into doing the honourable thing,” she said, turning away. “Let your own heart decide how far you wish to take this revolution. I have stated my reasons, you know my aims; the rest is up to you.”

“You have stated it very nobly,” said Laurence. “Please – I have no wish to appear ungenerous, but so much has happened today that I fear my mind is clouded. Give me until tomorrow. Come with me to Mr. Stelson’s office; I have to go anyway, to arrange my new accounts.”

“Take as much time as you need,” smiled Kay. “I’m going into the garden to try and rescue some of mother’s plants before the grateful horde descends.”

She kissed him and touched his cheek.

“You are a good man, Larry,” she murmured. “Remember that.” She held his gaze for a moment, then turned and left the room.



After his smoke, Jonathon went upstairs and knocked on Lydia's door.

"I know you're not changing, since we don't have our clothes yet." he said, opening the door and striding in.

"You did not wait for my permission," said Lydia evenly. "Do that again, and our relationship is over."

"Oh, sorry, sorry. I tell you – if this were a hotel, pliers couldn't get me to pay the bill."

"This is not a hotel," replied Lydia, turning from her examination of the pictures on the mantelpiece. "Though that would be the only place where your rudeness would be tolerated. I almost think you are envious."

"Of him?" snorted Jonathon. "Oh yes, to be a scattered provincial has always been my secret goal."

"He's obviously not used to guests, and we did come at a moment's notice," replied Lydia. "And if you think it is amusing to throw a host's efforts at hospitality in his face, you have a rather sad sense of humour."

"Well – it's just the dishonesty of the whole business," said Jonathon, flopping into an armchair. "These 'ums' and 'ers' and 'how many sheep do you have?'. Much more pleasant when a man simply bonked his mate on the head and carried her off on the back of a horse."

"Believe it or not, Jonathon, I'm sure one or two men exist for purposes other than carting me off on a horse."

"Perhaps in Abyssinia," he replied. "Those that are here, and have seen you, I think not."

“Yourself included?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You know you are safe from me, because if I had a mind to win you, I wouldn’t drag your bonnet around like a broken doll. I’d have you on my horse in no time!”

“That is so – disgusting,” said Lydia.

“You’ll notice I smiled when I said that.”

“Your smile is your broken doll.”

“Easy!” laughed Jonathon. “Let’s take a moment off from uprooting each other’s souls. I just wanted to say that if things don’t pick up around here, I’ll be off before the end of the week.”

“As you like. Father will take me back.”

Jonathon pursed his lips, then smiled. “You know, I think I am a kind of bully.”

“You are.”

“Give me a moment to revel in my revelation, please. Because I am free of so many prejudices, I feel I have the right to rub other’s faces in their conformity. He wanted to tear my throat out downstairs, you know. I saw it in his eyes. But he smiled and gave me a room instead.”

“Let him find his feet, and he will surprise you – I feel that,” replied Lydia. “Even English hosts have their limits.”

“Only you can surprise me, dear Lydia,” said Jonathon, flinging his leg over the arm of the chair and clasping his hands behind his head.

“How so?”

“Listen to you! You normally scorn this sort of fawning vine. This is interesting. I have always had the highest regard for your instincts. They are always so authentic.”

“He was unable to conceal his confusion,” said Lydia. “Which puts him a notch above you, if authenticity is what you value.”

Jonathon stared at her for a moment. “You know, I think that if we ever – even for a moment – were to take each other seriously, our friendship would end. We would offend each other too much.”

A knock sounded at the door.

“Our clothes are here,” said Lydia. “Go and change, Mr. Eddsworth.”

“I said I would see you fall in love in Dorset,” he said, getting up from his chair, “but I think I was wrong. He is a different man than I expected.”

“Then he, too, has surprised you,” replied Lydia.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### *A Feast*

LAURENCE FELT MUCH BETTER BY DINNERTIME. By then he had washed off the perfume, changed into his formal dinner-wear, and felt in full command of his faculties. He had made arrangements with the stable hands to convey the expected crowd to the stables, providing them with stout sticks and few illusions.

The atmosphere in the dining room helped, of course. The shining silver, rich mahogany table and snowy linen napkins banished all thoughts of rank spittle from his mind. He sat at the head of the table, aglow with the benevolent strength of generous hospitality.

Lydia entered the room quietly, and Laurence rose, regarding her for a brief moment of mute appreciation. She wore an Empress gown, and the lace hung across her pale shoulders like a fine web. Her delicate neck lifted like an ivory pillar into the dark swirls of her hair, and her eyes were bright and lively.

“You know,” she smiled, touching a crystal goblet, “I wonder when it was that this table was last at full capacity.”

“We shall all be sort of huddled at this end,” said Laurence, pulling out a chair then taking her hand. “Please – beside me.”

“Jonathon will be down shortly,” she said, sitting. “I hope he has not rubbed you irrevocably the wrong way. He expected a Rousseauian paradise with all the servants in loincloths. He’s actually a good sport, when he remembers that other people have feelings too.”

“If a person has a good side, this countryside brings it out.”

“Your mother is not joining us?”

He shook his head. “She sends both welcome and regrets.”

Lydia nodded and took the time to look around the room carefully. “It’s not often one sees bookshelves in a dining room,” she commented.

“Legacy of a restrained English marriage,” smiled Laurence. “Father read and took notes, Mother lectured the children. I can’t tell you the number of times I used his inkwell as a condiment in my haste to go out and play.”

Lydia laughed. “Your father was a writer?”

“Oh yes. You may have heard of his most famous work – ‘Mysteries of the East’. Quite a glossy tome; lots of illustrations, not much mystery.”

“That was your father?” exclaimed Lydia. “Of course – I know the book. I should have liked to compliment him on his prose, though I didn’t actually get round to reading much of the actual text.”

“Mother thought we would be excommunicated,” Laurence admitted. “Oh, the endless rounds of clergy who came so earnestly to talk him out of his sins – though his book was by no means autobiographical. ‘Have you actually read the good book?’ he always asked, offering it. The conversations always halted there – you could see their rabid fascination, their yearning to see more vying with their mustered indignation!” He laughed. “They never stayed long.”

“Even my own father was hesitant to let me take a good look. But I got a hold of it once or twice, when he left it in his study overnight. Confusing, but not so confusing as to dampen the... interest. Why do you think we are so tantalized by all that?” asked Lydia. She turned her goblet; the light from the candles shifted over her face.

Laurence blinked. “By – matters of the flesh?” he asked. “I suppose because it flies in the face of other worlds. Not much of God in it, despite what the Catholics feel.”

“No – I suppose not,” she said slowly. “But I wonder... we sit in expectation of a wonderful meal – not to suppose, of course – and that is a matter of the flesh. Not much of God in that either.”

“Yes, but meals are civilized institutions, full of arid eloquence and good manners,” replied Laurence. “Were we to shout in ecstasy while eating eclairs, you could be sure dessert would be a taboo topic in England. Passion unmask, and all manners are a kind of mask.”

“Ah – then we are not to use cutlery tonight? Just dunk our heads in the soup and slurp?”

Laurence laughed. “That might be enough Rousseau for Mr. Eddsworth. Perhaps I should amend my statement. Social intercourse is a mating of the minds, and as such requires conversation. Thus cutlery is to be our lot, for now.”

He suddenly realized the audacity of his comment – though it was meant quite innocently – and blushed.

“Ah,” smiled Lydia, “you see how difficult it is to talk of these matters? Perhaps they shall forever remain a mystery, for we are all so shy.”

Laurence cleared his throat. “I know that this will seem like obvious steering,” he said, “but I wrote to our pastor this afternoon about the possibility of your singing at his church, if you are agreeable. What would be a good day?”

“Any day. Do you have a copy of your father’s famous book here?” He frowned. She smiled. “What’s the matter?”

“Ouch – I think I have a sliver in my finger, the helm was wrenched from me so abruptly!”

“Our level of comfort should not always be dictated by tradition, don’t you think?” asked Lydia.

Laurence smiled. “Do you know, I often wondered what it would be like to have been raised by the beliefs I now hold. Rationality, open-mindedness, unencumbered questioning. Yet I meet such a product and find myself somewhat at a loss. You owe your father a great deal.”

“I know it. He often told me that I would meet a good deal of people who are embarrassed by what I take for granted. Do not despise them, he said, but study them well, for your ease has risen from their discomfort.”

“Admirably put. Should I stick a pin through my chest and spread my arms like a butterfly?”

Lydia leaned forward, suddenly earnest. “Yet in the face of what we see, of what we would like to discover – we should feel no shyness. And if we find ourselves shy, it should be the heel that spurs us on, for we are never shy of anything but our truest selves.”

Laurence stared at her silently for a moment. “Do you think that’s true?”

“I can prove it,” said Lydia, sitting back. “When we met, this afternoon, what did you feel?”

Laurence swallowed. “What I thought – was that you were beautiful, and I was a liar.”

“Why?”

“Because I wanted to say it, but I thought it would be wrong.”

“Why?”

“Because it is not something one says so soon.”

“Why?”

Laurence thought for a moment. “Because – it aligns the moment of meeting into a kind of – state – that must be either rejected or accepted, and I don’t like being rejected on first appearances.”

“That is false,” replied Lydia. “What you offered was an appreciation of appearance. For me to accept or reject you on that alone, I would have to value appearance over reality, and that would be against my deepest beliefs. What you are saying now – that is real. I cannot reject that. I can disapprove, or take offense, but I cannot reject it. I can only reject you if you reject yourself first.”

“And now –” asked Laurence, unable to meet her eyes. “Do you take offense?”

“One is never offended by truth,” smiled Lydia. “Unless one prefers illusion.”

Laurence took a deep breath, then laughed, rubbing his beard. “Then I am very glad you have come, and I look forward to your stay.”

“I am glad I came as well,” said Lydia, leaning back in her chair and regarding him with pleasure.

The intimate silence was broken by Kay’s sudden entrance. Compared to Lydia – and despite her best efforts – she looked quite shabby. Kay stared at the table, curtsied and went straight to her seat. Laurence rose.

“Lady Cerbes, my sister Kay.” Lydia shook Kay’s outstretched hand.

“Excuse me for being late,” said Kay, “but I am famished! When will dinner be served?”

“Dinner is waiting for Jonathon arrival – and yours,” said Laurence.

Kay frowned. “Jonathon? Who is that?”



“Mr. Eddsworth. A friend of Lady Cerbes. Not to worry – he is, apparently, very informal, and will not mind your attire.”

Kay glared at him, then rose. “I will go and change.”

“No no – never mind,” said Laurence. “We’ll never get started if everyone keeps coming and going!”

Kay hesitated, then sat again.

And they sat, the three of them, and a silence arose that seemed insurmountable. Kay sat, aware of her shabby silhouette; Lydia leaned back unapologetically and Laurence felt a sudden surge of resentment towards his sister.

“Are you hungry?” he asked her finally.

“We are expecting more company later tonight, Lady Cerbes – have you heard?”

“No.”

“Well, we have embarked on a program,” said Kay, her eyes bright, “which was suggested by a woman Laurence wronged a long time ago – he seems quite taken with her. She has opened our eyes to the plight of the poor – not your run-of-the-mill kind, either – real cases! Mary O’Donnel, her name is – I hope you will meet her, she has many interesting things to say – she has opened our eyes, I think. Don’t you think, Larry?”

Laurence stared at his napkin, unfolding it with a grim slowness. “Yes – she is interesting.”

“Interesting! Now that’s an understatement! She had Larry leaping about a field a few weeks past! And being almost struck, sad to say. We’ve had quite a time, you see.”

“Almost struck?” asked Lydia, turning to him.

“Oh yes!” said Kay. “But he did not strike back – did I commend you on that, Larry? There were hundreds of them, on the ground. We are going into the business of saving souls, Lady Cerbes!”

“A costly venture,” she commented. “In many ways.”

“No – I must disagree. It makes life worthwhile, being in a position to help.”

“That may be so – but have you ever asked what puts you in such a position?” asked Lydia.

“Such questions!” cried Kay. “Altruism justifies privilege.”

“It certainly does – given that altruism is the root of privilege.”

“Excuse me?”

“Language is a funny business,” said Lydia, turning to Laurence. “It’s odd that we so often think of altruism as kindness, or generosity, when those words exist already. This is an interesting exercise I set myself sometimes – treat a word like a product and ask yourself: what demand does it satisfy? What differentiates it from related words?”

“That’s a game to while away many empty hours,” commented Kay.

“For instance,” said Lydia, “take the word ‘altruism’ – why don’t we simply say ‘kindness’?”

“Because altruism is more ethical imperative than charitable impulse,” Laurence replied uncomfortably.

“Correct!” smiled Lydia. “And what is the imperative?”

“That we must help others.”

“At the expense of ourselves?”

“If I understand the theory,” said Laurence, “it is not a moral act unless it is, at least in part, at our own expense.”

“Then the theory is that, for an act to be moral, it must be self-destructive in some way?” she asked.

“No – it must remain true to a hierarchy of values that states that the needs of others take precedence over our own needs,” he replied.

“Yes what is the definition of ‘others’?” asked Lydia. “Does it include murderers? What is the definition of ‘need’? Is it whatever others want, regardless of the harm it may cause them or those around them? You see – without proper definition, altruism is merely a slave morality, an ethic of unquestioning subservience to the needs of others.”

“That is ridiculous!” cried Kay, her cheeks colouring. “The desire to help is not a confession of slavery!”

“No?” asked Lydia, turning to her. “Then you would provide a murderer with a victim if he or she really needed to kill someone?”

“Of course not!”

“Then to help someone is to act in their best interests. Yet unless you are willing to say that there are no essential truths to human nature, you must admit that there is no conflict at all between one’s own rational values and the rational values of others.”

“I’m afraid you’ve lost me.”

“Since we are all human, what is objectively good for one must be objectively good for all. Honesty is a universal value, therefore to lie to another is never a moral act.”

“It can be, if that lie creates happiness for them,” retorted Kay.

“Then you are saying that someone who prefers lies to truth is of greater value than someone who is completely honest.”

“I have yet to meet such a creature,” replied Kay. “We are all liars of one sort or another.”

“A contradictory theory,” said Lydia. “If it is true, then whoever says altruism is moral is lying. If it is false, then who benefits the most from believing we are all liars?”

“Liars, of course,” said Laurence suddenly.

“Although it’s not a real benefit at all,” said Lydia. “Just a justification for further lies. For we are not all liars.”

“Oh no?” asked Kay. “Who paid for your dress then?”

“Excuse me?”

“This – dress you’re wearing. You chose it to highlight your beauty – it was well chosen, I applaud you. But did you sweat for it in the fields? No – your father bought it for you. Did he sweat for it in the fields? No. Yet you sit there and your whole demeanor cries out: ‘look how lovely I am!’ Yet it’s all a lie, if you didn’t sweat for it.”

“Kay – that’s enough,” cried Laurence.

“No,” said Lydia, “that’s all right. If it were true, Kay, that the absence of a perfect world damns all who act within it, then you are arguing against action of any kind.”

“No – I argue against false morals.”

“Are not all morals false then, since injustice exists?”

“All privileged claims to morality are false,” replied Kay. “Only the poor can claim goodness, for they alone remain uncorrupted.”

They heard a curse from the corridor, and the maid burst through the doors.

“Man to see you, sir!” said Joyce hurriedly. She was pushed to one side, and the red-bearded man strode into the room.

“Oh good,” he said roughly, “we ain’t missed dessert. Ye’ll need more places, though. There’s more’n four score of us.”

Laurence rose, enraged. “You were not invited into the house. There is food and shelter in the stables.”

“Food and shelter in the stables,” repeated the man, his eyes gleaming. “Yet we’ve a taste for more’n animals get. Delicacies’n’wallpaper are more on our minds. Like this pretty cave here.”

“You will get out, or I will throw you out!” said Laurence.

“Spy the hero for the ladies!” sneered the man. “Full-fed, how he snarls at the starved!”

“There are more than willing enough, my man!” said Laurence. “If you don’t want to be helped, you are on the right path.”

“But where’s me manners?” asked the bearded man. “I shud be bowin’n’scrapin and sayin’ ‘thank god fer generous vermin like yerself!’ For vermin ye are, no mistakin’ it, for ye are afire with a kindness ye never made!”

Laurence strode forward.

“Larry!” cried Kay, rising. The bearded man stood outlined against the door, his face twisted in bitter spite. It was a portrait of sorts; a picture of loss as old as the world, a loss that goes far beyond poverty and opportunity, the kind of loss that makes circumstance the only sin. Laurence stopped for a moment, arrested by the tone in his sister’s voice, the pleading for recognition. As he looked at this man, at the eyes raised in a chaos of challenge and fear, he wondered at the possibility that a certain view might see all opportunities as a kind of death, a death of certainty about the world and one’s place in it, and a deadly brand of empathy common to all who fail to

draw the line between sympathy and judgment came to him, and he imagined what it must be like to be such a tortured soul, and the imagining entered his own soul.

“Larry!” cried Kay, her hands trembling. “We must do good!”

Yet indignation and anger seemed so certain, so easy... Laurence took a deep breath, his heart pounding fast. To be in the position of being insulted is the most seductive substitute for morality; to throw off offense is to throw off the self, so often...

“You have been hard done by,” he whispered, “and so I grant you one more chance. Go into the stables and eat and sleep, and tomorrow we shall see if you can stare Fortune in the face without snarling.”

“We’ll se fer us *both*,” said the bearded man, obviously straining for a parting shot. Raging tears sprang to his eyes; they caught a diamond flash as he turned and lurched out of the door.

Laurence rang for Joyce. “Have him escorted – see he goes out quietly,” he said, taking a sudden breath as if short of air.

“Larry,” said Kay quietly, “I am unutterably proud of you.”

He turned his head to look at her. His eyes swung past Lydia’s face, where paused for a moment, but there were too many honest questions in her eyes that he could not answer, and his eyes continued towards his sister, like starving twins.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### *The Earth Moves*

MR. STELSON WAS A MAN OF MONEY; his skin looked as if banknotes were a sort of dust that had been ground into his pores from constant handling. He was the sort of banker who did not see money as an expression of sweat and dreams; to him it was neat numbers in a column, a tidy pile in a vault. He enjoyed its presence and regretted its absence; where it went when it departed interested him not at all, as long as some of it remained behind.

Banking is savage on the aesthetics of dress; whenever a youthful employee draped himself in a colour which contradicted the fact that bankers must look either like undertakers or the Master they serve, he was sternly admonished to appear more like Mr. Stelson. Those who entered his office for the first time were occasionally seen to rub their eyes in confusion, thinking themselves suddenly struck colour-blind. The grayness of the office was relieved only by the piercing blackness of Mr. Stelson's suits – and the blackness of those suits was not relieved by any colour in the banker's face, which could have set the discovery of circulation back several centuries had it been more widely observed. Of course, there was no guarantee that this had not already occurred, for he seemed so ancient that he could well have confused medieval physicians in his youth.

Mr. Stelson had long given up surprise as a hopeless cause, but the visit paid to him by Laurence and Kay that morning in late summer revised his opinion on that matter.

They came in unexpectedly, jarring Mr. Stelson's concentration as he worked his way through a pile of figures. It would have struck several people stone dead to discover that Mr.

Stelson was a revolutionary, but it was true. He so despised interruptions that he sometimes wished the whole aristocracy burned and buried, since they were the only ones able to enter his office unannounced.

“Lord Carvey,” he said slowly, rising. Laurence thought for a moment that Mr. Stelson really did want to kill them; he had forgotten that this was the banker’s habitual expression.

“Mr. Stelson,” said Laurence, as they all sat down. “Please welcome my sister Kay. We have come because I have decided to change the nature of my inheritance.”

The banker frowned. “And which aspect do you wish to change? I assume you have consulted your solicitor.”

“Of course,” said Laurence. “I wish to place half of my fortune at my sister’s disposal.”

Mr. Stelson leaned back in his chair and drummed his fingers rapidly in front of his nose, as if he were trying to hypnotize himself, or them, or both.

“Quite a shift,” he said finally. “May I be so bold as to inquire of the reason?”

“Well, it’s certainly not the case that we have to justify ourselves to you!” said Kay.

Laurence stared at her for a moment. “All right, Kay. Why should we – what is the point of explaining ourselves to you, Mr. Stelson?”

“Well, quite simply,” replied the banker, “ascertaining the possibility of enacting your plans.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your father was quite clear. ‘Watch my son, he said, he will try to do strange things. Let him proceed only if he listens to common sense and practices frugal fiscal habits’. You realize,



of course, that your stipend is in no danger, but access to the general balance of your funds is quite well guarded until...”

“Yes – my twenty fifth birthday. Which is today,” interrupted Laurence.

Mr. Stelson paused. His thoughts were almost visible: *ah yes, of course; these strange human rituals...* “Of course,” he said finally. “Although still relatively sound, your family fortunes have ebbed considerably over the past three generations,” he said, with the authority of personal knowledge. “Your father’s great grandfather held a good deal of capital in gold, which dropped in value sharply after the conquest of the New World. Your grandfather singlehandedly created the squireship of the Quentens by lavishing a large proportion of the remaining funds on young Gwendoline. Your own father traveled to the point of excess – a very costly habit. In short, your fortunes are not what they once were. Now that you plan to hand over control of half your fortune to a woman who is scarcely well-informed of business – if you will forgive me, madam – it is well within my right to ask the reason why.”

“How is it your right?” cried Laurence. “You are a banker!”

“Clarification,” replied Mr. Stelson shortly. “I am a successful banker. And I did not get that way by distorting facts. You, Lord Carvey, are to be commended for your agricultural ability; it has helped your family fortune somewhat – though what the results of that shall be, I cannot say – but there has been a not-inconsequential drain on your reserves by a certain Adam Footer, who has been given free rein on your allowance by you, and has spent a good deal of it on lumber procured at absurdly high prices. Furthermore, it has come to my attention that you are planning a social experiment of a decidedly haphazard nature, for which you have drawn up neither criteria of success nor plans of finance. Now, I would appreciate it if you would inform

me of the nature of this experiment and the projected income from its completion, or withdraw your funds from this bank and take them elsewhere, for I will not have my reputation compromised. And I warn you: few reputable bankers will oversee your funds if they find your plans have met with my disapproval.”

“But this is insane!” said Kay. “You work for us!”

“No,” replied Mr. Stelson evenly, “I work for the increase of capital. That is my reputation, the reason why twenty-two percent of the higher London nobility trust their fortunes to my care. If you wish to destroy your fortune, you will not do so at my bank.”

There was a short pause as the siblings stared at the banker.

“All right,” said Laurence finally, “we shall try to reason with you.” He pursed his lips for a moment. “Would you say, Mr. Stelson, that there are two types of capital?”

“No.”

“Just a moment. There are the numbers on the ledger, that is a record of sorts – but what is it a record of?”

“Profit and loss, of course.”

“Of course. But the source of profit – and you should listen less skeptically, because I have a great deal of experience in this matter – is the ability of people to maximize the resources at their disposal. I inherited failing lands, declining productivity and apathetic tenants. I taught them how to farm better, and that was important; nothing would have happened if they had not listened to me. I made them listen by talking of the future, of the possibilities of a better life. They listened because they wanted that better life, and were willing to work to achieve it. That is

the essential source of profit – the belief in better things and the desire and ability to work to achieve them. Do you agree?”

“I must know the purpose of the argument before I can give my opinion,” replied Mr. Stelson.

“Maximizing profit involves the liberation of desire and effort,” said Laurence. “This is the goal we have set ourselves. We are taking the hopeless and giving them hope. We are taking those who drain societies’ resources and teaching them that they too have the ability to achieve more.”

“And the means by which this is to be achieved?” asked the banker.

“There are two ways,” replied Kay. “My brother will oversee the finances, and I will – manage the compassion. It is more than opportunity that these people need; they also need love and faith in themselves. Laurence will ensure that the opportunities are created, and I will ensure that their souls are turned from bitterness to hope.”

Mr. Stelson stared at her. “I would repeat my question to you, if I thought you could muster a rational reply.”

“I just have!” cried Kay. “This is by its very nature an undecided approach! I cannot outline how one best injects hope into a human soul! But I will tell you this: if we cannot achieve this, then all ‘expenditures in the creation of opportunity’ will be utterly in vain!”

“I agree,” replied the banker. “That is the root of my objection. I am not unaware of the matters of the soul. However, opportunities exist already for those with the ambition for something better – as you put it – and the presence of this desire in the soul has, in my experience, little to do with prior circumstances. I have had men in here who came from

backgrounds that would make even the most dissolute shudder, yet I have not hesitated to approve their request loans, for they have the stamp of this ambition clearly branded on their foreheads. I have also denied loans to the wealthiest and best-educated – your grandfather was only one example – because they display an utter lack of this desire. It is in the sovereign consciousness that ambition is born, in the will of the individual, and if you believe that warm thoughts and free food can create what is essentially a personal integrity of the very highest order, you are gravely mistaken.”

“Then what you’re saying is that no one can ever truly help another human being,” demanded Kay.

“Precisely. But I will say something more, which is that those with the most desire to help are always those in most need of help themselves.”

Kay’s eyes narrowed. “That is almost – criminal!”

“I have no desire to argue this; you have used a good portion of my valuable time as it is,” said Mr. Stelson. “And you have made my choice all the clearer. I see that you are willfully committed to this course, a course which I predict will end in utter disaster, and since that is my evaluation of the outcome, you will close your accounts with me and go elsewhere.”

“What?” cried Laurence. “Your bank has managed our families finances for eight generations! You swallowed the improprieties of my father’s line without complaint!”

“Not so,” said Mr. Stelson slowly. “Not without complaint.”

“Nevertheless, we continued to bank here. We wish to simply divide our finances, you see that as just grounds for jettisoning us! That is incredible!”

“Your ancestors wasted their capital on themselves, which is always a controllable disaster, being as it is limited by the individual’s capacity for consumption. I know all about your plans, even what you have patently avoided telling me. To destroy capital for the sake of one’s own foolish whims is one thing; it makes a banker shudder, but not lose sleep, for life is finite. But to pledge one’s resources against the inequities of the whole world, against the personal choices of others, is to utterly destroy the limitations of loss. I know that you are young, and want power over men’s souls. You call this compassion, but it is not, and I also know that you will not listen to me for the very reason that you have not discovered this. Thus I know that, were I to approve this plan and lend my support, I would be a mere spectator to the most gruesome kind of carnage, and I have neither the stomach nor the desire to partake in such cruelty.”

“What?” said Laurence, his face pale. “Why do you say that we desire power?”

“Larry! How can you ask such a question? We shall do the right thing,” said Kay, rising, “though the skies fall!”

“If the skies fall – is it the right thing?” asked Mr. Stelson evenly, staring at her.

At lunch, Laurence was decidedly fidgety. His beard seemed to itch him, and he kept glancing at the door. Kay observed him, sipping her thin soup.

“You are faltering, Larry,” she said.

“I feel uneasy,” he said, looking away.

“Larry – he is a banker! He knows nothing of the soul!”

“Do you really think so?”

“Is that a rhetorical question, or do you have something to say?” she asked, putting her spoon down.

“Ever since we began this project,” he said, “I’ve had the feeling of being – pushed. I felt pushed into the initial decision, and now I feel that I am sort of coasting, and am losing the power to judge what is happening, or where we are going.”

“You believe that I pushed you into this?”

“No – not at all. That’s not it at all. It was something – oh, it’s so stupid to talk about it, as if it were a kind of possession. It was as if I were being shoved from behind by an invisible hand, but every time I turned around, so to speak, I could see nothing behind me.”

“It was your conscience – that’s all,” said Kay. “There’s nothing strange in that.”

“Actually – and this is the complicated part – it wasn’t my conscience, which was itself striving against these impulses, but a sort of idea similar to what you expressed in Mr. Stelson’s office – that we are doing the right thing, though the sky should fall, and that, to some degree, we expect it to fall – but that doesn’t concern us.”

“You really listened to him,” said his sister, shaking her head. “I am a little disappointed – though I suppose I shouldn’t be.”

“Why not?”

“Because you are a man, and men can only think of power as a means to personal gratification. Women, on the other hand, seek power in order to help others.”

“And this helping – has no personal gratification to you?”

“Oh, I see,” she said. “If I answer yes, then I am obviously in need of help, and if I answer no, I shall not be believed.”

“Then – which is it?” asked Laurence.

“It is something quite different,” said Kay, spearing a sausage. “Though I wouldn’t expect you to understand it.”

“Please – tell me.”

Kay smiled. “If we are to be dealing with souls – which is my end of the business – then my criteria for success shall be quite different from yours. You get the looms built, find a few buyers, keep everyone fed, and you have succeeded. For me, success is quite different. I wish to mold souls like a potter molds his clay. Don’t look so surprised, Larry – I have never talked about anything else. We are not the first to believe in love and charity; religion has demanded the same thing for thousands of years. Yet we look around the world and see precious little of it. What does this mean, other than that the soul of man still needs a lot of work? Even with the absolute incentives of punishment and reward, religion has achieved less than nothing. There is still war, poverty, hatred selfishness. Perhaps it is the deformity of original sin, but I don’t think so.”

Laurence frowned. “You don’t?”

“No. Personally, I believe it is because people have not been forced to love each other. It’s very sad, Larry. The soul in a state of freedom is a selfish, grasping thing, able to pass a starving man in a ditch because it is late for a card game. Freedom has not sufficed. The threats of religion were never really believed, because death is a mystery and procrastination an inevitability. We have to try something else; we have to create a world where the soul is forced to adapt itself to goodness! This means rewarding selflessness and punishing selfishness. This means forcing men to live for the sake of others, to remind them and drive them and force them

until they hold their own desires as illusory evils. And of course, this requires both power and the will to use it. Yet it cannot ever be said that I am acting for myself. I would prefer a nice husband and happy children. I do not desire anything for myself – as mother constantly informs me. I just happen to believe that I have a responsibility.” Kay smiled again and popped a piece of bread into her mouth, chewing vigorously. “But then, I’m just talking because you seem concerned. I hope I haven’t upset you.”

“No,” replied Laurence, breaking his last piece of bread. “I understand. Power has been used before – but never for the good. It is nothing but an infernal prejudice – and perhaps you’re right, a peculiar manifestation of male pride. I feel I have these doubts in order to be absolutely committed once I have mastered them.”

“I have never doubted your need to be committed, Larry,” replied Kay, putting down her napkin. “Now – would you mind getting the bill?”



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### *A Confession Before Beauty*

IT'S JUST UP HERE," said Laurence, giving Lydia a last helping hand up the hill. "Sorry it was such an arduous climb. But it's on the way to the church, and it's worth it – that much I promise you!"

Lydia clambered over the final rocks and straightened her back, breathing deeply. Lifting her head, she gazed out at the view.

"Oh my," she murmured.

It was as if nature had laid a banquet for the eye to feast on. The hill dropped away steeply for a hundred yards or so, its base burrowing under the cloudy treetops. The small patch of wood stretched away, thinning slightly. Beyond it lay distant rows of green fields, neatly marked off by low stone walls. A winding road stretched between the occasional cottage and, on the horizon, low clouds hung like enormous sheep grazing on the meeting of land and sky. A gentle breeze floated up the cliff, warming their faces.

Laurence watched Lydia, enjoying the view of her enjoying the view. *It is unusual to see someone so unconscious of observation, he thought, so unusual that one almost feels ashamed for seeing such an absence of masks, as if one has crept up on a loved one while she sleeps in order to find out if she whispers your name...* He felt a sudden rush at the thought, and stepped back from the edge.

"How far do your lands stretch?" Lydia asked finally.

“From the base of this cliff to the horizon – well, a little beyond, but not much,” replied Laurence.

“Quite a stretch.”

“Well, you know, looking at it, it seems quite large, but that’s sort of an optical illusion. When you have to walk it end to end every week, you realize that it’s actually endless,” grinned Laurence, sweeping the horizon with his hand.

She smiled. “In London, it’s considered a good view if your window doesn’t look onto someone else’s.”

“I think that’s quite sad. I mean, I recognize the economic necessity of hordes in close quarters, but I wouldn’t live there for the world.”

“That’s because you value a certain physicality of view,” said Lydia.

“Hm?”

“You stand here and say: ‘ah, look how far I can see!’. But that’s only your eyes. In London, you can see as far as intelligence can stretch – if you know the right people – and that is far beyond the horizon of sight.”

“What was that like, growing up with such intellects at the dinner table? I ask because when I first traveled, about four years ago, I met such brilliant people that I felt I had a long way to go to even begin catching up. My intelligence still doesn’t feel naturally acquired, sometimes.”

“How to begin, after such a beginning?” mused Lydia, staring at the view. “Have you ever noticed that the traits you admire most in people are the very traits they seem most ashamed of? That’s an odd thing, when you think about it. At our table, food was often forgotten in the pursuit of truth. And philosophy, well, it should never be spoken in the parlour; the dining room

is its best arena, for it is essential nutrition. Do you see that hawk? It's odd; many times when I talk with people, and the conversation drifts to principles, or absolutes, they positively freeze; they get very tense and call me judgmental for believing that such-and-such is so and no other way, and it is quite confusing, because I believe one should never be unduly upset by self-evident things." Lydia glanced at Laurence. "But I've thought about it, and I believe that, for most people, to believe that something – anything – is absolutely true, is to accept that fact that they have been lied to for most of their lives, and that is a hard thing to accept. I also think that there is a natural division in mankind between the thinkers and the doers; I don't mean that making a cart requires no thought, but that it requires quite a rigorous process of abstraction to create the social or political conditions wherein making a cart is possible. Or desirable. Or achievable. A cart carries goods and people, of course, yet that requires such things as property rights and the right to freedom of movement. That's what I mean by the division. Some people build the carts, others build the conditions for carts." Lydia shook her head and laughed suddenly. "I'm sorry – where did we begin? I'm quite made fun of, because I can't string two connected thoughts in a neat row."

"If it's chaos, it's pleasant chaos," smiled Laurence.

"If only my Aristotelian tutor had believed that!"

"So tell me – where does the singing fit in? Here – have a seat. The rock should be warm, and it won't stain."

Lydia sat down. "Ah, the singing! La la la. Yes – where does that fit in? Somewhere in the realm of 'amused tolerance', I would say. You see, everything in my circle centers around intelligence. 'Oh that Lydia,' they say, 'she's got herself a little hobby to rest her mind from the

pursuit of knowledge!'. Like hunting or fishing. Technically difficult opera they like, because it shows skill, but if I were to sing a simple ballad with longing and passion – oh, that would be quite tawdry, quite too enthusiastic. It seems they can only set their mind free by cutting it off from the heart, and I can't see the sense of that... Yet they can carry a thread of logic about a thousand miles longer than I can, so perhaps there's something in it... Don't think I haven't noticed you getting sleepy," she said suddenly, turning to look at him.

His eyes flew open, and he shook his head and stretched. "You're quite wonderful to listen to. Very relaxing."

"So I talk, and you nap. And if I want to nap? Will you talk me to sleep?"

"I'm not feeling too talkative right now. I'm enjoying digesting your thoughts."

"I am surprised."

"Why?" asked Laurence. "You think most interestingly."

"No – I'm surprised that you are not in a talkative mood. I often talk when something is bothering me."

He pursed his lips and shook his head. "What could be bothering me?"

"That man last night."

Laurence stiffened slightly. "I'm sorry you had to see that."

"I'm even more sorry that you didn't," said Lydia softly. Laurence glanced at her, and the intensity of her sympathy struck him like a blow, especially as she had just been so merry.

"Don't be ashamed," said Lydia, putting her hand on his forearm.

"I am quite confused," he said.

"I don't blame you. Why?"

Laurence stood suddenly, his eyes burning, and looked at her. “I do have something on my mind,” he said, taking a step back, towards the cliff. “But it seems odd to tell you.” He raised his hands. “It’s a breach of – I have only just met you. It’s not right.”

She sat very still, watching him.

“There’s something that’s been preying on me, but it’s so senseless. We have to help them. I know that. It’s right. But – I thought I was a good man before, when I was helping them grow more crops. That felt good. This doesn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because – oh, I suppose because I didn’t earn my power to help them. Because I am privileged.”

“But always had the power; why is it different now?”

“I never considered my power in this way before.”

“But even if your power is unfair, how many use their privilege in this way?” asked Lydia.

“Not many, of course. Your father, me... But there’s a kind of suffering in the world... You can’t stare it in the face and remain the same person. What I did before, the crops – can’t touch that kind of suffering. But I’ve seen it; I must do something. Those faces... But I rebel – that’s the truth. I rebel against it, and I don’t know if that’s right.” He halted, agonized.

“Go on.”

“I feel impure, Lydia; so help me God. I feel impure when I am spat in the face and cursed and humiliated. Perhaps that is because I want to take the easier way; I don’t know. But a part of me loathes the poor; not the poor, but this kind of poor... I know those who have done better, even with nothing. Adam Footer is one. But then – perhaps there is more to it than meets the

eye. Perhaps there is a poverty I don't understand. Perhaps they cannot do better. I don't know!"

"What do your instincts tell you?" asked Lydia.

Laurence shook his head. "My instincts are nothing, because I am privileged."

"What do they tell you anyway?"

Laurence took a deep breath. "If I am honest, I believe that they are worthless, hateful beasts, and if there is any justice in the world, they deserve their fates."

"And you? Are you a worthless beast?"

"I don't know!"

"You're lying," Lydia said. "Everyone knows."

"How much power have I earned? Where would I be had I started out as they did? I will never know!"

"How popular are you with your peers?"

"Oh, if I'm honest – they hate me."

"Why?"

"Weren't you listening?" cried Laurence. "I don't have any answers right now! I am confused!"

Lydia made no reply. She sat hugging her knees, fighting her own reactions, seeing all the answers in a blaze of light, but uncertain of how to tell him.

"I'm sorry," he said suddenly, lowering his head. "This was utterly uncalled for. Please – excuse me."

"It's all right." Lydia raised her eyes. "I'm just not sure how to respond."

“This was utterly uncalled for,” he repeated. “I had no right to burden you with these thoughts.” He smiled. “You are, after all, paying a social visit.”

“But I will say one thing though,” said Lydia, rising. “You are a thoroughly modern man, because you are a good man, who does good things, but has no idea what goodness is.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### *A Tale of Worship*

THE VILLAGE CHURCH WAS A LOW, SQUAT BUILDING. Stunted bushes clung to the base of its walls, and strands of ivy rose like galley ropes towards the roof, as if the land hoped to drag the structure down into its bosom, or pull itself up to the pinnacle of the lonely cross. Its walls were simple, rough-hewn, and above the rust-coloured doors hung a piece of lacquered oak carved with the inscription: 'Faith is Reason unto Itself'. This homily had been chosen by Father Jones, who was quite a remarkable character.

Gerald Jones had been born into the church; this was a joke in the village, though if there was nobility in it, it was the nobility of circumstance alone, for it was between the pews that he drew his first breath, and his first cry was a lasting one. Gerald's mother had been a thin, nervous woman, given to strange rages and dreamy reveries before blowing curtains. Those with long memories remembered her as an oddly determined girl, friendly to butterflies and fearful of men, who rebelled against the stifling conformity of her small circumstances by surrendering immediately to all demands. A traveling tinker with poetic aspirations became her husband by making two mistakes; he mistook her distance for mystery and, when she accepted him at once, confused obedience with acceptance. He soon found out that she regarded all men as uniform seeds whose only hope for robust growth was the grim pruning of a determined wife, and a savage, silent battle soon ensued before the quiet eyes of their only child.

The boy grew like a mushroom, deep in the dark embrace of maternal fascination. This was not unusual at first, for all new mothers sink into the wombs of their infants, but her husband



lacked the ability or desire to woo her back to the more measured pleasures of adulthood. There were no siblings; it was Gerald and herself, adrift on a murky sea of self-regard, and the pleasures they gave each other were deep. They spoiled each other with their intimacy, for there was no effort in it, no need for compromise or definition.

Gerald was five when his father escaped the descending nets of his mother's demands; he strode into a cleaner dawn as the boy watched from his little bedroom window. The dark landscape, still leaning towards sunlight, shocked the boy immeasurably; it seemed unimaginable that his father could leave and the world continue to turn. He watched until the rising sun outlined the distant cross of the village church, feeling the cold regard of a new Father.

The boy's vestal birthplace was a mere matter of odds, for his mother spent so much time in the church that even pious villagers regarded her with unease. Her religion was deep and needy; it is natural that such an infant-woman should prefer the endless generosity of the supernatural to the navigated affections of mere mortals. It seemed inevitable that the boy was going to become a priest, yet his fervent faith was a departure from the easy-going traditions of village worship. The previous priest had been perfectly matched to the demands of the community; he was disciplined but sensible – being himself a farmer's son – and would not dream of interrupting the harvest with ecclesiastical demands. Father Jones turned out as was feared; he was a professional priest, and expected that every facet of village life would revolve around his God, just as his mother's life had revolved around him.

Yet even this had not been disastrous at first, for Father Jones' fervour had been somewhat restrained by the demands of his mother. In his early twenties, however, she died of a long

wasting disease, and he utterly retreated into the bosom of his peculiarly feminine God. To the villagers, God had hitherto been salvation; there had been a certain practicality of cause and effect, and the congregation had followed the landmarks to heaven with little thought for theology. God to Father Jones was love, romantic love incarnate, the kind of love that punishes by generosity, and a new beast began to lurk in the spiritual life of the village, the beast of reproach, and it began to unsettle the rhythms of life and death. The church devolved from a social place of spiritual transaction to a flickering womb of scolding devotion.

This shift alienated many villagers; there was much muttering and shaking of heads. Numinous spiritualism has always appealed to guilty leisure more than arduous labour – especially labour involving the natural elements. To the villagers, the purpose of religion was to provide comfort in the face of death and scapegoats in the face of disaster. Because life hung so precariously over the chasm of natural disasters, the need for reassurance was as intimate as the desire for life. Faith was a dedication to survival; God was merely the means. Thus, when Laurence’s reforms began to spread their wealth, church attendance slowly dropped off. The murky guilt provided by Father Jones did not sit well with the new pleasures of the villagers. He knew this – and, in knowing it, knew his enemy.

Lydia seemed to almost sniff Father Jones when she and Laurence approached the church late that afternoon. When they opened the door and peered inside, it seemed dungeon-like, like the inside of a barely-cracked egg; wizened heads and slumped shoulders lined the pews like the chained rowers of an ancient galley. The light from the red windows bathed the scene in a crimson light, a glowing tribute to years past when all glass was stained with blood. An alcove

in the far wall of the church contained the altar – the altar in turn contained Father Jones, who, wrapped in his sermon, did not notice their silent entrance.

“There are those, my children,” he was saying, placing a hand on his notes and raising his eyes to his congregation, “there are those who walk among us and say that they are gifts from God, that their generosity surmounts Christ’s in its practicality. How can they say this, friends? Why, because they can wave one hand and fire up the fullness in your stomach, wave the other and keep your cattle on all fours when the frost comes. They need no miracle for their loaves and fishes but the glory of God’s skies and the bounty of His earth. And it is said by many that these men are in fact gifts from heaven, that God has awakened from His slumber, seen the starvation and want here on earth and sent them to us as His agents of a better world.

“And do we need proof of their worth? Have they not provided us with the means to grow food for those in want? Have they restored the glow to our children’s cheeks? Have they not granted us respite from the Four Horsemen? And are we not tempted to fall on our knees in gratitude and praise them to the skies?”

Father Jones paused, his eyes fluttering to the stained glass. “Yes – are we not tempted? For if we suppose that this is no small miracle, we are right – and if we suppose that there may be a price paid for this miracle – we are more right, for Satan rarely tempts us with hardship! Were pleasure the only moral compass, the road to heaven would be paved only with the avoidance of pain, and all would be good who felt good. That would be a simple test, friends, too simple for the Deceiver, who knows well the lusts of man!

“But it is not so. It is not written so. The high road is the hard road, friends, and we would be fools falling into evil if we clutched at every pleasure that came our way, with no thought for the consequences to our souls.

“No – the Devil knows the heart of man, how it yearns for comfort and a release from the harsh demands of goodness! He knows how it longs to beat easier over a full belly and a happy future – he knows that man’s belly thinks of the future as only the day after the end of digestion, and cares only how it shall feed again! He knows that the weakness of man, the crack in his armour, is his trembling flesh, the flesh that demands satisfaction before salvation! The flesh that knows nothing of the sacred pleasures of God, the flesh that knows it is only a few years from dust and wishes to gorge itself as much as possible before it is discarded.

“The Devil sits in his lair, friends, as he has for all eternity; he sits and he plots, for he wants souls for his belt! And after a thousand years of thinking, of thinking so hard that his ears melt and run down his neck, he hits upon a solution and laughs and leaps and spews fire from his mouth!

“The Devil chooses his man very carefully. The Devil knows that men who know his face make bad servants, for they hate themselves too much to keep any faith, even in him. The Devil chooses carefully, because he knows that his best servant is the man who thinks he is doing good!

Father Jones raised his eyes to the rear of the church, towards the darkness where Laurence and Lydia stood. Their eyes did not meet, for it seemed that the priest was looking past them, past the church, to the vast fields beyond.

The priest cleared his throat and spoke very softly. The congregation leaned towards him, like rushes in a gentle breeze. “When the Devil has chosen his man, he begins to whisper in his ear, very gently, in dreams, and the man wakes in a cold sweat. He has felt the brush of greatness, but of what sort he knows not.

“When man awakes, and looks upon the earth, he begins to lust for it, just as the Devil did since the dawn of evil. But the man feels a gentle lust, a seduction that feels like the brimming love of deep waters.

“And now this man finds himself filled with waking dreams, dreams that bring fears, but he quiets his fears by telling himself that he wants the earth only as a gift to others, to the poor, to you, my friends! And he works hard; he travels; he learns from many men, for the Devil is busy. And upon his return, this prodigal son does indeed seem to bring the light of salvation with him, for he believes he can make the earth bloom by turning a page!”

Lydia suppressed a smile and glanced at Laurence.

Father Jones rose to full height. “And the earth does bloom, just as expected, and his generosity is unbounded, for the earth seems his to give, and it quickly becomes the only gift he cares about, for the Devil is whispering dreams of dominion over life and death!

“The Devil speaks to this man like a mother in dreams: ‘What is life but what you are able to grasp with your own hands?’ he whispers. ‘My son, do you believe that God made man to suffer? No – He helps those who help themselves, and loves a man who leaps to Him on strong legs. The ugliness of man in the muck, of thin children and women’s souls barren with bitter tears makes Him turn His face in pain, for has He not provided man with all the bounty to worship Him in peace and joy? Yes – all this has been given to you, but you spurn it, you spurn

His gifts and prefer the games of war to the work of plenty. The life is a test, yes, but a test of love, not suffering. Suffering stems from a loss of love, love for this gift, this earth, and it grieves God.”

“This man ignores the holy warning of James 3:15: ‘This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish’. Thus this man listens to the devil’s voice, and he hears the laughter of children that his lands have not heard in a long time, and his heart shakes off its weight and rises once more, and he begins to plan, for he wishes to make a heaven of earth.

The light was fading softly, as if the church descended through a deepening tide. Laurence shivered as the priest repeated his words.

“Yes, my brothers. A heaven of earth... And while this man labours for a heaven on earth, the true heaven, the heaven whose garden is watered by the tears of the penitent, God’s heaven, the true home of man, withers in the face of man’s newfound Gluttony.

“For behold, friends, we see before us the disaster of the age. We see its face and know its name, for it is Gluttony, the scourge of old.

Father Jones wiped his forehead. “What is this Gluttony? Do not be misled, friends, by the heaviness of your table or the upsets of your stomach, for that is only man’s gluttony, and can be survived by the righteous. I speak here of the Devil’s Gluttony, which is a greed for the temptations of this false world.

“We have all heard the holy words, friends, in Corinthians 3:19: ‘For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness’. And in James 4:4: ‘know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God’. Thus the wisdom of this world is

foolishness with God, yet we must also know that the comfort of this world is discomfort with God. For we are like men sent on a long journey by a sworn lover. And along the road of our journey, beckoning from smoky windows and dark swamps, is our dark lover, the Devil, who would take us from our journey and seduce us with shallow pleasures. Of what account would we place a man who turned from his sworn love for the sake of shameful lusts, no matter how far he may wander?

“This is our journey through this world: we are sent on a pilgrimage by our lover, our God, into this life, and we are not to travel lightly or easily; we are not to consort with the Devil or dally with his whores, for it is on our souls that we return whole and pure to the God who sent us.

“A man may turn from the path, yet he will blink and laugh if told, for he believes he walks the path of righteousness. He believes that he serves God by serving the pleasures of this earth. He does not know that to be for the world is to be against God.

“In Job 5:20, we read: ‘In famine He shall redeem thee from death: and in war from the power of the sword’. So I say to you: forget your dreams of earthly lusts, and trust in God alone. Go home to your children and take their bottles, their full plates and easy women. Take them from this easy lust of crops and bartering and usury. Sit them down and speak to them of their true love, their God who watches over them and weeps at the sins of their negligence. Tell them to turn from this madness, this lust for a world of pleasure and return to the Church that gave them life!”

Father Jones mopped his brow as he finished, his eyes scanning the pews. The faces turned to him seemed pale in the thick tallow light, knotted with hope and strange resentment.

“Let us sing,” he said.

Lydia and Laurence stepped outside the church, listening to the droning voices within.

“You said – we should back go inside, and arrange for your concert,” said Laurence.

“Are you tired?”

“No – I haven’t spent as much time here as I should.”

“Who is the priest?”

“Father Jones. A rather capable man. Quite out of place here, I think.”

“Were you not bothered by his sermon?”

“I don’t pay much attention to religion.”

“Perhaps you should,” she said. “Not that it’s any of my business. Let’s talk to him.”

When the singing had ended, Laurence opened the door and watched Lydia enter. The congregation was breaking up, and Laurence nodded at some of the villagers he knew, and was surprised when they averted their eyes and hurried past, out into the evening air.

“Father Jones!” he called.

The priest’s head rose sharply, and he stared at Laurence.

“Lord Carvey – what a surprise!” he said, bowing slightly.

“I would like to introduce you to someone, if I may.”

“One moment,” replied the priest, arranging some papers on the altar.

“These are quite remarkable,” said Lydia, walking up to the wall and touching the stained glass.



Father Jones followed her gaze. “Yes – I have received some material benefits from Lord Carvey’s reforms, and have chosen to use them to reinforce a point.”

“This is Ammonius, is it not?” she asked, touching a glowing figure in the glass.

“The same.”

“Who’s he?” asked Laurence.

“An early Christian Father,” replied Lydia, “who tested his faith with a red hot iron.”

“A metaphor, naturally,” smiled the priest.

“And this is St. Margaret Marie Alacoque,” said Lydia, tracing her finger over a ribbon of lead. “A very pious woman. She took no liquids from Thursday to Sunday, and when she did drink, preferred laundry water. She cut the name of Jesus in her breast with a knife – and when that didn’t last, burned it into her flesh with a candle.”

“Can it be?” wondered Laurence.

“Such days this world has not seen since, Lord Carvey,” said Father Jones reverently.

“These stories are testimonials to a special brand of passion, a passion for God despite the inevitable discomforts, that has not survived into modern times.”

“Father Jones,” said Laurence, “I would like you to meet Lady Cerbes, daughter of Lord Cerbes.”

Father Jones bowed. “Your father is a renowned scholar.”

“And Lady Lydia a renowned musician,” said Laurence.

“Renowned – in the here and now. Tell me – were you raised as your father was?”

“Better,” said Lydia, “for he could not benefit from his own instruction.”

The priest threw his head back and laughed. “Ah, rare – rare!” he cried. “And you are here, which is most unusual. How is that?”

“My father was invited; he was delayed, and I came in his place.”

“A substitute that none shall censure who have eyes to see,” said Father Jones, his eyes gleaming. “I shall sound remarkably, almost pathetically eager if I ask – but ask I shall – will you sing in my church?” He smiled. “There, both provincialism and celibacy are revealed in the awkwardness of my question. Yet I was born to wait, and shall await your reply.”

“Of course I shall sing here – that is why we came here today,” replied Lydia.

“And we shall hear no bell so sweet, and the shapes in the stained glass shall lean forward a little to hear.”

“You are well spoken,” commented Lydia.

“Yet often too florid – I can hear it myself!” smiled the priest sadly. “When one sits alone in a dark room and reads Cicero until the tears run from one’s eyes – and when no stern master reproves one’s over-ornate stabs at the eye of rhetoric, then we may say that a man has been self-educated – and that both teacher and taught are happy fools.”

“Your speech trips in maddeningly small circles,” smiled Lydia.

“Yes – there it is seen, the mark of restraint! Wonderful!”

“What would be a convenient time?” asked Laurence uncomfortably.

The priest turned on him almost angrily. “Sunday, of course.”

“What time?”

“Eight thirty.”

“Thank you.”

“And now, if you will excuse me,” said Father Jones, straightening suddenly, “I have much tidying to do.”

“Of course. Until Sunday,” said Lydia, squeezing his hand.

“He makes me itchy,” said Laurence as they walked home.

“Have a heart, Laurence,” said Lydia, turning up her collar. “No woman, no children – all alone in the dark, groping for something that isn’t even there.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

### *A Waking Flower Drinks at Last*

KAY WAS GIVEN TO LONG REVERIES IN BED. She took forever to rise, and found the hour or so between the first knock and the last rise the most perfect time of day. She often imagined herself on a silent beach, with her birds, alone and self-sufficient, breaking coconuts and awaiting the arrival of her warrior-lover. It was a strange sort of distance, for there was little of melancholy in it. She had made a complete world; she was a house inhabited by hauntings, a lost dream lolling in low tide.

And yet – there was an tense expectancy, even in such distance. Souls adrift in sweet silence may be the drawing breath of a life about to scream. Angry souls may be carved from fire, from want, starvation and madness – or from over-heavy swaddling blankets, from the distance of a huge room spied through light lace, from maids tiptoeing in smiling terror, a mother refusing to touch... A dreamy life becomes intolerable in it's own sweet, slow way; it is a gentle suicide of sighs.

The morning after his arrival, Jonathon rose late and dressed quickly. Entering the sunroom, he noticed a strange woman sitting at the breakfast table. Settling into a chair, her stared at her quite gamely.

“Good morning!”

Kay's small mental birds scattered. She blinked. “Good – morning, Mr. Eddsworth.”

He took a large piece of toast and crammed it into his mouth, chewing at it like a conveyer belt. She smiled and shook her head.

“You are Lord Larry’s sister?” he asked.

“Yes. Yes.”

“Hello.”

Silence fell. The beach beckoned.

“Finish an argument for me,” said Jonathon suddenly. “Do you think we all should care so much what people think of us?”

Kay blinked. “What – what is that?”

He leaned back in his chair, a knowing look in his eyes. “I loved natural sciences when I was younger. I took frogs and turned them inside out. I learned the name of every part. But frogs are so unimaginative. They take their orders so meekly: your liver shall go here, your heart here and your spleen there. Yes sir, they say, and pack themselves up and leap forth into this world, certain that each is an individual. A student opens them, and he is fascinated to learn their names because they are so ordered, but there certainly comes a time – well there did for me, anyway – when he realizes that names only exist for things that do not change.”

“Yet we have the word,” said Kay with a small smile.

“What?”

“Change. The word change.”

Jonathon frowned and leaned forward. “I wasn’t finished. My love affair with biology, however, was. I wanted knowledge that transcended classification. I learned everything, but everything had its place. I turned to people last of all, almost in despair, and I found that all the

cardinal lessons of biology and philosophy are lies. People aren't holy souls, rational animals or even solid mammals. They are amphibians. I suppose the same god is in charge of both. 'You are to place both your spleen and your thoughts in such-and-such a manner,' he says, and everyone packs their heads and abdomens neatly, and leaps forth into the world, certain that each is an individual. Yet if you open them, you realize that you can label each one with your eyes closed, for there lie religion, patriotism, parental loyalty and social convention, into such neat rows that you would almost imagine that each were the same machine with a different face."

Kay looked at him silently, her eyes wide and perplexed.

"Anyway," said Jonathon, leaning back again, "I am now a footman, a valet and servant who can find nothing better to do with his time than unpack and repack other people's luggage in the hopes of finding an original arrangement. Which brings me to my real question."

Kay raised her eyes gradually. "Mm?"

"Do you think we should ever care what people think of us?" he repeated.

Kay shook her head slightly. *He is asking me a question*, she told herself slowly, *yet there are three little black hairs curling out from the top of his white shirt which seem to muffle his voice... Something about frogs*, she thought. The three hairs rose and fell.

"Am I boring you?" he asked.

She shivered and rose quickly. "No – no. But I think it is too early in the day for such thoughts."

"Yet I must have something to do. Have you any suggestions? I was brought here by Lydia, but she's gone a-wooing and left me all alone."

The sudden intensity of her eyes almost frightened Jonathon. *The woman's a rosy thorn!* he thought.

"I am quite sure they have only gone for a walk," Kay said.

"I dared her to fall in love in Dorset," smiled Jonathon. "I was only joking," he added.

"You were inquiring for things to occupy your time," she said, patting her mouth with a napkin. "Well – we have a decent stable, though no horses fast or unruly. There are several pleasant walks, though none offering a decent road. A good – swimming hole is not too far off, a rather decrepit inn, an occasional dance and many old men who enjoy their backgammon. Take your pick."

"I pick – what you pick," he said, leaning back and clasping his hands behind his head.

"Oh – I do apologize, but I have an appointment this morning," said Kay. "I have to talk to some people – some people we are trying to help. Mary took them out to a field, to build a shelter... They were at a barn, but it burned down; well, they burned it down, actually – excuse me, would you terribly mind buttoning up your shirt?"

Jonathon raised his eyebrows.

Kay paled. "Please excuse me. It's my mother talking. She's a devil for decorum."

"I apologize." *That was out of place*, he thought, twisting his buttons.

"So – unless you are interested in tending to the shattered lives of the – terminally hopeless, I would suggest you pick from the – list I offered."

"You are trying to help people in a burned barn?" asked Jonathon.

She gestured quickly, blushing. "Um – well we were trying to help them before they – burned it down. Yes, we didn't do a very good job. We are trying to set up a sort of – loom-

house here, or near to here. Larry's project, of course, not my mother's. I have had a little say in the matter, and we are using this project to try and – reclaim the lives of those who have been worst off from birth." She took a deep breath. "Of course, there are snags. Well, more than snags, really. Outright disasters – I'll tell you freely if you press me!" she said with a quick laugh. "The worst among them have burned down a barn and seem fairly adept at abusing any hospitality that comes their way. And they don't seem to understand the concept of work at all. At all, I mean, and of course we aren't the best ones to teach them – I mean Larry perhaps, he's very hard-working, but what are we going to say? 'Get a good education and be sure to appoint a good bailiff?' I don't think we're going to have much luck..."

"Compromise," said Jonathon, almost cutting her off. "We go for a swim, and then we go to the burned barn. Yes?"

"I – hadn't planned on a swim," said Kay, hugging herself tightly. "To others – it seems quite wrong."

"The barn was a surprise for me too," grinned the young man. "Yet let's be flexible. A short swim. Then a presentable stroll."

She laughed giddily. A flush was creeping up her pale neck. "Oh, the maids, they bathe there at night, lucky angels!" She leaned forward and whispered: "And sometimes not alone! But I could never... I mean, I haven't even swum there myself for – almost eight years."

"Do you think that everything has to be so – complicated? These rules. They are for foolish women and bad men. You are not foolish. I am not bad. Why can we not be allowed an innocent bathe? I swear I shall take no advantage. It shall be a sweet memory."



Kay paused. Her rising flush struggled to meet her high hairline. Her teeth worked on her lower lip. Finally, she ducked her head and said, with a sudden gleam in her eyes: “I shall have to change now. We shall have to return here. I shall have to get dressed now.”

“I shall obey,” he said, rising with a grin and watching her leave.

Kay stood before the fatal mirror, examining her reflection. There is no vision in the mirror, no critical consciousness in the eyes of good men, but there are a thousand calamities in the minds of nervous women. Kay gazed at herself and shook her head. *My thighs are too fat, my feet too long, my ears stick out, my hair is limp, my hips too wide, my breasts too small, my eyebrows meet when I squint – in fact I am nothing more than a collection of used parts, as if the beautiful women had already picked clean the heap of loveliness before I arrived, and I was left to fashion myself with their rejects. And so now I must only be seen in the dark, and then a man may only touch my cheeks, the tip of my nose and my knees. In the morning I shall rise early and scurry for a nightgown the size of a small tent or hide under the covers until he goes to brush his teeth and then jump up and dress quickly...*

Kay shuddered, shook her head and pulled on the heaviest bathing suit she could find before dressing rapidly and going downstairs.

“So – this is the spot,” said Jonathon, pushing the branches aside.

“Yes – I loved it as little girl,” replied Kay. “I haven’t come much lately, though. You know – too busy.”

“Too busy for this?” he cried, gesturing in amazement.

The pond steamed slightly in the morning light; a light breeze shifted the mist like slow dunes of soft sand. Branches reached over the silent water in a handshake of fragile webs, casting long shadows over the lily-pads.

“And we are quite alone?” whispered Jonathon.

“Well – within shouting distance, to be sure,” replied Kay.

“The water is warm?”

She shivered. “This is a still pond. Only deep water is cold.”

“I like the insects on the water,” said Jonathon, walking forward and pulling his shirt off.

“Like tiny Christ’s proving their ancestry.”

“They vanish as soon as you touch the water,” commented Kay, watching him as he stepped out of his trousers. His legs were very lean. “Your clothes – you should hang them, or they’ll get wet.”

“Thank you,” grinned Jonathon, tossing them aside. He shook his head, raised his arms and threw himself into the water. Surfacing, he whooped and shouted. “Coming in?”

“Yes – of course.” Kay performed an odd sort of wriggle, like a caterpillar shedding its skin, and hung her dress carefully on a branch. She turned to him with all the radiance of a floating leaf, chest lowered and elbows inward.

“Come on then!” cried Jonathon, splashing her.

“Yes yes,” she muttered, waving her arms tightly. “Don’t get me wet!”

“So says the porpoise! Come on!”

Kay took a step forward, touching her toe to the water. Insects approached it, curious. She hesitated. “Not that warm.”

Jonathon came out of the water shook himself dry. He raised his head, grinned and charged at her. Kay leapt back, her feet slipping in the mud, then turned and fled from him around the pond. Whooping, he lumbered after her, legs wide and arms outstretched. She cried out, giggling hysterically, then turned and jumped into the pond, hearing the thunderous crash of the water as he charged after her. Kay turned on him, arms flying madly, throwing water and debris at him. After a moment she stopped, bursting into laughter.

“My Lord – what a sight!”

Jonathon stood in the shallows, a lily-pad hanging from his head, leaves clinging to his sturdy chest. He shook the foliage off and leapt at her.

“No prisoners! Head first!” he shouted, grabbing her and throwing her over his shoulder. She had barely touched the water when she was back, leaping on his shoulders, pushing him down. Jonathon staggered, groaning, then sprang forward, head first, into the water, sending her flying. Kay disappeared underwater. Jonathon frowned, then toppled as she pulled his legs out from under him. Flopping backwards, he splashed onto the bank of the pond and she leapt onto him, blowing water.

Kay landed on him, and it was like an electric shock – the adrenaline, the joy of horseplay, and suddenly, like the first twistings of adolescence, she felt his bathing suit on her thighs as she straddled him, saw his white teeth and laughing eyes. With a cry she tore herself off him and threw herself back into the pond.

Jonathon sat up in the mud, brushing sticks from his arms. Kay’s eyes rose above the water slowly. Both her hands rose in a gesture of peace. He smiled. Suddenly she stood and blew an enormous mouthful of water at him. He cried out and threw himself at her. She gave way and

they bubbled briefly underwater, his hands groping, grabbing her legs. Kay shrieked, coughing, and he threw her to the bank; she turned, tripped him, and he fell onto her legs.

Her hips twisted involuntary, as if seeking warmth, and she placed her hands on his hair. He raised his head, looking into her eyes for a long moment.

“Peace,” he murmured.

“Peace,” she replied, staring at him, then turning her head.

They let the high sun dry them, lying on the edge of the water.

“You fight dirty,” she murmured, wondering at the quietness of her voice.

“It’s a mud pond,” he smiled. “What do you expect?”

“Gentlemanly behaviour.”

“If I were a gentleman, I would have sent my valet to bathe with you. Would you have preferred that?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Is he handsome?”

He grinned, crossing his hands behind his head. “No, but he has a great way with the ladies.”

“How lovely. Isn’t that what they say about farmers? That they have a ‘great way’ with the livestock?”

“There’s no insult in that. We’re all animals. We play like kittens.”

“And wash like hogs,” commented Kay. “You’re going to have to get wet again, you know. Can’t have you tracking that into the house.”

Jonathon sighed. “And like all animals, we must be domesticated.”

“Men,” said Kay slowly, “have never understood the link between tidiness and civilization.”

“Men tidy themselves for their women’s family, for her friends and relatives. Never for her. Cleanliness is boring.”

Kay snorted. “That’s ridiculous!”

“Really?” asked Jonathon, sitting up. “You said: ‘tracking it into the house’. That’s for your mother. Yet you do not mind lying here with me in the mud. Could that be because it is – perhaps – appealing? Could it be appealing because it has nothing to do with mothers or relatives or family or all the other devils that so oppress women?”

His words sun into Kay. A shiver passed through her, and goosebumps rose on her skin.

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

### *A Sorcerer's Dance*

“YOU AREN'T COMING?” asked Kay, pulling a loose thread from her rough peasant dress.

“I don't know,” said Mary. “I was never allowed as a child. I had to stay back, with Lady. All that – wildness made her nervous. Everyone came home drunk and shouting... It was terrifying.”

“You would be a princess, you know,” said Kay, shaking her hands through her hair.

“Everything reverses tonight!”

Mary smiled. “That's quite a temptation.”

“All I'm saying is: look at this dress,” said Kay, leading her over to a closet. Pulling the door open, she took Mary's fingers and ran them up the delicate lace of a white gown.

“Oh, but – that's lovely,” said Mary. “I couldn't wear that!”

“Just wait,” said Kay excitedly, taking the dress down and laying it on the bed. “You're much thinner than I, but it might do...”

“It would get ruined.”

“So? I never wear it. Probably never will.”

“What would your mother say?”

“Oh, she never goes to these ‘unholy abominations’,” mimicked Kay.

“I can't.”

“Listen – let’s be honest. Your life has been hard. It probably never will be easy; that’s the way of things. So for one night – one night – surely you can afford to abandon your missions, causes and extraordinarily enlarged brain.”

“I suppose,” said Mary, staring at the dress.

“Haven’t you ever wanted to be beautiful?” asked Kay.

“Oh – beauty is a shield, a snare.,” replied her friend, still fingering the fabric. “Dangerous. Not for me.”

“Not even – not even for one night?” asked Kay, running her fingers over the lace. “One night?”

Mary’s eyes flickered; something flashed in their gray depths, a hope, a passion, a strange mixture of desire and forgetfulness.

“All right. One night,” she whispered, picking up the dress. Laurence’s voice rose from downstairs, and she started.

“Why not?” asked Laurence.

“Oh, these country abandons are quite foolish,” replied Jonathon. “Though you, of course, look magnificent.”

“That’s how it goes,” said Laurence, glancing down at his rough tunic. “Everyone changes places.”

“And what happens? Do you push a plough while peasants loll about reading Euclid?”

“No. There are a lot of games...”

“Pass the parcel? I never liked that as a child. It always...”

“Will you listen?” demanded Laurence.

“Yes – for heaven’s sake shut up!” echoed Lydia, trying to arrange her shapeless outfit.

“All right! Go ahead.”

“Good food, dancing, jests of every kind,” said Laurence. “And the ‘Blass’.”

“The what?”

“The ‘Blass’.”

“I heard you. What’s that?”

“The Blasphemous Mass.”

Jonathon smiled. “I see.”

“On this holy night, every year, Garth, a barkeep who used to be a monk, dresses up as Father Jones and gives a rather unusual sermon.”

Jonathon wrinkled his nose. “Ah – rural wit.”

“He’s actually quite good.”

“You’re going?” Jonathon asked Lydia.

“No – this is my evening ear. Of course!”

“Are there masks?”

“Some,” smiled Laurence. “It is pagan!”

“Well, I suppose I could don hair underwear for one night.”

“We leave after dinner,” said Laurence, handing him his woolen tunic. Jonathon stared at it.

“I’m itchy already,” he said.



The light of the fire traveled for miles; they saw it long before they reached the carnival. Rounding the last bend, they saw an astounding sight.

It was, of course, a farming village, so the sights, sounds and smells of the earth permeated the soul of the community. Dress was earthy; set against the fields, the peasants looked like camouflaged prey. Sounds were earthy: the heave of the plough, the wheeze of the scythe, the sweaty grunt of the harvest, the grumbling counting of sheaves. Smells were earthy: pigs, cows, manure, fertilizer, stagnant water and old seeds stunned the nose with productive stench. Simple gaiety fled from this merciless assault. Except for one night.

One night every year, on All Saint's Eve, the grim gods of church and earth fled before the bright bellowings of Bacchus. One night, a dancing, multicoloured giant seemed to rise from the dark earth, spouting wine and song, a momentary god of blind abandon and scant regrets. One night, the structure of life dissolved into the spontaneous flames of pure sensuality.

As they watched, a tall man with a fiddle began playing before the hurling blaze, his legs twitching, his mask flickering in the flames. Another man beat a drum with two bones, his arms flying, his grin wide over his teeth. Around them a circle of distorted, gibbering, plunging creatures danced; children leapt and grabbed at masks; old women swayed with the seductive grace of young girls; men shouted and threw themselves at the laughing dancers.

"Oh my god!" murmured Lydia.

They stood, transfixed at the music. The fiddle screeched and jittered like a banshee on a flying horse; the drums pounded like a hundred bursting hearts. The music had no form, little melody, but possessed a driving insistence, a wild command of every moment, a forgetfulness of

the moment before, an shrug at the one to come. *Now, now, now...* it droned, encouraged, commanded.

“Come on, Kay!” shouted Jonathon, running forward. Laurence smiled, took Lydia’s hand and charged after him.

“Are you all right?” asked Kay.

Mary’s face was pale; her eyes burned. She giggled suddenly and picked up her white dress,

“It’s about time!” she cried, grabbing Kay’s hand and sprinting after the others, her legs flying like a child’s.

They plunged into the madness of the dance. The fire hurled shadows and light over the whole scene, it loomed like the judge of an endless war of angels and ghosts. Mary felt her body responding to the music; she threw herself at it, almost weeping; as if she were flying free of an eternal cage. She caught glimpses of others; Jonathan’s grinning face, Kay’s breathless excitement, Lydia’s hesitant abandon, Laurence’s mad energy. The villagers seemed like another race; a kinder union of forgetfulness; men and women danced her around, passing her from partner to partner, and Mary felt no divisions, no high fences of old hates; the whirling forms seemed to become one being, a single blend of single flesh; blind, thrusting, joyful...

Kay was shocked at the first contact; a young man dressed in stained red thrust himself against her, and she felt the tangible weight of his erection. She shuddered, and was about to cry out, when Wife Jigger passed by her whirling eyes, grinning, winking. A feeling of safety suddenly flooded her; there was no censure, no retaliation, no danger. She felt her body begin to flow with the music; a man danced with her; another grasped her by the waist and pressed

himself against her buttocks; she felt a strange, delicious ripple in her belly as she swayed with them. Jonathon caught her then, lifting her high; she came down upon him and danced close, swirling his hair with tingling fingers.

For Lydia, it was all a little perplexing. She found herself dancing mechanically, scanning the surrounding sea of flesh with a scientific eye. *How interesting that they should perform so*, she thought, – *it obviously has something to do with their normal lack of expression, with the harshness of their everyday life, with the* – “*WHOO!*” The last expression was quite unscientifically yanked out of her by Laurence, who grasped her hips from behind and pulled her to him.

“Oh – hello!” she panted, turning.

His face was a wild mask; he cried out, grasped her hand, and began spinning her. Sparks from the fire drifted around them as they flew.

“Sorry,” she said as she stepped on his foot again.

Laurence laughed, his hair wet on his flickering forehead.

“Gravity ain’t helping!” he cried, lifting her up and dancing on. Lydia’s legs kicked awkwardly. Jonathan’s face swam past, his eyebrows wiggling madly.

“Dorset! Dorset!” he shouted.

“Dorset!” shouted Laurence.

“Dorset!” cried Lydia, laughing suddenly. She wrapped her arms around Laurence’s head and pressed her face against his sweaty neck, consumed with giggles...

Eventually, exhaustion took its toll. Two by two, the sweaty dancers collapsed beside each other. The fire began to burn down. A short man in kaleidoscopic clothing dragged a podium in front of the fire.

“Blass! Blass! Garth! Blass!” cheered the lolling crowd.

The man took his place on the podium, thumped a huge black book down, and looked sternly at the revelers.

“Welcome!” cried the fool. “Welcome, friends, to the one night of the true church!”

“Blass! Blass!”

“Welcome, friends, to the night of revelation! Welcome to the night of the new religion! Welcome to the latest words on the oldest book! For tonight, friends, and tonight only, I read from the Newest Testament!”

“Garth! Blass!”

“Recently unearthed from the vaults of a Persian King,” cried Garth, “the Newest Testament contains the final explanation for the Christian hordes! No longer does God work in mysterious ways! Scholars and bookworms report that the good God admits all his mistakes. As the most learned man among you – and the only sober one to boot – it falls on me to read the holiest words of the Newest Testament!”

“Blass! Garth! Preach on, fool!”

He opened the huge book and ran his fingers down the first page.

“‘Dear Christian fodder!’” he read, glancing up. “Most informal, I do say. ‘Dear Christian fodder, it has come to my eternal attention that I have been a little unclear in my past

communications. Many lessons have been misinterpreted, so I have given this Newest Testament to Father Garth to clear matters up. First, the story of the Garden.

“The Garden of Eden, you say, is a parable against the sin of disobedience. In this you are all entirely stupid. I mean – look at the damn story, will you? (he’s a little testy here),” commented Garth, then read on. “Two fools are sitting under a tree with nothing to do all day but stare at each other and wonder why they don’t feel any lust. All right – perhaps they were a little bored, but hell – that’s all I ever do – how was I to know they wouldn’t be satisfied? So the woman talks to the snake – who, I see now, was also a little bored at having to slither in circles praising me all day – and the snake says: ‘Eat the fruit!’ Eve perks up – it’s something different, anyway – and she says: ‘What fruit?’ ‘Why, the fruit that gives you the knowledge of good and evil,’ replies the snake. ‘Why would I want that?’ says the woman – who, of course, hadn’t ever really learned to think, being forced to lounge around all the time. ‘Because it will make you like God!’ replies the snake.”

Garth glanced up, his eyes dancing.. His finger tracing the page reverently.

“Now, in my infinite wisdom, I now realize that this may have been a little confusing to the young lady. I mean, I barge about blowing my trumpets and proclaiming myself the good of goods, or the god of good, or the good god, or something like that. So naturally Eve thinks: *well, that’s all right – I become like God, which is good, right?* So she climbs up and takes a bite of the fruit – which tasted damn good; I should know; I am the recipe! She goes to Adam and says: here, have a bite. Now in my wisdom, I made man to have no will against a woman, even before she could give him sport, so he pants and slobbers and says: ‘sure, Eve, sure – whatever you say!’. So he takes a bite as well.

“Now this didn’t sit right at the time. You see, in my infinite goodness, I wanted Adam and Eve to be dumb pets, doing nothing but praising me to the skies. I wanted them to be obedient. I got them to beg and roll over, but they never got the tree thing right. So I got really angry, threw them out, and blew up the Garden.

“Looking back, I may have been a wee bit hasty. I mean – I wanted them to worship me, right! What was I thinking? How on earth are they supposed to worship a good God if they don’t know goodness from a hole in the head? Well, they found it out, so I threw them out. I was wrong. I suppose I’ll have to get them back from Hell now. So – that whole original sin business – forget it. Administrative error. ‘Cause I suppose if knowledge is evil, you’d have to throw your children in the snow for learning to read, or studying the Bible. All in all, I’d have to admit I didn’t think that one through too clearly.

“All right: point two. Listen up. This business with Abraham. You know, the one I told to stick a knife through his son to prove he loved me. That – I don’t know, it seemed like a good idea at the time. Again, I had the idea that I wanted him to worship me as a good god. But would a good god ask him to stab his son through the head? I mean – that would be a bad thing to do, right? Also, I never thought what it might do to Abraham’s son, Isaac. How would you feel? You’re Isaac, and you’re suddenly shaken out of a bed. ‘Come on, son, let me stick a knife through your head.’ ‘Why, dad?’ ‘Well, this voice in my head told me to!’ I don’t know about you – it’d make me pretty nervous. I tell you to love the weak and helpless, and I forget all about little Isaac! I tell you: senseless. Forget that ‘spare the rod and spoil the child’ order too – you can’t love the helpless while beating them senseless. So ignore Abraham; it’s wasn’t my best moment. I wanted him to worship me no matter what I did, which doesn’t make sense when

you think about it. I mean, why not worship the devil then? He does whatever he wants, lucky bugger. And if faith means doing whatever I tell you to do, free will sort of goes out the window, doesn't it? So don't do whatever I tell you to. I'm not in my right mind sometimes. These stories are parables about the sin of obedience. Think for yourselves. If you hear voices telling you to kill your children, go lie down for a while.

Garth glared at the laughing crowd. "No giggling," he admonished sternly. "These are holy words." He waited for their attention, then turned the page and read on.

"The same goes for Job. You remember him – I blew up his sheep, axed his wife and children, made his hair fall out, his ass explode with boils. Why? Because the Devil told me that Job only loved me because I was nice to him. Well, that part makes sense, doesn't it? I mean, you're supposed to love someone because they're nice to you, right? But nooo, at the time I wanted to be loved no matter what I did. Score one for old horny head. Also, I detect a slight inconsistency in this whole 'loving your enemies' business. Look at me – I toasted the Pharaohs and drowned everyone but Noah and company, right? I cursed Adam and Eve and made Jeroham's bowels fall out, right? My son beat up the money-lenders. Well – all I can say is that when you have an infinite cheek, it's pretty hard to turn. So forget the whole thing. If your life goes to hell, don't just accept it. Get angry. Resist. Act. Might be good for you. Worked for me, anyway.

"The Good Samaritan. This one is particularly embarrassing. I go and tell you: 'if someone is hurt, and you have the power to help him, do it or be damned'. Well, it just struck me that I've been sort of sitting on my hands for a couple of thousand years while nuns fall down holes and children get struck by lightning on their way to church. I have the power to help, I suppose. But

I don't. So I suppose you don't have to either. Take it from me: life's much better as a spectator sport. Don't get involved. Don't take any trouble. Use the free will idea – it's always worked for me. You see someone bleeding in a ditch, just say: 'he ended up there because of free will', and keep on walking. Sure, it doesn't make much sense, but it seems to work. Except for the nuns perhaps.

“Oh, and as for Noah, that one's right out. Just because I drowned almost everyone in the world for being bad doesn't mean it was the right thing to do. Looking back, I suppose there were a lot of little children who drowned too, and they were scarcely responsible for what their parents did. I should have got Noah to save them, and forget about the animals. I knew I was wrong afterwards; that's why I made the rainbow. If he'd had any sense, Noah would have asked me why, if drowning everyone was a good thing, I promised never to do it again. But I was vain then; I saved him because I knew he wouldn't ask those kind of difficult questions.

“Another thing. I also think I went too far in is this 'damning pride' business. Take the Tower of Babel; Noah's children try and build a tower to heaven, I whack them on the tongue and make them all babble like lawyers so they don't reach it. What on earth was I so angry about? I tell you over and over that heaven is the best place there is; you try and get there and I curse everyone I can lay my voice on. 'This is the greatest food ever!' I say to a starving man, then get angry when he reaches for it. I tell you that you are all personal creations of the greatest God; I tell you to rise above the obstacle of original sin, to strive for perfect goodness, perfect thoughts, perfect actions. I tell you to love your enemies, to feel no anger, to love a God who loses his temper – I tell you to achieve all these things, then say: 'have no ambition!' I don't



even want to try unraveling that one. Forget it. Have pride. Live ambition. Pursue progress.

And remember: the new Original Sin is believing in the old one.

“Well, I know you want to get back to your party,” read Garth, glancing up with a grin. “By heavens, He is all-knowing!” He read on. “So I won’t take up any more of your time, given that I have a eternity, and you don’t. So go in peace; be happy, work hard, be good to each other and enjoy yourselves. And sorry for all the foul-ups.”

Garth closed the book with a bang. “Here endeth the Newest Testament. My friends, have you learned wisdom?”

Jeers, catcalls, laughs and shouts rose from the crowd.

“More dancing!”

“More drink!”

“Music! Play!”

“Give us a kiss, you!”

“Bend over!”

The fiddler started up again. Garth smiled. “My work here is done,” he murmured, stepping down from the podium and hurling the book into the fire. He stared at the bursting flames for a moment, then spun and joined the rising dancers.

The liquor was flowing fast; it was a downpour none could stay dry in. Flagon were passed endlessly; lips dribbled, eyes blurred, cheeks grew sticky. Mary soon found herself staggering; she was utterly unused to drink. Her body felt loose; not disconnected, but uncontrolled. She

had to stop and turn away sometimes, wiping tears from her eyes. Emotions coursed through her; pain, rage, joy, hate, dazing and exciting her in random stabs.

Some time after Garth's sermon, she was sitting against a cask, weeping bitterly. *Safe place; safe place*; the words circled her inner eye maddeningly. She took off her mask to wipe her eyes and laid it down beside her.

"So yer back," said a voice harshly behind her.

Mary's mind cleared instantly; her thoughts, feelings and soul seemed to vanish into a dark place.

Farmer Jigger lurched forward, spilling his drink.

"Yer back; older, wiser. Taller," he slurred, his beard dripping with liquor.

Mary jumped up. "Good evening," she said, her voice shaking.

"Aye, yer back, an' we hain't even had a spell t'speak!" he said. "T'get reattached!"

Mary's hands wandered behind her, feeling the cask, searching for an edge.

"I need to a-pologize to ye, young 'un," said Farmer Jigger, leaning forward. "I was in a grip; I shouldn'a done it."

Mary took a quick step back, staring at his mouth.

"I 'us lost to meself; I weren't in me best sorts. I 'uz wrong. Ye weren't that bad. I've missed ye, Mary!" He reached up and grasped her forearm. "Did ye miss me, little 'un?"

"Of course," whispered Mary.

Farmer Jigger grinned. "I thot so! Ye have the kindest of kind hearts, little Mary, an' I spited ye fer that. I thot often of that night; it plagues me. I 'uz never a kind man; never, though

I ache for want of kindness. I's plagued by con-shence, not kindness. It's my curse on this hard earth. But ye was always a soft kindness t'me. Always."

Mary twisted in his grip.

"What's that?" he demanded suddenly. "Are ye pullin' at me?"

"No – no!"

"I felt ye pull, Mary O'Donnel!"

"No – I leaned. I leaned!"

"Aye – that's good. Don't ye pull no more. Ye be nice t'me!"

"Yes..."

"Ye be a fair woman now, Mary," he said, taking a swig of drink, his hand tight on her arm.

"Ye've grown into your bones well."

"Please..." whispered Mary.

"Please what?" he demanded. "Please be nice? Aye – I'll be nice. As nice as I know how! Ye was always trickin' me, Mary! Always pullin' me from th'seat of virtue. Always provoking, always stealing, always resisting, always pricking my anger. Have ye larned better yet?"

Farmer Jigger leaned forward. With a desperate cry, Mary tore her arm free. He howled in rage, grabbing at her. Mary twisted to one side and ran towards the fire. The dancers danced madly; the music pounded. She turned and saw Farmer Jigger lurching towards her. Frantically, she dragged a burning branch from the fire and raised it before her.

"Never!" she cried. "Never will I be kind to you!"

The drunken dancers laughed, whirling. Farmer Jigger staggered forward.

"What's going on?" demanded a voice. Mary turned and saw Laurence swaying beside her.

“Keep him away from me,” hissed Mary.

“That’s burning your goddamned hand!” slurred Laurence, glancing at her wrist and trying to knock the branch away.

Mary gritted her teeth, not releasing her hold.

“Come on,” called Laurence to Farmer Jigger. “Those are old times now. Leave her be. Leave her be.”

The dancers began chanting the words: ‘leave her be; leave her be...’

“This witch has got yer mind, Lord Larry!” snarled Farmer Jigger.

“That may be,” he said with difficulty. “But I am her protector. Her protector. Leave her be.”

The old man looked at Mary for long moment, his eyes burning with hatred.

“Aye – fer now, witch, I leave ye with yer taken soul!” he cried, then turned and staggered off around the fire.

“That is burning you,” said Laurence, pulling at the burning branch.

Mary loosed her hold, and he threw it back into the fire.

“Thank you,” she said shakily.

“It’s nothing, nothing... But your hand...”

He took her wrist, and leaned down to look at her burn. Her eyes stared at the part in his hair and saw nothing.

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

### *Evil Condemned*

THERE WAS A GRIMNESS IN THE AIR AS THE TWELVE MEN FILED IN; the choice of location was not without accident. The scorched smell of hastily-burned pig still clung to the burnt rafters of Farmer Jigger's barn. These were the wise men of the village. In the larger world they were of little consequence; they knew this, yet they also knew the scope of their own realm, and ordered their wisdoms accordingly.

The power-looms had been delivered that morning; they had been deposited in Farmer Jigger's burned barn, awaiting transport to their new lodgings. John Mudder, the boy who had beaten Mary as a child, was now the mayor, and he had ordered the other twelve elders to meet with him after sundown in Farmer Jigger's burned barn.

After they were seated, John Mudder called the meeting to order.

"All right, lads. We all know why we're here. Anyone got business other than what's afore us?"

There was a general muttering and shaking of heads. Business there may have been, but none as important as what was to come.

"Then state your business to Farmer Jigger," said John. "Who's first?"

Thomas the baker rose. "There's three of them came to my mill yesternoon, Jigger," he said, shaking his head. "Three of them from your lands, and they stole and cursed and I expect payment. I'm out five – no, six shillings worth of millet."

“They tore good meat from my very hands,” said the butcher, leaping up. “You’re a party in these hands, Jigger. Tsk – ate it raw on my doorstep. My wife done fainted.”

“They stole from my barn,” said a farmer slowly. “I went to Orson Andrews, but he says he can’t protect everyone when a rampage is on. Said we might as well ask him to stop an army. He won’t have no part of it. Says he didn’t invite ‘em.”

“And these contraptions,” said John Mudder, waving his hands at the power-looms. “I can’t say as I understand their use, but I do know that they means that, unless we do something, these thieves are going to stay.”

“I think we’re entitled to our peace,” said another farmer, “and to the lives our father’s lived. Days past, when thieves came to our house, we ran ‘em off with dogs. Now we are esposed to ask ‘em in, and say nothing when they steal our bread? What’s next? Our wives? Our children? Good market with the gypsies, they say. We should give the young lads some beer to run ‘em out, and those that don’t wants to leave can greet the dawn with their eyes open! An’ while we’re at it, we might as well clean out the rats as well as the bugs, no matter how fat they be!” he finished, glaring at Farmer Jigger.

“Now, Harry,” said John. “There’s no point raking old business here. Farmer Jigger’s as keen to have them gone as you are – as all of us. Problem is, they’re Lord Larry’s idea, and that’s a high fence. These contraptions are the devil’s work – no mistake about it, and those that are going to work them are trouble, as you can’t teach dogs to wait tables. But they’re here, and we’d be best finding out what the Lord Larry has planned with them afore lynching the lot. For sure as sin we ain’t the men we used to be. There are lots leaving their land who’d be happy to

take our place, so we'd best not making a lot of trouble afore we know the sound of the situation, else we could be turned out on our arses."

"Then what?" demanded the baker. "We let things go, an' maybe we all find ourselves fiddling with these wooden things, not seeing our families from dawn to dusk. I spake with a ragman who passed – he said he came from Sheffield, where there are armies of slaves wheeling over such machines. They work and sleep and count themselves blessed to eat. I say: I'm happy where I am, and none are going to turn me out if I can help it!"

"An' what if it is his Lordship's project?" asked the butcher. "We aren't slaves – we are men who have a say in how we live! We don't eat in holes in th'ground, but with each other, and none shall cook but what all want. Th'lord also works for us, and I say we do what we want and let him ask th'questions!"

"And I say you are a fool, Arnold Hacker," said John Mudder. "If we deal harshly with him, shall he deal easily with us? Let us not forget that we be prosperous men, and that is largely the work of Lord Laurence. If we are to deal with this problem, we shall use our heads first, then our hands!"

"What – and go to our pretty Lord with our hats in our hands and say 'please, sir, will you take away the men ye brung?'" bristled the butcher. "No, I say, that is for slaves and women! I brook no divisions in my house, an' my house is more than its walls. My house is all my interests, and I will not ask to be delivered from thieves and villains when I have the strength to deliver meself! While we sit here talking, thieves are scouting our houses and stealing from our fields! We can rid ourselves of them by morning, if we have will and manhood! I say we do so! Who is with me?"

Several men stood, raising their hands, but the company lingered.

“Sit down,” said Farmer Jigger. “Sit down!” The men sat. He rose. “You are all fools, because you think only of what is happening, not what has happened. Think for a spell: what happened just afore these thieves arrived?”

“We had a picnic?” offered one of the men.

“No. Who arrived in the village not two moons ago? Or rather – who came back to the village two moons ago?”

The baker stood. “Mary O’Donnell!” he cried.

“This marks the beginning of wisdom,” said Farmer Jigger, pointing sternly at him. “Afore she came, our Lord was as pretty to us as a lover. Since she came, he’s turned all sad and scurvy. She was his enemy; she insulted him and was cast out for it. Now she has returned, and he dances with her on All Saint’s, his eyes bleary from curses. It’s quite clear what has happened. She is a witch, and has cast a spell over our good Lord.”

The men shivered and crossed themselves.

“Why think ye this, Jigger?” asked John.

“She was always a strange lass,” replied the old farmer, folding his huge hands over his belly. “Ye remember her of old; I recall ye had yer differences with her as well, John Mudder. I cast her from my house a-cause she insulted Lord Laurence. She hates him. She’s been lost in the wilds for years, learning the ways of darkness. She has gained strange powers. How else could she have gained the ear of a man she spat on? She has been seen at his house, walking with his sister. She dances with him. She spends his money. His mind is no longer his own, and I can only say that we are lucky she chose him and not us.”



“Then – what is to be done?” asked the baker.

“Those approaching my age will remember what we did with the last witch,” said Farmer Jigger.

John nodded. “Laura...”

“Speak not her name, fool!” cried Farmer Jigger, crossing himself. “They haunt, and we were both her executioners. The Lord has seen fit to test us again, and it shall be no use going to Lord Laurence, for his soul is taken. We must take matters into our own hands. Again.”

“All rise who see fit to burn the witch,” said John.

All rose, their brows sheened with sweat, their hands twitching.

“Then let us go,” said Farmer Jigger, rising with them. “The devil waits for no sunrise!”

## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

### *The Strength of Darkness*

MARY HEARD THEM COMING, FOR SHE WAS NOT ONE TO SLEEP DEEPLY. She heard them coming, and her face flushed.

“Bob!” she whispered, sitting up on her pile of leaves and pulling her blanket to her throat.

“Bob!”

“What – eh lass? What?” muttered the old man, turning slowly on the floor.

“Go – get Laurence – I am in danger! Get up! Get up!”

“What – eh – what danger?”

“Men are coming for me. You must hurry, for God’s sake!”

Knotted Bob jumped up and lit a candle. Shadows crawled the walls. Mary’s face loomed pale.

“Who’s coming, lass?”

“Men,” she shivered, her eyes wide, her thin blanket at her throat. “For me.”

“What men?”

“Please – just go!”

“What men?”

A sudden pounding shook the loose door, rattling its hinges.

“Help me! Again!” whispered Mary, retreating to a corner of the room and squatting on her heels.

“Who’s there, by God?” cried Knotted Bob, turning to the door.

“No affair of yours, Bob!” shouted a voice. “Open the door!”

“What do ye want from my house?”

The door creaked and splintered, falling inward like a broken card. Jeering voices leapt in from the dark.

“The Witch, Bob! Give us the Witch!”

“Fools at your leisure, damned fools at your drink!” shouted Knotted Bob, raising his fist.

“G’wan home and snore it off!”

“Give us the Witch!”

Knotted Bob grabbed his axe from the hearth. “Steel’s worsen’n fantasy, brethren!” he cried, raising the blade and glaring at the doorway. “Your choice, if ye see it unfit to be decided by the light of day!”

A dark form strode forward from the blackness and stood in the doorway.

“Put down the axe, Bob,” said Farmer Jigger slowly, folding his arms. “This is not your affair.”

“If it’s my hearth, it’s my affair, Jigger,” growled Knotted Bob. “Now stand back afore I layer you out!”

“You’re an old man. There are many of us,” said the old farmer. “We kill you, and blame the murder on her. None’ll question an ashes its motives.”

“Aye? And would ye turn a guest out into the night?” asked Knotted Bob.

“Yes,” whispered Mary.

Farmer Jigger whirled on her. “I sent you into the darkness where you belong! You should have stayed there!”

“I did,” she replied. “I no longer wanted to be alone.”

“Ye come with us, Witch!” snarled Farmer Jigger, moving towards her.

“Touch her, and I’ll touch ye!” growled Knotted Bob, raising his axe higher. “Who says she’s a Witch?”

“She’s fogged Lord Larry’s mind, his whole family,” said Farmer Jigger, turning to him.

“She’s got him all twiggered and wrapped up, nice as you please. What did yer feed him, devil-  
bride? What did ye mutter a-neath the moon? Ye cain’t swallow us all.”

“Aye – ye’re the whole world,” whispered Mary, her eyes dimming. “The whole world...”

“What has she done?” asked Knotted Bob. “Be sharp!”

“She’s got our Lord spending our thrift on thieves, that’s what she’s done!” Farmer Jigger suddenly grasped Mary, turned and thrust her out the door. Arms snaked forward to grip her. “That what ye’ve done, h’aint it?” he shouted. “Been waiting for yer chance, h’aint ye? Lying in a ditch, gnawing souls and sucking hate. That learns ye fast in the dark ways, don’t it Witch?”

Knotted Bob leapt forward through the door. Outside, Mary stood in the center of a rough circle of men. She stood, a broken swan, her head lowered.

“Th’first man t’touch her wears this headpiece,” said Knotted Bob, his hands tightening on his axe.

“Put that down, old man,” said Farmer Jigger evenly, moving towards him.

“Don’t touch age, farmer!” cried Knotted Bob. “Or it’ll touch ye back!”

Farmer Jigger stopped and shook his head slowly. “We only came for one. Don’t make it two.”

“Take another step, Jigger” said Knotted Bob softly. “Please – now I am begging you!”

The farmer sighed and took another step forward. Knotted Bob's axe flashed down, but Farmer Jigger was swifter. He twisted to one side and gripped the old man's wrist. Bracing himself, he lifted Knotted Bob bodily, staggered a few steps, and hurled him towards a tree. There was an awful creaking as Knotted Bob crashed into the trunk.

"Come, lads," cried Farmer Jigger, dusting his hands. "Let's get to work!"

Mary heard the laughing and muttering around her like a dark wind through high rushes. Hands grabbed and smothered and dug. Her eyes lolled.

"The pond! The pond!" cried the men. "In case the fire spreads!"

The men shouted their assent and Mary felt herself carried aloft, jabbed by palms and fingertips. The procession walked under her; she seemed to float above them like a ghost. Their torches burned like fairies at the edge of her vision, brightening the sky and darkening the stars.

They thrust her in a heap by the edge of the pond. She tried to stand, but was thrust back and fell into the mud at the edge of the pond. She knelt silently, her hands wandering over her nightdress, her head lowered.

"Aye, look at her kneel," cried John Mudder, standing before her, "jus' as if she weren't the devil's whore!"

*The devil's whore...* Mary's head jerked up, an inhuman look in her eyes. In a flash, she suddenly seemed to come back to herself. Her legs tensed and she leapt at John, clawing at his face. He felt her hands wrapping around his temples, and the last sight he ever had was of two bladed thumbnails poised above his face. He wrenched his head, then screamed in agony as they plunged through his eyes. Mary felt liquid jetting up her wrists; she leapt off him as he staggered

off into the darkness. She heard a vague hissing and scrambled forward, screaming, scratching, biting. The men gave way before her like old brickwork. Her hands met hair and tore it free; men threw themselves about and cried out as they crashed into friends and torches. Mary felt a terrific blow on the side of her head and her legs collapsed under her. She raised her head, dazed, and saw a man before her.

“Lie down, devil!” he screamed, raising his fist.

Mary laughed harshly and leapt at him. He stepped to one side and caught her waist as she flew past. She was surrounded.

“Hold her down!” shouted Farmer Jigger hoarsely. “Goddamned Witch – hold her down! Let’s give her what she earned!”

A man sat on each limb. Mary felt her joints sinking into the mud, and rolled her head in agony.

“Open your eyes, Witch,” hissed the old farmer, slapping her face hard.

Mary’s eyes opened. He looked like a man with antlers, so many branches radiated from his head.

“Given that we was goin’ to have a fair trial, Witch, yer struggles are taken as the very spittle of guilt. Ye’ve blinded a man – take that as a prize to your dark Lord! Lash her, lads!”

Mary felt herself hoisted up, her legs and arms bound. A single tree stood by the water; the men tied her to it and stood back. A sudden hesitation hung in dark air.

Farmer Jigger strode forward and stood before Mary for a moment before turning to the milling men.

“Is there a coward among ye that d’aint have the stomach to call this justice?” he shouted.

“For man or not, any that dare no further shall join her there!”

Men shifted. Torches lowered like falling eyes.

“Are ye all so holy that ye fear no anger from a crossed Witch?” cried the old farmer. “Can ye sleep at night when she has ruined a man better than ye? Can ye let yer children alone in the field if we leave her ‘scape? By God, I am afraid of no Witch when she has stunk up the sky with her earnings! Harry! Give me your torch!”

A man walked forward slowly, passing his torch to Farmer Jigger.

Farmer Jigger turned to Mary, who stared at him as if he were her whole life. She spat in his face, her neck coiling like a snake.

He took a step back, wiping himself.

“Now we’s both wet,” he said softly. “But I’ll dry thee!” With that, he leaned forward and thrust the flames against her legs.

For a moment Mary felt almost relieved. There was a slight hissing and gust of steam, nothing more.

“Jigger – she’s wet,” whispered one of the men. “Jigger!”

Farmer Jigger’s face was a dancing fiery mask. He pushed the flames into her skin. His hand reached up and tore her nightdress from her thighs. Mary went completely limp; the ropes seemed straining to keep her upright.

A scent hit her nose then; it was odd, sweet. She wrinkled her nose, and then, almost immediately, a terrible sense of violation struck her. It was an irreparable pain, a forever pain, a pain that knew nothing of ending.

Mary threw her head back and howled; the terrible sound rang long and high. The men drew back, crossing themselves.

“Jigger!”

Mary’s soul felt like a trembling rocket, ready to burst from the torture and soar upwards from the dark wound of her life. The peeling agony propelled her like fuel, and she yearned for release. She felt her pubic hairs curling from the heat. There was an explosion, a flash, and for a terrible moment Mary thought that her heart had exploded.

“Jigger! Stand back! Or I’ll shoot again!”

A figure lurched against Farmer Jigger, scattering his torch. Immediately the pain eased, and Mary felt a cool breeze against her upper thighs. Stinging smoke. Nothing more.

“Ye scum laddy wart!” shouted the figure, smashing its fist into Farmer Jigger’s face. “Lord! Lord! Help her down!”

The crashing sounds of men fleeing into the undergrowth echoed in the still air. “Men! Stand as you are!” shouted a voice. A man ran into the clearing, thrusting his pistol in his pocket. He quickly drew a flask from his belt and raised it to Mary’s lips.

“Drink – drink this,” cried Laurence. “Quickly!” He reached down and splashed swamp-water on her blackened legs.

Mary felt the heat of brandy on her tongue. Her head rolled. Death called, soft and sweet.

“Drink! For God’s sake, drink!”

“My legs..?” she heard herself murmur.

“Your legs... Drink. Please...” whispered Laurence, tipping the flask again. The liquid ran down Mary’s chin as her face fell forward.



“Bob! Bob! Help me cut her down!”

Knotted Bob stood up from Farmer Jigger, his mouth a savage line. He took his knife from his belt and cut the cords that bound Mary to the tree. She fell forward into Laurence’s arms.

Laurence helped lay her down in the dark grass. Farmer Jigger stood.

“She’s a Witch, Lord,” he said, pulling his shirt over his stomach and wiping his mouth.

“She’s a Witch, and ye have no business with this kind of justice.”

Laurence turned to him slowly.

“Murder is not justice,” he said softly. “You and your family are no longer of my lands.”

Mary heard the words shining through a cloud. They fell around her like soft folds, pulling her back from the cold, back towards the heat, towards the excruciating pain. *There is more to be done*, she told herself, her senses waking to war, *always more, for you made a vow*.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

### *A Short Waking*

“SUN UP!” CRIED ADAM FOOTER, FLINGING THE DOORS OF THE STABLES WIDE. Light flew into the darkness like a stern governess, tapping its hand with a ruler and brooking no lolling about.

Shivering heaps lay huddled on the ground. A baby wailed, startled.

“Sons of Christ, behold the great time of morning!” cried Adam, poking at the blankets with a stick. “Rise and greet your new lives, brothers!”

Men and women began groaning, standing, clutching their blankets to their shoulders, teeth chattering.

“Cold!”

“Christian fishes!”

“Belike the sun’s barely up!”

“Wood! Wood! What’s to burn?”

“All present?” asked Adam. “Raise your hands, let’s see how many be left. Six, eight, twelve, five, ten, twenty-two, twenty-eight, thirty-two, thirty... nine. Forty-four. Forty four!”

“Three’s out to pee,” called a voice.

“Forty seven! Any else?”

“Two – no four, slept in town.”

“Coming back?”

“Not at this hour.”

“Fifty-one then.” Adam muttered. “Fifty-one is a good number. Maybe half will still be here in a month. Now the first thing to do is get your things and follow me.”

Groans sounded. “Where are going?”

“To the barn, bright sparks. That’s where the looms are. Come on – come on!”

It was a slow business, getting them all moving and on the road. When they finally arrived at the barn, Adam led them inside. They stood and shuffled, casting apprehensive looks at the massed looms.

“Now listen,” cried Adam, tearing off his hat and leaping onto a low beam. “This should be clear – you are not the workers I wanted, but Lady Carvey has got it into her head to mix business with charity. It’s my job to prove to her that it isn’t charity, so I can make some money. It’s her job to prove it is charity, so she can sleep at night. These are the rules: you are to come to work at dawn every day but Sundays, when you may do as you please. You will be paid one penny for every three yards of cloth you spin. These machines are your tools,” he said, gesturing at the power-looms. “They are very valuable. If you break one, we’ll make the next one with your bones. Any questions?”

There was silence for a moment.

“An’ we wuk on empty bellies?” asked the red-bearded man who had accosted Laurence.

“Yes – for two hours. Then, food will be brought. For one week. After that, you must buy your own. Any other questions?”

“How do we wuk these things?” asked the bearded man.

“Come here,” said Adam, leaping down and walking to the nearest loom. The man sauntered over.

“Pick up that roll of thread. Now weave it in between the bars.”

The bearded man thrust the thread between the first set of bars, licked his fingers, then threaded it through the next set, continuing until he had worked his way across the entire frame.

“Now grab the lever on your left side – that side,” said Adam, pointing, “and pull.”

The man yanked hard on the lever. The loom screeched.

“Gently – gently for God’s sake!” cried Adam. “Like this!” He eased the handle down, moving the woven thread up to the top of the bars, then released it. “Now, starting from the other side, do the same thing. Then pull the lever down again.”

“Christ,” grinned the bearded man. “That’s no backache!”

“The trick is not doing it once, but doing it a thousand times a day,” said the merchant, “without missing a single bar. Any cloth that is not woven perfectly is worthless. You will not be paid for it, and you will be charged for the thread you have wasted. Are there any questions?”

“What’s the use of working and paying for learning?” demanded the bearded man. “Seems as you’ll be making a pretty penny from us n’matter what we do!”

“What is your name?” asked Adam.

“Jake the Red.”

“Well, Mr. Red, this is a test for me, something to show what my machines can do. It will give me some hard numbers. These are my terms. If you don’t like them, you are free to go.”

“Free!” muttered the bearded man. “Free to starve.”

“That’s all the freedom you had before. Any other questions?”

“What am I esposed to do with my young’uns when I wuk?” asked a woman.

“How old are they?”

“Very little. So high.”

“Too young to work?”

“Aye.”

“Well, one of you will have to be a nanny while the others work. We can pay her, I suppose, from your earnings. Take turns. Anything else?”

There was nothing.

“All right!” said Adam. “We will do no weaving today. Your duties for today – for which you are being fed – is to raise a house for yourselves. Come with me.”

They followed him outside, to where a pile of lumber stood.

“Now roll up your sleeves, and let’s get to work!”

By mid-afternoon they had erected a ramshackle dwelling not far from the barn. It leaned a little precariously, but Adam determined that it would hold.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

### *An Asking*

LAURENCE ENTERED HER ROOM VERY LATE. He was having trouble sleeping. His dreams had shifted slightly. Where once he dreamed of the earth being turned to take new seeds, now his mind's eye seemed to follow the chaffs and rubble into the darkness, his dreams lay under the overturned earth, among the still insects and discarded husks.

Mary heard him come in; her eyes opened, and she turned towards him, painfully shifting under the cool cotton sheet. Her throbbing body seemed to recede; her mind hung like a high candle in a dark room.

“Lord Larry,” she murmured.

“How are you feeling?”

“Tired,” she said. “But grateful. I always felt that I would know when my end would come. Last night – was not the time. Thank you.”

Laurence pulled up a chair, rubbing his eyes. “To think that such things are possible, in this age, on my lands... When Knotted Bob hammered on the door, I scarcely believed him. When I came – it was like walking into hell itself.”

There was a short pause. Laurence shifted in his seat. Mary waited.

“Mary,” he said finally, “I want to do something for you.”

Mary closed her eyes.

“I have done you wrong,” said Laurence softly. “When I first saw you, years ago, you frightened me. I didn't understand it then. When you said: ‘did you go to Italy because you

were good?', I understand now what you meant. I have spent my whole life, it seems, fighting the ignorance of the privileged. 'Why do you have castles?' I asked. There was no answer. I have privilege; I think I use it for good. But that is not why I am privileged. I am privileged because I was lucky. But you – it is possible that you are the most intelligent women I have ever met – bar one. And while my sister – God bless her, she tries – was struggling with her Euclid, with no chance of mastering it, you – you were pressing your cheek against the flank of a cow, working your hands like a machine, your words lost for want of ink. I can't – imagine such a fate."

Laurence stood suddenly, feeling on the verge of something. The house was silent, expectant.

"Now I find I am frightened of you still," he said finally. "I have tried to put myself in your shoes, but I can't. I think that if I were you, I should hate the world. No – more than that. I should loathe it with all my soul. Such injustice... I should want to tear its heart out by the roots, throw it before the mirror of itself and watch it cower."

"I have done that. That has been in me," whispered Mary.

"Yet you manage to speak of love. I wish there were better words. You speak of caring. I do not understand."

Mary pulled herself up and sat watching him.

"What do you want to understand?"

"I want to understand – how you can care."

"Would you like me to tell you?"

"Yes."

“Then bring me some water, and I will tell you.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

### *A Telling*

“I THINK THAT CERTAIN SOULS ARE PLACED HERE TO TEST THE AGE,” said Mary. “When I left Farmer Jigger’s house, I was almost relieved. I felt that if I had stayed, I would die. I wandered; when I was hungry, I stole; when I was tired, I slept in trees. Everything fell away from me. My hair grew wild; my breath stank. I would crouch in bushes by roads and watch people passing. I felt like a ghost. I learned to pray. I dreamt of heaven. I longed for death. I asked myself: why was I born? To think that I had been orphaned in the wilderness, a mind without means, the soul of an angel in the body of a dog... I hated God; I dreamt of stabbing Him in His sleep.

“One day I passed a tent; I heard a man preaching from within. I crept inside the door, and suddenly his words seemed to strike my soul like an arrow, splitting it in two. I remember his words.

“‘Do not despair if your lot is a hard one,’ he said, ‘for the hardest steel must go through the hottest fire. You are tested? – cry thanks, for your soul is tempered! You shall pass through this veil of tears to the light beyond – and this light might be tomorrow, for God intends that each of us shall do good in our lifetimes. If you are tested; if you are reviled, outcast, spat upon, you must give thanks, for the love you find at midnight shall shine even brighter at dawn!’”

“I do not remember the rest of his words; these alone made sense to me. It was as if I alone was being spoken to, as if everyone else dozed and God spoke only to me. I came into the tent with hatred; I left it with joy, for I knew my challenge: to find love and goodness despite spit and curses. If I could do that, I would be greatest among the living.

“I left, and I headed north. I wanted to find a moor, a dark place in the wilderness where I could eat berries and learn to love my fate. I ended up in Yorkshire; I found a little mound in a bog where no man had been for a thousand years. I built a lean-to and sat for days, eating nothing, and I felt my eyes beginning to live with the landscape. The trees, the rushes, the still pools of water; I saw all these as living things, as the hands of God, reaching for me, reflecting me, holding me.”

Mary laughed quietly. “I was going quite mad, of course. I thought of all those that had come before me, the ecstatic saints, and I felt them around me, gesturing at me to follow them, to run naked off cliffs and meet them on the hard rocks. But still I remembered the preacher’s words: ‘God intends that each of us shall do good in our lifetimes’, and I resisted the call to madness. I flung myself into cold water; I beat myself with branches and the pain kept me in my body. I broke my fingernails and pulled my hair. I ate too much. I starved myself. I stayed in the world. I lived like this for a long time. Spring, summer, spring, summer... When the second winter came, I shivered and crept out of the wilderness.

“I came to a town; I was almost blind; I had not spoken for over a year; my tongue felt stuck. It was market day. Children threw stones at me; I caught at them and pressed them to my chest; they shrieked and ran away. I went to the market, where the colours and music seemed to beat at me. I climbed on a scaffold and began shouting. A crowd gathered. A priest crossed himself. Men stared at my legs, scratching themselves. Clouds were gathering; the music stopped. Men began climbing the scaffold. I climbed higher, on the beam. I remember looking down at a little girl without shoes, standing alone. Our eyes met. The girl took a step back, groping for the hand of the man. He scowled and shook his head. My heart broke; I threw myself from the scaffold at

the girl's feet. I groped for her feet and began kissing them. She sobbed; I looked up at her eyes and she was crying. I felt such loss; it was incomprehensible, unimaginable; I felt that no time had passed, that I was looking at myself. 'Cry, cry!' I felt myself shout; I wanted to beat the tears out of her, to squeeze her like a sapling. I wanted to beat all the women in the square for keeping their distance, for turning away from such a beautiful child. 'This is all of us!' I cried, wringing my hands and weeping in the mud.

"I remember being yanked away from the girl; I pulled her over; I could not let go. The hands were rough; they touched what was my own, and I began clawing at the men. The priest was leaning over me, shouting something, and I began to retch. Suddenly the hands let go, and I heard a low voice in my ear. I looked around wildly, and an older woman's face appeared before me. She smiled at me, and placed her hand on my cheek. That little touch; I felt as if I died... I cried out: 'Mother!', and suddenly everything went dark.

I awoke in a white room. I could not think; I felt stuffed with cotton. Everything ran through my mind; scraps and bits, could's, trees, voices, without any sense. It was very quiet; I could hear distant singing. I thought: *this is heaven; I shall be washed, scented, and soon I shall go and join the singers.* I felt such peace. And then I saw a white vase sitting on a wooden table by the bed. It had a long crack running up the outside of the porcelain – I remember it well – and I suddenly felt an awful loss, because I knew that there couldn't be any cracked vases in heaven. I knew then that I wasn't dead, and I wept bitterly.

I lay there for some time, then the door opened, and a young woman's head came round the side, wrapped in white. Her eyes widened, and she crossed herself quickly and disappeared. She

left the door open. I wanted to get out of bed and close it, but I couldn't move; even my muscles were cotton.

Eventually the older woman came in. What a face she had! Some people have peace like cows have peace; nothing can touch them. She had peace like God has peace, for He has seen the ruin of all His creation, and still He loves. Even her eyes; they were full of such sorrow, such tenderness, such knowledge that you felt they saw through all your darkness.

“Are you hungry?” she asked gently, and I turned my face away. Such a simple question, so long unasked.

I was allowed to stay. I could not take my vows, for Mother Margaret said that my soul was not ready. I worked in the garden, helped with the meals, rubbed the sister's legs after prayers. I rarely spoke. I lay under my blankets at night and made a volcano out of my knees, spraying lava with outstretched fingers. Life seemed an intolerable burden; it felt as if the tide of life had pulled away, and I lay in a little pool among the rocks, staring at the insects trembling above me. The sun slanted through the water as it set; shadows in the crevices of my small pool stretched, and I longed to stretch with them, to disappear in darkness. I lived with death; I cannot tell you what it meant to me. Everything I saw, everything I touched reminded me of heaven, of a shining light I could dissolve into. I would touch the red carpet by the altar and think how shabby it was compared to the carpet of heaven, which would be perfect soft grass. I would sit in a pew after everyone had gone to bed and watch the starlight coming through the stained glass, and think that in heaven such light would be perfect beams, like the legs of God striding past.

Yet soon I felt the tension of a coming storm. I bored the sisters with extravagant stories, strained jokes, tense self-praise. How desperately I wanted to be loved! I think my whole soul

strove for a single soft touch. There was love there, of a sort, but the sisters moved through me like smoke; I couldn't seem to believe in them. I was afraid of them; their gentleness reminded me of the concern of nurses by the bed of the dying. Their kindness lowered me into a grave.

Mother Margaret was patient; she taught me to read better and allowed me three afternoons a week in the library. I read everything, became certain, confused, certain again. I constructed fantastic dialogues in my mind, but when I spoke to a sister, my tongue froze. There was a wall between myself and the world that I couldn't get over; I touched it, beat at it, even tried to climb it once in a while, but I would become tense, sleepy, irritable. I was disgusted with myself. God scolded me in terrible terms; I was weak, cowardly, resentful, petty, a temptress, a slug among mountains. I quailed before Him, and loved Him all the more.

I distracted myself with pettiness because if my mind had cleared, I would have killed someone, everyone, myself. Such kindness the soul provides; it disarms one when one is nothing but knives. A hatred lay in me; it is impossible to describe it; a bishop came to visit, a fat man in silk who sat and picked his teeth while we kissed his hand. And when I touched my lips to his skin, I smelled garlic and pheasants, and I felt as if I would be sick. I excused myself – I was shaking – and I went to my chamber and bit my tongue on the bed. I hated the man, for I imagined the good I would do in his place. I thought of sitting around a crowded table, smiting my fist and laughing, all evil scattering before my rage. And then I saw myself in my little cot, a small knot of resentment and bitterness, and I cried hot tears, wanting to tear myself out by the roots and scatter myself in a strong wind, thinking that the stuff of my sick soul might at least make crops grow where it landed... And I thought of God, and He laughed at me from His dark throne, laughed at this knotted disease He had made. I thought of the blessing of free will – His

great gift to mankind – and I wondered at my free will, for I had been born bright into a land of shadows, and the shadows had warped my soul, turned it against itself, and crushed it so that I dripped between the clenched fist of my circumstances. ‘Where was I when You made your Plan?’, I cried into my knotted sheets, my heart clenching, my breathing laboured. I was an outcast; I had not asked for such a soul, such a life. I thought of grinning ploughmen, fair wives and happy stupid children, and I wanted to tear my mind out by the roots – *why can I not be happy?* It seemed so easy for others – don’t think, don’t question – I did not choose to think – where is my free will?

And in that moment of stillness, at the heart of the most essential question, I suddenly abandoned God. And all forgiveness disappeared with Him.

Mary turned to Laurence, who sat at the foot of the bed. His head was lowered, his eyes shaded. The candle lit his beard like glowing moss. He did not move.

“Do you know,” she said. “It was amazing: I rose to the material. All higher things vanished, as if they were never there. God, angels, devils, heavens, ghosts and goblins, all disappeared in a twinkling, and I felt such a sudden rush of passion that I convulsed physically on my bed, and my eyes were opened, and I saw. God was a drug for my hate, keeping it at bay, and I suddenly thought of all the stupidity and evil I had known, all the wrongs I had received, and there was suddenly nothing above them, nothing behind them, nothing beyond them. They were simply there; evil was no longer the work of Satan but nothing more than the ravings of rabid animals. My hands flexed, power running through my veins, at the sudden thought: *what if this is the only world?* And then I felt a sudden rush of panic; I had hidden in this womb while the world cursed and convulsed in the distance. Men were not pawns of universal power, only

lost animals striking at their young, and I became possessed of a savage desire to save – not to renounce, not to counsel patience, not to hope for better after death, but to stride out and rescue now, here and now! I thought of the girl in the marketplace, and I was overpowered by self-loathing, for I had cursed mothers for abandoning their young, and then had abandoned them myself, hiding out in this empty house of God, waiting in vain for a salvation that was myself. And I made a vow to myself: *I will rescue life, not death. I will be a salve for the world's wounds; I will not drug pain with eternity, but soothe it in the here and now.*

Thus were my eyes opened. And how I wished they were not! I looked at the sisters, and they were no longer glowing princesses of God, but forgotten mice hiding in dry cellars. I had never asked them about their pasts, for I thought them serene. I questioned them then – and such pain rose before me! One girl's mother had tried to drown her; another had been beaten by her brothers daily – she flinched when I touched her cheek; another had been violated from infancy; another had been set on fire because she had taught herself how to read; another had her fingers broken because she touched herself. They were all lost in visions of the wonder of death; they drugged themselves with death because life was an open wound; they rubbed death into their wounds and lost all limbs. I woke their nerves; they revolted against me; I became their devil.

Mother Margaret took me to her office and demanded the reasons for my actions. Why was I unsettling their only safe home?

“Mother Margaret,” I said, “Why were we placed here?”

“To suffer,” she said, “and to love despite our suffering.”

“Who must we forgive in order to love suffering? God? Man?”

“It is not our place to forgive, but to be forgiven,” she replied.

“Forgiven for what?” I asked.

“Child – you know the catechisms. For the sin of Adam. For the sin of being human.”

“Mother Margaret,” I said, “I have striven for faith. I have tried with all my might to believe, but I cannot. I cannot love a God who creates a life of suffering.”

“We chose to suffer; we ate the fruit.”

“I did not choose to suffer!” I cried, “I did not choose to be born; I did not choose to have such a mind; I did not choose to be beaten and cursed and reviled. God made the world; He made me; only He could have chosen me to suffer. How do we know that we are not worshipping the devil? What if we are wrong? What if Satan is the God of this world, and we pray to evil for salvation from evil? What if God put us here to end evil, not just hide behind pious walls?”

“Child,” she cried out, raising her hands. “I cannot explain the eternal mysteries to someone who has no faith. I took you in because your soul was troubled. I gave you books because your mind was confused. I prayed that peace of mind would be granted to you.”

“Your prayers were not answered,” I said. “Neither of our prayers were answered. Nothing is listening. This is the only world, and I will suffer its evils no longer.”

Mother Margaret shuddered at my words. Suddenly she shook her head.

“I cannot let you disturb the peace of this place. You have stayed; I have striven, but still you rebel. But think – it is such a small time – a few years, and you will be free. Why rebel? Why fight?”

Her words summoned the sweetness of death in my soul. But I resisted it.



“If I die,” I said, “I will live in heaven and look at the world and my heart will be sick that I did nothing while alive but wait for death. I cannot live for such torments.”

“Then you must leave this place.”

I sat for a long moment. For the first time in my life, in that moment, I felt true peace. I had made my decision.

“Then I will leave,” I said.

I thought of the first words Mother Margaret had spoken to me: ‘Are you hungry?’ I had spent a lot of time in the garden; I had learned a lot about crops; I suddenly felt this desire: *feed the poor*. I thought of the hunger of the body; how such wants made everyone angry and afraid. I went to the library and took the books on agricultural husbandry, and packed them with my clothes. I went to the pantry and took all the food I could carry; I was taking from the dead; what did I care? Then I said goodbye to the sisters. How they wept, pressing me with beads, like desperate refugees thrusting children into passing carriages. I left without saying goodbye to Mother Margaret; she seemed like an embalmed Egyptian Queen, gesticulating from a bony throne.

I wanted to lose myself; I could not bear open spaces. I went to London, and I saw the face of poverty. I remember watching the rich carriages sweeping past; I felt no resentment. I thought of tea parties and gallery openings; who would want to descend to the gutter in the face of such plenty? Yet I felt that this chasm must be bridged somehow. So much, so little; who can explain it? Who can explain the thoughts of a woman who passes a crying mother by the side of

the road and signals her driver to get her home faster? We see dying children and feel a sudden desire to see our own children. Why? Why?"

"I don't know," said Laurence.

Mary shrugged.

"Rhetorical. You cannot know. But I know. Think of Christ. He took all the world's pain on his shoulders; I shouldn't have been surprised if he had crucified himself, to escape the blinding agony of such a weight. Here it is, simply: the poor are not real.

"We all have a structure: I am good; those who are different are bad. How else can we remain sane in the face of universal misery? We drug ourselves with distance. We stroll through a pantomime; we never let the reality of others enter our minds. And thus they become unreal to themselves. What does a child do in the face of indifference? Why, he becomes indifferent to himself. His rages and pains do not pierce him; they flicker and strain below his vision. He becomes undemanding, passive, resigned. Wronged, he wrongs himself. He passes from the eyes of society, a mere clutch of dull rags. Multiply him a million times and he becomes a gray grain on a gray beach; dumb, excluded, his mutterings are not heard over the mad music of seaside dancing.

"I thought of this, and found my purpose: to remain human. I am a woman as much as the highest duchess; our breasts beat the same drums, we raise hammers and sherry with the same muscles, scream as loud in birthing, sigh and die in the same heartbeat. Our eyes see the same sunsets, our ears twitch to the same baby's cry, our palms brush the same lover's cheek, we taste the same rejections; our fingers trail cages of iron or gold; it matters little which. I thought that if

I could find a man of means and have him taste the same ashes I have tasted, I could become a bridge over the greatest divide. I speak for my tribe, the largest tribe: the excluded.”

Mary looked Laurence full in the face.

“When I read of your experiments, I saw you behind me on the same road. Think of it – I sympathized with you! ‘Excluded good’ – we are the same soul. We are brothers. Everything I have known, you have felt. I read about you, and I decided to come. I wished to make the world real for you. I know that you have seen it, the possibilities of this life; I knew it the moment I read of you, the moment I saw you, the moment I spoke to you. I see it in your eyes now. I wanted to come to you and say: ‘We are cursed for breathing, we brothers. Let us do good, and damn all curses.’”

Laurence looked at her, his eyes widening like the rings of a disturbed pool. He opened his mouth, and just at that moment the faint strains of a piano floated through the air.

“I – I have a guest,” he said, rising with difficulty. “Is there anything you need? Ring the bell if you do.”

Mary smiled. “Anything you see fit to provide will be welcome.”

“Then I should let you sleep,” he said, turning to go.

“Laurence?”

He turned. “Yes?”

“Thank you for listening.”

He nodded. “Yes – I have a lot to think over. Goodnight.”

“Sleep well,” said Mary softly.

He paused, nodded, then left, closing the door gently behind him.

Mary's eyes took a few minutes to adjust to the blue darkness. She stared at the moon; when the outlines of the room began to press faintly against the edge of her vision, she whispered her oath once more, her hands pale on the white sheets.

Laurence stood outside her room, his heart beating fast. *How odd that I should feel guilty*, he thought, passing a hand through his hair. Shaking his head, he mounted the stairs.

He looked into the music room; Lydia sat at the piano, one hand playing, her head resting on the other. A single candle stood on the desk; the moonlight iced her white nightgown; her hair was down. Laurence stood for a moment watching her in wonder; it felt as if a light breeze was stirring the darkness he had felt downstairs.

"Can't sleep?" he asked.

"Too windy," she murmured. "And I had a bad dream."

"Oh?"

"I dreamt I was becoming weak, ill," she said, turning to him. "Everyone gathered at my bedside, talking softly and crossing themselves. No one knew my malady. Then, just as I was drifting away, the doctor pulled back my nightgown and found a leech on my... neck. It was horrible."

"How strange," shivered Laurence.

"Will you play with me?" asked Lydia, shifting on the piano bench.

"I'm a little tired."

"A few minutes. Then I'll go to bed."

“I was a mean hand at Chopsticks,” he said, walking towards her and forcing a smile.

“What’s your taste?”

“What better? Some Mozart.”

Laurence sat beside her; the window was open; he could see the pool glittering through her hair; garden air drifted in, full of life.

“Tell me which key to hit,” he said.

“This one.”

“Nudge me when.”

“I will.”

Lydia began playing; her elbow brushed Laurence’s side, and he pressed his finger into the ivory. What began as halting became rhythmic, and he slowly felt his soul begin to lighten. The terrors of Mary’s story began to part before the fluid laugh of Mozart; the vases and paintings seemed to come back into view, and he felt such a delicacy of civilization that he suddenly threw back his head and laughed. He turned to see Lydia watching him.

“All better?” she asked gently.

“I believe I may also have had a bad dream,” he said, smiling suddenly.

## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

### *Eloquent Freedom*

LORD CERBES STOOD ON A HIGH HILL IN YORKSHIRE, admiring both his far-flung lands and the man who stood in front of him.

“I was here once, as a child, you know,” he murmured. “It wasn’t a sight likely to lure me back.”

“Didn’t keep me here either, sir,” replied Thomas. “That was the start of it all.”

“Tell me what I see.”

“Over there, afore the sea, are the Glenn Fens,” said the young man, pointing at a low spread of tangled undergrowth. “The smoke to the west aways, that’s the village. The planted fields around it; mostly to the west and south, are what we always farmed. The one’s to the north, and a little to the east, those we just begun. Where we’re standing has been barren scrub for as long as minds recall. This is where I think we can tend the new sheep.”

“Sheep have never been tried there before?” asked Lord Cerbes.

Thomas shook his head with a smile. “Lord, we’ve had enough hardship keeping skin and soul together. We’re only starting to raise our heads now.”

“You know,” said Lord Cerbes, “you are the true owner.”

Thomas shifted from foot to foot. “That kind of philosophy is beyond me, sir.”

“Facts are not philosophy. But come – what are we to do today?”

“I wrote to Clem Weatherby; we will meet him and the others for dinner. They have been working out the draining methods while I’ve been gone. Until then, I thought we might ride around for a spell. Take in the lay of the land.”

They rode for hours. Lord Cerbes was excited. The village seemed a different world than he remembered. A solid sense of labour hung around it; the streets were clean, the faces of the men and women hurrying by were stern, open, tired and quietly delighted.

“We’ve set up a sort of school in the chapel,” commented Thomas as they passed the building. “A friend of mine spends the morning teaching the children about proper crop methods; in the afternoons, they tend their own little gardens. We will give prizes to the best yield in the next summer.”

“They are taught to read?”

“And write. They have to make notes about their methods.”

“The priest doesn’t mind?”

“We lost our priest,” replied Thomas.

“Excuse me?”

“I mentioned it before. He got very upset at the upheavals; railed against our pride and lack of faith. He went to Canterbury to complain a few months ago; he hasn’t returned.” Thomas sighed. “I suppose we’ll get another one eventually.”

“What is happening to the morals of the village?”

“I don’t quite follow, sir.”

“Well – how do men live? Do they drink? Do they shirk? Do they lust?”

Thomas frowned for a moment. “Well, we’re all quite busy, sir. We used to have a sort of lusting in the village, years ago. But I think most young men want to settle down and raise a family. Yet when there’s no food, no opportunity, no hope for a better future, they tend to live for the present. I suppose that’s why we needed the priest. He kept their desperation in check. But it never seemed enough. No – we have our rough sorts, like any, but most seemed to have put their back to the wheel of progress.”

“And drinking?”

“There is more,” admitted Thomas. “It’s a heady time, but a little shaky, if you catch my meaning. Most are excited about the future, but they can’t seem to believe in it fully. Can’t say as I blame them, either. I also get the idea that this kind of change is almost a rebellion, and something will come crashing down on us. But I would rather have a year of this than a lifetime the old way.”

“This is all most interesting. I feel ashamed to have spent so much time with books.”

“Well,” smiled Thomas. “Books are the first step. The only first step.”

“Quite right,” smiled Lord Cerbes, “and quite kind of you.”

The dinner was served at the inn, in a long, low, soot-stained and heavy-beamed room hung with stuffed heads of old predators. *Should be some aristocrats up there*, thought Lord Cerbes.

Seven men were talking at the table, mugs of ale in their hands, baskets of dark bread at their elbows.

“Nay, ye speak from yer nose!” cried one of the older men. “Roger Bacon my arse! ‘Twas Hans Lippershey what done it first. Holland, 1608.”



“Some say so; some say nay,” replied his combatant. “I have it on personal authority that those what ground eye-glasses in Italy more’n three hunded years ago done it long a-fore old Hans.”

“Personal authority! – aye, if yer age were as long as yer tales, ye may have personal authority on a land ye never been, an’ a time ye never seen.”

“Ye’re both starin’ strange,” said another man disgustedly. “‘Twas neither Hans nor Eye-talian peeper-makers. Mr. Galilei, 1609. Fust real telescope. He’s what saw the spinners of Jupiter, the stars in th’Milky Way, an’ the mountains on th’moon.”

“Nay, not for th’sake of patriotism, but th’sake of truth,” put in another, “it must be said that Mr. Galilei’s trappy tube was a mess of squinting and correctin’. Mr. John Dollond, he of this fair isle, 1757, fashioned a convex crown glass and a convex dense flint – that his compound lens made up fer the chromatic squinty’s at two wavelengths cannot be denied by any who draw true breath!”

“You’re all right,” said Lord Cerbes, quite dazed at the erudition of the argument. “But in the middle of the last century, James Gregory developed a method in which a central concave parabolic mirror merges the light to one focus of a concave ellipsoidal mirror, which reflects the light to the ellipsoidal’s second focus through a central hole to the main mirror.”

“Aye? An’ what’s the use of that?” asked one of the men skeptically. “Sounds like a lot of showy trickery. Sir Newton’s got the best, the most elegantist solution: his primary parabolic mirror bounces th’light to a leaned-up reflecting mirror, which spits it straight at the eye. Nice and easy’ no need for Gregory’s little hole and tricky set-up. Why, starin’ through his mess in a stiff breeze ud give ye a thunderhead in a second!”

“Aye,” said another. “An’ he had the smarts to give up on this speculum metal fer his mirrors – load of crap anyway; always needs fixing an’ polishing!”

Thomas stood, enjoying the sight of Lord Cerbes’ astounded face. The argument wound down after a time, and Thomas stepped forward.

“Friends, this is Lord Cerbes. I wrote you he was coming.”

The men rose and nodded, introducing themselves.

“I have come to talk with you about the proposed swamp draining,” said Lord Cerbes, sitting.

“Er – may I trouble you for a glass of beer?”

## CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

### *An Awakening*

LAURENCE SLEPT FITFULLY; in his dreams, he lay on a bed of twisting skeletons; their bones pierced his side; a woman in a corner chair did not stir; he cried out; she turned and stared at him, her face a sheet of white bone...

He awoke, shivering, staring at the ornate plasterwork of his ceiling. He had looked at it countless times, admiring the snowy leaves and peering cupid faces. He looked at it now, and thought: *How much were the workmen paid? Could they provide for their families? Or did they leave my fat house with dry bread to feed the anger of their wives? Did they snarl at their children's hungry complaints? Did they raise their hands against them? Did my father haggle with the foreman, scrimping to buy some heavy volume of eastern religious practices?*

Laurence thought of the piano he and Lydia had played last night. When he was seven or so, he had sat under the piano watching the local tinker's legs as he tuned it. The old man's trousers were frayed; he kept wheezing consumptively, taking a rag from his pocket and coughing into it. *How does a tinker know how to tune a piano?*, he thought. *Did you have the mind of Mozart, old man?* The man left, having squeezed a few pennies from Lady Barbara; Laurence had watched him from the bay window, shuffling down the garden path, still coughing. *Where did you go, old man? Are you playing concerts now? Are angels applauding your fingertips?*

Laurence shifted on his silk sheets, half-remembering the ghosts of people who had passed through his life. His first nanny, shunning food to hide her growing belly, her blue eyes wide and trapped, dismissed when he was eight... The youth who had delivered the elder Lord

Carvey's books; Laurence remembered finding him one morning, poring through the volumes behind the garden shed, licking his grimy fingers clean and turning the pages with the reverence of a monk. *Were you to have been an historian?* And Ralph, the boy who had carried his books, clutching them to his chest while Laurence strolled and swung sticks in carefree abandon, ignoring his constant questions. Ralph had not lasted long; Laurence had gotten rid of him, replacing him with a sullen, dark-haired boy who trudged painfully, one leg wasted.

It seemed that a huge wound had opened up in the world. Laurence quailed before it... Coincidence, chance, circumstance; *were I born a poor girl...* So much of him seemed to have been shaped by chance that Laurence felt dizzy, disoriented. *What is really mine?* The question turned in his mind, mocking his sense of self. *All self-respect is vanity, for all virtue is circumstantial...*

Laurence rose heavily; he was getting nowhere. While dressing, he turned and glanced at his bed. So many mornings he had lain there, as a child, making animals with the bunched sheets, while other boys dodged beatings, their backs bowed with coal, with bales of hay, with the crushing burden of an unchosen life. *I am the exception;* the thought ran in maddening circles through his mind.

After dressing, Laurence went downstairs, vowing to only eat toast. He stopped at the entrance to the kitchen. His mother sat at the table in her nightgown, her hair down.

"Laurence," she said, rising. "Do sit down."

Laurence walked forward warily. "Good morning, Mother."

"How did you sleep?"

“Poorly,” he said, rubbing his eyes.

“I’m sure of it. Kay tells me we have a new guest.”

He shook his head. “Please – not now, Mother.”

“She says the child was about to be murdered.”

“Yes – that’s right,” said Laurence, surprised at the concern in his mother’s voice.

“How is she?”

“She’ll survive. I spent some time talking with her last night. Listening to her.”

“You will prosecute, of course.”

Laurence’s piece of toast halted in front of his mouth.

“Excuse me?”

“As well as your duties as a... farmer, you have responsibilities as the justice of the peace.

You will doubtless round this rabble up and prosecute them for attempting murder.”

Laurence paused. “I hadn’t thought of that. I was going to...”

“Look,” his mother interrupted shortly. “We may be the idle rich, but we have our responsibilities. Don’t make faces! We stand for justice. Your father once had to oversee the execution of a rapist – a terrible business. This is beyond the power of your bailiff, Larry. He may have been among them.”

Laurence paused. “It will – it will cripple the village, Mother. We need able hands for irrigation. It was a dozen men – maybe more. All prominent. I will banish the Jiggers – I have said so.”

“It’s not enough, Laurence. I warned you of this. I warned you that making them rich was a mistake. You did not listen. You made them rich; they ceased going to Church – now, when the

fruits of your labours have turned rotten in your hands, you wish to run away, to slap them on the wrist and call yourself just. There is a burnt child in the servant's quarters, Laurence! You cannot ignore that. You have a responsibility."

"This is not a product of wealth, Mother," he said heavily, "but of superstition. They have only recently raised their heads – how can they be expected to just throw off the fears of two thousand years?"

"Exactly!" said Lady Barbara, rapping the table sharply. "How, if they are not punished for their transgressions? When they worked on empty stomachs, they knelt before God and called themselves content. Now you have turned their eyes to this world, Larry, and they think that by living for their selfish desires, they have the right dispense justice as they see fit. They must be stopped. You must stop them."

"What would you have me do?" asked Laurence. "Shoot them in the chest?"

"You must round them up, get their confessions, and hang them," said Lady Barbara.

"Just – as easy as that? What of their families?"

"They should have thought of that before."

Laurence felt a sudden lump of anger; it was almost unbearable. He leapt to his feet awkwardly. "Is that it?" he cried, his face flushed. "As simple as that? They do wrong, and we hang them. We, the pampered cats of the common good, pass judgments on dogs kicked by history! What if you had been born poor, Mother? What if you had to feed your children tree bark and hold them as they wheezed their last breath in your arms? What if you were married to John Mudder? I have seen his wife – she flinches if you scratch your ear. What would you have done in her place? Sat sipping tea and talk of instant justice?"

“Laurence!” cried his mother. “Sit down, child! What on earth is the matter with you?”

Laurence shook his head mutely, his hands balled. He would not let her see his tears. His whole mind felt disordered.

“Sit down!”

He sat, looking away.

“What is the matter with you?” demanded his mother. “Yours is not to question the way of the world. I didn’t notice you complaining of injustice when I sent you on your grand tour of Europe. ‘How exciting this will be, Mother,’ you said, ‘how instructive!’ You did not complain that other children had to carry wood for your warmth. You took the goods without complaint. Now the bill is due. Now you must be strong. Now you must taste the bitter fruit of justice. And now – now! – you complain of injustice? It’s a little too late to be convincing, Laurence. Too little, too late and a little too convenient for my tastes.”

“I can’t do it, Mother” he said simply, his eyes fixed on the wall.

Lady Barbara paused for a moment. Laurence could feel the coming storm. A dazed voice in his mind cried: *what do you want from me?* He felt surrounded by something hard, enveloping, insistent. He thought of his mother, of Kay and Mary and all the other women who seemed to be obsessed with him, controlling him with their homilies, their blind, drowning concern. He suddenly wished that someone would stride into his life and rescue him from the eternal attentions of these women, and he missed his father with his whole soul.

“I want you to leave me alone,” he whispered.

“I will do no such thing, Laurence,” said his mother evenly, rising with her cup of tea. The cup trembled on the saucer, tinkling, and she set it down quickly. Laurence wanted to rise, snarl, run, but he felt trapped, lethargic.

“Your position has placed no great burdens on you, Laurence,” said Lady Barbara. “You have been very lucky – it has all been great fun. But life isn’t all fun and games. I – I know. You have long complained that we are the idle rich. I agree – most of the time. But when there is a war, we send our sons. When there is revolution, we pledge our swords. When there is injustice, we avenge it. You were raised as a kind of soldier, Laurence. When the world is at peace, you are free to play. But the world – your world – is stirring with war, and you must rise to the challenge. You must be a man. Only thus is your position justified. If you run away, you are a coward, a parasite, a selfish, ignorant child, and your resentments, your fears about your privilege, all will become true. But you cannot blame your position. You cannot blame me, or Kay, or God, or life. You can only blame yourself. And I will make sure that you do.”

“Oh really?” cried Laurence. “You are going to tell me how to be a man? Where were you when father was heading out the door for months, writing me endless letters? Were you saying to him: ‘No, dear, you have children, you have a son who needs you, you have responsibilities!’ No – you didn’t like to have him around. You found it easier to have him out of your life. You didn’t think that his son might need him, that your daughter might need him – no, that didn’t serve your self-interest. And now you come to me and preach self-sacrifice! Why should I not take my cue from you – from my confounded father too – and say: ‘no thanks; I think that is a little too uncomfortable for me, and I must think of my own comfort first and forever!’”



Lady Barbara placed her hands over her mouth, her eyes closed, her brow furrowed in pain. Laurence's heart sank.

"That is harsh, Larry," she whispered, turning away from him. She began smoothing a lace coverlet on the arm of the sofa, tugging it one way, then another. Laurence closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"I had no power over your father because he did not love me," said his mother, staring at the lace. "Don't be sad. It happens. Only the poor may marry for love. You think that you understand women because you were raised by one. But you don't, not really. I honestly tried to make your father love me. I rubbed his feet, brought him cocoa, read him to sleep. But he didn't desire me, and if that's not present, everything else is just – make-believe. He only wanted me when I was putting on my powder."

"Mother..."

"I know – you are uncomfortable. I know. But you raised adult issues, and you must deal with them as an adult. I couldn't leave you with your father when you were young. Something about him – didn't recognize children. He was always irritated with you. When you were two, he was playing croquet and you wandered off and fell into the garden pond. I saw you from the kitchen; you leaned over and fell in. Your father didn't even look up. I was very undignified – I screamed at the gardener, who fished you out. Your father kept saying: 'you mustn't pamper him'. Men don't understand that life is fragile; it is always at the mercy of chance. So you see, I don't think I had anything to keep him here, with you. The problem wasn't me. The problem was your father, pure and simple." Lady Barbara dropped her hands and looked up at Laurence.

His eyes were red, his cheeks sunken. “I hope that this has made things a little clearer for you,” she said.

Laurence looked at her for a long moment; it seemed unbearable; he felt that her whole will was aligned with his life; she had nothing else but claustrophobic concern; in other words: control. He did not have to fight her; could he ignore her and banish her to an empty hell. It would be so easy! He could live for pleasure, for war, for leisure, literature, laughter or simple work. And it came to him suddenly, as he looked into the depths of her gray eyes... *The poor woman; everything she has is second-hand!* His eyes widened; his mother held his gaze without fear, without pride. *You want justice, men must provide it*, he thought. *You want love, men must provide it. You need money, men must provide it. You have no will, no power, save convincing me.*

It opened for him in an instant, like a wrapping too-long toyed with. Her aggression was nothing but hostile begging; limbless, she demanded to be carried. These trembling tendrils that had bound them together... how savage, how stern – how weak they suddenly seemed. But to rise, to leave, to walk away from such suffocating concern – would that not be an act of near-murder? How many people cut themselves open for the sake of controlling the knives of others? *They have nothing; we have everything – can we not be kind?* But Laurence felt a sudden anger in his chest, a disgust with self-inflicted agony; agony that was held like a dripping heart before others at the greatest feast, destroying their appetite for *life*. *You have done this to yourself!* he cried silently. Lydia’s face rose in his mind’s eye: *she has never demanded anything of me; she enriches me*. He felt a sudden, wrenching desire to flee with her, into her world, a world without victims, without the eternal responsibility of being mankind’s keeper...

The room glowed with sudden sunshine as he rose. His mother took a deep sigh, and he turned towards her.

“I shall only prosecute Farmer Jigger, who I know was there, and those who confess, Mother,” he said quietly. “I will not have another witch-hunt on my lands.”

He saw his mother’s frustration rise, seeking a crack in his wall. Her eyes floundered like thrown fish on the boards of a bottomless boat. He stood firm, holding her gaze. It was a long moment.

“Your father would have hung them,” she said finally.

He shook his head. “If you will excuse me, I need some fresh air.”

Lydia found Laurence in the garden. He was sitting on the ground, leaning against the stone wall of a trickling fountain, enjoying a rare cigar. He did not hear her approach; his eyes were closed; the sunlight played on his face like the knightly warmth of the natural gods rewarding one of their own.

“Hello there,” she murmured.

Laurence heard the voice; he did not want to hear any voice. He realized it was Lydia’s, and smiled.

He opening his eyes and looked up at her. “Hello.”

“My father is coming,” she said.

He blinked. “What?”

“My father is coming,” said Lydia, holding up a letter. “Tomorrow.”

“Why so soon? From where?”

“Why so soon? Because I asked him to. From where? Yorkshire. His holdings. He’s full of beans about what’s happening there. A ‘renaissance of the sod’, he calls it.”

“What can that mean?”

“He told me not to tell you,” smiled Lydia. Laurence looked up at her; her face was lowered over him, her hair hung over her right shoulder.

“You know,” he said, “Lydia – I’m very glad to see you.”

“Oh? I was afraid of approaching you,” she said. “You looked so content. Which is not how I’ve seen you for the past two days.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, frowning. “Have I been neglecting you?”

She laughed and stretched, looking down over the garden. “Oh no,” she murmured. “I haven’t been completely honest with you. I had no intention of accepting your invitation at first. But a rather foolish man was pursuing me in London – one of those men who are so sure of themselves they cannot hear a dissenting voice. He was quite insistent.”

“How terrible. How can a man try to force love? It’s like trying to make a rose grow by tugging at it; all you do is pull it from the soil and kill it.”

Lydia laughed. “Quite true. So I thought that I would escape such base yankings by leaving the city. This seemed the perfect place to hide out. Yet I never thought I would find such lovely roses here,” she said, glancing at the high bushes nestled against the trellis.

Laurence followed her eyes. “All fresh for your arrival. Mother’s project. But she has no green thumb; she’s too impatient. I told her that she had to be more gentle. She didn’t take it too well.”

“What makes her so aggressive? You don’t have to answer that.”

“She’s frustrated. She wants her world to be all icing and no cake. But her icing keeps collapsing, so she damns all baking.”

“How abstract.”

Laurence shifted. “Yes, I suppose so.”

There was a short pause.

“You know,” said Lydia, “I also asked my father to come because I wanted him to get to know you.”

“I thoroughly enjoyed my brief chat with him,” said Laurence.

“You have no idea how perceptive he is. He has all the elemental health of the new world. He is an antidote to all darkness. I am a very fortunate woman.”

“I have no doubt. You find darkness here?”

Lydia nodded. “Yes. Yes, I do.”

“Where?”

“In a place where everyone is dark, I see no darkness. But here, shadows are everywhere – save where you breathe. Am I being terribly presumptuous?”

“God no – it’s a relief to hear clear words!”

Lydia sat beside him. She ran her fingers lightly over the grass and turned to him. “I think that you want to brighten the entire world, Lord Laurence Carvey. I have seen this trait before – it is a confusion of goodness – but never as strongly as in you. Such burdens – I cannot understand them, Laurence. Were you at the meeting when they voted you the Second Coming?”

He laughed. “I don’t know. What am I to do with my life but be good?”

“Heavens, what a manifesto!” smiled Lydia. “Yet I have often found virtue a substitute for a lack of happiness, creativity – or love. Ambition for good, not joy of life. If that makes sense.”

“It does make sense. You know,” said Laurence, “that is how I started. With joy. My obsession for agricultural improvement – is that part of the malady?”

“No – except when you begin to think that your crops are those around you. Then, perhaps, you fall prey to delusions of grandeur. These things are out of our hands. We are each given the chance for happiness; if we take it, we are content; if we believe that we can give it to others, we are lost.”

“I can no longer think in such selfish terms,” said Laurence. “Have you spoken to Mary?”

“The burnt girl?” asked Lydia, turning away. “No – oh no.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t explain it. Doesn’t she frighten you?”

“Yes,” replied Laurence, “but I cannot ignore what she represents. She is almost – my conscience.”

“Have you done her wrong?” Lydia asked.

Laurence turned away from her.

“Yes,” he said.

“How?”

“When I was twenty, I came back from a tour of Europe spoke at Farmer Jigger’s house. He was the bedrock of the community – still is, or was, or won’t be for long, I suppose. I was idealistic, optimistic, hopeful. I spoke too fast, too eagerly. I didn’t even notice Mary until she spoke. She criticized my enthusiasm. She criticized my position. She...”

“How old was she?”

“I don’t know. Quite young. Maybe twelve.”

Lydia nodded. “Go on.”

“Farmer Jigger attacked her for criticizing me. She held firm. Events escalated. She was thrown out. Into nothing. I have learned since what happened to her after she left, while I was dining on veal twice a week... It is almost unbearable.” He smiled. “Tell me: am I too sensitive? I miss my father.”

“What would your father say?”

“Oh, Lord Gruff! He would knock some sense into me. ‘What are you doing worrying yourself sick over an outcast?’ he would say. ‘You are built for better things, boy! Chin up! Take care of yourself, and let the world take care of itself! Where’s my jam?’”

“What would you say to that?”

Laurence paused. “You know, I don't know. I can’t imagine. I saw so little of him.”

“I think you will enjoy spending time with my father,” said Lydia with a sudden smile.

“Yes,” murmured Laurence, turning to her. “I’m sure I will.”

The moment of redemption hung suspended like a drop of water from a rose-leaf. It trembled, unsure of whether to cling or fall.

Kay’s voice shattered the reflection.

“Laurence! Laurence! Can I speak to you?”

Laurence and Lydia turned. Kay stood on the back porch, Jonathon beside her, grinning and waving, his hair standing in every direction. Lydia sighed and waved back. Laurence rose dutifully, dusting himself off.

“Thank you,” he said. “I’d better see what Kay wants. Will you still be here?”

Lydia nodded. Laurence walked off slowly.

“Well, precious!” cried Jonathon, striding jauntily down the path towards Lydia. “Long time in the wilderness!”

“How are you, Jonathon?” murmured Lydia.

He threw himself on the grass beside her, scratching his belly.

“This is a most remarkable place,” he said, turning his face to the sky. “I almost expect to see fairies in dark suits trimming the undergrowth by moonlight! Such elemental order!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Have you spent any time with this fascinating Kay creature?” he asked, rolling on his side and looking at Lydia.

“No.”

“Oh, but you must! Such a paradigm of repressed femininity! Such trembling, uncertain wanting! Do you know, she is quite attracted to me. I am everything she wants to be. She honestly believes in heaven. She is very earnest. She says I will not go to hell though, simply because I am happy. How rare to see body and God warring! She is a morality play.” He punched the air madly with both fists. “Desire, duty – which will win? What will become of her, I wonder? What’s the matter?” he asked, flicking her shin.

“Oh Jonathon,” sighed Lydia, moving her leg, “do you have any idea how tiresome you are?”

He grinned. “There’s a smile behind that – I can hear it. I warned you against falling in love in Dorset, Princess Lydia. You won’t get what you want here.”

“What do I want?”



Jonathon plucked up a daisy and bit the head off. “Why, your father, my dear!” he chewed. “You want someone like your father, but he’s old and wise and one of a kind.”

“You know, you are awfully serious about your own emotions, but terribly flippant about other people’s,” said Lydia.

“Hm,” said Jonathon. “I must think about that soon,” he said after an instant, spitting the half-eaten daisy on the grass. “Ugh. What a harridan of a mother! What do you think of her?”

“I think she’s the woman for you.”

“Lady Barbara? Lydia!”

“Why not?” she said, rising. “She’s perfect. She’d take a paddle to your buttocks twenty hours a day, leaving you three to consider your sins in childish glee and one to plan new ones.”

Jonathon laughed. “What a delicious thought!”

“My father is coming in two days. We will stay for a few days beyond that, and then we will leave for London.”

“We – you and I? Or you and...”

“You are welcome to stay here, I’m sure,” interrupted Lydia, pushing her hair behind her head.

Jonathon snatched a blade of grass from between his pressed toes and regarded it for a moment. “I would love to take Kay to London,” he said suddenly. “I may have found another project. To take a passionate soul and turn its delicate eyes on itself – how exquisite!”

“But what will you do with your life, Jonathon?” asked Lydia.

“Why, live it!” he said in all innocence. “What else?”

Kay's excitement smacked of an elementally destructive substitute; the religion of the lonely.

"Laurence! Laurence! You must come!" she cried breathlessly. "I've got the most wonderful note from Adam! Look! Look!"

She thrust the scrap paper into his hands, her eyes shining.

Laurence read:

*I'm not saying I was wrong. I'm only saying you should come down and take a look for yourselves.*

*Adam*

"Remember how skeptical he was?" said Kay, jabbing her finger at the paper excitedly. "Remember he said: 'they'll never learn?' Remember he said: 'we can't do good?' He says he's wrong, Laurence! He's wrong!"

"All right, all right" said Laurence, waving his hands. "Have you eaten?"

Kay shook her head quickly. "No – no. I'm not hungry."

"Look – you have to eat something. Go in and have some breakfast. I'll wash and get dressed, and I'll meet you downstairs in a few minutes."

"What?" cried Kay. "What? Don't you care?"

"Not enough to ruin my health," said Laurence. He turned and entered the house, shaking his head, the phrase ringing in his mind.

Lady Barbara had been sitting in the sunroom reading a letter, her mind circling around her conversation with Laurence. She heard Kay bolt noisily into the house, towards the kitchen, and, with all the blind instincts of obsessive motherhood, rose and smoothed her dress, her face a white mask.

“Good morning, Kay,” said Lady Barbara, coming into the kitchen.

Kay glanced up, her mouth full, crumbs on her dress. She pointed at her cheeks, grimaced and waved.

“Don’t say anything – I don’t want crumbs on the wall as well,” said her mother. “Joyce, please leave.”

Kay stopped chewing and gestured: *what’s the matter?*

Lady Barbara held up the letter she had been reading. “I have been informed by Mr. Stelson that you have convinced Laurence to hand over half our fortune to you.”

Kay’s eyes bulged, her cheeks colouring. She tried desperately to swallow, but could not.

“Don’t choke,” said Lady Barbara. “I’m not in the mood to rescue you. You won’t need to speak anyway. I may be resigned to the fact that my children hate me. I may not have been a good mother – that’s the fashion these days, isn’t it, to blame the mother? – but I don’t think so. Why don’t I think so? First, my whole life has revolved around my offspring. I would grant my life for them in an instant. Yet there are two things I will not do for my children; two things they constantly seem to demand of me. First: I will not tolerate deception. And second: I will not help them cover it up.”

“Mother,” cried Kay, wiping her mouth hurriedly, “it is not for – selfish reasons that I want the money! It’s not for myself – you must know that! What would I do with it? I have no taste for money. It is for others – others. Not me.”

“So you say,” said Lady Barbara. “Yet I look at you now, and your eyes are shining, your hands are shaking, and it seems to me that you are deriving an unholy sort of pleasure from your generosity. So it really is not for others, Katherine Anne Carvey, now is it?”

Kay’s cheeks reddened; the remains of her muffin paused in mid-wave. She set it down quietly.

“Of course I know nothing about helping others,” continued her mother. “I am little more than a hateful matriarch. Yet you do not know that I was unwilling to follow your father because I did not want my children being raised by a nanny. Yes – I had help, that was necessary. But I was present at the changing of your nappies myself, often. I directed your reading. I instructed the maids how to deal with you. I even played with you. Everyone thought I was mad – ‘you’ll spoil them’, they said. I didn’t listen. I tried to guide you every step of the way. I tried to help you. Now if I had only done it for my pleasure, would I continue to help you even though you spit in my face? When I find out, for instance, that my daughter has stabbed me in the back, that our family fortune is in jeopardy, would I talk to her calmly and try to get her to see the error of her ways? Would I?”

“What,” said Kay, gulping furiously, “what are the errors of my ways, Mother? How can you be so cruel? I won’t have my money until I’m thirty, or married. I am trying to help people now!”

“You are not helping people!” said Lady Barbara evenly. “You are only trying to satisfy your abominable vanity! Look at you: swelling with pride; your eyes are bulging with self-satisfaction! ‘Look at me,’ you cry, ‘look how good I am!’ I know you, Katherine. I know the pride you have in your heart. You claim to care for people. Tell me: do you care for your mother?”

“Yes – of course!”

“Then let us speak reasonably.” Lady Barbara leaned back, gazing at her daughter.

“Mother – what was I to do?” cried Kay, her hands fluttering. “Sit in my room and watch my life pass me by? What was I supposed to do?”

“What were you supposed to do? What were you supposed to do? You were supposed to stop being a burden!” replied Lady Barbara. “You were supposed to settle down and give me grandchildren! You were supposed to think of your responsibilities to others – not a lot, just a little. You were supposed to have a little sense, not just run around trying to turn weeds into roses just to satisfy your own petty vanity!”

Kay’s eyes stung with tears; her hands wandered the tablecloth.

“Mother – I am not so terribly – attractive,” she whispered. “You know that I can’t – I can’t hold a man’s attention!”

“Oh? Pray tell: when have you ever tried? When we had the garden party last summer, and Charles was trying to speak with you, did you make any effort to be civil? No – you retired to the garden shed with Millie to play cat’s-cradle and sing your little songs! And when we went to Lady Horace’s ball, did you make any attempt to mingle? No – it took three women and a crowbar to pry you from the wall and make you dance. And you fell over – do you remember?”

Five years of dancing lessons – you were prepared; you were invested in – and you fell flat on your face! You don't think I knew what that meant? How do you think it made me feel, to be a laughing-stock? Were you thinking of me then?"

"Mother," moaned Kay, "I didn't try to fall! It was an accident!"

"Of course, I could believe that were it an isolated incident, Kay," said Lady Barbara with a gentle smile. "But it wasn't, was it? Would you like me to continue?"

Kay paused, and shook her head.

"Very well," said Lady Barbara. "Most sensible. Now: as to this business about the money, I will simply not allow it. You think I am helpless because Laurence holds power of attorney." She smiled. "Perhaps so. Yet I am not utterly without power. If you pursue in your actions, I will have no choice but to turn you out of this house. And we both know that your allowance will not cover your living costs. Of course, if you think Laurence will provide for you, if you are certain that he will honour his promise, you may well choose to defy me. That is your choice. But if you think that this Jonathon character will marry you, you are wrong. Not after how you have behaved, which is little better than a common harlot."

Kay half stood; her hands shaking.

"I did not give you permission to rise," said her mother.

Kay said: "I suppose I learned how to be attractive to men from you!"

There was a long pause. Lady Barbara's eyes rose to the ceiling, as if the words were balloons bumping against the pale gray paint. Her body seemed to shrink into itself, find a silent core, then whiten into an icy fist.

“You are no daughter of mine,” she said slowly, her voice rising. “No daughter of mine would take her mother’s generosity and call it failure. No daughter of mine would take the sacrifice of an unhappy marriage maintained for her sake and call it a failure. Do you think you are the only person in the world who ever had to carry a burden? I gave you everything! At five: ballet lessons. You sprained your ankle. ‘Mother – I cannot continue!’ At seven: elocution lessons. You stuttered, stained your dress. At nine: dancing lessons. Eleven: singing lessons. Hopeless, but we persevered. Thirteen: piano lessons. The lid fell on your fingers. ‘Mother – I cannot continue!’ Same outcome, every time. And now you think you have been wronged? You think that I had access to any of these opportunities? Well I am telling you now, Katherine Anne Carvey: I cannot continue! You are a failure, pure and simple. Not a daughter, not a woman, not a wife. You are a lazy, incompetent, selfish, shallow, deceitful, vain child, and I wash my hands of you forever!”

Kay sat, the words running through her like swords. They were not new; she had heard them before, many times; but because they were not new, they were believed. *Look at my life*, she thought, *how can I disprove her?* Her hand reached into her pocket, fingering Adam’s note. She drew it out and flung it from her. Lady Barbara stared at her, her eyes dark, unfathomable.

“I don’t hate you... mother...” gasped Kay.

“Spare me your hysterics,” said Lady Barbara. “What do you intend to do with my money?”

Kay faintly heard Mary’s bell from upstairs; suddenly she imagined her burnt legs and open mouth. Kay felt as if she were lashed to a pole as the flames crept higher.

“What do you intend to do with my money?” repeated Lady Barbara.

Kay’s hands rose before her, opening and closing rapidly.

“Why – spend it!” she hissed.

Her mother did not respond; she looked over Kay’s shoulder as a knock sounded on the door.

“Come in,” she said pleasantly, the steel trap rising from her tongue.

“Am I interrupting?” asked Lydia, opening the door.

“Nothing but an inconsequential family dispute,” said Lady Barbara. “Kay, do sit down – you look quite ridiculous.”

Kay wanted to say it – wanted to say what hung in her soul, the teardrop of oily darkness, the squeezing sense of destruction. She glanced at Lydia’s composed face – it seemed as if she caught a flicker of sympathy. *Exhume this corpse!* her mind cried, but a secret wall rose before her honest light. What wall? What honesty? Why, the *shame of the wronged* – what a strange silent beast glistened in the sudden light! It lurked in the undergrowth, flinching under skies no longer storming. Her once-bright soul, prodded, jabbed and beaten by monkeys, had become a monkey itself, a cross-eyed ape wandering in search of whips. ‘Harmed is bad’, not ‘harming is bad’; this was her secret tattoo, the fuse which seemed to blow, its sparks scattering all clear judgments. In the dense cave of deep despair, the harming hand could no longer be recognized as her own; in her mind’s eye, Kay had long ago become her own executioner; she shamed herself over her own corpse, her long hair draping over the bruised and bleeding neck. Now a door seemed to open; she started at the sudden light; she covered herself with her own skin, and rose red and naked in the opening light. A saviour stood in the doorway, perhaps, a kind face and outstretched hand. *Nothing here but me!* she cried; all tormentors took to shadows, and her hand revealed its own whip. How could she stand such perplexed brows, such silent, wondering questions? *Who has been wronged here?*, her judge might ask. *I* – she would reply – *I have*



*been wronged, for I am wrong!* What court would take this as an answer? *No – this will not do!* the judge would laugh, shaking his hoary head, *for we are not born to beatings!* What stand could she take? Kay had lived in the shadows, the shadows of her mother’s cold smile and blurred hands; her *life* was darkness – how could she call such a world-wide shadow to the stand? Whose eyes could detect such subtle shifts in light? Would not her judge say: *you call the world to the stand, yet you are alone in your cell: take it yourself!* No – in the face of such surrounding shadows it was better to clap one’s hands over one’s eyes and *become* darkness. Moonless cracks lost in the shadows of scars – who would enter such a landscape? Whose frail lights could find her twisted soul among the rocks? Who would not lean over such a trembling soul and say: *you have done this to yourself!* We find a soul broken for its noble secrets and weep for its honourable wounds; souls broken for evil secrets, childish secrets, family secrets, find no such pity; the world hears only the squeezing laughter of the self-condemned and turns away in disgust.

These inklings darted through Kay’s mind as she stared at Lydia; she heard the faint slap of a rope snaking towards her, as if down a deep well, but she felt alone, banished, and shamed herself for falling in. The rope fell complete and lay in tangled coils at her feet.

She lowered her head.

“Excuse me,” she said, turning to leave.

“Wait a moment,” said Lydia. “I couldn’t help but overhear…”

Kay paused, her legs trembling.

“It seems to me that you’re treating your daughter badly,” said Lydia, turning to Lady Barbara.

Lady Barbara’s breath hissed. “May I remind you that you are a guest in this house,” she said evenly.

“Yes – and a guest would be remiss if she did not wake her host on smelling smoke.”

“An entirely inappropriate analogy,” said Lady Barbara carefully, her voice spinning on glass. “These are private matters.”

“If your daughter was ill, would you turn the physician away on the grounds of secrecy?”

“My daughter is not ill,” said Lady Barbara calmly.

“Are you?” asked Lydia, turning to Kay. “Are you ill at heart?”

Kay stood rooted on the spot, her eyes darting from Lydia’s kind face to her mother’s drumming nails.

“I…” she faltered, taking a deep, shuddering breath. “I… feel a little dizzy.”

“I don’t think any mother has the right to speak to her child as you do, Lady Barbara,” said Lydia.

Lady Barbara rose. “I do not have to sit and listen to a stranger – a guest – telling me how to raise my children. I wish you to leave my house.”

“I would be remiss in my duties if I left your house now,” said Lydia softly.

“That was not a request,” said Lady Barbara.

“Yet if I understand your son’s position correctly,” replied Lydia, “you are in no position to do anything other than request.”

“You – tramp!” whispered Lady Barbara, licking her lips. “Do you think you have him so wrapped around your finger?”

“I will not be spoken to in that way. You will keep a civil tongue in your head.”

Lady Barbara’s face turned almost purple. “This – this is my house!”

“Even if that were true, it would not excuse your cruelty towards your daughter.”

“Cruelty! This child is – senseless!”

Kay took a step backward, raising her hands. “Please!”

Jonathon entered the room. “Lydia?” he asked.

“Not now, Jonathon,” said Lydia, not moving her gaze from Lady Barbara’s eyes.

Jonathon took a look at the triangle and grinned. “Ah – the Valkyrie rides again! Mind if I watch?” he asked, leaning against the wall.

“Jonathon!” cried Kay. “I’m sorry!”

He looked at her curiously. “For what?”

“This is ridiculous!” said Lady Barbara.

“What did Kay do to deserve such abuse?” asked Lydia.

“She disobeyed me!” cried the old woman.

“I am disobeying you,” said Lydia evenly. “Will you abuse me now?”

“I never laid a finger on her!”

“You don’t have to. I am disobeying you. Why don’t you call me a selfish, pathetic failure?”

“You are a guest!”

“I am not acting like a guest.”

“That is your crime!”

“Why do you not abuse me?”

“Why should I?”

“Why not? You seem to enjoy it.”

“That is too much!” cried Lady Barbara. “I will not be abused!”

“Why is that abuse?” asked Lydia.

“Why? Why – because it is unfair! Ahhh, you don’t have children, you don’t understand.

You think you’re all high and mighty because you can step into a situation and assign blame to whomever you please. But you try raising these children! You try it! They are hopeless!”

“Oh? And who made them that way?”

“Yes, go on, blame the mother! That’s what you young people always do!”

“Mothers are always blameless?” asked Jonathon.

“I was not speaking to you!” said Lady Barbara, whirling on him.

Jonathon raised his hands. “Easy! A simple question!”

“You have no right to ask such questions! What responsibilities have you ever taken?”

“Oh? You know me so well?”

“Enough to know that you are acting out of lust for my daughter!”

Kay turned away, her hands wandering over her ears.

“You see?” cried Lady Barbara. “The child cannot even bear the truth!”

“You are too harsh,” said Lydia. “You bruise these delicacies.”

Lady Barbara turned to her and smiled. “Am I? You wish to corner me, but it will not be so easy. I will speak the truth, though you condemn me for it. I will say that this young layabout is

lusting after my daughter, and you – you – are lusting after my son. Is that the truth you wish to hear? Or do you prefer your little delicacies?”

“I am attracted to your son,” said Lydia. “Jonathon?”

He grinned at Kay. “I think she’s ripe. Definitely.”

Lydia almost laughed. “Anything else?” Lady Barbara was silent. “Then you will listen to me for a moment,” continued Lydia. “I think you are very unfair. I think that you bully your children. I think – no I know – that you will not try bullying me because you are afraid of me. This is not because I am stronger than your daughter – it is because I am not your daughter, thank heavens! If I were, I would be as she is. As you are, Kay. You are not to blame. You are to be congratulated for keeping any sense of yourself. It takes more strength than most have.”

Kay turned to her mother, lowering her hands. “I think – I think you do me wrong sometimes,” she said, her voice trembling.

Lady Barbara’s lips curled. “How brave you are, child, surrounded by bullies.”

“You do me wrong,” said Kay suddenly, passionately. “You do me wrong!”

“You prefer your friends to your mother? Very well – let them change your nappies. I wash my hands of you!” She glared at Kay for a long, venomous moment, then turned and left the room.

Lydia stared at the doorway for a long moment, feeling her heartbeat slowly returning to normal.

“Well!” grinned Jonathon, flopping into a chair and clasping his hands behind his head. “I said to myself: ‘bring your lance’. But no, I left it with my horse. Need it, don’t have it. Have it, don’t need it. Story of my life.”

Lydia turned to Kay.

“Are you all right?” she asked. Kay shook her head numbly.

“What have you done?” she whispered.

“Do you want to lie down?”

“No – Laurence and I must go to the farm – we have an appointment – we – he’s coming to... fetch me...”

Her voice faltered, and she leaned dangerously to one side.

“Hup! This way!” cried Jonathon, leaping up to catch her as she fainted.

Holding her limp body in his arms, he turned to Lydia and grinned.

“Nice job – what’s for lunch? Elephant-wrestling?”

Lydia laughed. “You know – I can still stand you sometimes. Thank you.”

“Days of St. George, you know,” he said, carrying Kay into the drawing room. “They never end.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY

### *An Illness Begins to Manifest*

LAURENCE WENT ALONE TO SEE ADAM; he was not surprised that his sister had fainted; he had always suspected she was an thinly-iced volcano. Lydia offered to accompany him, but he declined, feeling odd about his visit. On the way out of the house, he was surprised to see Knotted Bob lurching up the path towards the house.

“Good morning, Bob,” he said, smoothing his hair.

“Fair sunny t’ye, good sair,” said the ancient man, stopping and stooping.

“What brings you here?”

“Come t’see th’lass,” he said, wiping his face. “Hain’t been myself since th’other night. How are ye faring?”

“It was a shock. How is your arm?”

Knotted Bob flexed it. Birds scattered, startled. “Me joints popped out when I hit th’tree. Popped ‘em back in, and came for ye. No lasting harm.”

“How is the village?”

“Jigger’s are decamping,” replied Knotted Bob. “The whole town’s gone scurvy. Children squalling, wives staying with their mothers, husbands staying with their drinks. They’re all abreath for their lord and master.”

Laurence sighed. “I am going to the Jiggers now.”

“Need some rope?”

“I’m still considering what to do.”

The old man's lips tightened. "S' a fair breeze today, Lord," he murmured, glancing at the sky. "They'd twist well."

There was a pause. Laurence nodded. "Thank you."

"How is th'lass?"

"Quite well, all things considered."

"Has she spoken t'ye?"

"Yes. Oh yes."

"Tragedic," muttered Knotted Bob. "Terrible tragedic. She may be horned, but there's wrong at the roots."

Laurence touched his beard. "Horned?"

"Comes off her like brimstone up th'nose. Her heart's as black as a new baby rolled in coal. Maybe red inside – who's to tell? Who can squint in such caves?"

Laurence frowned. "Yes. Well, I will have to call her to testify against the Jiggers."

The old man nodded. "That's a start. 'Bleed the venom', I cry. Bleed the venom. It's her only hope. Her only flight from a dark cage. If she wants it."

A cloud seemed to hang over the village, a cloud of furtive hope, like the eyes of a child fearing correction from a distracted father. He nodded at known faces; they did not respond, but turned away to invented tasks. Children ran wild, chasing birds and tormenting cats; women huddled in groups, gesticulating, their voices shrill. A lonely cow lowed in the village square, prodded by shouting boys.

A young man ran up to Laurence, his face red.



“Lord Carvey! How are you?”

“Well, thank you,” nodded Laurence.

“Harry,” said the youth, bowing awkwardly. “Harry Turnpike – I am the buyer for the Jiggers. Just back from Tottenham, yes sir, just back this morning. Good morning to just come back, I say. Bad time to have stayed, sir. You understand.”

“What? Yes, thank you. Have you heard anything?”

“Bits and scraps, sir. Something’s underfoot; I don’t like the smell. Everyone’s talking – what happened?”

“You will learn soon enough,” said Laurence, turning and walking on.

“Thank you, sir,” called the youth, waving frantically. “Been away – don’t know! You understand!”

Laurence felt strange walking up the path the Jigger’s farmhouse. He remembered the night, so many years before, when he had entered, crisp on the wings of travel and youth, to scatter a naked bird to the harsh winds...

He knocked on the heavy oak door, hearing the sounds of a women crying. He knocked again; after a pause, the door opened to reveal Wife Jigger.

“Good morning, Wife Jigger,” said Laurence.

Her eyes began to stream, and she wiped them with the back of her forearm.

“God bless you, Lord, and forgive me,” she said with a hurried curtsy. “Goodness your grace looks well; I always said you were a handsome steeple – how right I was, how right... Is everything well at the house? What news of the land?” Her hand wandered up the doorframe. “What is going to happen to my husband? He’s a good man; confused, but with a heart of gold.

He hasn't said a stitch; trying to preserve me, bless his troubled soul. But I know it's something bad. He must've lost control; I know he – he does. Is it anything we can repair? We have some money – the crops've been good, bless you. But we're old now. He doesn't get out much; he's got a lot of sorrows. I do what I can. Is there any chance of us being... left in peace?"

"I'm afraid not," said Laurence. "This is a very serious matter."

"Oh Lord, serious matters are for men! We have our children to think of, and accounts to keep; what passes for serious in men's lives I have no idea! He won't tell me. The world is a mystery to me. But I have always done right. Always done right..."

"I know," murmured Laurence. "You are not part of this. But it cannot go unpunished. He..."

Wife Jigger raised her hands as if to ward off a blow. "No – this is between ye and he. I'll get him."

"Thank you."

The old woman went into the house. He remembered golden hair, and thought: *she had a daughter, probably gone and married...*

Wife Jigger returned, wringing her hands apologetically.

"He's in the garden, sire – asked me to lead you through."

Laurence nodded and followed her. The house was silent. He glanced through a doorway to the empty dining room; his words lurked there: *Well you play your cards right, and you just may go to Italy...* Laurence turned, regarding the doorway he had just passed through; he felt an elemental shiver, recalling the evil of that night, when the darkness seemed to glare at him from beyond the door...

Farmer Jigger knelt in the garden, uprooting plants. A large pile of torn greenery lay at his feet.

“Farmer Jigger,” said Laurence, walking towards him.

The old man raised his eyes and looked at him.

“You have come to ensure I leave?” said Farmer Jigger slowly.

“No,” said Laurence. “I have come to – to... You must be tried.”

“Tried?”

“I am not going to banish you. I am going to try you. All of you.”

The words seemed to have no effect on the old man. He turned his hands over, regarding the hair on the back of his fingers.

“Supposing you tell me what this be about,” he said finally, squinting up at Laurence.

“You tried to murder a young woman,” said Laurence. “You and at least a dozen others. This cannot go unpunished.”

Farmer Jigger held his gaze for a long moment, then nodded slowly.

“I set them up,” he said. “T’was my idea. They obeyed me a-cause I hold the reins here. If they hadn’t obeyed me I would have done them all in.”

Laurence blinked. “They are responsible for their actions.”

“Aye,” said the old man slowly. “As you were for yours.”

“Excuse me?”

“Ye be our lord. That is the way of the world. But ye brought vermin into our town. Ye loosed stealing drunken scum on us. My barn was burned down. I stand by my actions.”

“Why not come to me?”

“Because ye were bewitched. Ye are still. I know the signs. The witch has you. She took yer sister, then she took ye.”

“What witch? Mary?”

“Don’t speak her name on my property, if ye please,” said Farmer Jigger, standing painfully and crossing himself.

“She’s not a witch.”

Farmer Jigger regarded him almost compassionately. “You were a good lord, sire. You always did good by us – more’n most. We loved you. Then you turned on us. What were we to do?”

“If you were unhappy, you should have come to me. You should have respected the law.”

“Ye be the law, sire. Ye did this to us. Ye did not come to us. Should I have trotted to London and pleaded my pains with the King?”

“I would have done anything to prevent this.”

“Ye did it to begin with.”

“You should not have taken the law into your own hands.”

“So now ye must take the law into yer hands. Make an example of me – hang me from the highest tree, if ye’ve a mind. But leave the others alone. Don’t barren our lands, Lord. None will profit.”

“You will all receive a fair trial.”

Farmer Jigger scowled. “Aye – at your hands, with the witch whispering into your ear. I am not built for pleading. All I can offer is myself. Leave th’others be.”

Laurence paused. His skin twitched, just below an eye. "I cannot," he said.

"Who says so? The witch?"

*No – my mother*, thought Laurence suddenly, and the thought sent shivers down his spine.

"Come with me now," he said.

"I offer no fight. But can I clear up my affairs first? I have family."

"How long do you need?"

"I will be done by sundown. I will come to the square."

"Very well."

Laurence left the farmhouse with a heavy heart. *What have I been doing?* he thought, walking aimlessly down the rutted road. He had always prided himself on his relationship with his subjects. Now he had to hang one of them – possibly more. *Of course, it's not all strawberries and Italy...* Still, he could only half-shake the wish that Mary was far away. He imagined her out of his life, then it struck him that, for her, being far away from him meant being far away from his protection, and her image rose in his mind; half-starved, sleeping in ditches, vulnerable, hopeless, mad, and he sighed, realizing that she was also his responsibility. *When I lived for myself*, he thought, *my time was my own...* How impossible his life seemed to have become! Yet she did not provoke the attack; she only wanted to help the unfortunate. *Perhaps she is the herald of a new age of caring, and like any herald, she has to face the anger of those who shake before her sudden trumpets...*

Lost in his thoughts, he did not hear the voice at first.

"Lord Laurence," called Adam again.

Laurence turned, and saw the merchant walking towards him. He was smiling.

“Lord Laurence!” he cried, waving his wide-brimmed hat. “Where is that sister of yours?”

“She was taken ill this morning,” replied Laurence. *Case of maternal flu.*

“What a shame. Serious?”

“Just – temporary.”

“I was told that you were coming to the Jiggers. What happened? Town’s gone all headless!”

“Two nights ago, Mary was assaulted and almost killed by the men of the village.”

“What?” cried Adam. “Is she all right?”

*He didn’t ask why*, thought Laurence. “Yes – barely. I came to arrange for the trial of Farmer Jigger and perhaps a dozen others.”

Adam whistled. “Badness,” he muttered, then brightened. “I don’t suppose this will cheer you up any, but you should come to the workhouse.”

“What’s happened?”

“I think it’s better seen than spoken,” said Adam.

They walked for a time in silence. Laurence felt a sudden urge to confide in the young merchant. There was something elementally healthy about him, like the feeling he got from Lydia, but without any of the complications. He imagined a clear, confident response, an unbiased solution to all his problems. Yet the man was of a different world; ‘with power over others comes responsibility for others,’ Laurence imagined him saying; ‘if you want to change places, I will hang them high and sleep deep...’

They approached a low building of rough wood, set in a barren field. Birds circled overhead, confused and squawking.

“They put this up in one day!” said Adam. “I never would’ve expected it. God but they grumbled! I had to oversee every nail. Fell down once, but we fixed it.”

“Where did you get the materials?”

“I ordered them from London while I was there, along with the looms. They came yesterday morning. Now we can work in the rain.”

“Good job,” said Laurence with a slight shudder. *Am I coming down with something?*

They stopped outside the building. “The miracle’s not the outside, but the inside,” said Adam. “I may owe your sister an apology. I didn’t expect this.”

“Show me,” said Laurence.

Adam opened the wide door with a flourish.

It took Laurence’s eyes a moment to adjust to the dark interior. He squinted, then his eyes cleared. What he saw astounded him.

## CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

### *Half a Confession*

“YER LEGS?” ASKED KNOTTED BOB. He sat beside Mary in the guest room, stirring his tea.

“They will heal,” she murmured. “I will be scarred, but only skin-deep.” She smiled. “I can still be lovely.”

“I wish I could’ve done more,” said the old man. “Time was, in my sapling days, I could’ve felled ‘em with a plank. Thought at first they just meant to scare ye.”

Mary glanced at him. “They didn’t.”

“Aye, ye’re a very portrait of courage.”

“No – it’s true. I was not afraid. I thought: if they kill me, I could never have succeeded; if I live, I will almost certainly succeed.”

“Succeed in what?”

“Why, my plan,” smiled Mary.

“Shouting down a well, he gains only an echo,” said Knotted Bob. “And less light.”

Mary laughed. “You are very quaint.”

“What plan?” he repeated.

“Why, power over life and death,” said Mary.

“The good Lord has the monopoly,” said Knotted Bob slowly.

“Which lord do you mean?” asked Mary.

“The one in heaven. The one who looks into your soul and knows all it’s hidings. Th’one that says: ‘turn th’other cheek’.”



“Oh, that one. Well, it seems that only applies to some.”

“Say.”

“You really want to know?”

“Say, and I’ll reply.”

Mary reached behind her and plumped her pillow. “Did Laurence ever have to turn the other cheek? Never mind. It’s rhetorical. Some are born with the power of life or death; if you cross them, you die.” She half-closed her eyes. “Or, more accurately, they try to kill you. What they don’t know is that the power of life or death is only two-fold. Let live or let die. For sure as sunrise, if what they let die lives, their power becomes a two-edged sword. Their supposed ghosts return with tangible chains.”

“He was young, a sapling. Barely with beard.”

Mary smiled. “Which is why I had to leave. Now he is a man, with a man’s sense of right and wrong. Which is why I was able to return.”

“What be your tomorrows? You’re skirting something fierce.”

“The good Lord – in heaven – He loves to test the faithful. Sometimes He tests them with plagues, sometimes with hunger, sometimes with war – and sometimes with people. When I wandered in the wilderness, I was visited by a voice. It said: ‘you shall be the test of these times’. Yes, you may widen your eyes; you think these are only old tales. Yet God lives eternally. He speaks eternally.”

Knotted Bob frowned, rubbing his face. “Aye – perhaps.”

“Do you remember I once said: ‘I will rage against God’?” asked Mary. Knotted Bob nodded. “I thought at the time that God had cast me out,” she continued. “That was hatred.

Then I thought society cast me out. This was vanity. Then I thought: Laurence cast me out, and this was wisdom. Tell me: do you ever think that there is something terribly wrong with the world? Do you ever think: ‘this is not how it’s supposed to be?’”

Knotted Bob looked at his hands. “I be a man.”

“No,” said Mary. “You ‘be’ a wronged man. The wrong of the world lives in the excluded, the exiled, the poor, the violated. I thought: if I do not fit the world, the world must fit me. I must bend it to my will.”

“Aye – yer conceits drown me!” cried the old man, crossing himself.

“Survival is not vanity,” said Mary. “I will not be condemned for wanting to live! Something had to give. The world or me. I resolved: not me!”

“All this the voice spoke?”

Mary smiled. “No – of course not. God does not give answers; that would take away the miracle. The miracle is how we respond to His questions.”

“Pah! Too oily.”

“The word you want is ‘sophist’, but I am no sophist. I may be slippery; I’m not oily. I thought: if the world is to give way, it must recognize me – and if it recognizes me, it must recognize the banished. The poor. And will you tell me with a straight face that this was not Christ’s message to the world?”

Knotted Bob looked down and shook his head.

“I will take that as a yes; I know how galling it is to be corrected. Then the question arose: how can the world see the exiled? Being in the wilderness, I had ample time to think on this. Then it hit me: the world can only see the exiled by being exiled itself!”

“I’m no bright spark; ye’ve lost me,” said Knotted Bob, looking up.

Mary smiled. “If the world says: ‘I am exiled’, it recognizes itself in all exiles. Suddenly the power of wealth, position and privilege fall away, or are revealed for what they are, for what they have always been: an illusion. We all have the same destination; we are all born of the same mothers; we all drift from dust to dust – everything in between is just imagination. Does St. Peter guard the pearly gates with the words: ‘did you have the power of life and death?’ No – he says: ‘did you use your power for good?’ I was born with a kind of power – perhaps the greatest power. I can penetrate the hearts of men – and women. I can see into their souls.”

“Aye, perhaps. Ye’ve uncanny eyes. But can they turn on yourself?”

Mary waved a hand. “I know myself perfectly. Could I have survived in a state of ignorance? No – ignorance kills.” She almost smiled. “Or tries to. No, my power is greater than any sword. I know that men will do anything rather than face the truth of their crimes. I know their crimes: thus I can bend them to my will. No – not my will – I saw that look. The will of the good. God’s will, if you like.”

“What be their crimes?”

“Crime,” corrected Mary. “There is only one crime in the world.”

“Stumbler of secrets: brighten me.”

“Why: the wish to have what we have not earned! Look at the thief: he steals what he will not earn. The man who lies for love: a thief of hearts. The braggart: a thief of courage. The liar: a thief of truth. The priest: a thief of authority. Only God has authority.”

“Aye – and the bright sparks: thieves of darkness?”

“You’re close – very close – but you cannot see,” said Mary, glancing at him quickly.

“Intelligence is dangerous; being intelligent does not make others stupid, but it does make them gullible. Thus the intelligent person can make them do wrong for the sake of goodness. How does one define goodness?” Mary leaned back and stared at the ceiling, closing her eyes.

“That’s the whole secret. Make a man think something is good; and he is yours. He cannot stand against you. You only have to remind him, and you control him as surely as if you wear his skin. But you must be patient. These vines grow strong, but slow. Remind him of the good – he will flail at you, at what you provoke him to do, at the destruction of his illusions, but because you are only telling him what he already believes, he cannot fight you. He can only fight you by fighting himself, and what is the risk in that? Everyone around him is saying the same thing: sacrifice, sacrifice... He needs to sacrifice himself, but no-one tells him how. Tell him how – show him the cliff, and you need not move a muscle – he will jump himself, and on the rocks below he will find his good!”

Knotted Bob stood, his brow dark. “Ye have not changed. Ye be the same devil I knew at first!” he growled.

Mary looked at him; her eyes widened. “Good Lord, Bob! I am speaking of the danger of intelligence! Do you think you can harm a man by appealing to his goodness? You show me a truly good man, and I will show you a man beyond the power of evil. I only remind people of the virtue of sacrifice – and I am not the first; Calvary was the last, the greatest such example. Did Christ try to gain the power of life and death? No – it was offered, but he refused. He took the power of salvation, which was only proper. He said: ‘cast off your riches and follow me!’ Here Laurence lives in his little mansion, and the cost of one of his dinner plates could feed a

family for a month! I say to him: care for the exiled, or be exiled from goodness. These are not my words; they come from God himself! I only remind; I do not command; that is not my place; I am only mortal. This is what the voice spoke: 'you will be the test of the times'. The men of these times think that good china is more important than feeding their fellow man. Will you condemn me for reminding them that this is not so?"

"Ye speak truth; I hear it in my ears," said Knotted Bob, still standing. "But my heart says you are false."

"I did not invent this goodness," said Mary. "I only apply it."

"For who's gain?"

"For death's gain. For the knowledge of better after death. For the goodness of death, of everlasting life."

"Something's rotten; something's twisted; something's flapping in the wind," said Knotted Bob. "But I can't sniff it out."

"No," said Mary softly. "Because you believe in the same good."

"And ye? Do ye?"

"Do I what?"

"Do ye believe in sacrifice?"

"What a question!" cried Mary, clapping her hands. "I'm enforcing it, aren't I?"

## CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

### *The Cost of Charity*

LAURENCE STARED AT THE INTERIOR OF THE WORKSHOP. He blinked, shocked at the sense of concentration that hung in the dusty air.

Eyes stared; hands whirred; no jokes or curses cut the air. Even the children too young to work sat silently in corners, watching the activity in bewildered awe.

“You see?” cried Adam.

Laurence looked at the faces; they seemed completely unrelated to the scurvy portraits of human destruction he had first seen. They had been washed, fed; their hair had been painfully combed; they seemed like schoolchildren bent over their first lesson.

Then he saw, near the back of the building, the red-headed man who had spat at him. He carried something; Laurence could not make it out.

“That’s Jake,” said Adam. “A wizard of order.”

“What’s that in his hand?”

“His magic,” smiled the merchant.

“A – Bible?”

“No,” said Adam. “A whip.”

“What?”

“You want the results, you have to apply the pressure. They’re not used to this.”

“Is that what other managers use?”

“No,” said Adam slowly. “Other managers only hire those that want to work. They’ll get used to it – see them when they’ve had their first taste of real coin. Then they’ll know what’s good for them.”

“Any trouble so far?” asked Laurence, gazing at the scene.

“None worth writing home about. They listen to him,” said Adam. “Which is more than I expected.”

“I don’t like it,” said Laurence.

“Come outside, sir, if you please,” said Adam. “We’re within earshot.”

They stepped outside; Laurence shielded his eyes from the sudden sun.

“I don’t like it, Mr. Footer,” he repeated.

“You wouldn’t let me hire any others,” replied Adam. “You’re full of compassion; that’s admirable. But compassion shouldn’t elbow common sense. You want to mix charity with business; that’s your business. But when you hire me to get a job done, it becomes my business. I do what I have to.”

“Has anyone been beaten?”

Adam paused. “Yes.”

“Who?”

“A few who wanted to go play. I offered them the chance to leave; hell I can’t really offer that – they can stroll at any time. They want the money; I have to make sure they earn it. Now they’re earning it.”

“Look – when I approached the farmers with better ways of doing things,” said Laurence, “there were those who didn’t want to change. I showed some; they succeeded, and the others came around. It took time, but I was patient. I didn’t beat them.”

“This is what I keep saying. I’m sorry if I haven’t been clear, sir. You were dealing with farmers, working souls to a man. They knew what was what. This lot,” said Adam, jabbing his thumb at the workshop, “wouldn’t know an honest day’s work if it slapped them in the face. You wanted this lot; you said: these are your workers. Lord – I’d have preferred farmhands; they’re not used to this kind of work, but they’re used to work. This is a kind of contract; they don’t work, they’re breaking the contract. As I said, they stroll into the sunset any time they please.”

“How many did you beat? Tell me the truth.”

“Twelve? Thirteen? I wasn’t counting. And I never laid a finger on them. Not my line.”

“Women?”

“Only three,” replied Adam. “As a whole, they’re more sensible.”

Laurence paused. He looked over the fields in the bright distance, remembering the feeling of strident life he had striding over them, explaining his theories. The faces; of course they had been suspicious, but he could appeal to them; he needed no whips; he could press plenty into such fists until they opened of their own accord.

“This is wrong,” he murmured, closing his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” asked Adam. “They’re a swarthy lot, but things are going hummily now. A week ago they probably robbed grannies. Now they’re working like real people. Not my choice, but better than nothing.”



*I am hanging a man for murder tonight, thought Laurence, and condoning whippings on my own land!* He ran his fingers through his hair.

“No more beatings,” he said, turning to the merchant.

“Then let me hire my own men!” replied Adam.

“No!” said Laurence. “We will help these people.”

“Every one here takes the place of an honest man with a family to feed. What about them?”

“We can’t help everyone at once.”

“Then why not help those who deserve it?”

“They can help themselves!”

“That’s not true. I know a hundred good men without work. They’d give us no trouble.

We’d need no whips.”

Laurence felt a tension in his chest. “We help these people!” he said, his voice rising.

“Without whips!”

“I have a reputation!” replied Adam. “These looms are my ticket. Word gets out they don’t make money, I’m sunk!”

“No more beatings!”

Adam regarded Laurence for a moment, then lowered his head. “I’m afraid then,” he said slowly, “that our relationship is at an end.”

“I will hire someone else.”

“I cannot leave my looms here.”

“I will pay twice their value.”

“I cannot sell them to you. If they don’t produce, word will get out.”

“Damn it!” cried Laurence. “Is it so hard to do good?” He looked away, clenching his jaw. “All right,” he said finally. “One week. You may discipline them for one more week. After that: no more.”

Adam paused, considering.

“If I think they are not ready after a week, I will leave. With my looms.”

“That will be your decision,” said Laurence. “Now I must go. I have about hundred legal books to go through before the trial tonight.”

Adam said good-bye and watched him go. He sighed, turned and went back into the factory. As he walked along the rows of downcast heads, he seemed to pull a strange tide behind him. Ahead of him, they worked silently; in his wake, they raised bitter eyes and watched his back.

## CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

### *A Hopeful Rebuke*

“PRIDE HAS BROUGHT VIOLENCE TO OUR LAND!” shouted Father Jones.

The villagers shifted; they had never seen him so angry. Their womb of comfort had become a bed of nettles.

The priest paced before the altar. “A helpless woman has been attacked under our very noses, as we slept! By some who may be present!” he cried, glaring at the congregation.

“Do we learn nothing from the Bible? Do we learn nothing from Christ? Was he not also provoked? Did he leap at Pontius Pilate and strangle him for his evil? No – he placed his faith in God and submitted quietly to all injustice! But that’s not good enough for us, is it– no, we do not have to turn the other cheek. We do not listen to the Holy Words: ‘if your brother sins against you, go and speak with him!’ No – we can avenge ourselves! We can fire ourselves up and turn on the helpless with hatred in our hearts!”

Father Jones stopped at his podium and mopped his forehead with a handkerchief.

“There is no doubt that an evil has come among us,” he said. “Godless souls have entered our village. They steal, curse and spit. They cannot be reasoned with; they have no faith. They are not helpless outcasts, but violent rebels! But my brothers – they have been placed here to test us! If we feel Lord Laurence has sinned against us, we must submit to his authority; his will is not ours to question. We may not take the law into our own hands! We may not tear a woman from her bed and try to murder her in cold blood! My brothers! Look at the evil you have unleashed! Where was your patience? Where was your charity? Where was your faith? You

have taken heavy burdens on your souls, each and every one of you who knew of these foul dealings! Your hands are stained with blood!”

The congregation sat, their faces drained.

“Now we must pay a heavy price,” said Father Jones. “Having forgotten the humility of Christ, we must now submit to the justice of this world. Now we must watch our fellows be tried for their crimes, and probably pay the highest penalty. I know that there are those among you who see this as an injustice. I know that there are those among you who will see this as Mary O’Donnel’s doing, who will harbour hatred for the poor orphan. I know you are present, and I say to you: there will be no more injustice in our lands! If you nurture hatred to this outcast, this poor woman, you blacken your souls in the eyes of Almighty God!”

Father Jones stopped suddenly. He took a deep breath.

“Hard times are upon us, brothers. We are being tested. We must be strong. That is all. There will be no singing today.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

### *The Teeth of Privilege*

LAURENCE COULD FIND NO FORGIVENESS. The last witch had been legally burned almost a hundred years before. The practice of prosecuting witches had come to an end half a century later, when Chief Justice Holt had set the precedent of prosecuting anyone who complained of being bewitched on the grounds of fraud. The ‘pretense of witchcraft’ was still a punishable offense, but it required the active impersonation of a witch, and Mary as had shown no predilection for black hats, cats or broomsticks, there was no escape for Farmer Jigger and the others. It was attempted murder, pure and simple.

Laurence had sent for Orson Andrews, his bailiff, to come and discuss the case. By late afternoon, Laurence was perusing old cases more as a distraction than anything else. Bailiff Andrews was shown into the library.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Andrews,” said Laurence, rising.

“Afternoon, Lord,” replied Bailiff Andrews slowly.

Bailiff Andrews had a stern face; no, it was more than stern; it was stone. It had all the animation of an arthritic tree. He wore large clothes over his shapeless body, looking for all the world like a statue abandoned in despair, standing in a dusty workshop while the sculptor strove to drink himself into oblivion for failing to make it lifelike. The villagers had long ago learned to respect the face of Orson Andrews; its impassivity held firm like an enemy in dreams; it accepted no bribes, returned no smiles, and favoured no man over precedent.

Laurence almost hesitated to offer him a seat. The man didn’t appear able to bend.

“I’ve just returned from Trenton,” said the bailiff. “Sam Wetherspoon has told me. Farmer Jigger is now in my custody.”

“The trial is set for this evening. What do you know about witch trials?”

“Never seen one. Can’t be done nowadays.”

*Was that regret in his voice?* wondered Laurence. “What is your opinion?” he asked.

Bailiff Andrews stared at the young man, as if only now realizing he had to have one. This was an illusion, of course; the Andrews had been bailiffs for many generations; their knowledge of common law was impressive.

“Well,” he said eventually. “We have a thorn. Capital crimes are hard on a village. No villager has been hung for murder since the days of Yarwood Andrews, over a hundred years ago. No member of the village council has been found guilty of a crime in living memory; last was John Mudder, fined eight shillings for letting his pigs run wild. We’ll have no problem with the jury; don’t need one; he was caught red-handed. The problem is not Farmer Jigger – he must hang – the problem is the others with him. The twelve.”

“What should we do?”

“The problem is that they haven’t confessed. And probably won’t. We could get the confessions out of them, but that would be messy. Their trial would have to be by jury. Since most of ‘em are likely to be council members, it would have to be a dozen poor folk judging council members. There are only four witnesses...”

“Four? Myself, Mary O’Donnel, Knotted Bob and..?”

“Farmer Jigger. Sir.”

“Of course.”

“He won’t testify; he’ll hang anyway, and he’s got his pride. So that leaves Miss O’Donnel, Knotted Bob and yourself. Knotted Bob is out; his eyes are squinty. You?”

“It was dark; they all crashed off into the bushes when I arrived.”

“Could you tell any by sight?”

“Not surely enough to hang them.”

“Then that leaves Miss O’Donnel. Have you asked her what she saw?”

“I – er – no.”

Bailiff Andrews looked at Laurence, as if to say: *Why? Too busy in your library?* The young man was never quite sure if he got along with his bailiff.

“Let’s assume that she can identify the men,” said Laurence. “What then?”

Bailiff Andrews almost blinked. “Then we have another thorn, sir.”

“What do you mean?”

“She can’t stay here if she reveals the twelve. She would be more than shunned. So if she tells who was there, and no alibis, we have to hang them. Twelve families will have to be cared for. A new village council will have to be elected from scratch. Now we both know that Miss O’Donnel is a very unusual person; never seen her kind before, hopefully never will again. But the purpose of law is not only to punish, but also to prevent. There is little fear of a repeat offense if she leaves. She will tell; she will go, and we will have to pick up the pieces. I can’t see the point in hanging our whole council.”

“But they did wrong.”

“Aye – you have a fact there. But you also did wrong.”

“How?”

“By bringing in the thieves without asking.”

“Is that what the villagers feel?”

“It’s what they *know*, sir,” corrected Bailiff Andrews. “I have received over a dozen complaints of thieving in the last two days. We are going to have to try your workers as well, when we have some evidence. This will be very difficult; there are few witnesses; all the villagers know is that these people came, and their goods started disappearing. Who can we pin this on? How can justice be served? The villagers want these people gone.”

“I know,” said Laurence. “But they also will be bringing a lot of money into the village. The cloth they make will be sold for good gold.”

“The people have no need for more wealth just now. They’re still getting used to what they’ve got.”

“But the fact remains: these men did wrong.”

“They were provoked,” replied the bailiff. “They felt they had no-one to turn to. You seemed to change from sundown to sunup. They took matters into their own hands; I say we hang Jigger, and leave other parties in peace to learn their lesson.”

Laurence paused for a moment, then shook his head. “I cannot agree to that. They were involved in a capital offense. I believe we should put Mary on the stand; if she can identify the men involved, we must punish them. Not necessarily by death.”

“If we put Miss O’Donnel on the stand,” said Bailiff Andrews, “we have to put you on the stand.”

“Why? It was dark!”



“It was dark for you both. She was afraid, confused; she thought she was going to die. She would have, if you had not arrived. We cannot hang men on such single evidence. It must be corroborated.”

“Knotted Bob may have recognized the voices?”

“He had just woken up. The men were angry, shouting. It isn’t enough. We are talking capital crime. Why don’t you want to take the stand?”

Laurence paused. “I don’t know.”

“I won’t ask. But can you ask Miss O’Donnel to do what you will not? She was almost killed; she will want to tell the truth.”

*I wouldn’t be so sure of that,* thought Laurence.

“You will have to rule here long after she has gone,” continued the bailiff. “We cannot justly be sure of the twelve; we may punish some; we cannot punish all. Those that remain will be difficult. I say we treat them as one person. We cannot convict all, so we should not convict any. Their wives, their families – the whole village – will swear they were at home that night anyway. It will be an long, ugly business, and I cannot see the profit in it. Strange workings made this crime; when Miss O’Donnel leaves, she takes her workings with her.”

“Do you think she’s a witch?” asked Laurence.

Bailiff Andrews smiled. Almost.

“I wouldn’t leave my son in her care,” he said slowly.

The village gathered early for the trial. The evening air hung heavily. It had been a long time since a public trial; a faithless woman had been whipped five years before; a wandering

thief hung a decade before that. Children were excited, breathless, chasing each other among the huddled groups of parents. Chairs were brought for the elderly; crones sat in silence, attended by their daughters; old men sat and retold stories of old crimes.

There was a strangeness about the gathering; tales of dark magic and ancient superstitions flowed through the measured murmurs. In the soft light of dusk, the comfortable lines of contented faces seemed to melt away, revealing lean masks of fear and want. It had been over a decade since the last real famine; the echoes were present tonight.

The men who had participated in Mary's lynching were there; they had had a hurried meeting at Farmer Jigger's house after Laurence had left, and received assurances of anonymity. It was deemed suicidal to not attend.

Among the twelve, there was a sense of slow grinding panic. The men had sat and scowled at their tables all day, drinking steadily. Their wives had sent the children away and faced their wrath alone; they were particularly silent tonight, standing beside their men and shifting their weight from their bruises. There was an elemental sense of intrusion in the air; Farmer Jigger was the most powerful man in the county; he seemed such an elemental soul that lightning should strike him harmlessly. Now he was to be hung; there was a sick certainty about this, and the village no longer seemed self-contained; a sword was striking from elsewhere.

Just after sundown, the torches were lit. An ancient scaffold was dragged out and set up; Bailiff Andrews oversaw the erection of a simple podium and witness stand. Farmer Jigger was brought out; he stood erect, his eyes locked straight ahead. Wife Jigger shuffled into the crowd. Women looked at her sympathetically; a few patted her arm, and she burst into tears.

Kay arranged for the stable hands to carry Mary from Laurence's house. Mary was positioned in a chair at the edge of the village square; her face immobile, her eyes almost supernaturally alert. Kay sat beside her, holding her hand. Villagers crossed themselves and turned away.

Father Jones also came; he circulated among the villagers, but his words of comfort fell on hard ground. *You are not of this world*, said their closed faces, *you can provide no comfort*.

Jonathon and Lydia did not come; Laurence had asked them not to. They went for a walk, leaving Lady Barbara at home by herself.

Laurence dressed up for the occasion; more than he wanted to, but less than his mother wanted him to. He stood in the center of the square; his normal jocularly and ease with the villagers had disappeared; they respected his need for an authoritarian mask, and gave him a wide berth.

Finally, Bailiff Andrews stood up on the podium.

“Charges brought against Farmer Jigger,” he began without ceremony, “Breaking into Knotted Bob's house. Attempted murder. Resisting arrest. Incitement to crime. Destruction of property under forty shillings. For all these crimes, penalty: death by hanging. Farmer Jigger,” he said, turning to the old man, “how do you plead?”

Farmer Jigger stood taller for a moment, almost sniffing the air. He looked at Laurence, who returned his gaze without expression. He looked at his wife, and his right cheek twitched.. Twelve men's jaws in the crowd tightened.

“How do you plead?” repeated the bailiff.

“Are there any charged with me?” demanded Farmer Jigger.

“Are you confessing to others being with you?” asked Bailiff Andrews.

“Damn it – we know there were! I have offered to take this crime upon meself; I done it; that is common knowledge. But I will fight if ye try to drag others into it. I made ‘em do it.”

“The law does not recognize that,” replied Bailiff Andrews. “You have confessed to the crime, and we thus continue with your plea of ‘guilty’.”

“Hold! I dain’t say the words!”

“You confessed,” replied the bailiff. “You said: ‘I have done it’. You are guilty by your own admission.”

“Damn you, Orson Andrews!” cried Farmer Jigger. “I take this crime but others shain’t.”

“The law does not recognize that.”

“Damn your law!” shouted the old farmer. Twelve pairs of eyes glanced furtively at each other.

“We know that others were involved,” said Bailiff Andrews, turning to the crowd. “We know that probably a dozen men standing in this square were party to this crime. Do any confess their wrong before this court and God?”

Silence.

“I ask again: do any confess their wrong before this court and God?”

Silence. One could almost hear the moonlight fall.

“We cannot let this wrong pass unpunished,” said Bailiff Andrews finally, turning to the stand. He placed a black cloth over his head. “Farmer Jigger: you are sentenced to death by hanging. Do you have anything to say?”

The old man turned, glared at Laurence, then shook his head slowly.

“Mary O’Donnel,” cried Bailiff Andrews, turning to her, “can you see any man here who was there that night?”

Mary sat up, helped by Kay. The hatred in the air was almost tangible, though whether it came from the villagers or from Mary was unclear.

“I knew of Farmer Jigger,” she said. “I grew up in his house. The other men – their faces were twisted; I could not see them well. Only one other did I recognize.”

“Who was that?”

“John Mudder,” said Mary, her voice strangely restrained. John Mudder, the boy who had tortured her as a child.

“John Mudder: stand!” commanded Bailiff Andrews.

There was a short pause.

“John is not here tonight,” said one of the men.

“Why?”

“He is dead.”

A murmur ran through the crowd.

“Dead? How?”

“He was blinded by the witch, and he died,” said the man.

The crowd stirred; the fact had been named. Kay placed a hand on Mary’s trembling leg.

“There will be no more talk of witches!” cried Laurence, turning on them. “The next soul to speak of witches will be fined for perjury!”

“Laurence, ye be under a spell,” said Farmer Jigger. “Have a care what ye speak. I will be gone. You will remain.”

“There are no witches!” cried Laurence.

“Aye – now they can be caught for cats, so they carry no cats,” replied the old man. “But still they breathe. They used to curse; now they whisper.”

“That’s enough!” said Bailiff Andrews. “Is it confirmed that John Mudder is dead?”

“Aye,” murmured several voices.

“May his soul rest in peace,” said Father Jones, crossing the air.

“And there are none else you spy true?” Bailiff Andrews asked Mary.

Mary turned and stared at the crowd. Her eyes rested, here and there. She held the gaze of each of the guilty men for a long moment, then shook her head slowly. “None,” she said softly.

“I have no wish to condemn unjustly.”

The villagers muttered, confused. Twelve men let out a long breath.

Bailiff Andrews stared at Mary for a moment, then nodded. “So be it,” he said. He turned to Farmer Jigger. “Are your affairs in order?”

“They are,” replied the farmer, glaring at Mary.

“Does anyone have anything to say before I record the sentence?” asked Bailiff Andrews, turning to the crowd.

“I do,” said Mary.

Laurence looked at her, alarmed. *No!* he cried silently.

Mary leaned forward from the chair and stood in a sudden lurch, her face still, her eyes agonized.

“I may not stay here long,” she said through clenched teeth. “So I wish to speak to the villagers, because I do not wish any more harm to come to them.”

“You have that right,” said Bailiff Andrews.

“I was not attacked because I am a witch,” said Mary, her voice steady. “I was attacked because I brought change upon your heads. You do not know this yet – and perhaps your children will not even know it – but you are on the threshold of a new world. Your full harvest, red cheeks, the lives of your children, are all witnesses to that new world. It will be a beautiful world. For those who have it!”

Mary paused. Laurence could feel the crowd’s generosity. They had seen Mary’s decision not to name the twelve; they would listen to anything. Mary glanced at Farmer Jigger’s hard face.

“For those still in need,” she continued with a smile, “the world remains as dangerous as it was for your fathers. You raise cups to toast your plenty; souls still die of thirst beyond your borders. I was attacked because I have drawn your attention to those without your blessings. You still think that your wealth hangs by a thread. I am telling you that you are secure in your power – and that, being secure, your duty is to provide a little for those still in want. You complain of theft by the poor; yet they steal what you did not even possess four years ago. The greatest danger of this new world is greed; you do not see that you have more than enough to live, thus you hoard what you do not need while those around you starve.”

“This regards not the deed!” said Bailiff Andrews.

“I am almost finished,” replied Mary. “And then I will speak no more. My crime, the crime I was punished for, was reminding you of your duty to others. You did not wish to hear me; you thought only of theft. How little they mean to you, these scraps that have been stolen – yet how

much to the poor! Farmer Jigger attacked me because he feared what I asked for. That was his choice; I will not speak of that.”

Farmer Jigger’s eyes seemed to recede into his head; his cheeks flushed a deep purple.

“I will not be the last to ask for simple kindness,” continued Mary. “Others will come, for we are part of this new world. We must be patient with the Farmer Jiggers’ of this world, for they were raised in a world of want, and have not the sense to know when their bellies are full enough, not the sense to know that they can afford a little generosity, not the sense to know that their day is past, not the sense to know...”

Mary’s driving voice was cut off by a roar from the old man. He strode out from behind the dock, racing towards Mary, his bound hands outstretched, his face black with rage.

“Ye scurvy whore!” he shouted. “Ye dark child of th’ devil! This prize was mine!”

The crowd parted before him, eyes wide. Mothers grabbed the wrists of flying children. Mary stared at the man charging at her through the avenue of bodies, her thin body erect, motionless. Kay grabbed a rock at her feet, senselessly. Laurence leapt forward, pushing through the bodies, shouting.

“Husband! No!” sobbed Wife Jigger.

Bailiff Andrews took a step forward, but stopped suddenly, squinting. Standing in front of Mary were a group of men. Ten? Eleven? Twelve? He couldn’t tell.

“Part, slaves!” shouted the old man, trying to reach past them.

“That’s enough, Jigger,” said one of the men, blocking him.

“You will stand and watch while she spits on my ending?”

“Your part is played.”



Farmer Jigger glared at the set faces; the men could see the struggle in his eyes: *will I tell?*

Sam Wetherspoon parted his coat and displayed the hilt of a dagger.

“Your memory will be honoured,” he said softly.

“Like hell!” snarled the old man, jabbing his finger at Mary. “Ye be hers now!”

“You were wrong.”

“Go quietly,” said another man evenly. “And your family will be cared for.”

The old man stared at them, his hands clenched in fists of helpless rage.

“Farmer Jigger, you are sentenced to death by hanging for your crimes,” said Bailiff Andrews.

“Ye are crows, plain and simple!” cried Farmer Jigger, his chest heaving. “I was defending my own! Who is he that can watch the ruin of his house without anger? Who in this crowd would have cursed my success? Yea – an evil has come upon us: the evil of this woman!” he shouted, pointing at Mary. “Is there no man here with enough courage to call this stench evil? No – I am no learned man. But I know what’s what. I know what’s what!”

“If you do die unrepentant,” said Father Jones, pushing through the crowd, “you will burn in hell. Repent, brother. Repent, and be with God.”

“Aye,” said the old farmer, turning slowly towards him. “With Him I can plead my case. He knows the black heart of this woman.”

“Do not try to take His place. Repent, brother.”

Farmer Jigger’s face contorted; his titanic will strained against the dictates of eternity; his chest heaved; his hands opened slowly. “Aye – I repent my wrongs,” he murmured, glancing at Mary, his eyes like deep pits. “But hope for no forgiveness.”

“Go in peace, brother,” said Father Jones, crossing him.

Farmer Jigger turned and walked slowly through the avenue of bodies towards the scaffold. Laurence watched him go, remembering that fateful evening years before, when the old man had rushed to his defense against Mary’s angry condemnation. How silly it seemed; she was just a child. Now look at her revenge – no not revenge, he caught himself: justice. He remembered the endless pies Wife Jigger sent him when he was young, how he had hidden them under his bed and refused his mother’s spongy desserts. He remembered Lady’s trembling, almost luminous beauty. He remembered the happy house of milkmaids and children; it seemed a lifetime ago, a different world, an easier, simpler season...

Farmer Jigger slowly mounted the scaffold. Two men tied his hands behind his back. The old man raised his eyes and stared over the crowd to Mary’s white face.

“If I am unjust, we shall soon meet,” he said softly.

One of the men yanked a lever, and the trapdoor opened beneath the old man. He fell heavily; the crack of his neck echoed across the still faces. His legs twitched; his body turned; his eyes rolled; his breath rasped twice, then stopped. The sudden silence echoed over the still faces of the watchers.

“Justice is done,” said Bailiff Andrews. Mary smiled and touched her heart.

## CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

### *A Gentle Curse*

JONATHON AND LYDIA WATCHED FROM A HILL; they saw the dropping jolt of the old farmer's body. They sat in silence for a long time.

"I would have tried my luck with Squire Pounder," said Jonathon finally, rising and offering his hand. "Come on. We should get back."

"How strange it has all become," said Lydia, taking his hand and standing. "Tell me: are you in love with Kay?"

Jonathon smiled. "It would take a longer crowbar than I have to pry her from her nettled nest."

"She stood; she is strong."

"That's true. I wonder if we have not been enormously lucky. The more I see of the world, the more I realize how lucky those without mad parents are. It's like a plague. Who did we bribe in a past life?"

Lydia did not reply.

"Are you sad?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "I cannot wait until my father arrives."

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow night."

"He is quite the cleft. What are you and I to do, fellow dodger? We should start a club for the children of happy parents." He sighed. "I suppose you and I would do."

“He is lost,” said Lydia. “I must free him.”

Jonathon took a quick, deep breath. “You are not made for such missions,” he said, turning to her.

“You helped Kay. She is troubled.”

“Yes, but she knows it. He doesn’t. He is a most dangerous creature: a man convinced he’s in the right. You could saw the knees off his loved ones and he wouldn’t bat an eye. Not deep down. He has the excuse of ethics. I’ve seen it before.”

“Not in the mirror.”

Jonathon smiled and shook his head. “No – I know ethics.”

“From experience?”

“The experience of others. You show me a good man who doesn’t end up hating the world.”

“My father.”

“Your father is not a man. He is an emissary of the gods.”

“You’re so ridiculous.”

“He spoiled you for mortals.”

“No,” said Lydia. “That’s not true.”

“Oh? Then who have you loved?”

Lydia paused. “No man has been equal to my father.”

Jonathon frowned. “And now your first flush is for a man so bloodless that he doesn’t even know he has someone hanging off his neck. What does she feed on? Formaldehyde?”

“I don’t want to speak of that,” murmured Lydia, glancing up at the dark shape of the approaching mansion.

“Wait – you have given me enough advice in my time – stand still a moment.” He turned to her, his face suddenly serious. “I like Kay – don’t ask me why, even crushed petals are natural. They can unfold. But they have to know they’re crushed. She hates her mother. It’s survival for her, not ethics. She wants to live. I have access to her. She will fight me, but she will only be fighting her desire. There’s hope. I am only fighting twenty-odd years. I can win. You, my dear, fight two thousand. Ever since that coward got himself nailed up, we’ve all been ground down. Everything around us cries out for sacrifice – even the buildings shout it: *renounce your desires!* Why? I can’t answer that. No-one can. Flee the shadow of the falling cross. Don’t hang about for refugees. Those with sense will jump with you. Those that won’t – can’t be saved. It’s an instinct, Lydia. It can’t be forced.”

“What do you live for then?” demanded Lydia.

“Why – nothing. That’s the only trick. Don’t give an inch. Don’t spend a penny on this structure. Have the courage to find your own way.”

“And, in time, you will be old and lonely, and your life will have blown away like smoke.”

“Mmm,” murmured Jonathon, leaning his head back with a smile.

Lydia tugged at her ear, her brow furrowed. “I want to bring him to London,” she said as they climbed the steps.

“Do you?”

“Yes. London will save him.”

“Lydia,” said Jonathon. “He doesn’t want to be saved. He wants to save. And so he is damned.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

### *A Resisted Entrance*

LORD CERBES, ACCOMPANIED BY THOMAS, HIS BAILIFF, arrived the morning after Farmer Jigger's hanging, earlier than expected. He came to a silent house, a house like a pond in mid-winter. He knocked at the door, surprised at the quiet. Joyce let him in, and told him that his daughter and Laurence were out for a ride.

He was sitting with Thomas in the drawing room, chatting amiably, when two women entered.

"Oh," said Kay, blinking in surprise. "Good morning."

"Good morning," replied Lord Cerbes, rising.

"You are Lydia's father?" asked Kay.

"I am."

"Erm – welcome."

"Thank you."

There was a short pause.

"I hope I am not inconveniencing you," said Lord Cerbes.

"No, no. This is Miss Mary O'Donnel," said Kay, gesturing rapidly. "A friend."

Mary limped forward, her nostrils widening as she smiled. "Good morning, Lord Cerbes. I hope you had a pleasant journey."

"Mostly," he smiled. "We made very good time. The countryside around here is very pretty. Though near a barn, our carriage was set upon by a decidedly motley group of ruffians."

Mary sighed. “We prefer to call them unfortunates.”

“Ah,” said Lord Cerbes, sitting down. “What sort of unfortunates?”

“Kay – do sit down,” said Mary, turning to Thomas. “And who are you?”

“Thomas, madam...”

“Do excuse me!” said Lord Cerbes, striking his forehead. “Most unforgivable! This is my bailiff, Thomas Doveset. We have also come from a radical experiment. We must compare notes. You first.”

Mary smiled at Kay. “Ours is a process of reclamation. Would you mind if I used a metaphor?”

Lord Cerbes smiled. “Be my guest.”

“It is a mariner’s tale. A ship is manned by a crew who knows nothing of seamanship. During a storm, the mast of their ship snaps. They drift for days, then their ship beaches on the shoal of a desert island. There is plenty of wood on the island, but very little food. The men grow weak. With every passing day, the chances of them having either the energy or initiative to repair their ship diminish. Suppose you could appear on that island with only one article, what would that article be?”

“A person being an article, I suppose,” said Lord Cerbes.

“If you like.”

“Though your comment indicates my reply to be the wrong one, I would venture to say that I would bring a competent shipwright. He could teach them how to repair their ship.”

Mary smiled. “And then?”

“And then I suppose they would push off and... yes, I see. Probably to sink or crash into another island sooner or later. So they really need a navigator. But the navigator would be useless if he didn't know how to repair the ship.”

“And even if you could get them off the island with a navigator,” said Mary, “they still wouldn't have enough food.”

“Speaking of which,” said Kay, “would tea be in order?”

“Thank you,” said Lord Cerbes. Thomas seemed lost in thought.

Kay rang the bell.

“An interesting problem,” said Lord Cerbes, turning to Mary. “I assume there is a solution.”

“Certainly. But it requires a radical change in thinking.”

“Sheep,” said Thomas suddenly, his adam's apple bobbing.

Mary turned to him and smiled. “Excuse me?”

“Well, why should they have to be sailors?” he asked. “Make 'em more comfortable on the island, and we wouldn't have to worry about giving them navigators or shipwrights or any of that.”

Mary nodded slowly. “All right. I haven't heard that before. Interesting.”

“That's what we've been doing up north,” said Thomas excitedly. “Draining half a whole swamp! That's what put the thought in my head – you don't have to leave if you can make it better where you are!”

Mary looked at him for a long moment. “And would these unfortunate castaways know how to care for these sheep?”

“That's not too hard.”



“Certainly not, for anyone who has been raised around them. But all that these men have known is their ship. And all they have known of themselves is that they were unable to steer it. That, I think, is the root of their problem. They have no faith in themselves. If you or I were on this island, we would set about figuring out the best way to fix our ship – or stay comfortably on the island – no matter how tired or hungry we were. That is because we are used to solving problems – and because we want to live. Yet if we had never been able to solve problems, we might find the burden of life too heavy, and fall into despair. Then, even if we were brought nails, knowledge or sheep, we might just sigh on the sand and wait for death. What these people most need is a reason to live.”

Joyce entered and set the tray on the table.

“Thank you Joyce,” said Kay. “We will help ourselves.”

“Your argument, Miss O’Donnel, while interesting, appears almost tautological,” commented Lord Cerbes, leaning back.

Mary nodded calmly. “It is. Of course. But the question remains: when you have known nothing but failure, hunger and despair, what can give you a reason to live?”

“Love,” smiled Kay, pouring the tea.

Mary smiled. “Exactly.”

Lord Cerbes stared at her for a moment, then laughed. “I – sort of imagined a strident, scientific solution!”

“No, if I may contradict you, you imagined an material solution. A plan of action. A fix for the body. But that may not be what is required. You can say to a man: ‘this is how you must live’, but if he does not want to live, your words mean nothing.”

“What on earth could one do then?” asked Lord Cerbes, perplexed.

“We have only two real dangers to worry about,” said Mary, rising. “The external and the internal. External dangers are simple; cold, hunger, rockslides, mad horses, mad governments, mad... masters. The approach to these problems is simple: avoid, or solve. There is only one internal danger: despair. Life is always a choice; we can kill ourselves at any time. If we despair of living, we are as dead as surely as if we donned red and waltzed with a bull in heat. Our age has approached the problem of human survival with all the subtlety of a veterinarian: stitch it up and send it out. We have increased our knowledge of the body; of the soul, we remain savages.”

“That is because this is a secular age,” replied Lord Cerbes. “We no longer pray for health.”

“Yes,” said Mary, her eyes suddenly intense. “Having lost the idea of a religious soul, we ignore the reality of a secular soul.”

“A secular soul,” repeated Lord Cerbes, steepling his fingertips under his chin. “All right.”

“Men kill themselves all the time; in many ways; with knives, poison – but most often, with weariness. ‘I like to live dangerously’, says the man weary of life. ‘I like to gamble, drink, sleep little and eat poorly. I build nothing for my future; I live for the moment; I refuse all wisdom, all pleas from those who love me. I ridicule health, propriety, rationality...’ These weary men are the bane of civilization; they consume without producing. They are the instigators and fodder of war. They are the power-hungry, the criminals, the wasters of capital, the rakes, defrauders, duelers, shallow politicians, false prophets, willing martyrs, grand schemers and bloody idealists. They trumpet causes beyond life to avoid the responsibility of living. They are a plague as old as the world. They are the enemies of life. And until this age recognizes the reality of these weary souls, it will forever fight a losing battle.”

“Against what?”

“The irrational!”

“You make it sound like an entity.”

“It is,” insisted Mary. “It is the secular Satan. Evil is not hatred of life; that is just a symptom. Evil is weariness of life; the pursuit of sensation for the sake of sensation. Corruption, decadence, poverty, violence; these are the results of world-weariness. Poverty in the flesh always masks poverty in the soul.”

“You have thought long on this matter.”

She smiled. “I am this matter. I was born an orphan. I was not loved. I have felt this temptation: *live not*. I have touched the bedrock of emptiness: if I cannot laugh, neither shall others. I have felt the desperation of an empty life, a life sustained by will alone, not joy. This is the story of myself.”

“Yet you breathe,” said Lord Cerbes. “You are here.”

“Yes. I am here. Because I have found my mission.”

“Which is?”

“Bring love.”

Lord Cerbes shook his head. “Love of what?”

“Love of the discarded. Love of the hopeless. Love of despair. Love of those who have never known love. You are obviously a remarkable man, Lord Cerbes. You were raised well. You inherited love just as you inherited wealth. You have a foundation to your soul so deep that you think it is the essence of life itself. And so you look about you, at the wreckage of most men’s lives, and you think them weak. Wait – I know this – it is the blindness of unearned

strength. You think them weak, because you know nothing of your strength. A soldier home from a long war will flinch at the crash of a dropped pot. Do we think him weak? Perhaps. But this is only a judgment of circumstance, not justice. Most of our morals are circumstantial: I do not fear, thus cowardice is wrong. But tell me: were you raised in a world of fear? Can you speak reasonably of fear? Yet you label cowards every day.”

Lord Cerbes frowned. “Do you speak of me, or the world in general?”

Mary paused. “I don’t know you well enough,” she said. “Whether you are in league with the world or not. But I tell you this: we will not remain excluded forever.”

“And your solution? Love?”

“Don’t say it like that. Yes: love. But not your idea of love. Love which recognizes internal courage, not external actions. Love which respects the courage of living in the face of fear and despair. Love of the essential soul, not the daily actions. Love of what believes, not the beliefs themselves or their expression. Love of life, however lived.”

“Love of evil?”

“Love as an antidote to evil.”

“And how is this love expressed?” asked Lord Cerbes.

“Through sacrifice. From the knowledge that those lucky enough to be loved as children did not earn it; they were loved, and so became good. Most are hated, and become evil; an unearned curse. A man who escapes a plague is not saved by goodness, but fortune. If he has the strength to aid others, he must, for they were simply unlucky. You have escaped a plague. You must help others.”

“I don’t understand. How?”

“By sacrificing yourself. Who takes pleasure in helping the sick? Would a free man give up his daily pleasures to help them? Of course not. Yet in a time of plague, he must! Normally, I do not give food to others; yet if they starve I must. Mmm – your eyes say this is too abstract. Very well. What we have done here is set up a wool factory. No healthy person was hired. We took only the sick, the weak, the hated and hateful. We gave only to those who had never received.”

“And the result? Were those the ones who attacked my carriage?”

Mary shrugged. “An inconvenience; some damage, probably. This is the kind of sacrifice I call for. Naturally, our factory would make more money if we hired only the best workers. Yet Laurence is willing to swallow a loss – or not make as much as he could – because he recognizes the reality of true justice, which is not to punish people for accidents of circumstance.”

Lord Cerbes frowned. “Tell me: where is free will in your formulation?”

Mary’s lip curled. “Free will! Mozart played flawlessly at three; composed symphonies at five. He was with born innate skill, innate desire; did he choose to become a musician? Think of souls floating in the ether before being born. A chart is held before them; they are asked to tick off their chosen occupations. Who would choose poverty, ignorance, hopelessness? Who would tick off ‘criminal’ or ‘drunk’ or ‘stupid’? None – we would all choose to be brilliant artists, profound thinkers, noble statesmen. Yet the world overflows with lost dreams, futile goals, wasted lives. Where does this plague strike? What scythe cuts down these aspirations? What barrier lies between hope and failure? Nothing less than a famine of love. Food feeds the flesh; the soul lives on love. Those who are loved succeed; failures are hated from first to last.”

Lord Cerbes held up his hand. “One moment. No free will means no responsibility. Yet there are those who, like yourself, have found a reason to live despite a lack of love. Are we not to hold this possibility as a just standard?”

“I was born to survive,” replied Mary. “Before I was born, no doubt I was not offered love, but at least I got to demand a soul that can survive a lack of love. I lacked love, but I have talent, and that makes it all worthwhile, just as it did for Mozart. Yet such talent is very rare. It is not a just standard.”

“Yet what would this do to legal justice?” asked Lord Cerbes. “To government? To business? Do we say to a criminal: ‘you were not loved; you may go free?’ Society could not function. Evil would rule.”

“I agree.”

“You propose this?”

“No,” said Mary emphatically. “I say: the legal system must deal with criminals. But: the fortunate must deal justly with the unfortunate. Loving the unfortunate will breed fewer criminals. We must work from the bottom up. Otherwise, the rejected will revolt, as they did in France. If society contains too many people with nothing to lose, it will be destroyed. Love of the excluded is self-preservation. Those who, like yourself, have the most to preserve, must love the most.”

Lord Cerbes shook his head. “Where were you educated?”

“I educated myself.”

“That must be why I have such difficulty following you. No – that’s not an insult, but an admission of habit. Similar educations give common ground. We cannot say, Aristotle dealt

with the problem in such-and-such a manner, what do you think? Your thoughts are entirely your own. I cannot place them in any context.”

“Good – now you can think, rather than quote.”

Lord Cerbes laughed and rose. “Now that sounded like an insult. But I am tired; it was a long ride. I would like the chance to put my things away, bathe and refresh myself.”

“Of course,” said Kay, rousing herself. She stood and rang for the maid.

“Tell me,” said Mary suddenly. “How does your experiment differ from mine? What have you done for the poor?”

Lord Cerbes smiled. “What have I done? Why, I have sat in my study, written books on a wide variety of topics, gone to dances and chatted amiably with my peers.”

“In other words: nothing.”

“Precisely,” he said slowly. “Nothing. Neither for nor against. And they have risen.” With that, Lord Cerbes and Thomas bowed and left to collect their things. Kay stood in the center of the room, shaking her head slowly.

“Are you all right?” asked Mary, concerned. “What’s the matter?”

Kay raised her head, her eyes red.

“You are breaking my heart,” she said softly.

## CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

### *An Invalid Questioned*

“LONDON!?” EXCLAIMED LAURENCE, WHEELING HIS HORSE AROUND.

“Why not? When were you last there?” asked Lydia.

“Oh, er – a year or so ago. I sort of vowed never to return. I find rural life much less stifling.”

They had stopped in a clearing deep in the Dorset woods, far from the sight of man.

Laurence dismounted and tied his horse to a trunk.

“Hungry?”

“Starved,” said Lydia, getting off her horse.

“I brought some cheese and bread. A ploughman’s lunch. Here’s a sunny spot, quite dry.”

“My father is expected today.”

“What time?”

“Mid-afternoon.” Lydia spread herself out luxuriously; as she lay back, the leafy light mounted her face like an echo of ripples from a deep pool.

“I’m looking forward to seeing him,” said Laurence.

“Me too.”

There was a pause, filled by the still silence of deep nature.

“It doesn’t seem like a good time,” he said finally.

“Why not?”



“We’ve just started this – project. I’m not sure who to leave in charge. Adam Footer would probably sack everyone and hire decent workers. Kay would be hopeless.”

Lydia glanced at him curiously. “Why do you say that?”

“Well – you know her. She’s – rather flighty.”

“She has good reason.”

“What do you mean? I never...”

“I don't mean you.” Lydia paused and touched her lips. “I saw your mother having a real go at her yesterday.”

“Oh that. Well, two women cooped up in a house – what can you expect?”

“That’s unfair. How do you get along with your mother?”

“Oh, you know, not too badly. She’s a bit of a relic; it’s like shouting across a chasm of years. It must be hard, living in a changing world. I have no idea why I’m not more conservative.”

“What do you think will become of her?”

“I think she’s too set in her ways to really ‘become’ anything.”

“I mean Kay.”

“Oh.” Laurence frowned at the treetops. “That’s a tough one. She’s my sister, so of course I want to think the best, but if she were someone else’s sister, I would probably say that she will sort of live in the – periphery her whole life.” He frowned. “I know – that doesn’t make much sense. What I mean is that I can’t imagine a place where she could – thrive. She’s like a mushroom in that house, but I think she would wilt in strong sunlight.”

“When did you start thinking of her like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like an invalid.”

“An invalid!” said Laurence, surprised. “Well – I don’t – er – I can’t remember.”

“Was there ever a time when you didn’t think that?”

“I – I suppose when she was very little. She used to – well, parade. Dress up. Laugh a lot. But as she grew, she became very fearful. Whenever she got happy she would be sort of be – hysterical. I’m not sure if that’s the right word. It’s like she’s daring someone to let her be happy. I don’t know. I don’t claim to understand her.”

“She’s very unhappy.”

“I agree. But I think that, for her to be happy, the world would have to be different. Gentler. More trusting. She doesn’t seem able to – carve her way. If there’s no path, she can’t move.”

“So, if I were her, and I were to say: ‘dear brother, what should I do?’, what would you say?”

Laurence’s smile spread his beard. “Gosh Kay, it’s not so much a plan as a – state of mind. Be more – practical, you know, more logical, more – something. As to what you could do, well I suppose you could – help me more with the books, or take up a hobby, or start – well, socializing or something. Find a man. Read more. Stop wasting time. Settle down.”

“And if these were your options?”

Laurence shook his head, suddenly irritated. “These aren’t my options. I am a man. She said something like that to me once. It’s very annoying. Such is life. I didn’t get everything I wanted. If I had more land, or more money, I could do more. I mean, if I could wave my hand and make the world a better place for women, I would do it. But it’s a little beyond my power.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way – I’m not trying to fight you – but what is within your power?”

“Oh? Would you like that? If you had to get me to do something for you to make your life worthwhile?”

“Sure – if that meant sharing power more equally. That would be just. Wouldn’t it?”

“Your father gives you an allowance, doesn’t he?”

“That’s different.”

“Why?”

“Because he has always encouraged me to pursue my dreams. He never assumed I was an invalid.”

“That’s because you didn’t act like an invalid!”

“Is the cause and effect so clear for you? It isn’t for me.”

Laurence looked at her for a moment, then laughed. “Do you know, I think we’re having a fight. Like lovers.”

Lydia smiled and lowered her head.

“Don’t smile at me. This very disturbing.” Laurence shook his head. “All the women around me think I have some magical power. They all want me to turn something over to them so they can be happy. But none of them take the trouble to tell me just what that is. I think that’s because they have a kind of void in their souls, a void that just can’t be filled up with taking over someone else’s life!”

“You know,” said Lydia, “I think that if I had grown up solely in the country, in your family, without a worldly education, I would have turned out exactly as she has.”

Laurence smiled. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Why? What do I have that she lacks?”

“Oh – everything! You are talented, intelligent – beautiful. Cultured. You know.”

“My talent was nurtured by a father’s admiration. My intelligence was cultivated by education. As for beauty, that is a mean yardstick by any standard. And as for culture – well, I lived in London.”

Laurence laughed and clapped his hands. “Ah! So that’s what this is all about! You know, you don’t have to work so hard. I never actually said I wouldn’t go to London.”

“It would be good for her, too.”

He groaned. “Why, oh why can I never refuse a woman? The first biped to walk erect without a spine. I’m pathetic!”

Lydia smiled. “You’re not pathetic.”

“No, of course not.”

“I think it’s an admirable, attractive quality.”

“Of course you do.”

“No – really. Men are, generally, brutes.”

“Now that’s enlightened.”

“And they’re remarkably slow,” she said, twirling her hair.

Laurence’s grin fell.

“What about Mary?” he asked, his face suddenly gray.

“Oh – what about her?”

“I owe her something.”

“Give her some money.”

“No – she wouldn’t take it. She’s after something else.”

“That’s true.”

“Why do you say it like that?”

Lydia got up, brushed off her skirt and looked him square in the eyes. “Laurence,” she said evenly, “if you can ever find the strength to say no to a woman, find it with her.”

Laurence stared at her, perplexed. A fly buzzed into his ear, and he jumped.

## CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

### *A Story of Progress*

THEY RETURNED TO A BRIGHTER HOME. Lydia uttered a cry of joy and spurred her horse forward. She saw the marks of her father's presence almost immediately; the house seemed somehow energized. Perhaps it was the sight of the bright fireplace flickering through the bay windows; perhaps it was young Thomas pulling up weeds in the front flowerbeds; perhaps it was the sight of Mary striding before the fire, her body taut with energy.

Laurence looked up at the house, at the sight of Lydia dismounting and racing up the front steps, and felt his spirits rise in answer.

He dismounted, took the horses' reigns and walked them towards the stables, regarding himself in a strange light.

*Why am I so discontented?* he asked himself. Despite his new delights, his soul seemed to have become progressively heavier over the past few weeks, as if the unburying of old wrongs was hanging more earth on his shovel. These wrongs – injustice to Mary, to Kay, to his mother, to the memory of his father... *What would he say to all this?*, Laurence wondered, and the old man's voice seemed to rise like stern mist from his cold grave... *My boy, what are you doing mucking about in the pit of injustice? What are you trying to change? You are no murderer, no ravisher of the helpless; you have tried to help them in the most important way. That is more than most do – are you so willing to take on every burden? People are wronged in the world every day; are we simply to stare at this spectacle and breathe sad sighs? The unhappiness of the world is the province of no single man. You are only accountable for your own heart;*

*drowning in the wounds of others is an endless death! You must learn to laugh at these delusions of salvation; these glorious dreams of youth. Laugh, turn to the light, get married, and live a happy life.*

Laurence shivered, feeling the elemental uncertainty of an eternal debate. *Responsibility for myself or responsibility for others? Satisfaction or sacrifice? Justice or sympathy? Freedom or circumstance?* Tears crept into his eyes as he thought of his life a few months before, striding the fields, ordering, encouraging, certain. Strange thoughts ran through his mind. *Doctor, I seem to have caught an disease... The boundaries of myself have dissolved; I have become a dry harbour for all injustice, a soldier in an endless army. Tell me: what should I do? Live for myself or live for others?*

The doctor seemed unable to reply; his words would be seen as shameful. His eyes, however, spoke eloquently. *Your conscience has become painfully enlarged; it is paralyzing you. To take the swelling down, I prescribe two weeks of personal rest and pleasure, simple sensual feeling, and a respite from the endless demands of others.*

What a doctor! Laurence smiled. His soul stirred, and he turned towards the house, thinking: *I should have kissed her!* Thomas waved at him, grinning, as he climbed the front stairs.

Laurence entered the drawing room and found father and daughter arm in arm. Lord Cerbes smiled at him broadly, the smile of a King proud of his successor.

“Good afternoon to you, Lord Laurence Carvey!” he cried.

“Good afternoon, Lord Cerbes,” said Laurence, beaming. He clasped the older man’s hand in his.

“You had a good journey?”

“Wonderful. I am happy to see both you and my daughter. I am getting on in years; it is good to see such a renewal.”

“Um – thanks,” said Laurence, blushing.

“Shame for blushing!” laughed the older man. “We are all adults. Sit down now – I am going to press your hospitality by bending your ear. I have had the most remarkable fortnight.” Lord Cerbes walked over to the window, opened it, and called Thomas.

“I’ll just wash my hands, and be right with you,” replied the young man.

“Very well. Laurence, I have so much to tell you!” said Lord Cerbes. He strode to the fire and turned to the young man. Laurence looked at him; his graying hair was hanging over his forehead; his face was flushed, his teeth sparkled. *Ahh*, thought the young man, *thank God for the comforts of class!*

“I have some lands in Yorkshire; we talked of them when we last met,” said Lord Cerbes, his back to the fire. “I have spent ten days there, arranging for the delivery of several thousand sheep. You know, everyone complains of absentee landlords, but in my view *laissez-faire* is the best way. I have never set foot on these lands, but in the hands of the most able Thomas – welcome back, young man; sit there – these lands have become a model of modern improvement! No library, no earnest group of Oxford-educated agriculturists, yet they have made improvements that match yours!”

“How?” asked Laurence, astounded.

“How?” Lord Cerbes grinned at Thomas. “I defer to our expert witness.”



“Er – thank you,” said Thomas, shifting in his seat. “Well, it seems a strange story only looking backward, so to speak, and I have been told to leave nothing out. When I was a young lad, I left to seek my fortune; I did not think I was well-fitted to the confinements of rural life. I traveled to the ports, hoping to be taken on as a sailor – I thought it would be strange and exotic, bless me for a fool. So I signed up for a year, and our first port of call was Amsterdam; we had a rough crossing, and were landbound for over two months, waiting for repairs. I spent that time working on the land; I needed the money. I was laughed at; I thought I knew what I was doing. My employer knew English; he talked at some length about the extent of British greed; ‘You stupid warriors,’ he laughed, ‘shaking your spears in foreign lands while your families starve at home!’”

Thomas stopped, glancing down for a moment. “Excuse me. My parents died of hunger the winter before I left. My brother too. I don’t know how I survived. I couldn’t stand the sight of ploughed earth; it seemed like an open wound. But in Holland, they seemed to have tamed the beast of nature – and I apologize for my unnatural speech; my Dutch master was gripped with strange phrases. There was no hunger in that land. Every week I went back to the docks to check in with my captain, and there were ships – huge ships crammed with grain flying out over the sea. I became almost dizzy with the possibilities. I was gripped with the need to return to Yorkshire, to share what I had learned. But I was signed for a year. I had to wait. That was very hard... So anyway, we plied back and forth between Amsterdam and Southampton, and I spent whatever free time I had writing down – everything I had learned. Every time we docked in England, I mailed off a thick bundle of notes to my friends in Yorkshire. When I finished my year, I went back and found the whole community in an uproar.”

“I know that situation,” smiled Laurence.

“I’m sure you do. Priests muttered of blasphemy; old people muttered of the follies of youth, the young muttered of the blindness of age. In short, it seemed that if the energy spent talking about change had been applied to change itself, everything would be solved. I was gripped with a kind of frenzy. I spent every waking hour arguing, then I argued in my sleep. I had to go and get turnip seeds from Liverpool twice; the first time, they went bad because no-one would plant them. Always the same story. The farmers said: ‘We have enough to live on this year – why should we take risks?’ ‘Because you will end up with more,’ I replied. ‘So you say,’ they said. ‘But we could end up with less, and then where would we be?’ It was maddening; when they had enough, they didn’t want to risk anything; when they didn’t, they didn’t want to risk the little they had. I began to see why we had been on the edge of starvation for so many generations.”

“So how did it finally change?” asked Laurence, fascinated.

“I finally met a Jew in Liverpool who was willing to lend me enough money to buy some land. He was wild, an outcast in his community, mad with the idea of progress. He pressed the money into my hand, saying progress was the only interest he wanted.” Thomas smiled.

“Within a year, I was able to pay him back. Within two years, people began rotating their crops; they had to; I threatened to buy them out if they didn’t. It started to go very quickly after that. Turnips took over the fallow land; cows lived on them through the winter; manure was spread, we irrigated everywhere. Women survived childbirth; children grew tall; men grew wild. The church emptied; our priest left. We had a lot of time on our hands. Some of the older men began experimenting with science. It was a sort of mania; the pub was filled with happy drunks demonstrating the principle of displacement in their beer. On clear nights a crowd would gather

at Clem Weatherby's farm, paying a penny apiece to peer through his new telescope. Sam Foreman built a contraption to thresh his hay, and almost lost an arm trying it out. Everything was so – alive. The young men decided to try draining the swamp (another project first demonstrated in the pub) and, since this would require a large investment, I offered to go to London and meet with Lord Cerbes; we read about him in the papers, and I knew he would be interested. We met, and he agreed to come with me to Yorkshire – did I thank you for that, sir?"

"Many times," smiled Lord Cerbes. "And quite unfairly: all thanks are due to you."

"So we arrived, and Lord Cerbes spent a huge sum of money hiring workers to dig the irrigation, and paid off the farmers whose lands would be partially flooded for a few days, and bought the rocks we needed to reinforce the embankments. We started, and within a week, the level of the swamp began to go down..."

"We went out every morning," interrupted Lord Cerbes enthusiastically, "and measured a stick we had put in the ground. Seeing the water level go down was one of the most exciting events of my life! Think of it! A swamp that has existed for thousands of years, bending to the will of mere mortals!"

"In time, the edge of the swamp will go down to the point where we can plant it. But our plan was – sheep. Sheep would solve all our problems! We worked our way through a few of the tracts on sheep, and were mad with the idea. *We need money to pay for improvements, we thought; we can't sell our crop surplus; there is no market for food in Yorkshire. If we get sheep, though, we can sell the wool at any seaside port! Then we get gold, and with the gold we can buy wood, iron, nails, some of these new looms...*"

"That reminds me," said Laurence. "I have a man I want you to meet."

“I’d be glad to,” replied Thomas. “So the interesting thing is that by starting a small thing – changing some of our farming habits – suddenly everything began to change. I suppose that’s why the old men fought us so hard; they knew more about what we were doing than we did. It was like we had broken free of something, climbed over some barrier, and everything began to rise as a result.”

“So now?” asked Laurence.

Thomas paused for a moment, then laughed. “I cannot say: that’s the wonder of it! Everyone has their own plans. Who can say who will succeed and who will fail? Before, everyone did roughly the same – which was none too well. Now some hit the sky, while others still refuse to change, and can’t get their noses out of the dirt.”

“Is there a lot of resentment?” asked Lord Cerbes suddenly.

“Excuse me?”

“You know, form those who don’t do as well for some reason.”

Thomas frowned. “Hm. Yes, I suppose so. When I think about it, the old way protected a lot of foolish people. No – not foolish, for we are all fools in our own way. More like people who don’t like change. They resist everything new, but they can only do that for themselves; everyone else passes them by, in a way, and they feel left out. But rather than say: I excluded myself, they say: others exclude me. That upsets them.”

“Who is this Miss O’Donnel?” asked Lord Cerbes, turning to Laurence.

Laurence blinked. “Mary? Um – you’ve met her?”

“She and your sister were the first to greet me.”

“I see.”

“Tell me about her.”

Laurence turned to Thomas. “Have you met her also?”

Thomas nodded silently.

“What did you think?”

The young man chose his words carefully. “Such depths are not for me to plumb, sir.”

“But if you had to give an opinion. Please.”

Thomas thought for a long time.

“When I was younger, sir,” he said finally, “we had a dog, Sheppy. A good dog; loved to be petted. One morning, he disappeared. We looked and called, but it was no use. He was gone for two years. When he came back, he was thin, jumpy, and kept trying to eat the chickens. My dad said: he’s gone wild. Now there’s nothing wrong with being wild, he said, so long as you’re in the wild. But if you go wild, you have to stay there. You can’t come back. So my dad took Sheppy far out in the woods and left him there. But Sheppy came back. So my dad had to kill him.” Thomas paused and smiled ruefully. “That came out a little strong. I don’t even know if she likes chicken. But there is something wild about her.”

“Wild – dangerous?” asked Laurence.

“I can’t rightly say, sir. But she gives me a bit of the willies. She’s got a kind of Old Testament air about her. Like a prophet. I wouldn’t know how to answer her, but I can’t say I enjoyed listening to her.”

“She’s someone I wronged in the past,” said Laurence, leaning back in his chair. “I caused her to be expelled from her home. She returned a few weeks ago, and the villagers ganged up on her. They thought she was a witch, and tried to burn her at the stake.”

“Good God!” exclaimed Lord Cerbes. “Here? Now?”

“A very ugly business. We rescued her just in time. I had to hang the ringleader recently.”

“How awful!”

“So I feel a certain – responsibility in the matter.”

“Naturally,” said Lord Cerbes. “But what do you plan to do with her?”

“That I’m not sure about,” admitted Laurence. “I have given her a certain leeway. Mary had a plan, a plan that attracted my sister considerably.”

“She mentioned it,” put in Lord Cerbes. “Something about hiring the lowest of the low.”

“We hired miscreants,” continued Laurence. “Over the strenuous objection of the merchant who sold us the looms. And we have had no end of trouble with them. They burned down a barn, steal from the townsfolk, and we have had to appoint a rather brutal chap to keep them in line.”

“And the productivity?” asked Lord Cerbes.

Laurence shrugged. “Too early to tell. Certainly lower than it would have been with better workers. It breaks my heart to think of the men we could have hired who are now without work.”

“Men who have decided to be responsible, thrifty and industrious,” said Lord Cerbes slowly. “Men who have successfully resisted the temptations of drink, sloth and violence in order to live respectfully. Men who cannot help but see that their own responsibility is punished, while the laziness of others is rewarded.”

Laurence started. “I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“You may not thank me,” said Lord Cerbes. “For you have embarked on a dangerous road. An opposition to the natural order. Competence should rise; sloth should fall. Turn this on its head, and life loses all reason.”

“We fought those who were too lazy to change,” said Thomas tentatively. “If we had not, we would all be worse off.”

“Tell me – where would Mary’s system be if there were no poor?” asked Lord Cerbes.

“No poor!” exclaimed Laurence.

“Indulge me. No poor, no excluded, no hopeless.”

“Well – I suppose she would have nothing to say.”

“So, in a manner, she needs the poor; she will work to ensure they always exist. Reward the low, and you attract more to the low. Poverty presented in this way thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy, an endless justification.”

“But...” said Laurence, “Justification for – what?”

“Why, power, Lord Carvey! Power!”

A shockwave ripped through Laurence’s spine. He shot to his feet, running quick hands through his hair.

“Don’t say any more,” he said, his voice tense.

“Anyone who wants power over you need achieve only one thing,” continued Lord Cerbes, looking at Laurence as he paced. “They must get you to accept a definition of the good that excludes you. Thus your resistance is disarmed. They will say: the good is what you are not – and can never be. The same radicals are running around in London, though with far less

subtlety. ‘All privilege is evil!’ they cry, forgetting that goodness is available to all. They do not realize that privilege is the definition of nothing but privilege. They do not hate our ‘evil’; they envy our power. They seek to make us guilty, to emasculate us, to infect us with self-loathing. If they can convince us we are innately unjust, they hope we will lose the ability to judge good and evil. This can benefit only evil.”

Laurence shook his head. “But we are privileged.”

“Did we choose this privilege?”

“No – but we exercise it.”

“Just as Locke exercised the ‘privilege’ of intelligence, or Michaelangelo the ‘privilege’ of creativity. There is a natural aristocracy in the world, Laurence. No demand for total equality will ever change that.”

“We are still above the law.”

“If we murder, do we not hang?”

“Our wealth...”

“That will change,” interrupted Lord Cerbes. “Do you not understand the machine that men like us are setting in motion? Do you think that mere historical privilege can stand against men like Thomas here, men who can enrich a whole community with general knowledge? No – we are doomed as a class. Not because we are evil, or privileged, but because we are good. Because we encourage progress.”

“Men like us are very few.”



“Of course!” cried Lord Cerbes. “Very few – in every class! You have had to deal with reluctant farmers – we all have! All I argue is that privilege in and of itself means nothing morally.”

“Then what are we to do for the poor?”

“Well, what do you think, Thomas?” asked Lord Cerbes, turning to him. “You were born poor. What could we do for people like you?”

Thomas shifted uncomfortably. “Well, I suppose exactly what you and the Jew have done. Invest in us as if we were not poor. Don’t look at us as poor. I am more than just ‘poor’. I have never really thought of myself as poor. I was loved as a child, respected as an adult. I am a good man. Being called ‘poor’ rather bothers me, I think. I am not sure I need the pity.”

“And of the lazy among you?”

“They are not among my circle,” said Thomas abruptly. “They exist, but it seems to me that life is too short to waste energy on people who don’t really want to improve their lot.”

“Yet you argued against farmers who didn’t want to change,” said Laurence.

“Yes,” replied the young man, “but that was so I could do what I wanted. Not to help them, but to help myself. Because I had a goal. If I’d had the money to bypass them, I wouldn’t have given them the time of day.”

“I am as perplexed as you, Thomas,” said Lord Cerbes. “Laurence – why do you accept this guilt?”

Laurence scowled. His head pounded; he felt dizzy, as if he were being lowered into the ground on a spinning plank.

“I don’t know,” he said, closing his eyes.



## CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

### *A Terrible Temptation*

MARY LAY AWAKE, SHUDDERING WITH HATRED. Lord Cerbes' face giggled in her mind's eye, jeering at her from the high throne of natural health. *Privilege, privilege, privilege...* It was like a thudding heartbeat, a burning barrier to the land of normality. *He looks at me strangely*, she thought over and over, biting at her thumb. *What right does he have to look at me strangely, this fat crow of thoughtless fortune?* Agony rose in her breast, the agony of 'what if?' *What if I had been born rich, loved, protected, encouraged, educated? What if I had been given decent haircuts and pretty dresses? Would I be lying in a cellar nursing my wounds? No – I would be flying from party to ball, astounding the world with books on liberty, challenging my class with humourous pinpricks, in demand by all in fashion...* *I would be – Lydia*, thought Mary, feeling bile rising in her throat, rubbing her face with the heels of her hand. Her body felt strangely warped in the darkness, as if she had sprouted uncontrollable goat legs and a grotesquely enlarged head. The world seemed distant, alien, an icy hall of tombs, waiting only for her to surrender and lower herself into a cold embrace of stone.

A silent painter raged within her, showering obscene portraits on her inner canvas; she was a cannibal, gnawing the toes of children; a strider and commander of flames, a stone goddess stained with the shadows of shattered men, a high shower of poisoned arrows, a restless spirit of earthquakes, a tidal wave sinking soft cottages, a quiet blanket of death spreading over a wide, fertile land...

And in the midst of her midnight apocalypses, a smaller, softer painter raised an occasional silhouette; her cheek nestled on the warm chest of a loving protector, a hall of respectful applause for the sake of her tortured wisdom, a flock of staunch friends admiring her courage, and a loving child gazing at her with trusting eyes...

No! – that last thought was too much! Mary squeezed her scant breasts savagely, with all the rage of the brutalized child. She turned her head into her pillow, gasping at the pain, grinding her face into the white softness. The demands of children – the demand for clear, simple love, of respect for helplessness! *I hated myself when I was helpless!* she cried silently, falling through an infinite pit of shame. Farmer Jigger's face rose in her mind. She shuddered and leapt up as if the bed had burst into flames. She dressed quickly, almost unable to breathe, and fled the mansion, her legs burning.

The night was still, smooth. Mary felt a wave of rage against the stars: *you burned, and did nothing...* She walked down to the front gates and gripped the bars, her head lowered. A wave of nausea gripped her, and she bent over and retched, twisting her body, almost turning herself inside out.

"Mary," said a gentle voice. "Mary, look up."

Gasping, Mary raised her head blearily. An old woman stood on the far side of the gate, her face lined with pain, her hair like soft ash in the starlight.

"Mary – it's me," said the woman.

"Mother?" whispered Mary, her heart pounding.

"Mary!" murmured the woman. She was dressed in a flowing cloak of deep blue; a black velvet neckpiece circled her neck.

“Mother!” cried Mary, tugging frantically at the gate latch. When it opened, the old woman walked towards her. Mary fell to her knees, her heart pounding painfully. The woman reached down and touched her cheek.

“My beautiful, beautiful child..!” she whispered.

Mary broke into ragged sobs, pressing her face against her mother’s belly, gripping the folds of her gown in tight fists.

“Mother!” she cried.

“Hush!” hushed the woman. “It doesn’t matter now.”

“How – where – how did you find me?”

“Don’t think of that now. There will be time to tell,” said the woman, falling to her knees. Leaning forward, she pressed kiss after kiss on Mary’s wet cheeks, stroking her wild hair with a soft palm.

“Why did you leave me?” cried Mary, her voice muffled in the woman’s neck.

“I had to. I was very ill. But I cried on leaving. I cried because it broke my heart to leave such a beautiful child all alone in the world.”

“Why did you – why did you send me to that house?”

“I didn’t know,” said Mary’s mother softly, her voice aching. “I didn’t know how it would be. But my beautiful, angry child – you know how to exact justice. I am very proud of you.”

“Oh mother! Mother – I have evil thoughts!” whispered Mary fearfully.

“My good girl,” soothed her mother. “My good, strong girl. You will be well. It’s all over now.”

Mary reached up and stroked the old woman's soft hair. And then, terribly, the hair seemed to lurch to one side. Her mother's head slowly toppled from its perch and fell to the ground with a soft thud.

"Mary," said the head, gazing up lovingly. "I love you."

Mary stared at the head, her eyes wide, her heart frozen.

"Mary," whispered the voice sorrowfully. A slow snake emerged from between the lips.

"Mary..!" it hissed.

Mary shuddered and awoke. She lay huddled at the foot of the gate. The stars burned blindly.

## CHAPTER FORTY

### *A Sudden Rescue*

WITH A CLINK OF GLASSES, THE MEAL BEGAN. Laurence, Lydia, Lord Cerbes, Kay, Jonathon and Mary were seated along the table; Lady Barbara sat at the head, presiding over her guests with the grim graciousness of a lost age.

The talk ran counter to the courses; pleasant praise was heaped like icing during the appetizers; thick compliments drowned the main course, and by the time dessert arrived, the conversation was sprinkled with a pinch of sharper spice.

Laurence broached the subject first. His mother glared at him for a brief moment, as if to say: *not man enough to bring it up alone, eh?*

“So we expect to be gone for a month, perhaps two,” he said doggedly. “We shall be back by Christmas, or certainly New Year’s. I know it’s a bit of short notice, but I have found out that there are several... agricultural theories, or societies, which I would find great profit in meeting with before they disband in winter.”

“And your sister?” asked Lady Barbara, clearing her throat delicately. “Excuse me – Kay?”

Kay blushed. “Well, I suppose I am going to London in order to find – er – some sort of direction in my life.” She laughed quickly. “To experience something... beyond what I know. What I have grown to expect.” Her mother stared at her: *you pretentious fool!* “Laurence went on his grand tour!” said Kay.

“You do not need to traipse the world in order to be married,” said Lady Barbara curtly. “Laurence had to travel. Though judging from the accounts, it was a sorry investment.”

“I am not sure that such journeys are ever truly wasted, Lady Barbara,” said Lord Cerbes quietly, patting his lips with a napkin.

“Were the trip for the sake of culture alone, I am sure you would be right, Lord Cerbes,” said Lady Barbara smoothly, “yet my son decided to forego the wonders of the Coliseum and the Sphinx for the sake of delving about with sun-baked farmers. And when he returned, he did not bring a richness of soul, but a slew of expensive experiments for our collective purse.”

“Why travel to find the Sphinx?” muttered Laurence, unheard by all save Lydia, who suppressed a smile.

Lady Barbara placed her fork beside her untouched cake. “Lord Cerbes, you will excuse me if I sound harsh, but I am painfully aware of my children’s habit of acting without thinking.” She turned to Laurence. “My dear son, some years ago, you took it in your head to become a farmer. Though I have often wondered at the choice, I have done little to stand in your way, save for murmuring the odd word of advice – you see my children?” she exclaimed to Lord Cerbes. “Even when spoken to graciously, they make faces. No matter; it is not I who am shamed; all can hear my words. You took on the role of farmer, Larry, a role far below your proper station. You have invested vast sums in your improvements. Am I now to believe that this was a passing whim? For, given that you are about to throw off your stewardship for the sake of a whimsical trip to London, that is how it seems.”

“Mother,” sighed Laurence, “I...”

“If I may continue,” smiled Lady Barbara. “You have also, against my wishes – admit this, at least in the presence of others – decided to pursue the job of factory foreman. Disgraceful enough, even on the average, but you have added shame to shame by mixing your role with that



of a prison warden. As you have repeatedly insisted – again, for the sake of funds – these miscreants you have hired for this – factory – require constant, indeed often brutal supervision.

Am I to understand that this, too, was a fad?”

“It’s not as if…” began Laurence.

“What am I to do?” smiled Lady Barbara. “One cannot even squeeze a civil word in sideways with such lovely children! Furthermore, you also took on the role of governess with this Mary O’Donnel – and do not be ashamed, little one; I have resigned myself to the odd hold you have over my children. Am I to understand that this, too, was a whim? Or are you going to take her with you to London?”

“Mary is certainly coming with us,” said Laurence. Lydia touched his knee under the table, and he blushed.

“We didn’t think it wise to leave her here with you,” said Kay suddenly.

“Most kind, I’m sure, to refrain from inflicting your ill-considered responsibilities on others,” commented Lady Barbara. “Now – and I apologize for any redundancy, but I would like to imagine that I perceive the situation correctly. First, you are pulling up stakes here tomorrow and flying off. Destination? London. Purpose? Unknown. Duration? Past Christmas, possibly New Year’s. Cost? Prohibitive by any sensible standard. Responsibilities abandoned? Too many to count without shedding one’s shoes. Now, I can only assume one of three things: first, having tired of your natural family, you wish to adopt the Cerbes. Second, there is some romantic goblin in the air that is abducting all reason. Third, this is all an excuse to get poor Kay away from her suffocating mother.” Lady Barbara cleared her throat. “Again, I apologize to my guests for my bluntness, and sorely wish it were dispensable, but experience has taught me that

my children are regrettably blind to all shades but black and white. I also regret the airing of this petty laundry in the presence of guests, but since you wish to leave tomorrow, I am left with little choice. So, if you can enlighten me, I shall retire content.”

There was a brief pause after Lady Barbara’s inquisitional declaration. Laurence was about to speak, but Lydia touched his knee again, glancing at Kay, who seemed fascinated by the physical properties of her dessert.

Mary spoke, and Lydia’s heart sunk.

“You speak sensibly,” said Mary.

“Thank you!” replied Lady Barbara acidly.

Mary smiled. “You speak sensibly, for a person at the satisfied end of the spectrum. Your life has been quite richly lived, so naturally this sort of adventure seems pointless. Yet we are the ones who have to deal with this new world. We are the ones who have to reinvent the wheel, so to speak, for we find our new roads are not for old carriages. Money is not what it was; it is no longer safe behind the high walls of old privilege, but must be earned by hard work in the here and now. London is now a place of business as well as opera. Lord Carvey has reached the end of his tether here – as has Lady Kay. To continue progressing, he must find other channels, channels not specific to agriculture. In short, Laurence must diversify. We have spoken of this before. He must find buyers for his excess crops. He must find transporters, receivers, distributors, sellers, accountants and salesmen. London is the center of these skills. This is not merely a whimsical trip, but the natural progression of modern capital.”

“Excuse me,” Lady Barbara interrupted gently, “and I don’t wish to seem rude, but are you not, in fact, a peasant orphan? Not that this alone disqualifies your judgment – for I know there

is no longer any such thing as class – but as a peasant orphan, I assume that you have little experience in business.”

Mary nodded, her face pale. “That is true.”

“Then pray tell me why I should view your grand pronouncements as anything more than the ravings of an insane mind.”

“Mother – please!” cried Kay.

“Because the science of which I speak is being invented as I speak,” replied Mary. “As far as I understand it, Laurence is the first landowner in all of England to apply these reforms – though I’m sure Lord Cerbes is close behind. There is no clear plan of action, any more than there was for Christians between the death of Christ and the writing of the New Testament. We must feel our way, with reason and industry as our guide.”

Lady Barbara looked at her for a long moment, then shook her head and turned to Laurence. “If this trip is purely for – business – why must Kay go? I speak, of course, as a representative of the foolish world of the old world. I speak as an ancient, backward, retrograde, reactionary soul, a soul which, foolish though it may seem, would like at least some company at Christmas!”

“You should have treated me better,” whispered Kay suddenly.

“I’m sorry? Excuse me?” demanded Lady Barbara.

“I am not a – present – that you can keep under the tree and open at Christmas,” said Kay, staring at her plate. “What am I supposed to do until then? Sit in my room? Watch you eat toast?”

“Kay,” said her mother softly. “Is this really the time? Do you not wish to keep even a shred of pride?”

“I want to go...” said Kay.

“Why, then you shall go!” said her mother gaily, glancing at Lord Cerbes. “Is this a prison? I merely express my preferences. Whether they are taken seriously is up to my children; I bless them either way!”

Kay sat silent; her cheeks flamed an angry red.

“Now – what shall we do with our lands, Larry?” smiled Lady Barbara.

Laurence cleared his throat. “Autumn is almost here; the harvest is in. There is food enough for everyone. All that is left is to settle in for the winter.”

“I see. And these – workers?”

“I think we should leave Adam Footer in charge of them,” said Laurence. “He is a competent man.”

“Yet he resists these Samaritan fantasies, does he not?” asked Lady Barbara.

“Yes, but I think I can reason with him.”

“I have a suggestion,” she said, “which, as your father would say, will fell two birds with one buckshot. Kay wishes to expand her horizons; Adam Footer does not wish to oversee the factory. Why not leave Kay in charge of the factory while you all go to London?”

Kay looked up, startled at the sudden silence.

“I don’t think that would be a good idea,” said Mary.

“Are you part of this family?” inquired Lady Barbara. She lifted her hands. “This would benefit everyone, I think. Kay could prepare for motherhood by learning how to manage ungrateful people – who knows, she may display unguessed talents. The factory would be left in

the hands of the family – and, last and probably least, I might have some company for Christmas.”

“I would like Kay to come to London,” said Jonathon.

“Why?” asked Lady Barbara, glaring at him.

“Because... I would like to show her around.”

“Well, if that’s the reason...”

“Well, then because I am very attracted to her,” said Jonathon. Kay trembled. “Because I may be falling in love with her.”

Lady Barbara sat frozen for a moment, then shook her head with a shudder. “Then come to visit.”

“I already have,” smiled Jonathon. “But this is all up to Kay. What do you want to do, darling?”

Kay’s head looked as if it might explode. She put a palm on her chest, and stared at it, her cheeks burning. “I want to... stay... with you,” she whispered. Lady Barbara and Jonathon both looked around triumphantly, realized the question was still undecided and turned their attentions back to Kay. After several heartbeats, she raised her head and stared at Jonathon.

“With you,” Kay said softly, her eyes brimming.

“Then it is decided.” Jonathon smiled. “She is, after all, of age.”

“Yes, well, we can’t prosecute you for that!” muttered Lady Barbara.

“Come, good lady, none of that,” said Lord Cerbes easily. “Why not come down to London for Christmas?”

“Because I am old. Because I do not like to travel. And because I am the parent.”

“I am also a parent. Yet I do not order my child around.”

“No doubt the new world can find fault with everything I do, Lord Cerbes,” said Lady Barbara. “Yet I raise as I was raised. If there is a fault, it lies in these new coddling standards, not in me.”

“If the world did not change, tradition would always be right,” smiled Lord Cerbes. “Yet we must adapt.”

“I am trying to compromise!”

“Not with your daughter.”

“What would you have me do?”

“Why, the hardest thing for a parent to do,” replied Lord Cerbes gently. “Let go, Lady Barbara. Let go.”

“You are a man. You did not live for your children. You know nothing of this.”

“How refreshing to have a proper conversation!” said Lord Cerbes. “These matters are as old as sunset. Men, too, can become over-attached to their children. Yet we must all step aside at some point.”

“All I ask is that Kay make her own decision,” said Lady Barbara. “I am offering her control of the factory – and Christmas with me. What is it to be, Kay?”

“She has already made her decision,” said Lydia. “She wants to come with us.”

“She has not looked at me once. I don't think she even knows I am here. Kay? Dearest? Look at me, and say you will leave me all alone this winter.”

Kay picked up a knife, stared at it, then put it down again. She shifted in her chair. She touched her hair. She smoothed her blouse. Then she raised her head and stared at Lady Barbara.

“I shall be gone, Mother,” she said.

Her mother returned her stare. “You may be gone, my dear, but your comfortable life remains behind. Unless you plan to wait on Larry for the rest of your life.”

Alarmed, Laurence looked at Kay and shook his head almost imperceptibly, but she didn’t see him.

“Larry has been kind enough...”

“Just’ enough,” put in Mary.

Kay glanced at her and nodded, swallowing. “Yes – just enough to allow me control over half the fortune.”

“So you have replaced me with Larry. I see. Then I have no more use at this table,” said Lady Barbara, throwing down her napkin and rising. “I will retire to the Elysium fields, as you all so clearly desire. I will intrude no more in your new, wonderful lives. I shall live out the rest of my days alone. And I hope for your sake that your new atheism is correct, for as God is my witness, He shall not deal kindly with such untender children!”

Lady Barbara turned on her heel and marched out of the room.

Lord Cerbes rose. Kay covered her face with her hands.

“I think I’m going to be ill,” she murmured.

“Some wine will cover that!” said Lydia triumphantly, raising her glass. “Here – to progress!”

They all laughed awkwardly, clinking their glasses.

“Do you think she’s going to finish that?” asked Jonathon, reaching for Lady Barbara’s abandoned cake.



## CHAPTER FORTY ONE

### *A High Note*

LAURENCE RODE ALONE TO THE FACTORY SOON AFTER DINNER. He found Adam Footer inside, striding beside the rows of down-turned heads.

“Good day, Mr. Footer,” cried Laurence from the door.

Adam Footer glanced up, his face dark. “Good evening, Lord Carvey.”

“Rather late for industry, eh?” asked Laurence.

Adam walked up to him. “Outside, if you please sir,” he said shortly. Turning his head, he called: “I shall be outside; if I hear anything amiss, I will get the whip!” The heads did not raise.

Adam’s face seemed tired in the late light as he stepped outside. He rubbed his eyes and shook his head.

“What can I do for you now, sir?” he asked.

“What’s the matter?”

Adam Footer paused, his lips working angrily. “The matter is, good lord, that business cannot be done under such conditions!”

“What happened?”

“They were shocked at first. Now they’ve hardened. They don’t listen.”

“We must be patient.”

Adam’s face darkened into a scowl. “Patient! By God, sir, but this business is an unholy mongrel! If you wish to curry favour with charity, throw your gold by the road and be satisfied.

But to mix the laxness of charity with the discipline of business – that, Lord Laurence, is a contemptible cross-breed!”

“But – what has happened?”

“What has not happened? They are cunning creatures; they know I have no power to dismiss them, so they laze about and cry foul at all orders. I cannot fire them; I cannot hire others; the only discipline I have is the whip. This charitable venture has become the most brutal workplace in all England – I am sure of it. We beat someone every day. It does no good; these brutes are used to pain. I had to whip a man before lunch. When I returned, I found him and over half our woven wool gone. Gone, sir! That man Jake, the man I left in charge, he claims ignorance; he is probably expecting a cut. We are training them better in sloth, theft and fraud than poverty could ever have done! A dozen industrious men approach me every day begging for work. I have to say: ‘sorry, your muscles are too hard, your eyes too honest, your thrift too strong for our floor’. It is a crying shame. Please, sir – please – give me the power to hire and fire, or this venture will consume itself!”

Laurence frowned. “It’s no use, Mr. Footer. We must prevail. They will learn.”

“They are learning, sir! They are learning the exact opposite of what we wanted to teach them. How will that change?”

“They are still bitter from their hardships, Mr. Footer,” said Laurence patiently. “They are unused to their fortune. It will come.”

“I do not mind keeping them on, sir,” said Adam desperately. “There are a few honest ones still – but without the power to hire good workers, they have no examples but each other, and they cannot help but see that sloth is no more punished than work is rewarded. They respond as

most would; they laze and loathe labour. Let me keep them on, and treat them as any other workers. If they work, they will be praised. If they do not – please, let me fire them. Otherwise, we all suffer!”

“That turns against the whole purpose,” cried Laurence. “I will not break my promise; they have been betrayed enough by life!”

“I know nothing of this ‘life,’ sir, but I know that your approach makes them betray everyone; themselves, you, me. They learned no sense from their lives; we teach them no sense in their work. Where will it come from?”

“Mr. Footer, I understand your desire to make a profit. But we shall make a profit – and not just in money. We will rescue souls, Mr. Footer. But to do that we must be patient.”

“Souls!” muttered Adam. “Sir, you cannot save the souls of bad men with good intentions.”

“That is how it will be.”

Adam turned away, curling his hands into fists. He felt the rising bile, the grating frustration that makes one suddenly curse a dream. He could not understand why Laurence did not feel it as well. What drove the man’s compulsions? It seemed too gruesome a mystery. *I have known strange ones in my days*, thought Adam, *but he is the only one with enough money to help... Oh stupid, stupid world!*

“Very well, sir,” he said finally, turning back to Laurence. “Then I have no choice but to ask for extra funds.”

Laurence stepped back, as if Adam had pulled a knife. “Why?” he demanded.

Adam wagged a finger sadly. “Ah, there is the look I feared. But I will not be ashamed for what I cannot control. We must replace the wool that was stolen. We must find more – non-

workers. We must repair the damaged looms. And we still have not paid for the cost of repairing the late Jigger's barn. And we will need firewood come winter. This all costs!"

"How much?"

"I have written it all down, sir," said Adam, pulling a neatly-folded piece of paper from his breast pocket. Laurence unfolded it and stared at the numbers, shuddering as his eye ran down the page. When he saw the final sum, he put his hand on his heart.

"Net cost of hiring these workers, sir," said Adam evenly. "If we hired honest folk, we would not have to provide housing, replace stolen goods, burnt barns or broken looms. And we would get more than double the productivity. These are the costs, sir; they cannot be lowered save by doing business sensibly or closing it down entirely."

Laurence swallowed. "It is – more than I expected."

"This is why I am fighting so hard, sir!" said Adam urgently. "Both our reputations are at stake. I went to the market the other day and had to apologize to the merchant expecting our cloth. 'What's the matter with these looms, man Adam?' he said. 'It's not the looms, master, but the workers.' 'A sorry excuse,' he replied, 'I can give you the names of fifty good men.' 'That's not possible,' I said, 'as it doesn't reflect the plan.' 'Well my plan, man Adam,' he replied, 'is to buy and sell cloth, and if you can't provide I shall go elsewhere.' I promised him cloth within a week, but I can't stay awake forever, and when I sleep, goods are stolen and looms broken. In business, I have never disgraced my promise. In this business, I don't know how to keep it!"

Laurence sighed deeply. "I cannot break my promise to my sister, or to Miss O'Donnell. I shall approve these costs, though they gouge me deeply."

“Then, sir,” said Adam, producing another piece of paper. “Would you sign this statement to the effect that you reject my sound business advice? I may need it in the years to come.”

Laurence took the paper and stared at it. “What is keeping you here, Adam?” he asked suddenly.

Adam shook his head sadly. “A devil’s bargain sir. Desperate for backing, I signed with you. Now, I would find it almost impossible to find another investor. Anyone who has heard of my looms has heard of this place. I must find a way to make it work, else all will be lost.”

“I’m sorry it is so hard. I did not expect this either.”

“Sir,” said Adam, “you have the privilege of conscience. It is a costly pet.”

“I know; I sign the bills.” Laurence scribbled his name on the bottom of the paper, and handed it back to the merchant. “Now, I am leaving for London in the morning...” he said.

“What?” asked Adam, looking up sharply. “For how long?”

“A month or two.”

Adam stared at him, shocked. “What? You – you are leaving for a month or two?”

“What on earth..?” said Laurence, confused. “I will give you my address...”

“That’s not the point, sir!” cried Adam. “Were this shop running smoothly, I would wave you off with a smile. But we are at a very uncertain juncture. We have no idea what all the expenses could be. We’ve made no plans for shipments, or storage – or anything! I cannot arrange for all this as well as oversee the factory, which at present runs for over eleven hours a day!”

“We cannot afford more help.”

Adam’s lips twisted. “We could if... And what will I do if and when I need more money?”

“Write to me.”

Adam paused, and shook his head. “No, that’s no good.”

“Why not?”

“By mail, two weeks to London; a week to respond, two weeks to get back. Over a month between request and response. It is too uncertain. This is a day-by-day venture. It requires close supervision.”

“What do you want then?”

Adam took a deep breath. “I need an authorization on your account.”

Laurence hesitated. “I am uncomfortable with that.”

“You authorized me to purchase in your name in London; I did not abuse it.”

“I don’t mean that; as far as that goes, I trust you completely. But this project has cost me a good portion of my fortune; the looms, the factory, the wages, and now these new expenses. My trip to London will not be free. I am getting in over my head.”

“Given your approach, this is unavoidable.”

Laurence tugged at his beard. *Dammit!* he thought angrily. “I know, I know... Is there no other way?”

“I cannot continue as overseer without access to funds,” said Adam firmly.

“Then,” said Laurence slowly, “then I must grant that too.”

There was a short silence; the sun shrugged and sank below the horizon in disgust. Laurence wished he could follow it.

“Sir?” said Adam after a while.

“What?”

“On a personal note, I wonder about something.”

“Do you? What’s that?”

“This may be completely out of place, but have you ever wondered about Miss O’Donnel’s motives?”

“Excuse me?” said Laurence, oddly nervous.

“She is the original author of this scheme, yes?”

“Yes.”

“And you feel bound to her for a past wrong, correct?”

“Yes.”

Adam paused. “Well,” he said carefully, “if I had a mind to revenge myself on a man of privilege, and if that man’s privilege depended on money, I could find no better way than hers.”

Laurence trembled violently. “What?”

“It is just a thought, sir. You know her better than I.”

Laurence shook his head. “No – she is trying to do right. I am certain of it. She is correct: there must be some sacrifice.”

“Perhaps,” replied Adam. He turned to the door, then turned back. His face was dark in the twilight. He asked: “Yet must the sacrifice always be yours?”

## CHAPTER FORTY TWO

### *An Underdog's Howl*

“AYE,” SCOWLED JAKE, STRIDING BEFORE THE SEATED WORKERS, “ye sit and sip th’ fruits of my hardy heart without a scowl, but when I say: we must scan further, ye get all pale and trembly and say: ‘we must be grateful for the crumbs we find a-neath their creaking tables!’”

One of the women stood, her infant silent on her breast. “Ye have won us precious prizes, Jake – there’s none with sense who speak otherwise. Yet ye have snake-spit in yer heart as well, and should we risk our new fortune for th’sake of yer venom alone?”

A short old hollow-chested man called Sunken Sam nodded. “We’ve settled into a strange land, sure, and the lay of these woods are hard to spy. Ye’ve beaten a certain path to feastings; my pockets are heavier, to be true, but my back cain’t take many more lashings.”

“Have I led ye false as yet?” demanded Jake, his twisted face yellow in the candlelight. “We know they want to help us, to lift us from the shame they call our souls. They call bending us over these mad machines helpin’, yet we know that Mary O’Donnel has spoken to us of the rightful lazings of labour, an’ she says it is our right to stretch our legs for more’n a moment a day!”

The woman shifted the infant in her arms. “An’ I say, Jake the Red, that if we keep snarling in the face of this kindness – however strange that kindness beats down on us, we will again walk them old roads, and them roads will be as endless as ever.”

“Aye Mavis,” sneered Jake, “an’ ye speak as one who has a shiny new squaller pressed to her heavies, yet we young men cain’t expect chillen in this place; we hold no time as our own, an’ is



spat on by the high pretties of the village, same as always. How is we esposed to live like men? It's wrapped up that ye with young-ins want to squat pretty and nod and grin, but some uv us cain't – not if we want what ye've alruddy got!"

"So what d'ye want?" asked a man.

"We cain't ride the horses of our natural hearts until we be respectful men, until we can shrug the shreddings off our backs. We cain't sun in the smiles of pretty lasses until we can call our hands and homes our own. We be nothing but charity cases here, low-down squalors an' scurvy crumb-gatherers, smiling slaves an' begging dogs. I say we can do without the merchant, without his scorns and lashings. I say that we can take our reins in our own hands, and if they want t'help us, they'll let us live free."

"So what?" asked Sunken Sam scornfully. "So we says to Adam: please sir, we wants to play like big people, so off with you and leave us be?"

"Damn fool!" cried another man. "They'd just dump us in a ditch an' let the sunrise be our roof again!"

"But they hain't!" cried Jake. "They hain't yet, have they? An' we all know the 'why' of that! It's a-cause've Mary, who says: treat them as respectful souls. An' so far they've said 'yea' to all our askings!"

"An' beaten us fer axing," put in an old woman.

"An' fer not wukkin' when e'er they snap their figgers!"

"An' fer being tired!"

"An' for catching a stretch of sun when th'day is good!"

“And ye be whiny dogs for takin’ it!” shouted Jake, his cheeks purple. “These high and mighties be breaking us in two for their tables, and all you do is thank ‘em for it! My back’s crosser than any of yers, causen’ I see the difference a-tween their pounds and our pennies. They want to fatten themselves with kindness, so they try beating us into their shadows. But they weren’t beaten into their gold – they beat it out of souls like us! Lord Larry’s ‘scaping to London – I heard the words meself – so I say we turf the merchant and take the looms ourselves – and if there’s justice to it, it will be the justice of those what take what’s alruddy theirs!”

“It’s too risky,” said Mavis nervously. “He could return and loosen us again.”

“Aye – well if it’s risk ye be darting from, I’ll speak soft and simple. If ye quail a-fore this courage, ye may wake one fine night t’find this pretty nest in flames, and then ye’ll be breathing happy to ‘scape to the fields with all yer skin!”

There was a long silence after Jake’s words.

“But if we take this step, we shall hold the high pride of free souls,” he said eventually. “An’ that must be the true end of our sorry lives!”

The others stared at him; the candles sketched shadows through his bitter eyes. They stared at him, fearful of his threats, but they felt something stir in them, something buried beneath the weight of old misery and hated scars, something that struggled to wake before the trumpets of a certain dream of freedom. They felt this strangled hope; it rose, warring with fear and shame and hatred, and it took many hours of angry words before their course was decided.

## CHAPTER FORTY THREE

### *The Walls Close*

THE PRIEST SWALLOWED; HIS VISION SEEMED TO BLUR AT THE EDGES.

“What, nothing?” he asked, his mouth dry.

“I did not say ‘nothing’,” replied Lady Barbara, sipping her tea and watching him carefully.

“I merely said ‘nothing from me’.”

Father Jones rose, patting the back of his hair. “This is most dire,” he stammered. “I am in no position to take such a loss. I must post my accounts within the month. There will be questions.”

“No doubt.”

“I don’t understand. Why – what has brought on such a change?”

“A whim of the old world,” replied Lady Barbara. “My late husband, bless his soul, decided, naturally enough, to turn the family fortune over to Laurence on his twenty fifth birthday. This has occurred. Would you like to speak to him?”

Father Jones shook his head dejectedly. “I suppose I’d better... He was good company last night.”

Lady Barbara summoned the maid. Joyce entered, and was told to summon some soap for her face before summoning Laurence.

Father Jones sat back down in a plush armchair, crossing his legs primly. He picked up a little china figurine from the coffee table and turned it over in his hands.

“I suppose these shall all be made in factories soon,” he said sadly, looking up at Lady Barbara. “It is an... awful trial.”

Lady Barbara smiled. “Some see it as a challenge, Father Jones. Neither the first nor the last.”

Laurence came into the room, his face flushed from packing.

“You called?” he asked.

“Please – sit down, Laurence,” said Lady Barbara, gesturing to a chair opposite the priest.

“This morning, Father Jones came to ask for our tithe,” she said.

Laurence frowned, thinking: *Tithe! My God, but doesn't that seem like a word from another time! I had completely forgotten...*

“As you may know,” continued his mother, “we have been a central pillar of this parish’s finances for centuries. Many of the good works – distributing Bibles, aiding and educating the poor, and so on – have been largely paid for by our generosity.” She paused, waiting for a response. “This is called a ‘tithe’...” she said slowly.

“Yes, Mother,” said Laurence impatiently. “I know that.”

“Good enough,” she said. “When I had control of the finances, I always paid the tithe at this time of year. Some prefer monthly; I chose annually. Now, I have been looking at the ledgers – really Larry, did you hold your pencil between your teeth when you wrote them? – and I have calculated our tithe – our ten percent.” Lady Barbara pushed a piece of paper over to Laurence, who leaned forward and picked it up, sick at heart. *Not another one..!*

“You’re welcome,” said Lady Barbara.

“What?” scowled Laurence. “Heavens, of all times! Yes, thank you.” He took a deep breath, flinching at the number he saw. “This – this is – astounding. This is more than I promised yesterday...”

“Promised?” asked his mother sharply. “To whom?”

“To Mr. Footer,” said Laurence absently. “For improvements – and repairs.”

“We also help the poor,” reminded Father Jones.

“Yes, but in a different way...” said Laurence, still staring at the paper.

Lady Barbara smiled. “Well, since, as a real grownup, you want to play with all the money, I think it is only right that you take on the responsibilities as well.”

“Give me a pencil,” said Laurence.

“Oh – am I a maid now?” asked his mother.

“Give me a pencil!” repeated Laurence angrily.

Father Jones jumped up, fumbling in his pocket. “Here, here,” he said, passing him a pencil.

Laurence’s brow furrowed. “These sums – you have checked them?” he asked.

“Of course,” smiled Lady Barbara.

“I suppose they’re right...” murmured Laurence, his pencil flying over the paper. “Good lord – that can’t be right! Oh yes, the grain – of course. And this? Yes, the irrigation. And the fertilizer... the guano, lime, gypsum, and marl. And the salaries... And the London bills...” He rubbed his face with his free hand. “And that total is...” He looked up. “Yes – it is correct, to the best of my knowledge.” He took a deep breath. “But it cannot be paid.”

“Excuse me?” asked his mother coldly.

“Yes – no, it cannot be paid. You heard me,” said Laurence, sitting back in a chair, his face fixed.

“Oh, dear,” said Father Jones, clasping his hands and glancing at Lady Barbara helplessly.

“Cannot be paid,” said Lady Barbara slowly. “Cannot be paid. You have controlled our money for one month, and it cannot be paid?”

“Well, I mean, yes, it could be paid, but that would be the end of two things,” said Laurence.

“Selfishness and idiocy?” asked Lady Barbara.

Laurence sighed. “No, Mother. If I pay this, I cannot afford to ship any of this year’s grain. There will be no profit from our improvements. How, then, will we pay for next year’s improvements?”

“Shall I ring for Mary?” asked Lady Barbara, picking up the bell. “I am sure she will give us some comprehensive solution, based on her vast experience in these matters.”

Father Jones frowned. “Surely next year’s improvements will not be as expensive as this year’s,” he said. “I was under the impression that they were largely – structural.”

“Strictly speaking, yes,” replied Laurence. “But I couldn’t get the farmers to save their livestock’s manure, or make the irrigation efforts last. Few of them planted turnips – and those who did, did it poorly. And the benefits of crop rotation won’t show up right away – much of the soil is exhausted. So we have a pretty good return this year, all things considered, but next year we will have to buy more manure...”

“Surely not too expensive!” said Father Jones.

Laurence shook his head. “It needs to be treated properly. Plus, we will have to reinforce all the irrigation systems, buy additional seedlings and hire extra manpower to ensure the crops are

all rotated well and planted properly. That is highly skilled labour – I can't be everywhere at once – and it all has to be paid for.” Laurence put the priest's pencil down and rubbed his face. “But, most importantly, if we let this process go – you know we are going to London partly to preach agricultural reform – if we let it go, we shall fall behind the other landowners. I know how long it takes to effect real change, but the second round is always easier. We may be overtaken, and then we will simply have laboured long and hard to line the pockets of others.”

“Yes, I understand, the pace of reform will lessen,” said Father Jones. “But really, Lord Carvey – is that the only variable in the equation?”

“Look, I understand your position,” replied Laurence. “You are expecting a certain sum – you have every right to expect that; it was always provided. Yet it comes at me at an inopportune time. I had no chance to arrange matters to satisfy it. I am overextended. I am in an impossible situation.”

“Impossible!” cried Lady Barbara. “What foolishness! ‘Oh, excuse me!’ says the fop to the tax man, ‘pardon me – I am overextended. I had to have my silk shirt and stockings! I have to take my trips to Paris!’ The tax man laughs and says: ‘why that just won't do, my man. You shall simply have to give up some of your luxuries!’ You see, Larry, you are taking your whims as absolutes, so naturally you see your situation as impossible. Yet your trip to London is not a quest of the gods. Your patronage of Mary is not an eleventh commandment. Your obsession with criminals does not guarantee you entrance to heaven. Your fiscal guilt about your sister does not fall under the category of duties to the realm. You have chosen these foolish goals; you cannot argue from impossibility!”

Laurence sat and looked at his hands for a long time, thinking: *don't throttle; don't throttle...*

“What would you suggest I do?” he asked finally, buying time for self-restraint.

Lady Barbara started to say something sarcastic, but with all the eerie sensitivity of a controlling soul, saw his expression and instantly changed her tack. “Larry,” she said gently, “you do not have to save all the world at once. Even Christ did not try that. Improve your lands – yes – I know I have been harsh, but age is inflexible, and I cannot apologize for years. Improve our lands – that is progress enough for one year. But to try improving your lands while saving sixty-odd souls from poverty, starting a factory, rescuing Kay, elevating Mary to a position of influence, setting up a system of – distribution – as well as, perhaps, falling in love – yes, I am old, but not blind – that is heaping your plate to the breaking-point. You cannot do everything at once. Shed some weight.” She smiled. “For instance, why are these destitutes working in your factory, while Mary is sitting about our house? Put her to work with them, if you feel guilty about her. Let things take their course with Jonathon and Kay; you do not need to give her half our – your – fortune to make her attractive. As for this factory – if you want to save these poor people, turn them over to Father Jones; they must take instruction in life before taking instruction in work. It breaks my heart to see you overextending yourself in this way, Larry – especially when it causes you to reject our real responsibilities as landowners: the improvement of morals, taste and civility. When it causes you to destroy the church. Father Jones cannot survive on pennies in the box; he needs your help. That is the arrangement.”

Laurence paused, almost seduced by her words. *Sounds sensible*, he thought, *what is wrong with it? What? What?* Then, in a flash, he realized, and rose from his chair.

“I will put my trust in my improvements,” he said, turning to Father Jones. “More than in yours.”



“Larry!” cried his mother. Father Jones put his hand to his mouth, shocked.

“Larry,” said Lady Barbara, “even if you are a heathen, you have a responsibility to the souls of others! Will you take their comfort away?”

“What comfort?” cried Laurence. “Don’t you understand – this is the whole battle: *I* am the source of their comfort! The church counsels acceptance and patience, but does nothing to fill their bellies and feed their children. The church has had the world for over a thousand years – what has improved? Wars, famine, pestilence, death – that is the legacy of the church. Look at my lands – look at the wealth, the plenty, the joy! You want them back, Father Jones. You want them back in the fold. But you must take away their happiness to lure them back. That is the truth of this situation. I have chosen progress. I cannot solely fund those opposed to it, those opposed to happiness and the satisfactions of this world!”

Laurence stopped, his heart pounding. Father Jones stood up as well, his face set.

“I hoped it would not come to this,” said the priest slowly. “We have tried to be civil. Now the consequences of your blasphemy must be laid bare. If you do not pay your tithe, you, your lands, and all within it will be excommunicated. Not by me, but by the council of bishops. The Church has an interest in this matter. It will not tolerate dissent. You shall be made an example of.”

“Excommunicated, Laurence Turner Carvey!” said Lady Barbara, rapping the table with her knuckle. “No mass, no absolution, no burials, no baptizing, no confirmation. The villagers may sometimes sleep in on Sundays to recover from their drink, but would they stand for no church at all?”

Laurence shook his head violently. “If they don’t, they can move. The choice will be theirs: live happily without prayer, or pray in vain for happiness. I think I know what they will choose. They will shrug, eat well and worship life – and then God, if they choose, in their own homes.”

“And me?” thundered Lady Barbara, making Laurence flinch. “What should I do?” she demanded. “Should I stand before God Himself – as I shall do, and not before long! – should I stand before Him and say: sorry I did not attend mass in my last years, sorry I did not receive absolution and was not buried in holy ground – details, my son says, but foolishly important to you my Lord – I’m sorry I did not perform the duties demanded of me as an honest Christian, but you see, my son decided to go off to London! What will God say to me then? *Did you teach him to honour his mother, as I commanded? Did you fight him with everything at your command? Did you cast aside all parental love for the sake of Me, as I demanded of Abraham?* What would you have me reply to God, Larry? Perhaps hell does not exist for those who don’t believe in it, but it is very real to me, and you are sending me there!”

“I have no patience for these absurdities!” shouted Laurence, beside himself. “Your beliefs are your own business; I will not fund them! Why don’t you let us *go*?” he demanded, tears suddenly stinging his eyes. “Dear God! You oppress us, you press down upon us! Kay is right – you suffocate us – everywhere we turn we break our noses on your opinions! Why are you so involved? We can’t take a breath without making you cough! We must – we must live our own lives – make our own mistakes – that is the right of all free souls! Look at Lord Cerbes – does he choke his child every time he moves his hand? Look at Jonathon – does he have to write home for permission every time he wants a biscuit? For heaven’s sake, Mother – you may be wrong! This may be the wrong way to be a mother!”

“You disgust me!” said Lady Barbara, her face white with rage. “You have spoken your mind clearly to me – for that I thank you. I know where I stand. I hope your words satisfied you, for they are the last that will ever pass between us!”

“You’re absolutely right, for the first time in your life,” said Laurence. He turned to Father Jones. “I’m sorry for your loss, but the world must change!” With that, he turned and left the room, commanding himself not to slam the door.

Father Jones stood in silence for a while, rubbing his temples. “Well,” he said hopelessly, “that is that.”

Lady Barbara laughed harshly. “That is by no means that,” she said, ringing the bell. “Now, we call Kay.”

Laurence walked down the hall, his hands trembling, dazed at the depth of his sudden passion. *Poor Kay*, he thought over and over, with true, loving sympathy, *poor, poor Kay!* He wept deeply, suddenly, bitterly, imagining an eternity in a silent house with that mother, an eternity of dodging that harsh, accusing voice, an eternity of sitting in one’s room, unable to breathe, an eternity of choking on silent fear while one’s brother strode through sunny, far-off lands, a stupid smile on his stupid, stupid face...

*I must find her*, thought Laurence blindly. *She must be the first to hear a true apology.* Wiping his tears, he went downstairs.

Hasty resolutions are hastily enacted; that is their greatest danger. If Laurence had stood in the hallway for another twenty seconds, he would not have missed the somber procession of the maid bringing Kay to the chamber where Father Jones and Lady Barbara waited in silence.

Kay sat for over an hour, her soul dangling from a long rope woven by endless supplications, silent threats and veiled insults. Her mind was dazed by the changes of the past few weeks; when memories of early injustices first rise, they come as a tide that seems to wash away the entire self. The certainty of *I was wronged* on the imposition of *I was wrong* creates a terrible contradiction, a silent, vengeful war between justice and illusion. All the buried vengeance of the wronged child rises, burrowing under the wall of assumed goodness. All compliance is exposed as shocked cowardice; all obedience finally understood as brute fear. The almost-murdered soul rises from its deep grave like a scarred bag filled with blood, demanding vengeance. Mary could have told Kay the whole story of avenging innocence, but Mary was sitting in her little room, working on the speeches she planned to give in London. If she had sensed the danger Kay was in, she would have broken the door of that grim chamber with the hilt of a sword, and entered slashing. But Mary's inner eye, for that moment turned to herself alone, saw nothing, and so Kay, weighed by the endless pendulums of maternity, justice and grand responsibility, circled by the self-appointed guardians of God and Goodness, wavered on the loneliest border between self and silence.

## CHAPTER FORTY FOUR

### *Stripes Revealed*

LORD CERBES WAS IN THE GARDEN, READING, when Laurence came up to him and asked for Kay's whereabouts.

"I haven't seen her," said Lord Cerbes, glancing up, "but I haven't seen Jonathon either; I assume they are together."

"When she comes back, I have to speak to her," said Laurence.

"You are upset," noted Lord Cerbes, closing his book. "To be honest, I have never seen such a house of upset."

Laurence sighed, lowering his head. "Ohh, I am beginning to see why people just shut up and obey! Look at me – where is this division? I can rebel against my own class, against tradition, habit and God, without raising my voice. Crossed by my mother, I become a raving lunatic."

Lord Cerbes nodded delicately. "I don't wish to change the subject, but I would dearly like to see your factory before we leave. Is it far?"

"No – about half an hour by horse."

"Sometimes the best remedy for personal upset is to survey one's achievements," said Lord Cerbes. "I say this not only because of my wishes, but from long experience."

"Oh, and of course you are constantly rejected," said Laurence. "One reads the headlines all the time: 'Lord Cerbes still the toast of the town, but some seen not clinking their glasses hard enough!'"

Lord Cerbes laughed. “It is invigorating to see the passions of youth in full flight; it is also amusing to see them working so hard to imagine that they invented both society and rebellion at their birth. Of course I have been rejected. My father scowled and railed when I declined a career in public service; my mother sighed and fought when I married against her wishes. Most men laugh at my version of fatherhood.”

“Then – where is the difference? How are you so content?”

“The difference, dear Laurence, is time. As the years go by, one realizes that these things, though harsh at the time, scar little in the long run. Upset fades; contentment and self-respect mature. Why, if being strong were easy, wouldn’t everyone do it?”

“I suppose that’s true...” said Laurence, touching his lips. “Tell me – do you pay your tithe?”

Lord Cerbes looked surprised, almost offended. “Certainly not!”

“No – apparently I don’t either. As of now.”

The older man nodded. “Ahh – that’s hard. It was easier for me; my parents died before I took the risk of imperiling their souls. The pressure the Church brought to bear was most intense; I was publicly branded, excommunicated, humiliated in every way. I tell you: I would rather owe money to a thief than a priest. Standing firm was very hard, on Lydia as well as myself. But trust me – this turmoil will pass. I know this doesn’t help now; it is the worst kind of advice, the kind that, when given, is quite meaningless, and when finally understood, completely unnecessary.” Lord Cerbes smiled. “You are thoroughly entitled to your discontent – as long as you indulge the wishes of your guests.”

Laurence smiled in return, and suddenly decided that Kay was nowhere to be found. “Quite right. I just want to tidy myself up. Give me ten minutes, and meet me at the stables.”

Lord Cerbes nodded and rose.

The ride to the factory was pleasant at first; clouds scudded by hurriedly, as if late for an annual convention of vapour. After fifteen minutes, however, the convention seemed to have started, for the clouds suddenly stopped and vented their frustration on the innocent landscape. Neither man had brought protection against the elements; their hats quickly became sodden and shapeless.

Coming over the final hill, they were treated to a most unbusinesslike sound. Adam Footer’s voice mingled with angry male voices; the argument sounded as if it were getting quite out of hand.

“Good lord!” exclaimed Lord Cerbes.

“Damn it!” cried Laurence, spurring his horse forward.

It had been a hard day for Adam. The workers had refused to touch their looms; they were making more and more demands. Adam stood shouting, brandishing a whip. He was ringed by fifteen or so men; the red-haired man was shouting something back. About thirty other souls stood at a distance, hanging on every word.

“I’ve tole ye before, an’ I’ll tell ye agin: we cain’t work a dozen hours at a stretch!” shouted the red-haired man.

“And I suppose you want foot rubs and little girls feeding you grapes as well!” cried Adam. “You get two half-hour breaks a day – and all Sunday off! These are easier terms than any other workplace I know!”

“This ain’t any other workplace,” sneered Jake. “We know th’score; we are esposed to be helped – but workin’ us to skin and bone ain’t helping!”

“Yes – you are supposed to be helped – but you are also supposed to be doing some of the helping yourselves!”

“Help ourselves!” cried Jake, shaking his head. “Did y’hear th’wurds, lads? Help ourselves! Kicked in the gutter afore we larned t’walk, kicked in the head ever’ time we tried to lift it, beaten and driven off by ever’ single folk in these good Chrissen lands, and now, brothers, we is esposed to help ourselves, like good little child’en! Well, we *is* helping ourselves, Master Footer! We is working, we is rising early, we is breaking our fingers on yer damn wool, but we ain’t about to be taken for nothing!”

“Taken for nothing!” shouted Adam. “Taken for nothing! You’re paid! And who the hell else would hire you?”

“What is the meaning of this?” cried Laurence from the doorway.

“Aye – good morning, Lord. They want a shorter workday,” said Adam bitterly, snapping his fingers. “That’s for our generosity!”

“Here’s our good lord, come like an army to save the day,” jeered Jake, winking at his fellows, who laughed harshly, their arms tensing.

“What?” cried Laurence, walking forward.



“You heard me,” repeated Adam, wiping his face. “They want ten hours a stretch, like any river-cruise!”

“Do you – do you all agree?” asked Laurence, turning to the workers. They stood silently, watching him.

“That dain’t know what they wunt,” snarled Jake. “They’re just the sheep ye hoped fer! But we ain’t all sheep, sir and master. Some of us be men, and we know what’s what!”

“I don’t understand,” said Laurence, acutely aware that Lord Cerbes was standing by the door. “You are here by charity; we hired you with the best intentions. Why are you trying to take advantage of us?”

“Advantage!” laughed Jake. The other men echoed him. “Our eyes is going squinny with starin’! We cain’t scratch usselves, we hands be such claws! We live in this damn loomy-bin, ‘causen Chrissen folk won’t have us. We cain’t spend our little coins, ‘causen Chrissen folk won’t sell t’us! I tell ye, good sir: I ate better on the open road; slept better under trees, and cud call me hours me sov-ren own. If there be any advantage, lord, it be all yers. I sold meself to ye for hope; I’m now spyng that I sold me soul, me manhood and me freedom, so ye could live in a big house and swaller fat meals!”

“What – so what do you want?” asked Laurence, passing a hand over his eyes.

“We want a shine of time for usselves,” said Jake.

“We want more than a floor to live on,” said another.

“P’raps we want families,” said another, “‘causen we cain’t raise younguns at the foots of looms!”

“Good workers come with homes, Lord Carvey,” said Adam evenly. “Good workers come with gratitude and hard work. With good workers, you aren’t competing with begging as an occupation!”

“Ye scurvy stripe slasher!” snarled Jake. “D’ye own to yer lashings? Aye Lord,” he said, turning his back to Laurence and raising his shirt. “D’ye see these pretty scratches? Newgate left me no such lines! I had to become an honest worker to be thus hardly treated!”

“Is that right?” murmured Lord Cerbes, shocked.

“If you steal,” cried Adam, “if you shirk, if you break your machines so you can laze about, you will be whipped! I cannot fire you,” he said loudly, “so you must be beaten. You are shocked, sir?” he said, looking at Lord Cerbes. “And right you should be; I had no mind to become a slave-driver!”

“Good Lord,” said Lord Cerbes, looking at Laurence with a pale face. “What have you been doing?”

“Helping,” said Laurence grimly. “Laziness must learn discipline; it is for their own good. You – Jake – red-hair – yes, you. Are you the instigator of all this?”

“I ain’t no ‘instibator’, sir,” said Jake defiantly, lowering his shirt and turning around. “I only tells ‘em what’s what. Look here, sir, ye’ve lost a few men alruddy; even one of the lasses ‘scaped all this. Ye are a shining beacon, a goodly knight of better things, but we have a right to what’s ours. The road still calls us, for alluv us. There we can live free, though hated. This ain’t much better, as I see’t. Our muskels ain’t set fer hard work. We be weak from our freedoms, Lord – that’s a truth from a righteous tongue!”

“Testify, brother!” cried a man.

“We cain’t do whut ye axe,” agreed another man.

“We get tired!” echoed another.

“Th’lasses fall on their arses,” said another. “An’ we have to pick up whut they drop!”

Laurence paused, pursing his lips. “Did you inform me of all this, Adam?” he asked.

“I said, sir, that if it’s a charity, let’s have food and dancing. If it’s a business, let’s have hard, honest work. The two don’t see eye to eye. Never will in this world, I fear.”

Laurence scowled. The mantra rang in his ears: *sacrifice, sacrifice*. “Then we must have more charity,” he said slowly. “Eleven hours a day. Half Saturdays off.”

Jake’s face broke into a grin. “Y’hear that, lads? We be seen by clear eyes! You, sir, are a prince and nobbl’an! Ye shain’t be disappointed! When we gets our strength up, and our eyes adjust, we’ll spit wool like a river of sheep!”

“Good,” said Laurence uncertainly. “And Adam, I have brought the authorization giving you access to my accounts.”

Adam stared at him in shock, then shook his head.

“No sir, I asked for no such thing,” he said firmly.

“What?” asked Laurence, astounded. “Last night, you...”

“I was in town last night, sir,” said Adam slowly. “You must have me confused with one of your farmers. I would not be such a fool as to ask for such an authorization. This lot would be at me like flies on a carcass if they thought I had control over the funds.”

Laurence nodded slowly, understanding. “Yes – I am sorry. I have indeed mixed you up with someone else.”

Behind Adam, Jake smiled.

Adam shook his head, scowling, then glanced at Lord Cerbes.

“Will you be long in the district, good sir?” he asked with a sudden smile.

“Until this evening, Mr. Footer,” replied Lord Cerbes.

“Ahh, that’s a shame. You look like a man of business. I have a friend with looms all his own – if this interests you, I would love to write.”

Lord Cerbes hesitated. “I’m afraid I have all the business I can handle at present. But thank you for the offer.”

Adam’s face fell. “Aye, right you are. In future, perhaps we will be able to talk.”

Lord Cerbes nodded, then glanced at Laurence.

“My curiosity is fully satisfied, Lord Carvey,” he said quietly.

Laurence turned away angrily. “Very well.”

They rode home in silence.

## CHAPTER FORTY FIVE

### *A Spurned and Spurning Man*

SQUIRE POUNDER HAD ONLY TWO LOVES; he had rejected the first and been rejected by the second. This was a strange position to be in; it spoke of a man with odd passions who was failing to manage them very well.

He woke early, feeling with a tickling sensation in his heart. It was a familiar feeling; it had been with him since he was a young boy. He first viewed it as a crush; it came on him when he went to market with his mother and watched the haggling. Calling it a young boy's fancy, he waited for it to pass. In puberty, the feeling had grown to infatuation, and the young Pounder would sit in the pub with his father, totally absorbed with the talk of the merchants. By the time he grew into a man, his feeling had swelled to the heady certainty of love. His mistress was the *Call of the Coin*, and it was a demanding relationship.

The Call of the Coin was not sheer materialism, for Squire Pounder held that philosophy in low esteem; neither was it merely 'getting rich', for he spent money as quickly as he earned it. The Call of the Coin was his name for his love affair with the *Market*.

Now it may seem odd that a man can have a love affair with the Market, but many a woman can testify to the opposite, and cite situations of seductive undress utterly thwarted by the allure of a bulging briefcase. These women understand that, with the men they love, they will always be competing with a mistress, a mistress whose mystery, desirability and seductiveness rival even the most beautiful of consorts.

This mistress is not any particular market, or any particular transaction, or the idea of the ‘market,’ but the sum total of a life spent in pursuit of the Deal. The Deal is the consummation of the Call of the Coin; it is the sweet, wondrous moment when agreement is reached, papers signed, money passed and goods begin to flow. A lumberjack, prying the last tree free of a logjam and seeing the rolling trunks begin again to flow downstream, feels the same exultation; a man struggling in the folds of a foreign language feels the same joy when he finds himself able to think in that language; an artist, finding that his creation has somehow transcended his craft and breathes complete utters the same cry of happiness. It is the moment of completion, of certainty, of disciplined bliss, a pleasure that is transcendent, addictive, and extremely hard to come by.

For Squire Pounder, the Call of the Coin was a singular, driving passion, as rich and deep as any that have driven great artists. He lay awake at night, plans and contacts whirring through his head; possibilities, customers, financing, marketing, guarantees, improvements – the infinite aspects of business raced through his mind, challenging him, stimulating him, exciting him. He wrote lovesick letters at three in the morning to distant and perplexed bankers; he followed men of capital like a domesticated chivalric knight; he persisted in his dream like an unknown artist certain of posthumous fame.

What drove him? Was it money? Was it fame, reputation, glory, recognition, status or even that odd thing called success? There is no way of answering that; we could ask any great artist the same question, and would only hear the words that tell everything and nothing: because I had to. A woman, asked why she adores her husband, may list a few (or a few hundred) qualities, but in the end it is something beyond words; it simply is: I am, therefore I love him. The Call of

the Coin was not a choice on the part of Squire Pounder; it was a piece of his soul; it was his soul, perhaps.

Did he achieve success? That is hard to say; famous artists are often miserable, and look back on their salad days with envious nostalgia. Those who know themselves know that fame is only one tiny variable in the infinite equation of the soul; wealth too, by all reports. Success is not measured by the achievement of a thing, or status, income, recognition or any single event; none can never rightly say: my success is now. Success is a state closer to the heart than the head; it is measured by the approval of inner eyes, not the applause of anonymous hands. If these are our measures of success, then Squire Pounder was a success, for he was rabidly happy.

He was, that is, until his mother died.

Squire Pounder had only some feelings for his mother – or his father, for that matter – since he displayed one of the time-honoured symptoms of the talented, which is that no single human being can ever be quite as real to them as their own abilities. However, Squire Pounder's ability to follow the Call of the Coin had been greatly enhanced by his ability to keep his word, and this great virtue, so essential for good business, was also the cause of his estrangement from his first love. His mother, on her deathbed, wrung from him a promise to achieve rank, a promise that he never regarded as anything less than an absolute commandment.

Thus he was forced to dam the flow of his natural soul. Squire Pounder became what he most despised: a merchant in hot pursuit of aristocracy. By saving Lord Cerbes, he established his station; he took his achievement very seriously, and applied all his customary energy to achieving success in his new life. He studied music, art, literature, politics; in short, he became a true aristocrat by immersing himself in a culture he could not possibly add to. His natural bent

being so far from pale imitation, however, he soon found himself chafing at the uselessness of his life. Married to a hated station, he began to consider an affair. And, like all romantics, his first thought was for his first love.

Thus, when he awoke that particular morning, and felt the familiar tickling sensation in his heart, he felt, like all adulterers, both excited and ashamed. He knew, sure as sunrise, that he was going to end up down at the market; he knew this with all the guilty certainty of a man addicted to cheap women or expensive drugs.

Again, like all adulterers, he fought himself in a purely symbolic manner, failing to realize that teasing is also seduction. *I shall read about gallery openings*, he thought at breakfast, turning quickly past the stock pages. *I shall dress as a gentleman*, he thought after breakfast, striving against thoughts of rummaging through grain. *I shall go for a walk in High Park*, he thought on leaving his house, though his feet began to drift in the direction of Kensington Gardens.

And so it was that, with a surprise only half-feigned, Squire Pounder turned a corner and saw before him all the power, mystery and energy of the Call of the Coin.

If love is music, he beheld a symphony; if love is passion, he beheld an opera penned by a megalomaniac; if love is serenity; he beheld a boatload of Gujerati ascetics dreaming on the Ganges; if love is sacrifice, he beheld a legion of wounded soldiers defending a city of wounded children. But the Call of the Coin is its own special love, and what he saw fitted exactly.

The shouting, hawking, arguing, bartering, jeering, bellowing, crying and, occasionally, a barker's sing-song, fell on his ears like a good rain on thirsty crops. To the uninitiated – or to those whose passions run screaming in the opposite direction – it all seemed like a brutal



cacophony, but then the same could be said for opera. The sounds of the market were as sweet to Squire Pounder's ears as the purity of a seasoned soprano's voice is to a lover of the loudest art.

Squire Pounder stood in the richly-scented sunlight and felt his heart swell with yearning. He stared like a child lost in a land of eternal Christmas. His hands twitched like those of a violinist's just out of jail. *One little deal; would I be so disgraced?* he thought, taunting himself. It was almost unbearable. For he was now a gentleman, doomed to eternal consumption.

Squire Pounder took an outdoor table at a nearby restaurant, a table which gave him a good view of the market. *If pressed, I can claim anthropological purposes,* he thought, knowing it to be pure justification but happy for the excuse. Ordering a drink, he sat back and watched.

After only a few minutes, he was assailed by the voice of an old friend, Harold Clapstance. Harold had risen from the gutter on wings of talent, just as Squire Pounder had, and they were on very good terms for businessmen, having sued each other only twice. Harold had also elevated himself from the squalling mayhem of the market to the dusty shelf of nobility by purchasing a minor title; Squire of Kensington, or something of the sort. He was an astoundingly obese man; the Royal Commission had tried to charge him extra, reasoning that, pound for pound, he was in fact buying two titles, but he threatened to sue them for libel and they, being utterly unused to such treatment, nobly declined to pursue the matter.

"Why, Mr. Pounder!" cried Harold, lurching into a seat opposite Squire Pounder. "No, but it's 'Squire' Pounder now, isn't it? What's a titled rogue like you doing here?"

"Same as yourself, I suppose," replied Squire Pounder. "Missing old times. And you?"

“Ah, you have me there,” grinned Harold, signaling the waiter, who appeared immediately, apparently assuming that such a quantity of food would be ordered that he might retire on the tip.

“Two Haddock Blankets,” wheezed Harold, fingering the menu and licking his lips. “Two Shepherd’s Pies, two plates of jam butties and three pints of lime and lager.”

Squire Pounder glanced up and shook his head. The waiter stared at Harold, bowed respectfully, and left.

“Married?” asked Harold, taking a piece of bread from a neighbouring table and wishing its startled occupants *bon appetite*.

Squire Pounder grimaced. “Rejected.”

Harold stopped chewing (an action so uncommon that it indicated great surprise), and looked at Squire Pounder in a very perplexed manner.

“Rejected? Can this be?” he asked. “The man who sold marine insurance to a fishmonger? Rejected? By heavens, it seems that I’ve been getting large and soft, while you’ve only been getting soft. Who is she?”

“You wouldn’t know her.”

“Oh no? Remember, we’re all gentleman now. Daughter of an old-timer?” he asked, using a phrase which referred to any aristocrat with more than one generation behind him.

“Yes.”

“Really in love, or just ambitious in love?” asked Harold, resuming his bread compaction.

“Really I think,” said Squire Pounder, looking away. “Hard to tell; you know how everything goes topsy-turvy when you elevate yourself.”

“I can’t believe you took no for an answer,” said Harold. “When we were working on the Sheffield deal, you were so persuasive I think you could have convinced me to marry you.”

“Will you marry me?” smiled Squire Pounder.

Harry shook his head. “You see? It’s not believable any more. A great, great shame.”

“She slapped me.”

“And..?”

“And – I think she meant it.”

“Oh yes, of course. Listen: when Ethel doesn’t slap me, I know she’s bored. A slap is always passionate. You just have to channel it.”

“Do you think so?” asked Squire Pounder, looking up quickly.

“Where is the woman now?”

“God!” exhaled Squire Pounder, rolling his eyes. “Somewhere in Dorset.”

“So go to Dorset – if there’s a love-test in England, it’s got to be going to Dorset. It’d be like bringing her a dragon’s head, saying ‘look what boredom I will endure for you, my love.’”

Harold sighed. “Christ! It’s the only dragon left, seems like.”

“I should go,” murmured Squire Pounder.

“Well,” said Harold with great exaggeration, “unless there are – pressing matters keeping you here for the next – few – weeks.”

“No – you’re right. I should go,” said Squire Pounder resolutely.

Harold grinned. “Now that I believed!”

The haddock was brought, and the waiter placed one plate before each of them. Squire Pounder started to protest.

“No – one’s for you,” exclaimed Harold. “Aren’t you hungry?”

“I thought... they were for you.”

“Old times, my man. I’m on a diet now. Doctor’s orders. Gout. Don’t look at my leg.”

“But you ordered three beers.”

Harold shrugged. “It’s a liquid diet,” he grinned, reaching for the beer and licking his lips.

## CHAPTER FORTY SIX

### *Solitary Confinement*

KAY WAS HUMMING AND PACKING WHEN THE DOOR WAS PUSHED OPEN. Edith stood in the doorway.

“Madam wishes to see you,” said Edith, a malicious smile on her face.

Kay’s heart gave a sudden thump. *So close...* a child’s voice whispered in her ear. She shook her head, almost shivering with fear.

“Why?” she whispered.

“That is for her to say,” said Edith. “Come on.”

*Don’t, don’t, don’t,* said the voice, but against a crowd’s cry of fear and guilt, it had little weight.

“All right,” said Kay, straightening.

As she walked through the house, tiny portraits of pain and loss seemed to crowd her vision; there, by the wall, a little child, staring at an enormous mother’s raging face, her fingers daubed with paint. At the foot of those stairs, playing with the hem of her pretty dress, her mother’s voice droning out corrections after the guest’s had left; there, in that little room, caught admiring her naked young body in a mirror, screamed at for evil thoughts; through that window, in the garden, under that hedge, driven away from her only friend with ugly threats...

“In here,” said Edith, stopping.

Kay felt dizzy. *Danger! Death! Run!* the voice cried in full panic. She stopped for a moment, leaning against the door that held her mother, her hands shaking.

“Come on Miss,” said Edith implacably, putting her hand on Kay’s back.

“Get away from me,” snarled Kay, her hands rising in claws. *I must go in there! I cannot go in there!* The two voices collided with hopeless, helpless vengeance. Kay felt suffocated, blind; she groped at the handle of the door, wrenched it open, and went in.

Her mother sat, almost crackling with energy. Father Jones stood stiffly, facing the window. Lady Barbara’s eyes widened as she stared at her daughter, then narrowed with all the hungry pleasure of a confident predator. The room seemed lost, disconnected, as if floating in a narrowing empty space.

“Well, Kay,” said Lady Barbara evenly. “I am sorry to report that you have turned out worse than I could possibly have imagined.”

Kay’s pale form seemed to fade into the white wall. Her face was mute, blank.

“You have seen fit to humiliate me in front of our guests,” continued Lady Barbara. “You have decided to live utterly as you please, without a thought for the feelings of others. You have grown from a suspicious, impossible child into a shrewish, vicious, cowardly, manipulative woman.” The old woman sighed. “That is your choice, and age must respect all the choices of youth – that is the new thinking, is it not? We must all bow to the absurd vanities of empty-headed youth. Certainly I have a mind to, for I am thoroughly sick of the job of mothering such a child. You wish to become an adult – that is plain for all to see. You also wish to become a motherless daughter; that desire has been made plain to me, as to others. Very well. I will not fight you. But if you think that being an adult is all peaches and cream and shamelessly running off to London to chase young men, you are quite mistaken. I may no longer be your mother, but I am still an adult, and I tell you here and now that if you want everything to be as your vanity

dictates, it will never happen, not in this world, and certainly not in the next, where you will face judgment for all your present sins. You are an adult; you have wrangled control of half the family fortune behind my back – again, your choice – thus you must assume all the pleasant responsibilities that this choice entails.”

Father Jones turned from the window, his face pale.

“Lady Barbara,” he said hesitantly, “is there any need for..?”

“For what?” cried Lady Barbara, turning to him quickly. “For discipline? For responsibility? For accountability? Do not fall prey to these delusions of youth, good Father! Have the courage of your faith!”

“Yes, but...”

Lady Barbara rose from her chair like a specter. “What?” she shouted. “If you have nothing intelligent to say, at least have the good grace not to stand there mumbling like a fool!”

Father Jones went pale, as if assaulted by ghosts. He backed against the window, ducking his head and raising his hands.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Mother...” said Kay.

Lady Barbara whirled on her with a sweet smile. “You use that term with me? How fascinating! How anthropological!”

“Mother,” repeated Kay, “mother – what do you want?”

“A daughter I can be proud of,” said Lady Barbara, waving a hand. “But that is not possible. More to the point, there is a... financial matter which requires her ladyship’s attention. A matter of grave ancestral responsibility. Now I stand before you like a petitioner, like a little Jew

clutching his cap,” cried Lady Barbara mockingly, falling on her knees and raising her clasped hands towards her daughter, “and say: *please daughter, please please please find it in your heart to pay our tithe and save us from disgrace!*”

Kay’s hands fluttered. “Mother!” she whispered hoarsely, backing away, her eyes wide and wild. “Mother – don’t!”

Mary stood outside the door, staring at her hands. She had been about to knock, but suddenly noticed the blood running down her wrist. She uncurled the talons of her fingers and stared at the wounds her nails had made. *What a surprise!* she thought with the elemental innocence of the savagely disconnected. *What strange stories my body speaks..!* She felt a wave of passion; she fought it, shaking her head... *Not now; not yet!* Her body struggled, weeping blood, but finally submitted to the endless force of her will, her resolution, her vow made in the wilderness. It shuddered before the gale of her determination like a tree giving up its roots.

Almost frightened at her sudden calm, Mary made her way downstairs. She went out into the garden without looking up at the shuttered window which held Kay. She walked out the gazebo, seeing Jonathon and Lydia’s silhouettes as if in a dream.

“Jonathon,” she murmured. “Jonathon.”

Jonathon looked around, startled at the tone of her voice.

“Yes?” he said.

“Kay is up there,” said Mary, pointing over her shoulder. “She needs you.”

Jonathon glanced up at the shuttered window. “What?”



Mary pressed the heels of her hand into her eyes. “Get up there,” she said in an agonized voice. “Go – go. I... I can’t,” she whispered.

“What’s going on?” asked Lydia.

Jonathon stared at the window and stood, his jaw flowing to granite. His voice was low, dangerous. “Her mother,” he said slowly, standing erect and working his hands. He took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “This won’t take a moment.”

Jonathon walked into the house. He walked up the stairs. He opened the door. He stood in the doorway, seeing this skeletal woman, hearing the sealed, endless anger in her voice. He saw Kay’s eyes darting to the closed window. He saw all of this, and stood for a long moment.

“You may disobey your mother,” Lady Barbara was saying. “You may disobey the natural bounds of womanhood. You may even disrespect God. But you shall not disobey the necessities of mortal office! You will hand over a bill for the entire amount of the tithe, and you will do so with a smile on your face, a song in your heart, and a shine in your eyes. You will do all this because I tell you to, because even if you deny it, *I will not be less than your mother!*”

“Stop it,” said Jonathon.

Lady Barbara turned, her lip curling. “Oh, and here comes the big bad wolf to save little red riding hood from the wicked mother! What do you want, boy? To play the hero? Take my suggestion: have a purpose in your life first. You will look at lot more believable.”

Jonathon waved his hand. “What is the question here? Father Jones?”

Father Jones turned his head, his eyes red. “A little matter of a tithe,” he said defensively. “It’s not as if I wanted all of this! Yet I have a right to expect...”

“Money?” asked Jonathon, breaking into a smile. “This is about money? Well – how much?”

“My daughter is not for sale,” said Lady Barbara between gritted teeth.

“Slaves usually are,” said Jonathon. “How much?”

His head ducking, Father Jones picked up the scrap of paper and thrust it at Jonathon.

“This – this is the interest?” asked Jonathon, staring at it.

“No – the entire sum.”

“Gosh – let me see,” said Jonathon, pursing his lips, “it would take my investments about – what – two months to produce this sum?” He glanced at Kay, who stood against the wall, staring at the floor. “Consider it done. Father – come with us to London, and I will write you a note.”

“To London!” cried Father Jones.

“I assume the matter is pressing,” smiled Jonathon.

“Yes, well...” began Father Jones.

Lady Barbara glared at Kay. “So – you are going to be bought,” she snarled, “bought and paid for, like any common whore!”

Jonathon strode forward and raised his hand. It did not feel like a violent act. It was an instinctive act, a protective act. He knew it was not violent because the motive faded as quickly as it came. He saw it depart, and was profoundly relieved, for he at once understood the impulse that can make someone kill.

“Kay,” said Jonathon, turning away from the old woman, his voice quite calm. “Kay, come with me.”

Kay did not move for a moment. She studied him; he could almost feel his soul's roots twitch with the intensity of her gaze. *Can you be trusted?* The words cried out from her whole being.

"You are not being bought. Just set free. Kay, I love you," he said, and this was another impulse; it was not passionate, but certain.

"You love her weakness," said Lady Barbara, backing away in disgust.

Jonathon turned to her. "You want death," he said, amazed at his words. "You want death because you hate life. You hate life because you are a coward – and because you are a coward, you cannot let others live."

"Brutal beast!" hissed Lady Barbara.

Kay stood, a waiting wing. Jonathon walked up to her, touched her cheek, took her hand, and walked with her from the room, light as a feather.

## CHAPTER FORTY SEVEN

### *Released from Light*

THE NEXT DAY DAWNED WITH BRIGHTNESS SO INTENSE IT ALMOST SHIVERED. Outside, all nature's darkness hid in deep holes, surrendering the world to the sunshine. Inside, the house rose sadly; it was a exodus; even the wallpaper seemed to mourn.

The bags were carried down, the horses fed extra oats, the servants lined the steps to bid farewell. Lady Barbara rose early, dressed primly, and sat in her room silently, her mirror turned to the wall. When she heard the goodbye's to the servants, she rose slowly and came down the stairs. She kissed both her children, ignoring the sudden tensing, and blessed the entire journey. She accepted the awkward thanks of her guests with a gracious smile, then stood on the steps after the servants had left, after the carriages had left, and watched the road. The sun was everywhere; it lit the ruts left by the carriages; it lit the cracks in the steps; it lit the veins on the back of Lady Barbara's still hands. The sun was everywhere; it seemed to find no darkness worthy of retreat. The sun was everywhere, save one place only. The sun was everywhere but in her eyes.

## PART TWO

### *CITY*

## CHAPTER FORTY EIGHT

### *A Singing Kiss*

HE FOUND HIS WAY TO THE CONCERT HALL, OUT IN THE WEST END. He gave his name to a stagehand, and was seated in the middle of the front row. Someone he assumed was the director sat behind him, coughing and taking snuff.

“Fan of Lady Cerbes?” the man wheezed, leaning forward.

Laurence turned his head. “A friend,” he said.

“Lucky man! She’s a gem!” exclaimed the director. “Will you give me your comments after the show?”

“Of course. I shall be, perhaps, a little too kind regarding Lydia.”

The man croaked out a laugh. “That will be unnecessary.”

The candles were doused, and Laurence sat through about ten minutes of rather strained singing before Lydia made her entrance.

He was awed by the way she dominated the stage. It was not as if she owned the stage, but almost as if she *was* the stage. She moved as if she had applied for, and received, diplomatic immunity from gravity. She entered silently from the rear of the stage, dressed in a Valkyrie’s gown, and stood watching a pair of lovers intently, her eyes hooded and pained. When the other woman left, the man sat by a fountain and swished his feet in a shimmer of artificial water.

Lydia drifted towards him, her body alive with yearning. The man glanced towards her, but she stepped behind a pillar, leaned against it and turned an anguished face to heaven. She opened her mouth, and Laurence dropped his jaw.

The delicious shock of unremembered talent rippled through him. Lydia's voice seemed to start from nowhere and everywhere, from her body, from her eyes, from the walls around her. It had a clear, pure tone, a gorgeous controlled soprano, yet her technique seemed immaterial; her song was laden with a blind despairing passion for things lost, and Laurence was startled to feel tears in his eyes. He was sitting in a direct line from the man to Lydia. She turned from the pillar and gazed straight at Laurence and, at that moment, he would have traded ten years of his life to know Italian. As she sang, Lydia's arms lifted, reaching for him; he thought this was supposed to be directed at the man on stage, but he knew she was singing to him, in a voice of such longing that Laurence felt his soul hammering at his skin to rise and meet it. Happy is the man embraced by a woman's clear and welcome passion! Strangely enough, Laurence had been so immersed in family tectonics that he had almost lost sight of his attraction to Lydia. He recalled it now; it arose again, as if it had never been left, and tears ran down his cheeks.

*Beauty had been drained from me...* he thought blindly, and suddenly the reality of Mary and Kay's world became clear. It was a worthwhile world, a caring world perhaps, but a world with little beauty; a world of oppression and injustice, power and prestige, victims and resentment. All the massed bitterness of the excluded, which had been preying on his soul, seemed to lift and fly away from him, leaving behind mute wonder at a state of grace he had almost forgotten.

*Here – here are the fruits of privilege,* he thought, and the word 'privilege' had none of Mary's meanings; it was a state she could now fill if she so desired. Lydia's song rose around him, echoing through the almost empty hall, lifting his soul, burning clear all wasting fogs, and Laurence felt as if he were rising to meet her, to meet himself, to meet all that is best and most pure in the world.

“Will you still be ‘kind?’” wheezed the director behind him, laughing.

Laurence nodded, unable to speak. *I will be kind*, he thought. *I will be kind without guilt*.

He sat silently through the rest of the performance. For him, Lydia was the only singer; the others merely shouted on key. After the performance was over, he sat silently in his chair until the director plucked his sleeve and took him to Lydia’s dressing room.

Laurence knocked and opened the door, and saw Lydia in the light of many candles. She was removing her makeup, peering at her own reflection in the dim light. Hearing the door open, she turned.

“Samuel!” she cried. “Could you not wait until I was a little less in both worlds?”

“The lad was eager,” wheezed the director. “Can’t say as I blame him. Well done, lass!” he said, nodding significantly and retiring.

“It’s good to see you, Larry,” said Lydia. “Do you mind watching, or do you want to wait outside?”

Laurence shook his head, taking a seat. Lydia watched him from the mirror.

“Did you meet my father?”

“Yes... We went to the gallery this morning.”

“He is very fond of you.”

Laurence smiled. “I feel like a bit of an invalid with him sometimes. I had no idea how intelligent he really is.”

“He envies you, you know,” said Lydia, smoothing cold cream on her cheeks.

“Really?”



“It’s all theory to him. You are making it real. You also listen well, and he needs that. Philosophers love giving advice to practical men; it makes all their work worthwhile.”

“You were wonderful,” said Laurence softly.

“You liked it?”

“More than that. More than that. I hope I am not gushing when I say I was enraptured.”

Lydia smiled. “Oh, we artists hate gushing!”

“I don’t know why, but I assumed your singing was a sort of hobby. I’m sorry.”

“That’s how it started,” confessed Lydia, wiping her face with a soft cloth. “I spent a lot of time squawking the most abysmal nonsense. I don’t know why, but I was somehow sure that I had more to offer. Samuel was enormously helpful; he is a raspy ball of pure passion. He challenged me to go further. *Don’t be afraid of passion!* he kept telling me. It took me a long time to believe him. Why do you think we are so afraid of passion?” she asked, turning in her chair to face him.

Laurence blushed. “I don’t know. I suppose it seems easier to ignore – sometimes. We always think that no-one else feels as we feel. We are alone in our passions. We hide what is precious far from others. And ourselves.”

“That’s a kind of poverty, though, isn’t it?” asked Lydia. “Like a miser who prefers to starve than spend.”

“I have loved you from the moment I saw you,” said Laurence suddenly, feeling dizzy.

Lydia sat motionless, looking at him.

“When I first saw you, about a year ago now,” he said in a rush, “you seemed like all the good things in the world. The way you laughed, the way you moved, it was more than... But I

thought – and I don't know why – she is not for me. You seemed like a statue. I'm sorry. I have never felt this before.”

“You have never felt love?” asked Lydia.

“No – every time I see you, I think: I know love. Then, the next time I see you, I feel even more. It's – it's quite confusing. Even – even if you don't love me – sorry, that sounded presumptuous – if you don't love me, I am still grateful. You have brought so much to me just by being who you are.”

Lydia laughed, and Laurence's heart froze. “But Laurence!” she cried, “I do love you!”

Laurence felt his soul break free of all fearful moorings. He moved forward, his mind whirling. He fell to his knees before her chair, turning his face up to her. She reached down and touched his earlobe, caressing it between thumb and forefinger. Laurence reached up and stroked her earlobe. They both burst into laughter, stood and embraced. He fondled the back of Lydia's neck and leaned into heaven to receive her kiss.

## CHAPTER FORTY NINE

### *An Ending*

MARY FLUNG THE VASE AT THE FULL-LENGTH MIRROR. As the crashing echoed around her, she whirled and swept the pretty ornaments from the mantelpiece over the fire. She took her thin dress between her hands and tore a long strip up her front. Leaping on the bed, she grabbed the canopy over her head and pulled at it with all her might. Her arms were taut, her veins protruding. She wrenched, but it held firm. Finally, when she was straining so hard that her feet had almost left the bed, she cried out, let go and fell onto the sheets. Parting the fabric with her hands, she burrowed under the blankets, pushing her face into the sheets, and loosed a long, harrowing cry.

It was turning into a difficult day.

That morning, giddy with sudden freedom, Kay had agreed to sign over to Mary several thousand pounds for charity work. Mary was quite aware that Kay had fallen in love, and was guilty about abandoning her friend, and Mary had found it quite easy to get her to agree to the transfer.

After breakfast, she had accompanied Kay to the bank. Kay had drawn out a few hundred crisp new ten pound notes, handed them over to Mary, kissed her cheek, and left to meet Jonathon. Mary had leaned against a marble pillar, sweat running down her forehead, her eyes

unfocused, the bank counter swimming before her. Her trembling hands kept rising to pat the packet in her breast pocket. People passed by, on business of their own, their faces set in professional casts.

The pillar was cool against Mary's shoulders. She had a sudden image, a memory of being lost in a wood, some time after being thrown out by Farmer Jigger. Mary leaned her head back, her palms almost tingling with forgotten scratches, shivering in a solitary echo. The memory was strong, sudden. Mary tasted the berries and roots she had lived on during her years of wandering. One afternoon, half-starved, she had stumbled into a clearing in an endless wood. A cottage stood there; a young man and woman sat on a tree trunk beside it. The woman was holding a book, talking and gesticulating as the man peered at the pages. Mary crept closer, through the undergrowth, and huddled beneath a bush, watching them. The woman had stood, laughing, explaining something to the man, who smiled at her, his eyes glowing with love. They had talked for over an hour, then took an axe each and walked off hand in hand into the depths of the forest. Mary waited for a time, then crawled forward on her hands and knees. Behind the house was a little shed; inside a cow stood alone, slowly chewing cud. Mary had crept under the cow's belly, placed a teat in her mouth, and sucked at it ravenously. The cow had shifted and lowed. Mary's hands had wandered up the beast's flanks as she sucked, stroking, caressing, pleading. The cow had settled, and when Mary was full, she lay down beside the cow and fell fast asleep.

She awoke to the feeling of the cow's rough tongue licking her cheek. It was quite dark. Mary reached up and tickled the cow's ears as it licked her face. Sitting up, she had heard the

sound of passionate lovemaking coming from within the hut. The man and woman called each other's name, laughing and moaning. The cries of ecstasy rang in Mary's ears as the cow licked her face; she sat caressing the beast's cheeks, weeping bitterly, aching with loneliness...

The memory was strong; Mary had never thought about it before; it was lost in the void of her neglected yesterdays. She wandered out of the bank; the day was bright and sunny; the street teemed with busy people. Mary gazed up and down the road; it seemed that the stores, formerly such a foreign country, were now wide open; she held a key she had never held before.

She drifted up the street, looking at the shops in wonder. *If I want a sticky bun, I can buy one; if I want a painting, it is mine...* she thought, her mind striving to grapple with a great unknown. She walked up to a fruit stall, picked up an orange and stared at it in wonder.

"From the country, miss?" asked the vendor, an old man with an enormous nose.

"Yes," said Mary.

"Can't get these in the country," grinned the man. "They're called 'oranges' a-cause of their colour. Juiciest goodness you ever tasted. Try one; if you want more, I can get you as many as you want."

Mary leaned her head forward, opening her mouth.

"Heavens, miss!" cried the man, taking the fruit from her. "That's a bitter start! You've got to peel 'em, like this," he said, taking a paring knife and expertly shaving the skin. "Try it now," he said, handing the juicy innards over to her. Mary took a bite, and almost cried in agony at the tart sweetness; the juice ran down her chin, and she shook her head, leaning forward.

"Not pretty, but pretty good, hey miss?" laughed the man.

“How much?” gasped Mary.

“A shilling a dozen. More’n apples, I dare say, but these are magic for the sniffles. Eat one every morning, and the only use for your handkerchief you’ll find, I wager, is dropping it for pretty gentlemen to return. Can I bag you two dozen? No charge for the one running down your chin.”

“Yes,” said Mary. “Please.”

The old man grabbed them two by two and dropped them into a brown paper bag. “I can tie it for you if you want,” he offered. Mary shook her head. “That’ll be two shillings then.”

Mary reached into her pocket, felt around and pulled out a ten-pound note. The man’s eyes widened as she handed it to him.

“My word, miss,” he exclaimed, taking the note with two fingers. “I’ve never spied one of these before; ain’t they pretty? Can’t change it, miss.”

“No?”

The man laughed. “This could buy all my fruit, my cart, my clothes, and probably a few of my limbs. I need something smaller, m’lady.”

“That’s the smallest I have. Sorry,” apologized Mary.

The man shook his head with a wry smile. “Well, we all are different, ain’t we? I’ll tell you what, miss,” he said, handing over the bag, “these are complimentary. It takes a good memory to manage a lot of money, I say, and I’m sure you’ll remember old Jeremiah when you’ve a mind to wander with more practical money.”

“Thank you. I will,” said Mary, taking the bag. She curtsied, making Jeremiah laugh, then wandered off into the crowd. *When I was starving, she thought, he would be snarling. What a world! Those that want, lack; those that have, get...*

Soon, Mary stood before a dressmakers: *Algernon and Sons*. She stared at it for a moment, then went in, thinking: *what do I need a dress for?* The interior of the shop was dark, shrouded with endless rolls of fabric. A young man sat doing a crossword puzzle, his pencil in his mouth, his hair sticking out in all directions. He looked up as she came in.

“Sorry, miss,” he said, returning to his puzzle, “no walk-ins; by appointment only. We’re wholesalers.”

“I want to buy some dresses,” said Mary resolutely.

“Leave a card,” said the young man carelessly, taking his pencil from his mouth. “We’ll be in touch.”

“Do you make dresses from gold?” asked Mary.

The man’s pencil paused. He looked up, curious. “Excuse me?”

“I want the best,” said Mary slowly. “You understand.”

The young man paused, then sighed and rose. “Not really. Just a moment,” he said, disappearing into the dark folds of hanging fabric. Mary walked forward and touched a bolt, astounded at the smoothness of the cloth. *So much softer than a cow’s tongue*, she thought, and felt a sudden, nauseous shiver.

An older man suddenly appeared at her elbow.

“Rupert Algernon, at your service,” he said with a deep bow. “Whom do I have the honour of addressing?”

“Mary – Mary O’Donnel.”

“Well, good miss, my son informs me that you are in a hurry for the finest clothes. May I ask who referred you?”

“I was just passing; only passing by,” said Mary. “I saw the sign, and came in.”

Rupert looked at her for a moment, then smiled. “Please excuse the forwardness, good miss, but have you recently come into money?”

“Why?” asked Mary sharply.

“Oh – a thousand apologies! Your language and manners are, of course, impeccable, but here at Algernon and Son’s we pride ourselves in making the clothes fit the woman – in every way. For instance, I had a woman in tears here just yesterday; she had recently inherited some money, and had gone to one of our more careless competitors, who had sold her the most extravagant costumes. She went to a ball and was, I am sad to say, a laughingstock; she appeared too eager to appear at one with her station, if I may put it in such a manner. I ask only for the sake of service, not insult.”

“I see,” said Mary carefully. “Yes; I have but recently come into money.”

Rupert nodded delicately. “And – your circumstances before? Again; I ask only for the sake of finding a perfect fit.”

“What do you mean?”

The man tapped his teeth with the tip of his finger, then stroked his chin. “For instance, were you known in London before your sudden fortune? That is quite important.”

“No – I was quite unknown.”

“Very good; that simplifies things. And your former attire? What are you used to wearing?”



*Whatever I could steal from the clothes line*, thought Mary, and almost giggled, her dizziness increasing. “I would say: not especially formal,” she said with effort.

“And the venue for you new apparel? Where do you expect to wear your purchases? Balls? Dinners? Promenading?”

Mary frowned. “I imagine that most of your remaining questions will be quite irrelevant,” she said. “I assure you I will be a most unusual customer. I am looking for clothes to give speeches in.”

“In radical circles?” asked Rupert.

“I certainly hope not!” replied Mary.

“Then I would suggest something with the simple style of uncluttered elegance. Some of the new light cotton, well-fitted, grey and white, perhaps with a darker sash. An outfit which says, ‘I am serious, but not masculine.’”

“That sounds about right,” said Mary, taking a deep breath. *Calm down!* she ordered herself.

“Very well,” said Rupert. “Now, I have several sketches I would like you to look over – just for reference; we will of course create something entirely new for you. But first, if you will tell me your measurements...”

“I – I have no idea,” said Mary hesitantly.

Rupert looked at her suddenly, his composure breaking for a brief moment, as if he had a sudden insight as to the depths of her prior poverty.

“No matter,” he said calmly. “We will measure you now. If you will come this way...”

Mary took a step back. “I – do not like to be touched,” she said tensely, her stomach churning.

“It is painless,” said Rupert uncertainly.

“No doubt,” replied Mary. “Yet there it is.”

“You would prefer a woman? I can ask my wife...”

“That doesn’t matter. If you would prefer, I can go elsewhere...”

“No – I want to help. But you understand; if you go to a doctor, he must examine you...”

“There will be no examinations!” said Mary sharply. “Tell me what to do, and I will measure myself.”

“Certainly; that would be most satisfactory.”

“And can I be assured of your discretion in all matters?”

“Why – of course. We are quite trustworthy.”

“How much do you need to start?”

Rupert smiled. “We take no retainer, good miss. We measure, design and sketch without any obligation on your part. You review the sketches, pay for the materials, and only if you are happy with the results do you pay us for our labour. Our charges vary per dress; you will not pay if you are unhappy.”

“That is – remarkable,” said Mary.

“It is our philosophy,” said Rupert. “Do you not think true talent always finds its just reward?”

“Yes,” said Mary, pressing her palms to her eyes. “Yes – I do.”

“Then we are of like minds,” beamed Rupert. “I am so pleased. Will you come with me now?”

“Certainly,” said Mary. Rupert lifted a fold of fabric for her to pass, and followed her into the fitting room.

The fitting room was a dark chamber, lit only by a single skylight. Mary felt a sudden chill. Three female forms were mounted on poles, draped carelessly with fabric. One of the forms, breasts exposed, had a number of large needles stuck into the side of its waist.

Mary felt a sudden wave of dizziness. She backed up, running into Rupert. She turned round quickly, her eyes wild, her hands raised before her. “No – this is not right! I can’t – give me a few days!”

“Are you all right, Miss O’Donnel?” asked Rupert, leaning forward in the dark, concerned.

“No!” cried Mary. “Everyone asks... It’s nothing; I must – leave. I shall return – when I am ready. Thank you – for your time. Excuse me – I must go!”

Mary blundered forward, lost in the draping folds. She resisted the urge to cry out as she thrust the heavy fabrics aside with her hands. Bursting out into the storefront, she ran forward, wrenched the door open and escaped into the street.

“Miss – miss!” cried Rupert from the doorway. “Miss – leave your card!”

Mary nodded vaguely, waving a hand. Hailing a carriage, she crawled into it, her heart pounding.

“Where to, miss?” asked the driver.

“Hotel – the Waverly,” gasped Mary, her vision swimming.

She made it to the hotel; staggered up the stairs, holding the banister, then ran into her room, where she proceeded to destroy everything in sight.

## CHAPTER FIFTY

### *A Message from Beyond*

KAY WAS SHOCKED AT THE STATE OF THE ROOM; she was no less shocked at the state of her friend. When she opened the door, she saw Mary sitting in the floor, a shroud of blankets pulled up to her nose.

“Mary?” she whispered.

Mary’s wide eyes turned to her.

“Kay!” she cried, tightening her hands on the blankets. “Thank you! You should have been with me this morning! I walked, I had an orange – have you ever tasted one? They’re wonderful!” she cried giddily. “I couldn’t spend a penny – I tried, but no-one could change the money... Then I went to a dressmakers and had the most wonderful talk with... with... oh, what was his name, something and sons... Oh well. I’m going for a fitting as soon – as soon as I feel up to it. How are you? How is Jonathon? He’s a wonderful man; you are both very lucky; come in, don’t stand by the door!”

Kay stepped into the room. Mary got up suddenly, dropping the covers from her.

“Mary!” cried Kay. “What happened to your dress?”

Mary glanced down at the savage tear on her midriff, then looked up, her eyes mortified.

“Oh my!” she said, touching her cheek. “I don’t know... It was torn.”

“Mary – Mary, sit down. Please. You’re – you’re frightening me.”

Mary sat down immediately. “Please don’t be frightened, Kay,” she begged. “You are – my best friend. I don’t want to scare you. I’ll be all right. I’ve come this far. Oh, but Kay; Kay,

don't be frightened. I am. I am very frightened. I seem to have lost some sort of control. I have never acted like such a – child. Not even when I was a child!" she said with a brittle laugh.

"You seem very nervous," said Kay.

"It's very stupid!" cried Mary with a flash of anger. "Here I am; I have struggled for so long to make something of myself, to find a place where my gifts could express themselves. I was so strong, you know," she said, suddenly tearful. "I was so strong – do you know that? I had no pity for myself. I survived everything. I almost became someone else; that's what it felt like. And now I am in London – London! – and I have the best, most generous friend in the world – though I have done a lot for you as well! – and I am ready to start my lectures, and I seem to have sort of – lost myself. It makes no sense; now of all times, it makes no sense!"

"Hush!" said Kay, her senses almost supernaturally alert. "You mustn't carry on so. I don't know if this helps, but when I was six or so..."

"Six!" cried Mary, shuddering. "I am a grown woman!"

"You're right; I'm sorry," said Kay instantly. She looked at Mary for a moment, then shook her head. "It was just that... I was lost for a whole day, in the woods, and I didn't cry once. But when Larry found me, I burst into tears."

"Oh? And did Larry ever burst into tears?" cried Mary. "Of course not. He was crown prince of everything!"

"But Mary," said Kay, confused, "I could give you money because Larry gave me money."

"Oh? And who gave him money? Who sent him to Italy? Of course; I forget! He earned it by being such a good boy! And I was burned at the stake because I was a bad girl!" Mary looked around the room, dazed, then shook her head violently. "No – Kay – I'm sorry; he is a

good man; you are a good woman. Everything you are giving me, I will repay with interest. Interest! You know that, don't you? I loathe charity; I love the poor; they need charity, but I loathe it for myself."

"But – why?" asked Kay.

"Because I have earned more than charity!" cried Mary. "Because the world should kneel at my feet, yet I must scabble and beg for scraps like a stray dog! Oh Kay – do you ever wonder what your life would have been like without... without..."

"Should I come back another time..?" asked Kay, standing hesitantly.

"No!" cried Mary, her eyes widening. "No – don't go! I'm sorry; tell me how to be! I want you to stay, but I want to speak my mind. But I can't; I can't!"

"Why not? I am your friend. I want to help," said Kay, sitting again.

Mary shook her head. "I am not good to my friends. No, that's not true. I am just to my friends. I will make good use of your money. Good use. That is my plan. My plan. But what is my plan? It seemed so clear; I can't remember... Lady is dead, and I... I..."

Kay leaned forward, raising her hand. Mary flinched.

"Hush – I just want to feel your forehead," said Kay gently. Touching Mary's hairline with her palm, she found the skin burning. "Good heavens!" cried Kay. "You have a fever!"

"No – I'm just agitated. Your limbs would twitch too if you had run so hard, so long..."

Mary shivered, stood suddenly, went over to the washbasin, poured a tall glass of water, and drank it in a single gulp. She stood with her back to Kay for a few moments, then turned to look at her friend, her face quite composed.

“Please excuse me, Kay,” she said evenly. “That was unusual for me. I think it was a terrible strain.” She smiled. “Now tell me – why did you come?”

“I – I wanted to thank you for something.”

Mary nodded. “I’m glad. What is that?”

“When I was having lunch with Jonathon,” said Kay, “he told me that it was you who sent him up when I was... talking with mother. I – wanted to thank you for that.”

“You’re welcome,” said Mary. “I wanted to come in myself, but I thought that would only have sent Lady Barbara into further agitation.”

“You are very wise. I don’t know what would have happened if...”

Mary waved her hand. “No matter. We all need help; I help you, you help me. That’s what friendship means.”

“Are you feeling better now?” asked Kay cautiously.

“Much!” exhaled Mary. “It wasn’t the right time to be alone... So tell me, woman to woman,” she said, sitting down. “What do you think is going to happen with Jonathon?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well – how do you feel about him?”

Kay pursed her lips and smiled. “Oh, you know, he’s wonderful. He’s got such a merry spirit. He had me in stitches at lunch with stories of his schooldays. I think he’s very handsome – very! Don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I’m glad; I don’t have much experience with – that.”

“Have you kissed?”

Kay blushed. “Oh, well, no, not really. He kissed me on the cheek after lunch, and held my hand under the table before we ate.”

“What do you think of all that?”

“All what?”

“You know – the carnal side.”

Kay took a deep breath. “Oh – that. Well, I suppose it’s fine. I don’t really think about it.”

“Why not?”

“It’s – I’m just not... I’ve never really thought of myself that way.”

“Why on earth not? You’re so attractive.”

“How so?” asked Kay softly.

“You have lovely eyes. And your hands are graceful, though a little flighty. And your hair is very fine.”

Kay touched her pale hair self-consciously. “I just think – you know, he could have any woman in London...”

“But he wants you.”

“But – why? Doesn’t that strike you as strange?”

“You mustn’t think that!” exclaimed Mary. “Love is rare for the rejected. Why? Because we were rejected in the past? No – because we expect to be rejected in the present. Don’t lose the natural trust of love, Kay. The man loves you. He walked through fire for you. Don’t worry about why. Don’t analyze his heart; it has its own reasons. Accept his love. Tell me: you are satisfied with him?”

“Oh, yes!”



“Then love him, and leave his love to himself. And for God’s sake don’t try second-guessing what he wants. He wants you, pure and simple. He is a good man. You are a good woman. Be happy. Be happy.”

“You’re right, of course,” said Kay, “but I just sometimes wonder – not because of what mother said – whether he loved me because I was unable to free myself. Because I was trapped. Because he had the power to save me.”

Mary smiled. “Then save him.”

“What?”

“Look – he’s a good man, but we both know he’s a little unfocused. He seems to have no answer to the essential question: *what am I going to do with my life?* You are helping me; you are taking control of your finances; you are going to be a great philanthropist. But Jonathon? What is he going to do between the here and the hereafter? Just bounce around? You can save him by getting him on track.”

“How?”

“Get him started on a career.”

“A career!”

“Laurence has a career: agricultural reformer; Lydia has a career: singer; Lord Cerbes has one: philosopher. You have one. I have one.”

“What’s yours? In a nutshell.”

“Justice,” grinned Mary. “In a nutshell. We all have a purpose except Jonathon. Get him started. Save him from his drifting. You see, Kay, if one person thinks they’re doing all the

saving, the relationship can never be equal. And you deserve nothing less than complete equality.”

“What career do you envision for him?”

“Well – he invests, doesn’t he? Why doesn’t he talk to a financial institution? It’s just a thought.”

“An interesting thought though,” mused Kay.

“You’ll both be happier. Even happier. Talk to him now, tonight.”

“How?”

“Don’t be critical, whatever you do. Men hate that. Ask him what he plans to do with the rest of his life. Let him talk. Listen, and help him clarify his desires.”

“That is an astoundingly good idea.”

Mary smiled. “Do you still think I am fevered?”

Kay laughed. “No, I suppose not. Thank you, Mary. You are a true friend.”

After Kay had left, Mary lay on her bed. *If I am wrong, she thought, if there is a God who will call me to atonement when I am dead, He may rail against me for everything but today. Today, He will admit, I did a good deed. That will have to be enough.*

## CHAPTER FIFTY ONE

### *Two Departures*

IT HAD TAKEN ON ALL THE FURTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF A COMING WAR. Adam strode up and down the rows of the looms, his eyes sharp, his heart sick. Resentful heads were lowered over the swishing shuttles; the air was thick with intrigue.

*Good Lord*, thought Adam, *how dismal! Not in the plan, never in the plan...*

At the distant sound of the church-bell striking noon, all the workers folded their hands and sat back in their chairs.

“Lunch,” muttered Adam, taking a deep breath. *A few moments to myself...*

“Aye, lunch,” called Jake from the back of the factory. “And so much more than lunch.”

“Excuse me?”

“Well,” he said, standing and rubbing his beard. “We’ve been a-thinking, and a-talking, merchant, and we’ve tricked on a pretty thought.”

“I’m not interested,” said Adam shortly. “You have gotten all you asked for and more.”

“Oh, we’re not innerested in more,” cried Jake with a sudden grin. “We’s innerested in less – one less, to be smart. We’s innerested in setting ye free, merchant.” He snapped his fingers. “Ahh – that got his attention, friends! Ye see, it has tumbled on us that ye don’t like us very much, merchant, and despite the fact that ye give good back rubs, we can only say the feeling flows both ways. So we have a sit-yoo-ation here; two parties stuck together, neither liking the other. Well, we’ve tricked on a way out of our thorny dance!”

“Let me guess: leaving and letting me hire good workers?” asked Adam. “Or is it working hard and keeping your mouths shut?”

Jake shook his head with a smile. “Nay, nay; we can’t leave. The good Lord Larry would rain hard on ye if ye broke up his little party. Yet one of us will be showing his heels, merchant.”

Adam stared at the man, his mind searching for the whip.

“Y’see, we stretches and groans each morning, an’ then we sit down pretty as ye please and shove the shuttles while you storm up and down with the whip. So we be scratchin’ our noggins and saying: ‘what do we need him for?’” Jake spread his hands. “Now, yer value may have ‘scaped us, but it seems to us that we do all the working, while you do all the whacking.”

“You think I want to be here?” demanded Adam.

Jake smiled. “Why, nay, merchant. I think ye’d rather be jus’ about anywhere but here. So take our blessings and be off.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not? Getting fond of lashing?”

Adam’s cheeks flushed a deep red. “Let me tell you something, since you want the cards laid on the table. I have no sympathy for you. I do not think you are good people. I think you are outcasts because you are petty, cowardly, vicious and greedy.”

“Aye,” scowled Jake. “Life has made us so.”

“Has it?” demanded Adam. “You know, I had no education. I was born in the streets. And I have spent my whole life getting away from people like you. People who blame the world for

their own failures. People who expect something for nothing. You are all fools! The world owes you nothing. My philosophy: life is hard. Be harder.”

“Pretty, pretty speech!” cried Jake, clapping sardonically. “Ye cain’t expect something for nothing? Then why are ye paid for walking around? Lord – I’ve walked more in this life than ye could in twenty, and I was never tossed a penny for my footings!”

“I am paid because the looms are mine.”

“Why are they yours? Causen you made ‘em? Why, we make the wool, and we don’t get none.”

“You get paid.”

“Which we cain’t spend. None take our coin.”

“That’s you’re own doing. You fight, you steal, you curse.”

“We was provoked!” cried one of the men. “We be branded, cursed; we have to fight back!”

“Look,” said Adam, striving for calm, “you have to rise above that. People think you are bad. Fight back, and you prove them right.”

“Pah!” spat Jake. “Milky words from a milky man! Ye couldn’t stand straight if ye was propped! Here’s the what, merchant: we ain’t working until ye leave. We’re taking no more beatings, no more sneers, no more slavings to make ye rich. We work for oursells, or not at all.”

“You are all resolved in this?”

“It seems Christian fair,” said a man.

“I cain’t sleep for scars,” said another.

“Ye said we were esposed to help ourselves; this is how we want it,” said another.

Adam looked at their set faces for a long moment. “All right,” he said finally. “All right – I have no more patience. I got into this because I thought Lord Carvey was an investor. I was wrong. He prefers tinkering with souls to making money. No matter; I have only lost a month or so. All right. I will leave as I came, with a knapsack and a set of blueprints. The looms are yours. You can find your own buyers. You can pay yourselves. You can arrange transportation, as you please.” Adam nodded. “It is all yours.”

“Ye hear that, lads?” cried Jake triumphantly. “It’s all ours!”

A cheer rang out in the factory.

“Ye’re a noble soul!” shouted Jake. “Best wishes for ye!”

Adam stared at him bitterly. “You are fools to think it is so easy. But life will teach you.” He cast his eyes over the looms, over the flushed jubilant faces, over the ramshackle factory, then walked over to his little desk, picked up his knapsack, and walked out of the door.

He walked for a few minutes without thinking, driven by a blind need to put some distance between himself and the factory. Finally he looked around, and found himself on the road to the Carvey house. Struck by a sudden thought, he felt in his pocket and pulled out Laurence’s promissory note. He stared at it: *This entitles the bearer full access to all my accounts...* The signature and seal would be accepted by any bank in the realm. Adam broke into a sudden sweat. *This could be my ticket!* he thought rapidly. *Virtually unlimited funds; I could take it; it would be borrowing; I would pay it back double...*

In moments of crisis, habits rule. Adam had struggled up from nothing; he had never stolen, never cheated; never lied. The resolution that had brought him this far suddenly reasserted itself.

“No,” he whispered, shocked at the sudden depth of his temptation. “No – not that way!”

Adam thrust the note back into his pocket, his hands shaking. He looked around him, at the solid swaying trees and clear blue sky. Shaking his head, he laughed suddenly, adjusted his hat, and strolled up the road towards the Carvey mansion.

The door was answered by the maid.

“I have a delivery for Lady Barbara,” he said.

“One moment,” said Edith, glancing disdainfully at his clothing.

Adam whistled as he waited. When Lady Barbara came to the door, he smiled.

“I have a package for you, m’lady,” he said.

“What is that then?” she asked sharply.

Adam handed over the note. The old woman glanced at it, then stared at Adam in shock.

“Can you read?” she demanded. “Do you know what this is?”

“Yes, m’lady,” said Adam. “It is a promissory note. It entitles the bearer to draw whatever he wants from Lord Carvey’s accounts.”

“Why are you returning it?”

“Because I no longer work for Lord Carvey.”

“And why is that?”

“It is a private matter, m’lady,” said Adam.

Lady Barbara glared at him, her senses acute, confused.

“Well, I suppose that is very honest...” she muttered. “Do you wish to leave any message for him?”

“No, m’lady,” said Adam gently. “If experience cannot teach him, neither can I.”

“But – what happened?” she asked, her voice taut with curiosity.

“I simply found out that, because of his restrictions, I cannot do what I was hired to do. That is all. Happens all the time.”

“But – who will run the factory?”

“I leave that in your hands, m’lady.”

Lady Barbara frowned, then smiled suddenly. “Yes. Well, thank you for returning the note. Good day,” she said, closing the door.

Holding the note between thumb and forefinger, Lady Barbara slowly walked into the drawing room and sat on the couch. *This entitles the bearer full access to my accounts...* Lady Barbara stared at it. Father Jones had informed her that the tithe had been paid. *Yet it was only a loan*, she thought. *My daughter is not for sale... It is for her own good... And Larry – Larry will destroy our fortune if I leave it in his hands...*

For ten minutes she stared at the note, her cheeks flushing. Moral habits being what they are, she finally rose, went to her writing desk, pulled out a sheet of paper, and began writing a letter to her banker.

As he walked, Adam’s mind whirled. *What am I going to do now?* he thought. *There is no point roaming the countryside looking for a sensible aristocrat; that trait seems to have been bred out of them generations ago. Who do I know who has brains, vision and money? Lord Cerbes? No – he expressed little interest; he’s too abstract for such practical work... Jonathon? Too flighty; couldn’t be relied upon. Mary?* Adam almost shuddered. *God no! She was the force behind this disaster.*



His mind whirled as he walked through the blinding brightness. *I must get to London; Laurence is giving a series of speeches on agriculture; perhaps I find someone there who listens to what he says...* It was a desperate hope, but it was the best he could come up with. Taking out his wallet, Adam quickly counted his money. *Not much*, he noted dismally. *I will have to make my way on foot.*

Somewhat daunted by the discovery, Adam sat down beside the road, propping his chin in his hands and staring at the scenery. The numbness was wearing off; anger and despair were beginning to make themselves known. The dreary futility of starting over seemed to drain his habitual energy from his limbs.

He was so dejected that he didn't even hear the sound of the carriage.

"Is this the road to London, my man?" cried an irritable voice.

Adam looked up. A sumptuous carriage stood before him, two fine horses pawing before it, a driver mopping his brow. A man's face glared at him, framed in the carriage window. Their eyes met, and a ripple of recognition passed between them. *Merchant*, thought Adam.

*Merchant*, thought the man in the carriage.

"Is this the road to London?" repeated the man, a little less harshly.

"Yes, sir," said Adam, standing and brushing his clothes. "And if I may be so bold as to request a favour, I am sorely in need of a ride. I am on a business trip."

"A business trip!" cried the man, his eyes lighting up guiltily. "What sort of business trip?"

"One I would be most happy to discuss with you," grinned Adam, strength flowing back into his bones. "Good companions shorten the road, they say."

The man grinned back. "Hop in then."

Adam picked up his knapsack and climbed into the carriage.

“Walk on!” cried the man, tapping the roof with his cane. “What is your name, sir?” he asked, settling back in his seat and regarding Adam closely.

“Adam Footer,” replied Adam. “And yours?”

“Squire Pounder,” replied the man. “Now tell me – what left you abandoned in such a lonely spot?”

“Ah, business gone sour,” replied Adam. “Saddest story you ever heard. I have in this knapsack the means to near-infinite riches.”

Squire Pounder laughed. “So you say!”

“It is true,” said Adam earnestly. “You have heard of the new woolens?”

“Of course!” replied Squire Pounder, holding a sleeve forward. “Feel this.”

Adam touched the fabric. “Hm,” he frowned.

“What? What?”

“Well, I’m sure that is the best to be had; yet it is not the best to be made.”

Squire Pounder smiled. “Go on.”

“Have you ever heard of a power loom?”

“No – who is it?”

“A most bounteous device,” smiled Adam, pulling out his blueprints and spreading them on his lap.

“What on earth is that?”

“On earth, courtesy of heaven! This little beauty allows a worker to produce ten times more fabric than doing it by hand. Ten times more – and ten times better!”

Squire Pounder frowned. “You are sure you are not overselling a wee bit?” he asked skeptically. “Such a treasure would transform the realm.”

“Aye – it would, if a man had the vision and resources to bring it about. That was what I was here for. A local lord agreed to set up a workshop, but suddenly got the idea of using it for charity rather than business. He hired only the poorest of the poor, who proved to be exceedingly poor workers. I just left this morning, exhausted by their endless demands.”

“A bad mix,” said Squire Pounder judiciously.

“As I said from the start. But there’s no reasoning with a philanthropist.”

“This Lord – Lord Laurence Carvey?”

“The same, sir! You know him?”

“I was just at his house, looking for a – friend of mine,” said Squire Pounder, with more than a trace of irritation. “Now tell me – what would one of these looms cost? And no glossing, mind: I have some experience in these matters!”

“Well, depending on the number ordered, anywhere from five to eight pounds apiece. We had fifty looms here, at six pounds apiece.”

“What was their output?”

“Twenty yards a day. Each.”

“Twenty yards!” exclaimed Squire Pounder. “Liar!”

Adam smiled. “No sir. And that was with substandard labour. I calculate thirty yards with good hands.”

“They would pay for themselves in a matter of months!”

“And the rest would be pure, pure profit. Sir,” said Adam. “Aside from the wages and overhead.”

Squire Pounder leaned back in his chair, his eyes closed tight, his hands rubbing his legs vigorously. “Oh foul, foul – this is sorely tempting!” he cried.

“Tempting, sir?” asked Adam uncertainly. “Making money is not a vice.”

“Well, sir,” said Squire Pounder, letting out a deep breath. “You may have noticed a certain – aristocratic air to my demeanor.”

“Why yes,” pacified Adam. “I first took you for a good lord. Then, I thought – and don’t ask me why – this is a man of business.”

“You have the sensitivity of a good salesman,” admitted Squire Pounder. “You are right. I was once as you are now. Yet I performed a service for a lord, and was subsequently elevated into the ranks of the useless.”

Adam laughed. “Now that’s an odd sentiment!”

“Aye – so it strikes me sometimes. It was a promise made to my dear late mother, who desperately wanted something better for her only son.”

“So – and forgive my presumption – she wanted you to be useless?”

Squire Pounder guffawed. “Well – she saw more of the silk finery than the dull daily nature of the station, as it were. She saw ‘lord’ as better, and that was what I promised her.”

“Ah. So this opportunity is tempting because you fear being seduced by business again.”

“It no longer fits my station,” said Squire Pounder regretfully.

“That much is certain,” replied Adam with equal remorse. “Yet if you know of anyone in your old circle capable of understanding the power of such an opportunity, I would appreciate...”

“No!” cried Squire Pounder, thumping the floor with his cane, almost making Adam start. “No! I offered the ride; I will not let you go!”

“I appreciate the confidence, sir. It is not misplaced. Yet we are in an interesting dilemma.”

Squire Pounder nodded. “You understand – some aristocrats invest without incurring any social penalties. Yet for me, so recently risen, it would be viewed as an appalling lapse. There would be no mercy.”

Adam pursed his lips. “May I speak plainly?”

“Please do,” sighed Squire Pounder. “It would be a welcome change from my current circle.”

“Your esteemed mother; would she have preferred you to be a poor aristocrat or a rich merchant?”

“Good lord, my man! I am scarcely poor!”

“I do not doubt it. Do you own any land?”

“Well, I suppose I could set up a cart in some corner of Kensington, but no, not really.”

“Then, if I understand your situation correctly, you are currently living off fixed capital.”

“That is true.”

“Are you touching the principal?”

“Well – to live as required requires more than interest.”

“Then it seems to me that your rise is, for want of a better word, unsustainable. Thus it seems possible that you will have the opposite conversation with your son as your mother had with you, yet for the same reason: poverty.”

Squire Pounder nodded vigorously. The reasoning was not subtle, but his need was deep. “Yes – yes. I see your...”

“Then you must do something to maintain your fortune. This opportunity, then, fits you like a glove! Let us suppose that I set up an intermediate account. You deposit, I withdraw; then, I deposit the profits. All you have to do is sit back and watch it grow.”

Squire Pounder frowned, then shook his head. “You are, of course, a worthy soul, but I am suspicious by nature. I cannot give you free access to my accounts. Tell me – have you any experience in distributing and marketing?”

“Actually, I have hitherto largely focused on getting the goods produced first.”

“The clear answer being no,” said Squire Pounder. “I, however, have wide experience in international marketing; I supplied the Provisional government with grain during the recent revolution. I have a wide variety of contacts. I speak French. I have experience in shipping. I could not rely on you in these matters; it would be unproductive.”

“Quite right,” agreed Adam. “You must be directly involved. Your experience would mean the difference between profit and windfall. I would welcome the input.”

“No doubt,” said Squire Pounder, rubbing his chin frantically. “Yet direct participation would elicit a precipitous social fall.”

“Yet you seem somewhat unsatisfied with your station at present.”

“Acutely; quite acutely.” Squire Pounder scowled, drumming his fingers together rapidly.

“Damn it! I should have left you on the road!”

“That would have been quite wise,” smiled Adam.

“Don’t be impertinent. You need me more than I need you.”

“Quite right. I do apologize.”

Squire Pounder scowled. “You have spoken to no-one else about this?”

“Only Lord Carvey.”

“Does he know how to build these looms?”

“These are the only blueprints.”

“But he could build them from what he has.”

“True, but he has, fortunately, gone to London. He is in love. He has no experience in business. I do not think we have to worry about him.”

Squire Pounder paused for a moment. *Love..?* He shook his head suddenly, as if discarding an over-ornate hat, then rubbed his hands gleefully. “Good, good. All right. This is the plan. When we get to London, I will give you my address. Come to me Thursday – no, damn it, Thursday is bad – as is Friday. Oh God – and Monday. No – come to me next Tuesday, as if you are delivering a package. I will don a disguise, and we will go to a bank. Not mine – I may be recognized. We will go as two ambitious merchants in search of capital.”

“Will we get any?”

“Just watch. I know how to talk to these people.”

“Excellent!”

Squire Pounder and Adam regarded each other, gripped in the passion of the deal, then reached across the space separating them and shook hands eagerly. Adam did not shudder at the sweat.



## CHAPTER FIFTY TWO

### *Two Rescues*

JONATHON EDDSWORTH WAS SOMEWHAT SURPRISED AT THE CHANGE in his friends since leaving Dorset. He had an inkling that Lydia would fall for Laurence the moment she saw him, of course, yet he was a little surprised at the amount of energy she put into getting him into what she called the ‘right position’ (a phrase which caused Jonathon to make some rather ill-received jokes). When you find someone attractive, he insisted, the first thing to do is borrow a mandolin, hang about under their window and bellow love songs at their swaying curtains. “Everyone loves to be loved,” he said. Lydia contented herself with making several remarks as to the preference of many women to quality, not quantity. Jonathon retorted that she was a hopeless prig.

This was one of Jonathan’s odd characteristics. He called himself a romantic, yet like many romantics he had little sympathy for those on the receiving end of his cannon-like passions. Considering himself the sole repository of true feeling, he viewed women as fortresses of repression best besieged by continual assaults of emotional bombast.

It would be quite possible to point out to Jonathon that, despite his claim to the title of ‘lover of women’, there was more than a little patronage in his approach. To some degree, he still held the views of his forefathers: women were helpless maidens in need of rescue. While his ancestors viewed the salvation of women as a matter of military skill and economic strength, Jonathon aimed to redeem them with emotional artillery. In other words, Jonathon prided himself on his passion. Yet if his emotions had a definite aim, if they were part of a manifesto,

so to speak, could they really be said to be genuine? ‘Here’, cried Jonathon, ‘here: see the liberating display of my passion!’ Yet his passions were still a form of display; like the cry-on-cue emotions of the experienced actor, they could easily be termed more of a personal talent than a universal value.

Jonathon, of course, left himself little time to ponder these questions. On his return to London, he plunged back into his habitual search for new experiences (a paradox, of course, which entirely escaped him). He got into violent arguments at his club, ran from theatre to opera, tried learning yet another musical instrument, pored over maps in search of a new continent, played with the idea of going to France with a notebook and a keenly-perceptive eye – and spent a good deal of time trying to draw Kay into his peculiar gallery of over-stimulation.

Kay found Jonathan’s company both stimulating and unsettling, but she was distracted by herself. She was undergoing a phase in emotional recovery which could be termed ‘perceptive paranoia’. Having had her secret trauma so recently and dramatically exposed, she began to wonder about the number of people in the world with similar secrets. *I appeared normal for so many years*, she thought. *I was criticized as flighty, nervous and confused, yet I was really desperately afraid, and with good reason. How many people are like me? How much of society is really constructed around the need to keep these secrets?* Walking through London, she saw furtive, flushed children keeping close to their tight-lipped mothers, and her heart ached. A twitchy man approached her one morning, begging for money, his eyes wide and fearful, and she suddenly thought: *veteran*, and it dawned on her that there is a secret war in society, a war against the helpless; it is waged in homes and businesses, governments and clubs; the helpless

are children, workers, soldiers, peasants, husbands, wives; all who find themselves dependent on cruel power. The tense polarity of unequal relationships creates a dense whirlpool of compliance, resentment, control, defiance, violence, rage, fear and horror. A child is delivered into the hands of her mother, realized Kay, and often a separate world is created, a world far from the norms of society, a little prison of sick secrecy, a dank hole of endless, stealthy destruction.

When she read the newspaper, walked the streets, talked with people; wherever she looked, this secret seemed to be spilling from secret holes. She began to see *veterans* everywhere. The harsh noise of society, the racing evasion and silent desperation all seemed like the distant rumblings of hidden trenches, trenches where the helpless lay trembling before the trundling monoliths of cold, hard hearts.

Kay had spent twenty-six years of her life in combat. She had learned all the habits of predators; her senses had been strained almost to the breaking-point trying to map the cause and effect of trapped violence. A lamb caged with a lion learns a lot about lions. That knowledge lies buried until a safer time; when it comes out, it comes with such a sudden rush that the whole world seems to squeeze and distort itself into a wholly different shape. The accepted antonyms of truth: *I caused my horror; I was wrong; I provoked; I am a coward; my mother is good; I cannot influence others; I am insignificant; I cannot give pleasure; I cannot be loved...* These beaten cries of a broken soul become the elemental religion of the victims of violence; if overturned, the resulting crisis of identity is far greater than the loss of religious faith, for our parents are always closer to us than our gods. The soul becomes shattered in two; the one which knows the horror of violence, and the one which cannot allow itself to know the reality of its

world. This division sets the self at war with itself; the uncertainties, confused passions, the savage combination of wild noise and dismal silence are all symptoms of the *veteran*, the survivor of war who knows no end to war, no armistice but blind hope.

Kay had an odd, powerful dream one night. She seemed to be floating in a distant, insubstantial realm, a blur of possible life, jostling in a crowded room of potential souls. A tall, dark-cloaked figure called the souls one by one and offered them a life, presenting each of them with a book. Kay drifted through the emptiness, trying to peek at the book, but all the pages were blank. Finally, her name was called, and the dark figure asked her if she wanted her coming life. She asked what it would be like. The figure presented her with a book. *This only goes to age eighteen*, it said. *You must make your decision based on that*. Kay opened the book eagerly, and visions seemed to spring into her mind from the blank pages.

She felt herself, pink and kicking on a change table, saw a woman leaning over her and shouting *be still, be still!* The woman cried out, exasperated at Kay's struggles, and struck her violently on the face several times. The scene faded, and another came; Kay on the change table, some time later. She no longer moved; she lay frozen, silent, watching her mother's hands intently. Another view: Kay as a toddler; her mother trying to dress her. Kay went limp, watching her mother's hands; her mother cried out at her passivity and struck her again...

Older now; some change had occurred; she no longer was herself, but watched herself, as if floating some distance from her helpless flesh. She saw herself in an enormous bedroom, packing some biscuits in a little bag, sniffing, desperate. She followed herself as she crept down the stairs towards the front door; her view leapt suddenly to the top of the stairs as her mother

came thundering down! *Ungrateful child!* screamed her mother, descending on the little girl like a whirlwind, her hands striking, blurring like the wings of a hummingbird; Kay felt the sick desperation as she saw herself fall back against the front door, the door to freedom, not even raising her hands to protect herself, falling behind the towering fury of her mother's back.

Then, a period of strange calm; Kay saw herself at a party of her mother's, laughing with an oddly tense face, desperate to please, following her mother, clutching at her skirts, being snapped at, her hands constantly torn from her mother's flowing dress; she watched herself drift silently into a corner, standing, her hands folded over her stomach, staring at the wild hilarity of the party, at her turbulent father driving jokes into his guests like spikes...

Older again; in her dream, the visions had begun to take on a tired, dusty quality, a squeezing sense of slow demise. She saw herself as a young girl, trailing her brother without hope, swallowing his abrupt rejections without complaint, a fixed smile on her face...

More and more; she heard the sandpaper scraping of turning pages; the dark figure loomed above her, watching silently. Kay wandered through the wilderness of puberty and adolescence, a quiet lost habit of solitude; friendless, humiliated, a begging wraith of fearful need. She saw herself in a library, staring at textbooks, the words flowing and fading over the page, a sense of eternal falling gripping her, a trembling on the brink of the eternal demise of the unloved. Teachers railed against her, scathing her lack of concentration, her lack of effort, her lack of results; she felt a strange, drained exhaustion, the fidgety evasion of those who feel too much, whose burden is too heavy...

As she aged, she seemed to drift further and further away from the view of herself. At her first ball, in late adolescence, Kay saw herself at such a great distance that she almost couldn't

make out her own features. Boys ignored her; friends met each other, passing her by as if she were some sort of cracked ornament. Kay saw herself watching the giddy pleasures of others, a distant smile on her face...

Then, just as suddenly as it had begun, the book slammed shut. *You can know no more,* intoned the dark figure, waving a finger. *This is to be your life: will you take it?*

In her dream, Kay shuddered and wept. *No! No! No!* she cried in a formless voice; *I cannot accept such awful hospitality!*

*You will get no other chance,* said the figure. *Do you still refuse life?*

Without hesitation, Kay nodded. The figure lifted its hand, and Kay felt her soul trembling on the edge of annihilation, staring at a bottomless pit of nothingness, and then her soul pitched itself forward with a sigh of blessed relief...

Kay had woken suddenly, her cheeks wet with tears... *I am not sentenced to live,* she thought, the heels of her hands pressed to her eyes. *No matter what my pains, I always have recourse to the blessed nurse of nothingness...* With that thought, something she had always thought of as solid in her, a dark bedrock of pain, seemed to give way, and she saw at once the panic of annihilation that had always been her core. *I did not want to live,* she realized with the sudden clarity of pure insight. *I did not want to live, yet I never allowed myself to think of death...*

It was a hard, harsh night. When true despair first surfaces, it is a combat that knows no bounds. We always face two enemies; the dangers of external life, and the threat of internal despair. Of the two, the latter is by far the most dangerous; we can avoid lightning and

rockslides, but knives are always within easy reach. Kay did not actively think of suicide; her will to live was extraordinarily strong, but with a true knowledge of lions comes the true knowledge of lambs, and she wept and wailed for the loss of innocence, of love, of the certain pleasures of a serene life.

By the time morning began sending whispers of light into the depths of her dark dialog, the danger had begun to recede. Kay rose from her bed and washed her face, feeling a sense of peace for the first time in her life. *My soul has hope*, she thought over and over. Raising her head, she stared at her red eyes in the mirror.

“I salute you,” she said softly, raising an imaginary glass to her younger self.

Jonathon called on her at eleven.

“Come, pretty missy!” he cried, bounding into her hotel room like a spring puppy. “We can’t waste such a lovely day in our little rooms!”

“Hello, Jonathon,” she said softly, rising to kiss his cheek.

“Aren’t we cheery this morning!” he exclaimed, touching his cheek. “What happened?”

“You know, I had the strangest dream.”

“Ahh!” he grinned. “Don’t dream – live!”

Kay smiled. “I intend to. Where are we lunching?”

“I thought at Harrod’s. New paté, you see.”

They went for lunch. Jonathon recognized a change in Kay; he talked a great deal past it, as it were, and it wasn’t until dessert that she broached what was one her mind.

“Tell me, darling, what do you plan to do with your life?” she asked.

“I like the way you say that,” smiled Jonathon, digging into his trifle.

“I like saying it,” she replied. “Does my question make you uncomfortable?”

“What question?”

“Your purpose in life.”

“It seems an odd topic for lunch...” admitted Jonathon.

“Well, it’s not on the menu, but it’s on my mind,” she said. “You know, I respect you a great deal. Your humour, courage and intelligence... They are all wonderful attributes.”

“Ah – this in preparation for the great ‘but’!” said Jonathon mournfully.

“Not ‘but’ – more ‘yet’,” said Kay. “Coffee?”

Jonathon pushed his cup forward. “Always,” he said. Kay poured him some from the pot the waiter had left at her request.

“Tell me: where do you see yourself in five years?” she asked.

“With you, of course. Darling,” he said, taking a sip. “Ooh! Hot! Good! Any rumblings from the maternal volcano?”

“No,” she said calmly. “You know, you are going to great lengths to avoid answering my question.”

Jonathon groaned. “Well,” he said, “it’s just that I had hoped you would be the one person I could rely on to leave my future in peace.”

“You know,” she said suddenly. “I don’t even know how old you are.”

“Twenty eight,” he said. “Just.”

“When was your birthday?”



“Five months ago.”

“Not ‘just’ then. Happy birthday.”

“Thanks. When’s yours?”

“Not till summer.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

“Thank you. Five years?”

“No – twenty eight!” grinned Jonathon.

Kay sighed. “I should have brought my dental pliers.”

“Oh, don’t be annoyed,” he said, waving his hand. “All right – what am I going to do with my life? The question, as it stands, seems silly because it implies that life is a kind of thing that must be manipulated, like some kind of tool. What am I going to do with my life? Why, live! That’s my plan, if you can call it that. Living for the future always means losing the present, that’s the truth.”

“But your talents are so singular; you should do something with them.”

“My ‘talents’, as you call them, are not pets to be taught tricks. You want me to put them on display, I assume, so others can applaud them. But I think that true success is enjoying yourself, not pleasing others.” He smiled winningly. “Except pleasing you, of course. Darling.”

“Hedonism, in other words.”

Jonathon frowned. “That word has such a negative sound. It’s all these pathetic ascetics who couldn’t feel pleasure if it would save their souls; they set up this idea that goodness is whatever makes you miserable. It’s ridiculous. They have a talent for misery, so they try to make it a universal good. It’s a philosophy of wet blankets. Oh, son, they warn; beware of the

road of pleasure; it is the easy road, the slack road, the road to misery. They think having fun is easy. I'd like to see them try it. They'd know better. Pleasure is hard."

"I'm having a hard time following your thoughts."

Jonathon smiled smugly. "Well, they are quite radical."

"What would you do without your inheritance?"

"I'd be an actor. No – a traveling musician. Or a sailor, though the senseless discipline would be hateful. But at least I'd get a chance to explore."

"What about your investments?"

"What about them? They pay the bills."

"You manage them yourself?"

"Sometimes. It's fun; like gambling, but more respectable."

"Have you ever thought of doing it full time?"

"'Doing it full time'; ever notice how close that is to 'doing time'?" he commented.

"If it's enjoyable, it could be something you would enjoy doing more."

Jonathon paused, then shook his head. "I enjoy it precisely because I don't have to do it full time. Tell me, Kay – what's bothering you? Are you afraid that if we get married, I'll just sit around the house tripping up the children? Afraid of me getting accidentally re-upholstered? That won't happen. I'm always busy."

"No, you're not," said Kay gently.

"What?" cried Jonathon. "You're mad! I should show you my calendar!"

"You're always doing something, that's true. You're always active. But it's always on your terms. No-one ever has the right to demand anything from you."

“Not true,” he grinned. “Demand a kiss. Go on – I dare you! My, but that trifle was good!”

“And now it’s gone.”

“How philosophical.”

“Children will be demanding,” said Kay, ignoring his comment. “They will not fit your schedule.”

“Why not?” he asked innocently. “I do things children love to do. They’ll trail me like ducklings!”

“What about when they are ill?” demanded Kay. “What about when they need help with their homework? What about when they have problems? Will you solve every difficulty by force-feeding them excitement?”

“That’s a bit much,” he said shortly. “I am not that irresponsible.”

“What about me?” she asked with a sudden flash of fear. “I will not always be merry.”

“I will cheer you up.”

“Don’t you see?” she cried. “You just want to placate everyone! Everything you do is just for yourself. Everything which doesn’t fit what you want has to be fixed, controlled, gotten rid of. Kay is sad? – why, just cheer her up!”

“Why are you getting so angry?” he cried. “We’re just having lunch!”

“I am concerned about you!”

“That’s not true. I helped you, out of goodwill and love, and now you turn around and say: ‘everything about you must change’. You came with me for who I was; I was not false. Now you want something different. By heavens, I thought shrews waited until after marriage to reveal their true colours!”

Kay's face went white. "Is that how you see me?"

"That's how you are showing yourself. More than a bit of your mother in you, isn't there?"

Kay threw down her napkin and got up. "You helped me – that's true, and I will be eternally grateful to you for that. But if it's all one-sided, we can never be together."

"Kay – Kay, I'm sorry. Please – sit down. I'm not mad at you. Everyone just seems to want me to be something different, and I'm a little tired of it. I'm happy. I enjoy my life. If that's not enough for you, I never will be."

"Go for a job interview," said Kay, still standing.

Jonathan's eyes widened. "A – a what?"

"You heard me."

"But – I have enough money. Fortunately for you."

Kay stared at him for a moment in shock. "Then it was all about saving me, wasn't it?" she whispered.

"No – no! I loved you for accepting me! Don't turn into everyone else – please!"

"Anyone who finds fault with you is the enemy, aren't they? Well, Jonathon Eddsworth, that just isn't true. If you want to live your life entirely for yourself, don't get involved with anyone who cares about you. Don't listen to anyone. End up alone. Right, always right, but alone."

"Perhaps that's just what I'll have to do!" he said.

"If you change your mind, you know where to find me," said Kay, turning and walking out.

*Damn it!* thought Jonathon dismally. *Why does everyone turn against me?*

"Jonathon?" said a voice behind him. He turned and saw Lydia.

"Hello!" he said glumly. "What are you doing here?"

“Meeting Laurence for lunch. I’m a little early.”

“How is the great man?” he asked.

She smiled. “Wonderful.”

“Will you sit for a few minutes?” he said, offering her a chair.

“Of course,” she said, sitting. “Is this coffee still warm?”

“Help yourself.” Jonathon paused for a moment. “Tell me something, Lydia. As a friend.”

“Have I ever told you anything as an enemy?” she asked, pouring herself a cup.

“Don’t be glib. This is hard.”

“Really? Then I must be at the wrong table.”

“Oh be quiet and listen! Tell me – is there anything about Laurence that you would change if you could?”

Lydia smiled. “Fight with Kay?”

Jonathon sighed. “Just answer the question. Please.”

“Of course. I would change some things. I already have.”

“What?”

“You know – that business with Mary. I never could understand his attachment to her. So much guilt and pressure. It seemed quite unhealthy. But by plying him with love and goodness, I think I have freed him. You understand – this is strictly confidential. Oh – why do I say that? You tell everything to everyone.”

Jonathon blinked. “Have I offended existence in some way?”

“What did Kay want you to change?”

“She said I have no purpose in life. No – that’s not quite fair. She asked me what I wanted to do with my life. I got quite irritable. Don’t give me that look. Two opinions do not make an absolute.”

Lydia pursed her lips. “Of course – only two. All right – would you have taken Kay as she was when you met her?”

“What – with that mother?” Jonathon shuddered. “You must be mad!”

“So you wanted to change something in her.”

“I helped her. I didn’t want to change her.”

“By heavens – I had almost forgotten how maddening you are to talk to!”

“Why do you say that?”

“I love you dearly, Jonathon, but you have an irritating habit common to all who think they are always in the right. You love giving advice, but hate taking it.”

“That’s not true!”

“You see? But what advice did Kay give you?”

“She told me to get a job interview! At a bank! Managing investments!”

“Hah! Blasphemer!”

“What? You don’t find that shocking?”

“Jonathon – everyone has a purpose except you. Doesn’t that ever give you pause?”

He wracked his brain, trying to think of a contrary example.

“Listen,” said Lydia reasonably. “I no longer have the same passion to change you. Do what you want with your life. But spare a thought to some of the responsibilities that none of us can

ever escape if we want to live fully. Family, career, love, purpose. These things always require some planning. Some sacrifice.”

“I know, I know,” said Jonathon miserably. “I don’t know why I hate the idea so much.”

“I don’t either. But something in you drew you to Kay. I think it’s a good match. She has a depth of experience you lack; a knowledge of suffering and sacrifice. If you want her, you have to want all of her, not just the parts that fit your preferences.”

“So you think I should go for a – job interview,” he said with horror.

“Why not?”

“Where?”

“My father’s banking at a new institution, one focusing heavily on investments. There is a very unusual banker there, according to father. Here’s the address,” she said, passing a card to him. “I’m going there tomorrow, to talk about moving my accounts. Meet me there at eleven. I’ll wait and help you recover.”

“Well, I suppose she only asked that I go for an interview,” said Jonathon, suddenly brightening. “Not that I actually get the job.”

“Spoken like a truly changed man!” smiled Lydia.

## CHAPTER FIFTY THREE

### *Three Choices*

THE VILLAGERS MET WITH ALL THE PASSION OF PARTICIPATORY POLITICS. Ever since the death of Farmer Jigger, the village had been without a mayor. Flushed with new wealth, the position had languished vacant for over a month. Finally, Father Jones had called a meeting to elect a new mayor, offering himself as a candidate.

To everyone's surprise, Knotted Bob also came forward as a nominee. Since his retirement to his little cottage, he had almost completely dropped out of village life. A few comments were made about the failure of age to recognize its limitations, for Knotted Bob was still perceived as a figure of odd ridicule, yet some of the older men, who still recalled the wisdom of his nature, quietly applauded his choice. There was one other candidate, included more for entertainment value than serious politics; the ex-monk, barkeep and master of the blasphemous mass, Garth, also put his name on the ballot.

An issue had arisen which was expected to be the center of the coming debate. The farmers all paid a fixed percentage of their income to the village council; the council used this money for general use; the repairing of roads, education, poor relief and so on. Due to the astounding increase in crop production caused by Laurence's reforms, the council found itself sitting on an unprecedented mass of money and crops. The question remained unresolved as to what to do with this wealth.

The debate took place on a patron saint's day; no-one had to work, and chairs were brought to the village square so everyone could come, watch and have their say. The village election was



considered a great treat, a time when the clash of hoary opinions and old grudges usually made for a great show.

The morning of the debate rose clear and slightly chilly. In the early hours, the breath of those setting up the chairs and refreshments was clearly visible; by mid-morning, however, when the villagers began taking their places, the day had become comfortably warm.

Bailiff Andrews dragged out the podium he had used for the trial of Farmer Jigger and set it up in the center of the square. Several villagers glanced at it with a shiver of unease. The debate being considered vaguely in the realm of legality, Bailiff Andrews was the mediator.

The debate began at noon; Father Jones was the first speaker. The square was quite full, though many older men had obviously decided that more wisdom was to be had from another glass of beer than the words of the village priest.

“Friends,” he cried, after Bailiff Andrews had settled the crowd with several bangs of his gavel. “Friends, we come together on this beautiful day for the sake of good Christian charity! The good Lord has seen it fit this year to provide us with a wondrous bounty...”

“Which Lord is that?” cried Garth, to general merriment.

“Silence!” cried Bailiff Andrews.

“Thank you, good bailiff,” said Father Jones gratefully, turning to the laughing crowd. “We have a wondrous bounty in our hands, good citizens, and we must decide what to do with it. Many suggestions have been bandied around; some serious, some the mere ramblings of fools,” he said, glancing significantly at Garth, who mimed putting on a clerical collar and then yanked it up behind him like a noose. “My humble suggestion, as you know,” continued the priest, “is the setting up of a Poor House. This idea, more common to city than country, is to have a place

of refuge for the poor, a place where they can rest their weary bones, be put to good use, and be instructed in the ways of the Lord. This is, of course, the purpose of our lives; the saving of souls, not the stuffing of bellies. I know that my esteemed opponent, Knotted Bob, has made the suggestion of applying this bounty to further crop improvements, but I respectfully call his perspective utterly blasphemous! Yes – harsh words, my friends, but true to the will of God. Remember, brothers, that God has loosed us on this world only temporarily. He does not weigh our bodies, only our actions. To be sure, we can run after more wealth; God grants us the freedom to make evil decisions. He grants us the freedom to become fat and complacent – or we may use His freedom to help those of our brethren who have turned from the road to heaven. What is all the wealth in the world next to the salvation of a single soul? We have the chance to aid in the salvation of the worst poverty: the poverty of the godless, whose only reward for their wicked ways is an eternity in the agonies of hell. Do we need more food? No! Do we need more factories, more angry workers disrupting our town? No! Let us reform the workers we have before bringing more upon us! No more factories! Why do we need more wool? Why do we need more crops? What matters, friends, is the saving of souls from the claws of Satan?” cried Father Jones, crossing himself piously. “Help me in our common task! Help me save the godless! Give me the power, and I will use it for God’s purpose!”

“Thank you, Father Jones,” said Bailiff Andrews. “We will now hear from Knotted Bob.”

Silence greeted the rise of Knotted Bob; not only from respect, but also because everyone was fascinated by the creaking sound he made when he moved.

“Aye, we have a bounty,” said Knotted Bob, taking the podium and squinting over the crowd. “We have a bounty, and we have a choice. In this the head of the priest is on the nail.” He scratched his head; the crowd listened breathlessly.

“I think him too heavy for the podium, it creaks so!” cried Garth.

“Wait your turn, fool!” scowled Bailiff Andrews.

“Don’t we always?” grinned Garth. “Yet it never comes!”

Knotted Bob shook his head slowly. “This faith in poor-houses is wide of the mark; wide of the mark, I say! A man can be mean for many reasons, not least for want of bread. I spy faces here old enough to remember how this village was ten years ago; a deep hole of hunger and sickness; neighbour ‘gainst neighbour, father ‘gainst son. Not for more food, but any food! D’ye recall? Aye – I see by yer faces that the evils of those times are not quite dry in yer minds. Now we have a different life; strength and goodness is back in our bones. Is that a-cause of God? Perhaps, but I have no faith in that goodness; I have faith in food. Food gave us goodness; now the priest says: turn yer backs on yer crops and look to the poor. Aye – and he’s right, the poor are still with us, and always will be, I spy, as long as the world sits under sun and moon. So now we ask ourselves: what are we to do with ‘em? We can give ‘em food, and have less for ourselves, or we can give ‘em work, and have more for everyone. I say: let’s use this money to buy more land, more manure, more seedlings. Then, when poor come to us, we can give them a hoe, not just a leaky roof and pious lectures. Is there any man here who prefers kind charity to hard work? Nay – I say we be forged of sterner stuff. The only right kindness in this world is opportunity, not charity. The priest wants a poor house; let us lift the rocks of his kind words and peer a-neath ‘em. His work house; a house of God, aye, perhaps; a house of work, for

certain. The poor will labour in his little house – and where do ye spy the fruits of their labour going? Room and board, a little: back to the Church: a lot. He can speak of souls until we all give ours up, but the truth is that he stands to fatten his purse from his charity – and none the richer but him. Put me in the seat of mayor, and I will use this money to enrich us all, to make good men from the poorest of the poor. Put him there, and none will escape the better but him.”

The villagers scratched their heads and conferred. The problem of the poor had been on everyone’s mind, and not just because of the factory workers. Homeless people, hearing of the sudden wealth of the village and the loom factory, had begun making their way into the county, begging for work. Since the harvest was in, they found none. Fearful of drawing more poor through generosity, the villagers had provided little charity. Finding that this resulted in brazen theft, the question of the poor had become quite pressing.

“Garth,” said Bailiff Andrews disdainfully.

“Aye – good humour will have its say!” grinned Garth, rising and bowing deeply. “Harken, ye scurvy rabble – the fool speaks! Having nothing to gain but a short stretch of hearing, he speaks only nonsense. We have heard from two worthy gentlemen about how best to manage the fruits of your hard labour. Now, never having partaken of hard labour myself, I can only imagine what you feel on hearing how they plan to carve it up. But I think that if there were an excess of jokes in the world, and I was listening to two such kind souls talk about how to tell them for me, I could only think that this was just another kind of joke. Blessed with the glorious weight of self-importance, they cry: ‘what are we to do with the poor?’ Well, we have enough food, so there’s no point eating them; they’re quite stringy anyway, I hear. One says: save their souls by putting them to work, which sounds like a curse on our noble lords, who work not at all,

and thus must be going straight to hell. The other says: save their souls by preaching at them, as if he could not ramble the roads of our good lands and find poor enough to preach at, and so obviously prefers having them come to him than taking the effort to hunt down such rare creatures! Now the fool has a minute more, and he says that if he were mayor, he would at least know that he is such a fool that he has no business meddling in what isn't his. He would say: the fools of the world demand good roads and teachers for their children – very well, let them have them, so they can stay home and put hoes into their children's well-schooled hands. But that takes so little; even a fool can see that the mayor should lower your taxes rather than worry his head about what to do with his sudden windfall. What should we do with the money? Why, give it back to you, and let you do what you please with it! Fools cannot decide for fools. This fool has spoken the only sense he will ever dare, and will retire once more to his proper station.”

Garth sat down. The crowd stared at him in shock. The option of lowering taxes had not even occurred to them. Dazed, they shook their heads, thinking *what a strange notion!* The strangeness was the only argument they needed; they laughed and shook their heads, amused by the cunning jest, and many vowed to stand him a drink.

The ballots were handed out, marked and returned. Everyone retired to the tavern to drink and await the results. Bailiff Andrews sat in the square with Father Jones and Knotted Bob (Garth had gone to the inn), counting silently. He checked the results three times, then glanced up impassively.

“Come on,” he said, leading the two men towards the tavern.

When they opened the door, the room fell silent. Glasses lowered, beards were wiped and all eyes were on the Bailiff.

“Knotted Bob is our new mayor!” he cried.

The room erupted into a chaos of cheers. Knotted Bob grinned at the stricken priest.

“Welcome to the new world, priest!” he cried triumphantly. Father Jones glared at him in helpless rage, then turned and forced his way through the crowd and out of the tavern. Knotted Bob saluted his departure, then turned and surrendered to the handshakes and offered drinks.

## CHAPTER FIFTY FOUR

### *A Confused Interview*

JONATHON HOPED HE WOULD NOT BE SEEN. His eyes darted from left to right as he scuttled from doorway to doorway. Naturally, his demeanor drew all eyes to him; people shied away from him, as if he held a bomb or radical opinions under his neatly-pressed velvet suit. An amateur spy always hides conspicuously.

Even if he had run into a pack of his closest acquaintances, however, they would have been hard-pressed to identify him. His hair, normally waging a losing battle against gravity and static, was oiled, scented, and tied back in a smooth ponytail. His fashionable scruffiness was completely gone; he had risen early, gone to a barber far in the East End, paid excessively for a close shave and neat trim, and returned to the Financial District by back alleys, stopping only in a dank tavern to apply a good base to his face.

Jonathon carried his résumé in a small leather folder; he had spent lots of time in the morning worrying over how to best to transport and produce a single page without wrinkling it. Preparing a résumé is one of the few events in life that raises one's perspective from the minute to the sub-orbital. There are others; those born more than mid-way through a century pass idle moments of childhood and youth imagining their lives on the night of the great turnover. *I will be 34 on that day – surely I shall never be so old..!* Yet that night comes as all nights do, even the final one – and it is a powerful marker; the two new '0's line up against the flow and direction of their lives

like two holes of a shotgun. Jonathon was still some years shy of a new century, so struggling against the blank page of a résumé was the closest thing he had ever come to an honest adult self-assessment.

*I graduated from university six years ago...* It was like the ghastly exercises in sterile creativity inflicted on young boys: *What I Did With My Summer Holidays*. The hardest acts of creativity are reserved for retroactive imagination; filling in timesheets; taxes; extricating from lies; scant résumés. *My experiences are so rich;* thought Jonathon – *but my history so poor.*

Of course, if Jonathon actually wanted the job, the creation of the résumé would have been all the more difficult; he did not want to make it too impressive, yet he knew Kay would want to see a copy, so it had to balance...

As he scurried, a tense little ball of frustration welled up within him. *What on earth am I doing, trying to please people like this?* Like most people who have never received clear instructions on how to live, he had entered an amoral phase in puberty, then a hedonistic phase, and now was entering into a necessary but belated phase of trying to bring a life into existence whose construction required more thought than passion.

Naturally, he was afraid of turning to his father for advice. His father did not give advice, only orders. 'Responsibility' was the grim governess of his childhood; his father had been blind



to what made Jonathon tick, so they had set up the oldest standoff of human interaction; shouting absolutes across a canyon of incomprehension, able neither to leave the chasm nor bridge it.

Oddly enough, though, on meeting Kay, he had for the first time come across something he wanted, beyond the animal impulse of the initial grab. *You shall find love in Dorset*, he had said to Lydia, and now shook his head at the prophesy. There was something about her tenderness, her need... *Even to go through the motion of looking for a job is rank capitulation*, he smiled, feeling an elemental thrill at the depth of his surrender. *Fight as I might, I am thoroughly doomed...*

In his leather folder, his little document had a small number of large letters spread across its lonely face. He had struggled with it for hours, attempting to stretch his meager experience into something resembling a respectable course of action. By the time he was done, the words seemed strangely exhausted, like travelers returning from a long, arduous and rather pointless pilgrimage.

Jonathon glanced at his watch and upped his pace a little, finding new respect for the time management skills required by paranoiacs. He arrived at the Second National Chartered Bank ten minutes late and asked for Lydia's contact, Mr. Rangoon. He looked around, but Lydia was not there. The receptionist asked him three times if he had a cold before he sighed and spoke in his normal voice. She smiled at this endearing idiocy, and asked him to wait.

Pulling out his résumé, Jonathon pretended to study it carefully, not noticing that this gave him the shady air of a man frantically trying to commit an alibi to memory before being called into a courtroom. Finding the conversations around him quite intriguing, however, he began to notice his surroundings a little more.

Banks made Jonathon very nervous. His father had been of the opinion that finances were not a fit topic for family discussion (and it was not only finances; it often seemed that, for Jonathan's father, any topic but the weather and political opinions of the previous century were somehow unfit). As a result, whenever Jonathon overspent his allowance, his father referred him to the family banker, who had as gloomy a view of man's ability to handle capital as a Calvinist has of his ability to handle temptation. He would chew his nails and drone on in deep, deep shock and disappointment at Jonathan's 'transgressions'; a term which made the young man feel as if he had sinned against a flat green god.

Glancing around him, he saw similar types of men stalking the halls of the Second National Chartered Bank; men who, despite their naturally morbid inclinations, had decided against the job of undertaker because they would have found it distasteful that their clients had once been alive. These men could not farm because things grew; they could not trade because people bought and sold; they could not live a life of ease because that required pleasure. So they became bankers, for there was an occupation where the sum total of dreams, goals, loves and hates could be neatly tabulated in a double-entry ledger. They did not see capital as a lively echo of ambition, or a trembling potential of rank luxury, or a tidy means of easing daily burdens, but

as a dry, abstract monolith of dark responsibility. Some of these men had children; Jonathon was sure of that, but he also knew that they managed their children much like they managed their capital; the children had been put in their trust, and must grow through the judicious investment of cautious wisdom. Thus their children were invested with a deep fear of the original sin of financial irresponsibility; capital was not to be used, but nurtured like a grudge. ‘Goods not required for the binding of body and soul or the maintenance of a certain professional decorum are blasphemously wasteful’, they said; naturally, their children grew grave and guilty in the face of such savage retention.

*If I am not careful, he thought, suppressing a shudder, I could end up working here.*

“You’re next,” smiled the receptionist.

Jonathon smiled with the tense cheer of a boy unable to show his homework. *Remember: you don’t want this job!*

Deep as he was in a quiet tomb of capital, he was quite surprised to hear a raised voice from behind Mr. Rangoon’s closed door.

“I will stand for no such opinions, you young rascal!” cried the voice. “I am not interested in your references! I will, in fact, provide you with a wonderful letter of introduction to any competitor you require, for I can imagine no better service I could do for this worthy institution than having you work for one of our rivals! Now take your pretty degrees and get out of my building!”

The receptionist grinned. “Best place to work,” she said to Jonathon. “You’ll do fine. Just be yourself.”

“That is my plan.”

“Yes,” she winked, “but it might not work.”

A pale-faced young man came out of the office, clutching a résumé. He stared at Laurence, shook his head dazedly, and wandered out.

“Come on, then!” cried the voice irritably.

Jonathon picked up his résumé and walked jauntily into the office. *This shouldn't take too long.*

Mr. Rangoon was short, with lank white hair and strange spots on his skin, and Jonathon suddenly remembered an illusion he had when he was a child, that the moon was in fact the earth, and all the green maps were wrong; the earth was a sky-locked composite of silver shades. This did not lead to the next question – if the moon is the earth, where do you live? – until some time later, when a favourite nanny sat with him on the bed as the moonlight streamed in through the window and demonstrated to him that he did in fact live on an orange. Or was it a grape? Either way, he remembered sitting deep in the folds of manifested blankets while the solar system was spread out at his feet; a grapefruit was the sun; the moon was a grape; the earth an orange... And it had seemed to Jonathon that as he watched the orange slide into shadow that, had he sensitive enough eyes, he would be able to see himself staring up at the constellation of his own face, deep in a miniature citrus canyon... It was a joyful memory that brought him back in a flash to Mr. Rangoon, because it was rare to see such intense energy in an older man.

He could see Mr. Rangoon's vitality from clear across his office, and it stopped him short. Vitality had been the central question of Jonathon's youngish life; vitality, and how to keep it.

Vitality is the great unguessed gift of youth and the forgotten absence of middle age. Jonathon was horrified at how many people exchanged vitality for property; he was often decried for shying away from responsibility, but he was, he believed, very responsible towards himself. Of course, he knew he had been indulgent, but he had been aware lately of how possible it is for the greed of the infant to destroy the sensitivity of the child. The infant is little more than ‘more, more, more! – sleep’, and that was similar enough to certain adult pursuits that it was possible to let the infant maneuver the post-pubescent body like a drunken child in a wild crane. But sex had lost its luster to Jonathon – not completely, of course, but something was changing, even before he met Kay. He used women to conquer his impulses, to drown out the wild insistence of his inner life; everyone who treads torrential emotions needs something which shocks the nervous system into silence, even for a short time; days, hours, minutes. That is one of the greatest tragedies of life, of course, that the most sensitive have to destroy their sensitivity; starting as silent crystals of tremulous perception, they so fear being broken or overwhelmed by their perceptions that they take the wrecking balls of external stimuli on their menageries until they end up little more than insensate brutes. None scream so loud as those who cannot stop hearing.

So, something deep within Jonathon stirred at the sight of Mr. Rangoon – and he had all the arrogance of an inward-looking man in his late twenties, assuming that all he had mapped was all there was to map – and he blinked several times, and found himself becoming slightly liquid, so deep was his receptivity.

Mr. Rangoon sat behind his desk, writing on the back of his hand. “I am making my grocery list, young man,” he said without looking up. “If you can make me forget what I want to write next, the job is yours.” He glanced up suddenly. “You do know what the job is, don’t you?”

“Well – loans officer,” stammered Jonathon, deeply shocked at the sight of a banker with a visible personality.

“Quite,” said Mr. Rangoon absently, writing again. “You will be responsible for the management of other people’s hard-earned money. So we can assume you are not a total fool. What else can you bring to me? Come, come; I don’t eat much.”

“Um – a willingness to work hard,” said Jonathon, repressing a smile. “A resolute, decisive nature. Financial competence. I don’t drink a lot. I’ve never been convicted for fraud. I often rise before noon. Money bores me, so I probably won’t steal...”

Mr. Rangoon stopped writing, stared at Jonathon, then guffawed. “All – right, I lost my thread on ‘grapefruit’. What on earth are you talking about?”

“I am listing my abilities.”

“Give me your résumé.” He grabbed it and stared at it blankly. “You’ve never worked a day in your life!” he cried. “Perfect! All right, Mr. Eddsworth, sell me this pen. No – forget that; I already like the pen. Give me some ideas. Tell me something unusual. What have you got?”

Jonathon smiled. “Well, an uncommon aversion to hard work.”

“Excellent. We share two traits already. Made in heaven.”

“Excuse?”

“I loathe hard work. That’s why my wife sees me no more than five minutes a day. ‘Geoff Rangoon’, she says, ‘you are hogging the covers again.’ Do you hog the covers?”

Jonathon's mouth dropped open.

"Because that's my definition of hard work," said Mr. Rangoon. "Managing blankets while asleep. You are not close to your father."

"I..."

"Never mind – we'll get... Are you a Protestant?"

"No."

"Good. Why should our daily occupations be millstones around our necks? Do you know, I believe the Protestant heaven has punch-clocks, and all the saints fear unionization." Mr. Rangoon threw his head back and laughed. "Excuse me – I am playing up my eccentricities, just to get your attention. But there's truth in it, nonetheless. Let me put my psychic helmet on: you are rich, titled in an indifferent sort of way, here because of a... woman – yes I am getting someone quite lovely, though physically... What's the longest you've ever had a hobby?"

"Erm..." Jonathon was afraid to think, to answer, because he was certain that he was only a sort of prop for Mr. Rangoon's random inner ramblings. He paused for a few moments, then realized that the older man was looking at him expectantly, perfectly composed.

"Do childhood hobbies count?"

"Yes."

"Finger painting was a singular passion of mine."

"For..."

"Well – child-time is er – several months, at least."

"Until you painted a wall, or a maid, your mother, or your privates. A colourful totem pole, I'd wager. And since then?"

“Nothing has lasted so long.”

“Lovely! Now you.”

“What?”

“Well – why are you here? Something is missing from your life. You don’t have to work.”

Something tickled Jonathon’s eyes; deep, where the wet balls met his earliest memories.

Mr. Rangoon paused. “You are emotional.”

“Oh, it’s so...”

“May I?” The banker passed a handkerchief to the young man. “Go on.”

“Well, nothing is missing in my life.”

“Yes.”

“Um - are you sure you’re a banker? Sorry, that’s rude.”

“No, I am aware of my differences. Now, tell me about yourself.”

“Professionally?”

“However you like.”

Jonathon exhaled. “Good, because professionally... I am twenty-eight years old; I play the stock market; somewhat successfully. I’ve met a wonderful woman, very sensitive. I can focus myself for...” Jonathon paused; his eyes were positively burning. He shook his head. “I’m sorry; I am not feeling...”

“Sit, please – let us imagine that we are here as friends – friends, that’s all. So I, Geoff, say to you, my friend Jonathon, what is on your mind?”

“I don’t know.”



“You are not close to your father. You have a lot of talent – I have heard of you – there is in fact a small group of investors who follow your lead – you didn’t know that? How many teachers said to you: ‘if effort matched ability, you’d be an A+’?”

Jonathon laughed ruefully. “More than a few. Differently, though.”

“So why do you apply yourself so little?”

“Oh, I hate the idea of ‘willing’ everything. It’s like – if you try, they win. Everything you set your stake on becomes a trap...”

There was a pause. Jonathon rarely listened to himself.

“A trap...”

“So let’s say I like you, you are different, and I work for you – I know this has become more social than professional, but let’s say it went differently – and I like working for you, I have – you have something to offer me. Then, I want to please you, to keep working here, and everything becomes difficult.” Jonathon stood. “And suppose that works out – suppose I succeed here, then it’s fatherhood, tie-straightening, drinks at the club, portliness, orthodox opinions – patriotism, god help me! Everything becomes clogged. The heart softens... I don’t know. I don’t want to become anything – that’s an implicit condemnation of where and who I am now.” Jonathon passed a hand through his hair. “Don’t you have – isn’t the next person due?”

“The signal has been given.”

“Ah. Then...”

Mr. Rangoon leaned forward. “You want to live for the moment, Mr. Eddsworth, is that correct?”

“Well, this moment was not what I had in mind, but...”

“Do you know that more than ninety percent of the life-mass in this world is made up of insects?”

“I did not know that.”

“And, except for some inherited actions, they have no sense of time.”

“So I am...”

“Even plants, which are lower than insects, strain to reach the light, though it takes them years. I think enough of creation lives in the moment. You should aspire to be more than vegetation.”

“Why?”

The banker smiled. “It is my belief that the most powerful relationship in the world is not between parent and child.”

“Or husband and wife, given your insensitive greed for the covers.”

The banker smiled. “Any other guesses?”

“Creditor and debtor?”

He laughed, then his smile dropped. “Who has guided you in your life, Jonathon?”

Jonathon laughed, but the shards stuck in his throat. “Guided me – I am not a sheep.”

“Talent is very dangerous – did you know that?”

“Talent – I’m...”

“No – you are not a painter or playwright, but you have talent. The development and management of that talent is very difficult, very delicate. I could do it; that’s of little matter,

because you may not be ready to admit that your soul frightens you. But it is important to know that if this talent is not given it's proper direction, it will destroy you.”

“Now, that sounds melodramatic. My ability to choose stocks is not a kind of opiate.”

“The stocks – ah, who cares about that? You have managed your abilities by pretending there is no such thing as the future, and that is not bad – it could have been drink, drugs, women... Your future is knocking at your door, incessantly; you can concentrate on nothing else. You dabble because you are afraid of finding out what you are capable of, of knowing that you will never be loved by your family, who don't... Excuse me – too far, too soon. But everyone damns the brilliant idler for his idleness, but no-one takes the time to help him harness his abilities.”

Jonathon drew a deep breath. “Because, if you're that brilliant...”

Mr. Rangoon clapped his hands. “You're supposed to know how to do it yourself! Absolutely. And it would take someone who has actually done it themselves.”

“Meaning you.”

“And you'll kindly notice that we are over the hurdle of whether or not you have talent.”

“Do you give this speech to every one who comes in here?”

Mr. Rangoon stood. “Get up.”

Jonathon felt his stomach drop. “I didn't mean...”

The older man waved his hand. “God, I'm not offended. You have listened extraordinarily well, and I thank you for it. Come here.”

Mr. Rangoon opened the door, and they left his office. Several men were sitting in the receptionist's area. The banker rubbed his chin vigorously, staring that then.

“You – leave, go be a – florist. You and you; tellers perhaps. No? You can stay,” he said, pointing at a young man. “We’ll be back soon.”

Mr. Rangoon opened another door, and they went through and stood on a small catwalk over a wide swathe of mahogany desks, where dark-suited clerks with oiled hair toiled in respectful silence. A few glanced up and bent deeper over their desks, writing furiously.

“Do you know that the average person farts about once an hour?” he asked. “At any society ball, that means that all these well-dressed men and women who grin and sashay and tell dry jokes are producing several hundred cubic feet of farts between the announcement of their entrance and their burping swagger to their carriages.”

“I thought I was the only one...”

“Don’t we all? There are also the spontaneous erections, but... The point is that the real work of the body continues regardless of the appearances we may prefer as important. This is not the real bank.”

Jonathon watched the clerks, acutely aware of Mr. Rangoon watching him.

“Enter the mystery,” said the older man, pulling his sleeve. They walked down the stairs and through the hall to a smaller door at the rear. “You are one of the first titled sons of the realm to enter here,” he said, pushing open the rear door. “You will be known as the ‘old man’ here; don’t even ask what they call me.”

Jonathon had seen professional workplaces before, of course – banks were the most common. He had many memories of learning the strength and taste of a copper penny his father would

give to him while the elder Eddsworth went in to talk to Mr. Stelson (and take back afterwards). Because Jonathon had always been exquisitely sensitive to his surroundings, he had been charged with life at a theatre, cruel at the dentists, quiet at funerals and always sleepy and dangerous in an office. Sometimes he would go up with his father to the second floor of a bank and see the young men with young-looking, old-hoping moustaches and think that the ones who shuffled slope-shouldered and always stood and talked through their noses in one note were afraid and those who were square-shouldered and brusque and impatient and did not pause when speaking blindly were also afraid, and he wondered who it was who created such fear. Lost in the mineral taste of his copper penny, he imagined a huge gray octopus in a double-breasted suit and a gold watch on each tentacle telling the time in different cities who presided over the his clerks at the end of the day's business and feel each one's face with the slithery rubber of its suction cups and feel out those who had made mistakes and then the huge octopus would pull the erring clerks close to its oily heaving bosom, tilt them forward, and a gray tongue would roll forward from the enormous parrot beak and lick the hair oil from their heads before biting them off to the dutiful applause of the unchosen...

Of course, Jonathon would generally scream when his father tapped him on the shoulder to go, and he would look up into the fearful, superstitious eyes of a plodding parent regarding a hypersensitive child...

So when Mr. Rangoon opened the door, Jonathon was quite unprepared for the sight which met his eyes.

It was a low-ceilinged room, with desks and books scattered haphazardly about. Men gathered in clusters. There was a great wild carelessness in the room; where before there had been fear, now there seemed anger, and humour. Jonathon was transfixed.

Mr. Rangoon glanced at him and smiled. “So the interview is over, yet let me continue, if only because I told the other applicants they would have to wait. This is the loans room, also dubbed the shift of fools, as well as the C-squared, or the capital of capital. And I will tell you something very interesting. This room is exactly the same as the room we just came from, but this one faces forward instead of backwards. Boys!” he shouted suddenly, startling Jonathon. “Boys – who do we hate?”

The men cried back without raising their heads. “Pascal!”

“Who is our enemy?”

“Kepler!”

“Who do we live for?”

“He who is yet to be!”

“You see?” said Mr. Rangoon, turning to Jonathon.

“Of course – you don’t allow loan decisions to be made by fiery religious visions.”

“Actually, quite the opposite. It’s the damn calculus we hate. Allow me to lecture – it is so rare... You understand insurance.”

“Sure – sleep for the meek.”

Mr. Rangoon laughed. “Yes – perhaps. Insurance as a whole is made possible by the laws of probability, courtesy of one Blaise Pascal – and life insurance, by the new census bureau. Once you know the average life-span, and the laws of probability, accurate insurance becomes possible. This is true for maritime insurance – you don’t think all this new trade by sea has come about just because we’ve become better sailors, do you? No – we simply now know the odds of a ship making it back from the Cape of Good Hope – or, as we like to call it, the Cape of Good Math. And that’s what the young duds in the front office do, and as soon as we can invent an abacus with its own hands I can happily turn them all into fertilizer. Those are the young duds – and these are the young studs. Probability is empirical, and so faces only the past – what we explore here not the probable, but the possible, where no math dare venture!”

Jonathon shook his head. “So – what is your – way of – ”

“Hard to even describe, isn’t it? There are, I believe, instincts which arise from the past which are essentially conservative and self-protective and assume that what is to come will be more or less the same as what has passed. There are another, more subtle set of instincts which anticipate the future and can do serious damage to an old-fashioned sense of time.”

“Prophecy?”

“No, in that nothing can really be foreordained, but the kind of instincts which go to the root of new people we meet, or can tell a person is about to become ill by his handshake – well, there’s no need for a chasm of detail, but we believe here that there are new economic forces afoot, forces which in math can be represented only by ‘X’ (and an asymptote of profit, I hope) and which rational analysis can only approximate. The rest of it I turn over to...”

Jonathon leaped forward. “Feeling! You are mad!”

“This is as yet only a small division – and you are quite right – I am mad, but it’s a happy kind of mad. Our shareholders know nothing about this, but the ‘dud room’ outside is a sham, like a woman with downcast eyes who tears your back to shreds on your wedding night! These studs are my insurance.”

“And – how have you been doing?”

“Well, badly, but never boringly! Instinct is hard, hard... But enough about us – let’s talk about you. Now here, you might rightly think I stop lecturing and you finally get to speak, but you are to be disappointed, for the lecture continues, though with a shift in subject.”

Jonathon tugged at his tie. “Can we go back to your office? It’s quite hot in here.”

Back in the office, Mr. Rangoon continued.

“You are without a home in this rational age, because your syllogisms are invisible to you. There is poetry in business, and a poet’s effectiveness cannot be proved by any of Aristotle’s famous 196 syllogisms. You are passionate, but rudderless; libidinous, but unsatisfied, curious and restless. Each day is passed in pleasure; contemplation of the year is fraught with tension, because you have no idea who you are or where you are going. You numb yourself with random change because your impulses are almost overwhelming. You still cry at sad songs and feel lonely in the presence of others. You sucked your thumb until you entered puberty. You cannot imagine old age. You don’t want to waste your life, but feel that you are losing some intangible value, a little more each day.”

Jonathon stared at him. *Don’t cry, don’t cry...*



“So what can you do? Why work here? You do not have to work, and being minorly-titled you would face shame and ridicule for so doing. I am, in a way you do not understand as yet, offering you a new type of family. Why overthrow everything you have known for something new? Well, I have the greatest respect for your talents – and I can teach you how to harness them, use them, to flex your power, to use muscles that at the moment are using you. You have no choice about your talents – they are here, in your blood, and they will destroy you if left unharnessed. I can teach you to be yourself, because who you are comes from the future, and so cannot be learned empirically, from the past.”

Mr. Rangoon settled back in his chair, sweating.

“Now, I am done. Would you like some water?”

Jonathon tried to swallow. “Yes.”

Mr. Rangoon rose and called for some water. A woman’s hand passed it to him suspiciously quickly and he handed it to Jonathon.

“Power looms,” he whispered.

Mr. Rangoon leaned forward. “Yes?”

“That’s what’s needed here...”

“Tell me more.”

And so they talked about power looms, and Jonathon racked his brain for any figures he might have heard from Adam or Laurence, but Mr. Rangoon waved them away as inconsequential, and they continued for almost an hour.

Finally, Mr. Rangoon stopped Jonathon in mid-sentence.

“You have a headache coming, and that’s not what I want you to recall from our first meeting. Of course the job is yours if you want it – and naturally you will have to talk it over with your family. But come back Monday either way and let me know.”

Jonathon stood and bowed, feeling absurd. As he turned to go, he couldn’t resist the temptation.

“How did you know so much about me?” he asked. “Is that some of what – you teach?”

“No – that’s the speech I give everyone I like.”

Jonathon face fell.

“But only those who respond to it work out well here. That’s the kind of skill I can teach you. Nothing false in it.”

Jonathon wandered back to his hotel in the daze of the newly-discovered. There was an image of fire in his mind – the discovery of fire, all the way to the current matches and gas lamps. *That, he thought, is the journey of every untutored creative soul. Invent knowledge, invent self-management, focus, the right combination of discipline and listening, the relation between external impulse and internal sensation... Too much to learn, too much – how many fall by the wayside? It’s like being lost in the woods and having to learn which animals to fear and which berries are edible. So few would survive – and those who did would think it more talent than luck, and would die with the random fortune of their knowledge...*

As he wandered through the busy streets, he also remembered his grandmother – a woman he hadn't thought of in years, who was small and nice and had been widowed so long that it came as no surprise that her late husband's name had been Adam. She would sit and make him write thank-you letters to people he did not know and give him a mottled penny (she did not trust any pennies forged after Adam's death) for church collections, and whose nature was so essentially sweet that she was like a statue of sugar under a rain of years, dripping into the earth. Jonathon often wondered why she had absolutely nothing to teach him, and how she was so completely certain in the face of his turbulent disagreements. *I never cried at her funeral*, he thought.

He had an impatient and bossy older sister who always complained that he never talked to her, then cut off all his replies. She was currently breeding mini-Viscounts in Calais, and they caught up depressingly quickly every Christmas. There were others, general flesh and blood orbits who never made the connection of mind, and Jonathon's childhood had been a long wait, a kind of numbness which erupted into random action when he was twelve and read 'Moll Flanders' and realized that there was a kind of knowlege that his family knew nothing about. A frenzy slapped his mind awake, and he flew through his teens and early twenties like a wild comet of insensate greed. He occasionally questioned relatives about any artistic history in his family, but always came up empty.

Without warning, Mary's face rose in his mind. *Meat neither chilled nor eaten turns rancid. If it was so hard for me with everything I have had – if it is so hard with only wealthy blindness to deal with...* Jonathon wondered if anyone had ever complimented Mary. The intensity of her

eyes rose like baleful suns over his new inner landscape, and he barely controlled his impulse to cross himself.

Kay was walking towards Jonathan's house when she saw him. She saw by his gait that something unusual had happened; he was walking quite slowly, and glancing around as if surprised by everything he saw.

"Kay!" he cried, running up to her.

"Hello, Jonathon," she smiled. "Where have you been? I wasn't expecting to find you out and about."

"Where have I been..." he said slowly, shaking his head. "I have been at the bank."

"Oh – nothing serious, I hope!"

"Terribly serious," he said gravely. "I was summoned by the loans manager. Kay – Kay, I don't know how to break this to you, but – I am going to..." He sighed. "Oh, this is enormously difficult. I am so ashamed!"

Kay's hands flew to her mouth. "What?!"

"I have to report to his office at eight o'clock sharp Monday morning. He said he'll decide what to do with me then."

"But – how did this happen? Your wealth... what happened?" Kay shook her head violently. "Never mind that now. What can I do to help, my love? Is there anything... No – sorry – tell me what happened! What happened?"

“Well,” said Jonathon, burying his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking. “Well – what happened was – I suppose he liked me at the – interview.”

Kay’s eyes bulged. “What – he – what – what interview?” Her eyes suddenly narrowed. “Are you crying or laughing? Jonathon – Jonathon – don’t be a brute!”

A slight giggle escaped his heaving shoulders. Kay’s jaw dropped, and she whacked him hard on the arm with her umbrella. “Jonathon! That’s evil!”

He dropped his hands, his eyes streaming with tears as he laughed. Leaping up, he caught Kay in his arms and danced her around.

“Uncommon gifts – that’s what he said, love of my life, and he said: put your talents to good use! Such uncommon perception! Who would have thought a man of capital could be so *capital?*”

Kay laughed, hugging his neck. “And of course you had to hear it from someone else to make it true!”

Jonathon stopped suddenly, his face serious. “No, love. You were right,” he murmured, then leaned down and kissed her full on the mouth. She felt her soul soaring as they kissed, meeting his, and it was the first glimpse of simple beauty she had ever known.

## CHAPTER FIFTY FIVE

### *A Night Vigil*

LAURENCE DID NOT SLEEP WELL THAT NIGHT, and was becoming thoroughly irritated with himself. What Lord Cerbes said to him, that love is distinguished from infatuation in that love does not make one irresponsible, rang round and round his head, dizzying love into wild decaying circles. Oh the bliss of love in its early stages, when through wild blending it seeks to find roots enough to survive the inevitable withdrawal. *It is the noise of life that silences us*, thought Laurence, *the interference of others that sunders us* – he yearned to know how his passion for Lydia would have unfolded without this mess – to have financial dealings with a future father-in-law, how stupid, stupid!

The strangest thing, the thing that sent his will crashing against his confinement, bending like the nails of a man buried alive, was that everything in his life not seemed limited; his breath caught, remembering how a few months ago he seemed to stride through his life like a confident sphere of self-generated physics, bending light and objects to his merest preference. Now he was worried about Mary, Lydia, Lord Cerbes, Adam, his mother, money, the poor...

Predators make the worst prey; they are brash and awkward and feel the ignominy of showing their backsides. Having too much power makes them believe that it is themselves which create their circumstances, not that their circumstances have created them. A lion is a predator not because of the nobility of its soul, but due to his teeth and claws – should he lose his

weapons he keeps his soul only by shedding his nobility. Arrogance, of course, keeps empathy at bay, and empathy is a terrible thing for a predators; should they become prey, arrogance becomes their predator.

It was hard for Laurence's mind to encompass where his life was at present. Around 3am he threw his covers aside and stood impatiently. He went over to the window and opened it. London lay before him, the crowded roofs like angular frozen waves under the moon's dim charcoal light. It was an odd time to see London – a deep wind flowed in from the Thames; the fires had all gone cold; the skies were clear, the air relatively fresh. Laurence always took a few days to get used to the stench of London – similar yet so different from the fertile rankness of the country – here the excrement, smoke, deep tang of old sweat, rotting food and the javelin-like lavender of nobles trying to keep the smell at bay; mildewed clothing and the occasional terrible stench of the oddly-familiar decomposition of a human body lost in the trash of a blind alley – these were, for the short time Laurence stood before the window, mildly diminished, and he felt that he was standing before a soft and lovely painting, instead of being invaded by sensation. He took a deep breath, feeling the cold air tickle his beard. As he gazed, a short man strode purposefully down the center of the street – unusual, since purposeful striding was not much in vogue, since it was hard to march on cobblestones without stumbling) and a lamplighter strolled down from the other direction, whistling softly, balancing his long lighting stick on his shoulders.

*There they both go, thought Laurence, and were my life less mad, I would have never known that they existed.* It is often the sign of a mind attempting to forge a new perspective (or, in extreme cases, a new personality) that random connections are made that would confuse and bewilder our waking minds. *In that streetlighter is a whole world,* thought Laurence, surprised at the depth of this odd connection. *His hat is made by another man with three grandmothers – his trousers are patched by a good man whose wife feeds his children gin while he is at work – his lighting pole was cut from a tree which produced arrows which rained down on Muslim women during a Crusade, through blowing sand and down behind a high desert wall...*

This could go on and on – the windowsill his hand rested on had been build by an older man in a state of grace who was overjoyed at the feel of brick on his hand – if the world had been created by his mind, what titanic detail was there – what odd crate had rested in the corner of his room where the paint was darker? How many pairs of trousers had hung in the tiny closet opposite the window? Had any children been conceived in this sumptuous uneven bed? How many men had lain after lovemaking, swearing off their inconstant mistresses?

Laurence shook his head, feeling that to follow these thoughts was to attempt to ford an infinite river. Personality is little more than a limitation of perspective. Laurence, in widening his senses, was losing himself, and that felt close enough to madness to be resisted with all the wan strength of his fading will.



*Resist as ye might*, laughed a sardonic voice from deep inside his spine, *this earthquake needs not your blessing*.

Sleep was impossible; stillness made him jittery. Laurence fumbled around but could not find his matches; lifting the small roll-top writing desk (his heart pounding as if he were stealing something) he moved over to the window and, dipping his quill more by feel than sight, he wrote the following:

*Problems to be solved*

Then he crossed that out and wrote instead:

*Responsibilities*

*Mary*

*The factory / the poor / Adam Footer*

*Kay / marriage / possible dowry*

*Tithe / Father Jones / Church*

*Lydia / Lord Cerbes / marriage – mine?*

*Family finances / agricultural reform*

*Shortage thereon – rationalization of finances...*

*Mother (cannot live forever)*

Then he crossed the last one out, writing under it:

*Not unwell yet!*

Then he wrote:

Possible solutions

*More money would deal with Mary, the poor / Kay / dowry / tithe / SHEEP!*

*Money at hand: at start of year, ~40,000*

*Invested in agricultural reforms: ~15,000*

*Upkeep of house: 3,500*

*General family maintenance: 2,000*

*Factory / Adam footer: ~10,000*

*Remaining tithe: 5,000 (paid by Jonathon; must be repaid)*

*Remaining – 7,000; divided with Kay, 2,500 each, 2,000 reserved for emergencies*

*(required by banker)*

*Cost of sheep and transport – 3,000*

*- so I get 1,000 from Kay, I can pay Lord Cerbes, have some money to woo Lydia, then go home and hold tight until spring and the rent from the tenants – and hopefully the factory will begin producing some income...*

Laurence sat until dawn, scratching and re-scratching, feeling a kind of grim foreboding – it was all very risky, and depended on so many variables... He stopped around dawn, not because he was tired (though he was; his eyes felt made out of sand, and there is always something depressing about dawn when one has not slept) or satisfied, but he had run out of paper; both sides were almost black with scratches.

Eventually Laurence decided to start the day – always a little arbitrary after a sleepless night – and washed his face and dressed. Staring into the small mirror, he saw a little vein in his left eye and wondered why there was not a red line across half his vision, then he did something he had not done in years – he closed one eye and opened the other, then switched, magically shifting his nose from side to side... Then he felt odd, foolish, and imagined Lord Cerbes and a flock of solicitors spiraling out of the sun to peck and peck...

“Where would Kay-let be then?” he murmured. Putting his dark felt hat on, he went out into the street, into the wild bestiality of deformed Londoners. City life had of course its advantages, but pristine health was not one of them. Everywhere he looked was a smallpox-ravaged face, a nebulae of pimples with eyes peeping through, a nose-less face, a harelip rising like a cave-lip over blackened teeth; eyes like blue plates under the white ice of a faded cataract, men walking stiffly, wearing leather braces against gout or hernias; women without fingers, children with dull recessed faces and hanging vacant hair... Of course most were functional, some good, some evil, but it was a tide of deformity so great that Laurence felt the evenness of his features almost

as a mutation. Finally the begging and grabbing and constant parade of mute beseeching children became too much and he hailed a carriage and was frightened that one child, blind, his nostrils wide, searching, zoning in on the absence of stench that revealed Laurence's position, could be caught between the wheels – and gasped when the child rolled between the axles – then Laurence craned his head behind and saw the child unfold and bow to the carriage among a laughing tribe of malformed children who clapped his back with covered stumps and praised his performance in droning and keening tones.

“Please take me to the Wembley Club,” called Laurence, tapping the roof, suddenly afraid to look at the driver, for fear of seeing a headless man navigating through the eyes in his chest.

*More poverty is less poverty, he thought – of course there are more child beggars now than ten years ago, since ten years ago they would have been dead...*

And the strange virus of perspective entered him again: *were you born a blind orphan, would you roll between the wheels of a carriage and take a bow?*

Laurence almost cried out, shaking his head violently. *I did not make the world! Goddamn it!* So many men did it – did his father ever mention the poor? – no, save the inevitable comment – with a glance at his wife – that no man was poor who was happily married. Laurence thought of the men at his club, who would have passed Mary in the street, never inviting her in, sure that they deserved privilege, that their souls had existed before death and had been promoted to

privilege on birthright, that the poor were unworthy and they themselves were made virtuous by being dropped from infinity into their golden cribs. A strange revulsion arose in Laurence, a revulsion against self and society, against the whole sickly lie of unearned privilege – and then Lydia’s face rose before him, blotting out the gray smoky London street, soothing the numb jostling of the carriage.

“Larry,” she whispered, “try to unmake the world, you will only succeed in unmaking yourself.”

He leaned back against the pushing purple of his seat, wishing the world would stay still for a moment so he could see it properly.

## CHAPTER FIFTY SIX

### The Debtor's Prison

IT WAS A HIGH, GRIM BRICK BUILDING, SET NORTH OF EXETER, IN A DANK MOOR. The road faded into gravel, then a rutted muddy path, as if the road itself lacked the courage to make it to the end. It was raining – not true rain, more of a low lying cloudy drizzle, which seeped through clothes and skin and attempted to dissolve bone into chill marrow rivulets. The building loomed over the scant bare trees; bats flickered and circled around Mary and Father Jones, invisible and wandering in the night. The building was three stories of heavy brick; the rain-washed tiles dribbled into the gutters – the water dripped from the eaves in a dull trickle, as if relieved to be free of such a place. Some small firelight came from within; from the small gaps in the broken windows, smoke struggled out to be speared by the rain.

The entire edifice seemed like a dead womb unable to contain its cries. Where the birthing womb pushed potential into a waiting world, the Poor House drew broken lives back to its black maw, and its iron door closed over it forever. Mary shivered; Father Jones could not refrain from crossing himself – *this is where the dead gather to await extinction, where emptiness feeds on broken holes, where ghastly childhoods which have flowered into the black roses of violence, debt and theft return to fertilize the final evil of their ending...* Crows called like tired hinges in the empty trees; the horses snorted and faltered.

“Have you ever been to a poor house before,” asked Father Jones in a little voice.

“No, but Christ Himself did not fear hell. We should leave our horses here.”

They tied the relieved beasts up and walked forward. There was a great sweating iron door; Mary touched the ring and knocked three times. The sound tolled up her arm, down her spine and into the earth.

A small window eased back. A voice came from the dark.

“Visitin’ hours is over; admittin’ hours yet begun.”

“I am Father Gerald Jones,” said the priest.

“No death tonight.”

“I need to speak to the supervisor of this place.”

“He’s a-bed.”

“Can we talk inside? I’m a little wet.”

There was a pause, then the door creaked mightily and opened three feet. A short swarthy man with an eye-patch looked up at them, widening his single eye, perhaps in the hope that if he widened his one eye to the size of two, it would do almost as well.

“I am Father Gerald Jones. This is Mary O’Donnel.”

Another pause.

“Barnstable. Come in then.”

They walked through the door and were in almost complete blackness. Mary blinked and almost sneezed. Gerald turned his head away, but the smell seemed inescapable.

“G’wan – ye get used to it!” muttered Bartholomew. “Now come with ye’re drop off – but none without paperwork; we’ve all got to earn our hide honest if we want to stay on the sunny side of the shackles!”

The followed Bartholomew down a dark corridor and suddenly a shriek which they expected to make the walls run red rang out – it was like a spider crawling through their ears.

Bartholomew stopped, hitched his belt and screamed out, his head jerking to one side:

“Myrtle ye bat quit sounding, there’s nothing but walls as I’ve tole ye!”

They came to a small firelit room with a low table, a flagon and some grimy playing cards. Straw lay in a corner and a whip lay in loving coils beside it. A window-hole stuffed with newsprint and rags was high and opposite the door. Bartholomew sat in a chair with the balletic grace of a man with an anal complaint and regarded them.

“I dain’t take after hours without consideration, y’see, and them what comes with a priest air usually in the family way, which’n we dain’t take without further consideration, unless they not be glandular with coming life, in which case a priest is needed due to their witching, in which case we dain’t take them at all.” He winked. “Dain’t like the competition.”

“She – she is not my charge,” stammered Father Jones. Bartholomew stared at Mary for a long moment, then cocked his head, as if listening to a voice from the floor.

“Right – we was expecting nothing, but those I dain’t expect I know when I seem ‘em – and I expect you,” he said to Mary, and his head darted forward, and his eye seemed to recede until it was like a hole through his head, the wall and out into the night.

Mary smiled at him, and he shook a little, started, glanced at the floor, then back to her, his eye widening to, perhaps, three eyes.

“No, you see,” said Mary, “we have come to do good.”

“Good! Aye, goody!” he muttered. “Well out with it!”



“We have come to buy souls,” she said, stepping forward.

“Well to be an honest seller,” replied Bartholomew, “we have the rinds here, but the fruits is gone, so t’would be cheating ye something fierce.”

“You have mad women and children here, yes?”

“Barkers? Oh to be sure, yes.”

“Women with children?”

“And children alone, yes.”

“And debtors?”

“Aye.”

“We want everyone but the madmen.”

“Aye,” said Bartholomew slowly, starting into her calm eyes. “Ye’ve got plenty of that to spare alruddy!”

“How many souls here?”

“Four – four hundred and fifty three, if it please you...”

“How many madmen?”

“Four score odd.”

“The rest are sane.”

“Was when they came.”

Mary nodded, satisfied. “We’ll take them.”

Father Jones shifted. “Mary...”

She spun on him. “I’ll take them – you take your opinions and be damned oh I’m sorry Gerald this place frightens me what is your concern?”

He blinked, wishing he were still in the rain so he could wet himself in peace. “That – that is a lot of people to put on poor relief.”

“You have seen my wealth – you really should trust me, Gerald. I cannot do this alone.”

Dancing firelight brings out the angel in no-one’s face, but Mary’s eyes seemed so gentle – almost drugged – that Gerald found it easy to slither down the bank of her will.

“Now,” said Mary, turning instantly. “Bart – how much is owed by the debtors?”

“I dain’t see them figgers, Miss. But it is late, and me Master is abed since the day’s baying starts before dawn and I sleeps in the afternoon when the day keeps the baying at bay.”

“So wake him, my pretty Cyclops,” said Mary, pulling out a gold sovereign and tucking it neatly behind his eyepatch.

“Lordy Lordy now I can see!” cried Bartholomew. “I will be back directly!”

After he left, Mary sank down against the wall; her dress rode up her thin legs.

“*Deja-vu*,” she murmured, “should be French for ‘missed turn’. This place frightens me beyond – it is so familiar. I could close my eyes and describe the floor-plan – the dorms, barred windows, the exercise yard like the bottom of a well. And the people here... We cannot go down to the animal you know – while our heads are attached to our bodies, we must always have a purpose – we must be always reaching up, even when we are on the bottom we much climb on the faces of those condemned to share our cells.” Her face crumpled. “Oh god I could have been so much – I burn like the sun and still people walk into walls... You have no idea... But we are so far – there is nothing left to...”

Gerald felt rooted to the spot; it was like watching thin skin falling in sheets from a black skeleton; infinitely strong, infinitely hollow.

The sound of steps came from the corridor. Mary's head lolled, then snapped erect. She scrambled to her feet as two men entered – Bartholomew, a taller man with white hair and slow, deliberate movements. The taller man had the dazed and haunted look of a sleepless man torn from bed.

“Good evening,” he said wearily. “I can get little from Bartholomew – what is your business?”

Mary held her hand out – the older man kissed it; she blinked. “Sir – we wish to reclaim these souls here, specifically the debtors and fallen women. We propose to take them into parish relief in our home county, and to put them to work in a factory.”

“What – the men too?”

“All I have mentioned.”

“The law requires discharge of debt for the debtors and guarantee of charity for the women.”

“These we can provide. We need a total of the moneys owed – Father Jones has brought parish certificates for a number of these – we shall send more tomorrow. But I must speak to them now.”

“But they are retired – some chained – it would take...”

“Now!” cried Mary smiling. “This will take little time, and I am sure you will not have to report their liberation for a month or two, leaving funds for – improvements.”

The older man looked at Mary for a long time, then turned to Father Jones.

“Father, may I see the parish certificates?”

Father Jones fumbled in his satchel and drew forth a thick stack of vellum paper. The tall man glanced at them, then took them and riffled through them; the sheets fell together like the beating wings of tiny birds.

“Very well. Let us enter.”

Sleep is the repose of the natural self and the recoil of the artificial, a time when the truth of our life takes vengeance on our helpless prejudices. Each day is study; each night the exam. Dreams are lessons that contradict us where nothing else can; *I am afraid of being unprepared*, we think, and scurry in a cloud of darting worries like a school of small bladed fish – and nightly we dream of being late for exams or acting a part whose lines are forgotten – and then awaken and think: *ahah! – I am too unprepared!* Yet the truth of these dreams is that they repeat, over and over: *being unprepared is only a dream; you are unprepared every night – you wake and live on!* Dreams are the endless unguessed puberty of life, drawing us forward into the future. Dreams are the only un-empirical sensations we possess; we do not always dream of our future – sometimes our future dreams of us; as we return to childhood homes and seek to awaken, so dreams return to us from who we might be and whisper to us the possible truth of our endings. What we decide to day is who we shall be in twenty years; our aged selves reach back and tell us stories of how to grow old in body and young in heart. It can take a lifetime to unlearn the prejudices of youth, which is a state of pure preference. *This is what I want!* we cry on waking. *This is how things are*, counsel dreams, attempting to shift our foundations from bed to bedrock.

The door to the dormitory was locked; Bartholomew drew out a key and creaked it open, and from the black mouth of sleepless ruin exhaled an air pregnant with the unborn... Mary stood before the door and raised her hands; the cold air slid between her fingers, and she shuddered, her iron will rising over the gulf of what she saw, for the air of the room was full of bad dreams...

One woman screamed at a man whose skin was made of bone – a dark-haired brother leaned the creaking man into a chair, then crushed him so tightly in an embrace that the bone-man's brains oozed like slow jam through the cracks in his skull...

Another woman fumbled at a French door – on closing it a wild-haired woman swung in, hung on the glass, then fell forward in an orgy of touch of feeding – Mary couldn't tell...

A boy in a boat kept a half-submerged rhinoceros at bay with an oar, unable to paddle forward or drive the beast away, tiring slowly, inevitably...

A glowing ball from the night sky flamed into a hill, burning the very air away – a man floated above the a landscape; a second comet appeared, and burst the man asunder in a joyful relief of extinction...

Mary too a deep breath, then screamed: “*AWAKE!*” and the black air around her shook and withdrew, and Mary stepped into the dark. There was a terrible clanging as she shook the foot of each bed, and awful cries and groans filled the air.

“Brethren!” cried Mary. “Awake and greet the dawn!”

Moans blended to mutters, and the dead awoke to blindness. Bartholomew brought a torch into the great hall, and Mary’s form jerked across the flickers like the blank dreams of a pecking crow.

“Brethren, awake – I bring you life!”

The creaking multiplied as wasted limbs shifted on ragged sheets.

“My brothers – in the morning your chains shall be undone – will it be for the last time?”

“She speaks the truth,” hissed Bartholomew, “so shut it and listen!”

“Oh my brothers,” cried Mary, her voice agonized, “I am great fortune fallen from the sky! For God himself has not forgotten you here, and has sent me to turn you back from the everlasting fire!”

There were cries from the other dormitory, cries of frightened women hearing this great voice in the darkness, the wailing in infants beating at dried breasts. Mary drew back, and turned her eyes to the men.

“Now we wake the women!”

## CHAPTER FIFTY SEVEN

### *Tennis and No Money*

KAY WAS TOO EARLY, OR TOO LATE FOR THE BALL, AND IT BROKE LAURENCE'S HEART. He was born into certainty; it was only recently he had been unseated – she was born into uncertainty, and seemed doomed to struggle for growth under a constant cloud of 'perhaps'.

A very thin young man was calling out instructions as he lobbed balls over the net. The tennis court was cold, clay; the breath was visible. It was an indoor court, and there were no fires; the roof was too low for a decent lob, but Kay was doing her best. Laurence sat low in the stands; he did not want to interrupt, and seemed to be watching his sister with her whole body, and the sensation was excruciatingly tender.

There was an odd, foal-like joy to her movements. Awkward people can be shy or revel in their ungainliness; the intermixing of the two can be wonderful to watch, and he had a sudden vision of her as the kind of mother that children look to for play and secrecy, but never for guidance, and for the first time he thought of her as a fertile woman, amazed that her slight frame could in fact make life. She giggled a little as she swung – he could see her will in it; her body only obeyed strong commands, and then too late. Yet there was a yearning playfulness in her movements that spoke of a bottomless need, of a hole left unfilled in infancy that life could forever rush in and out of. Were she a composed woman playing perfectly nude, the impression could not have been more unsettling.

She did see him eventually, and her body opened like a flower even as her brows knotted.

“Larry!” she cried, running over. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing – how much longer have you got?”

“Oh – we just started – I don’t want you sitting there for an hour – why didn’t you write?”

“No – it’s fine – take your time.”

“But it’s cold in here – you will catch your death.” Her eyes searched his face. He smiled and looked down. Somehow, all these years, in the over-familiar bustle and impatience of sibling life, he had never really understood how much she worshipped him.

“Larry – what – have I – ” she paused for a moment, then nodded. “Wait – Josh! Tomorrow, if you please.”

The thin young man nodded, then put his racquet down and began gathering balls.

“Larry – let me change – I’m perspiring, whoo! Meet me in the café – I’ll be ten minutes, though my hair will be a mess of course!”

When she came in, her hair was still damp. Laurence sat at a low knotted table, sipping coffee. The small room was deserted, except for an old man reading a newspaper in the corner, cutting the pages slowly, his mouth set in the eternal manner of a father who waits to give a lecture on responsibility to a son who is late. Kay asked for tea and then came over and sat down.

“Do you know,” said smiled, “I have put on a quarter stone since coming to London! Everything is so tempting; I could just sit and eat scones and clotted cream until I burst! That’s



why tennis – of course Jonathon is a whiz at it, so that helps the motivation.” She laughed and smacked her head. “Do you know he got a job at a bank? Doing some sort of financial séance or conjuration – it’s hard to get him to make sense of the subject – we’re going to supper and a play tonight with his new boss – King Lear – he loves plays that poke sticks at fathers, of course...”

“Do you think he – do you think you shall marry him?”

Kay laughed again. “Marriage! I know women are supposed to scheme for this and that lever men from proud height to supplicating knee but I suppose that’s not happening – not that I could effect that anyway – because there is a certain kind of effective intimacy – you know I want to change him, that’s a woman’s calling or career I suppose – but I do respect and love what is already there. He’s – um – well he bites his thumb – I thought he was sucking it at first, but he showed me the callous on his knuckle – he’s always chewing something and he gestures too much – more than mother, really – and his hair in back sort of closes in on itself like ill-fitting barn doors – that is no good of course, and I always feel bad for the waiter who has to scrape his side of the table; he leaves so many crumbs – always tries to push them over to my side, and not too subtly either. And as I say, either a beard or none; this scrub business is plain silly – but he won’t hear of it!”

Laurence raised his hand. “Heavens – it’s as if you’re married already! Be careful, or you’ll make a right world traveler of him!”

Kay frowned. “Oh Larry that is much too harsh. He is a rather uncivilized beast, and that is of course charming, but a woman has two things to think of that men do not – society and children.”

“Men...”

“Think of these things of course – but a man has all his accomplishments and life to show for who he is; a woman has three things – her husband, her home and her children. So we have improvement, cleanliness and discipline close to our hearts – else what mark should we leave in the world?”

Laurence was confused – where did this brittle voice come from? While not wildly experienced with women, he knew enough not to light the powderkeg of mother/daughter similarities.

“You know,” continued Kay, while Laurence wondered why women were considered the sensitive sex, “I haven’t quite warmed to Lydia as yet, though I am sure I shall in time – she is quite high, isn’t she?” Kay shot him a fearful look – he felt quite deadened, and barely noticed. She smiled. “I am quite glad, though, that she and Jonathon are such friends. Is everything quite all right, Larry?”

Laurence took a deep breath. “No,” he sighed. “Kay, oh Kay – with the best intentions I offered half the remnants of our fortune, and now events have made a liar of me.”

Kay shot him another nervous look. “Larry – what on earth are you saying?”

“Before we left home, a few days before I contracted with Lord Cerbes for several thousand sheep, which I then duly and completely forgot about. After delivering them to me Lord Cerbes tried to cash the – Kay – Kay are you all right? Please let me finish – this is not the disaster you may fear – I can make it up to you – it is only for several months – and I would not ask except I have already taken a loan on the house to pay for irrigation and extra labour and so on – and I am loathe to begin selling off land – that is generally a hole with no bottom – Kay my God you are

white – do you want to see the figures – please do not think me a villain – I meant everything I said – and still mean it – but Kay please help me – all my future hopes depend on it...”

Kay’s eyes were flickering, wandering. “Oh Larry – why did you not remember?”

“Kay – I am so sorry...”

“But oh Larry – Larry I gave her most of the money.”

Laurence’s heart paused in its fearful flight; then turned and sniffed the air, scenting something unholy. “Gave...”

“Mary, Larry – I gave most of the money to Mary – for aid to the poor. She has ideas that – they sweep me – I wanted something for – oh my heart, my heart...”

“How much?”

“Four thousand.”

“Four thousand,” repeated Laurence dully. His heart slavered some. “Do you know what four thousand pounds is, Kay?”

“But the tithe was – and we pay it every year...”

“The tithe – the tithe is to the church, which though it may claim little from our own hearts, certainly has a claim on us through history and its beneficial effects on our tenants. My God Kay!” he cried, half standing, running his fingers through his hair. The old man in the corner looked up, and a young man entered in a laughing rush. Laurence resumed his seat. Kay drew back.

“Kay you have been in possession of that money for little over a week – what – what if I had chosen to do the same oh god I want to crush! That vicious bitch – to not come to me – did you – neither of you think of coming to me to discuss –”

“God Larry you sound like mother,” said Kay in a small voice.

“I – I sound like – ” cried Laurence. “That is so goddamned – irrelevant – were you thinking that I would pay some sort of dowry after you set fire to your portion – or that you would be able to live here indefinitely – and what – Mary – why? Over your own family?”

*Because she is a better sister than you are a brother,* thought Kay, utterly lacking the courage to say it.

“Larry – it was – I understand – but it was my money – why did you forget...”

“This is not about me – this was family money – four thousand – oh heavens! What am I going to say to Lord Cerbes? I have never broken an obligation – and to start – to start here and now – do you know that that I shall probably lose the only woman I have ever loved? That marriage is – is – ”

“Larry – the money might not be – irretrievable – and you know, you funded her – I cannot reason with you – I am too afraid.”

“And I was a goddamned fool to trust you, Kay – I am sorry, but it’s true. You will remain a child until the day you die. No – child is unfair – it is something far less – formed. Women have too much power in this godforsaken family.”

Kay slouched in her chair like a broken egg.

“I am not going to ask you for explanations. I trusted, she manipulated, and you fell to her. Oh God I wish father were here!”

*You are doing fine,* thought Kay miserably.

“I have lost care of my own interests,” muttered Laurence. “Trying to save the world, Mary, you... You are all beyond me – you damn, you damn your own souls.” He raised his eyes. “But no more. Not now, not ever. I have awoken. I leave for home this day.”

## CHAPTER FIFTY EIGHT

### *Mavis and Jake in London*

THE DIFFICULTIES THEY FACED WERE CONSIDERABLE. No-one would let them hire a cart and horse – the tribe of the loom-workers was still far removed from the tribe of the village. Due to the thefts, it was dangerous for the men to go into the village at all; they were not only shunned but actively threatened. In the oldest fence of ‘decent’ society, the poor men were reviled for their criminal shiftlessness; the poor women for their loose habits. It is very hard to trust those with nothing to lose.

They sat on a large mound of woven cloth and had no way to transport it to market. Debates raged among them – would they go to Exeter, hire a cart and bring it back? What about taking a small sample, getting some coin for it and using that to buy a cart and horse? The conversation often degenerated into blind resentment at the villagers, who would not sell them food or drink and then complained of theft! Social negotiation – especially on collective economic matters – is a notoriously difficult art, and many blind turns and near-fights were risked before a solution was found.

A horse would be stolen, then returned with fair rental after the cloth was sold. Jake and Mavis were to take the cloth to Exeter and get the best price they could, then return and divide the proceeds. There was some conflict over who would get to go, since there was not one person who would not rather ride in the open air and spend a night in town than squint over the looms.

Mavis and Jake were finally settled on; Mavis was felt to have gotten them into their current position by first turning the tide of anger over Laurence's initial offer. Jake had driven Adam Footer off, and so won their confidence.

The woven cloth was rolled into tight bundles – Jake himself stole away one clear night and returned with a fine and powerful dray horse, which was widely admired. Despite artful arrangements, there was no way to get all the cloth onto the one horse, but a good deal of it was lashed to its back.

Since most of the workers were out of money, haste was the essence. With all the sensitivity of natural thieves – combined with the absence of Laurence – they knew that any more predations on the social body would have dire consequences. The cost of eliminating small thievery is high, but there comes a time when enough theft justifies a strong reaction. Mavis and Jake had to walk, leading the horse, and the return journey was estimated at five days.

Mavis and Jake set off early the next morning. It was two days brisk walk to Exeter, and the journey was completed largely in silence. They had to pose as a married couple to save money on rooms, but Mavis did not get much sleep. Various fears crossed her mind; returning to the factory to find her child gone; being unable to sell the cloth; that Jake would run off with the money. The first night she gazed at his snoring form with all the mute frustration of a sensitive soul regarding a callous one sleeping soundly. This midnight vigil is almost always the lot of women, who sit and stare at men who doze off during big fights. Mavis had spent a good deal of

her life around drinking men, and had developed an almost-alchemical skill at measuring her men's intake. She liked them drunk enough to mute their sexual advances, but not so drunk that the devil in the heart of every alcoholic was loosed. In fact, by exposing herself to the worst aspects of destructive masculinity, Mavis had removed from her heart and loins every desire for men, and relished her tranquil life free of their fumbling resentments and bullying whims.

They made it to Exeter the next morning – a Sunday, market day – and sat and discussed how best to proceed with the sale. Jake was of the strong opinion that no honest merchant would believe that the cloth was theirs, and they would be imprisoned as thieves. Mavis admitted that this was a possibility, but argued that there would be a vicious markdown if they were forced to fence their goods. Her contradiction enraged Jake, and he seized her arm and demanded whether she ever wanted to see her child again – which Mavis took to mean she could be jailed or he could kill her. Either way, she took refuge in the passive mask of self-erasure, which pacified him and allowed her to plan her course of action.

Now, every person who has something to gain from recognizing his 'own kind' generally develops this sort of ability to a deep and unfathomable degree. Two men travelling in the same coach can within thirty seconds establish themselves to each other – their education, affluence, line of work and, if necessary, sexual preference. Those to whom this kind of social identification carries grave risk develop it to a silent and eerily accurate degree. Compatibility in this sense is largely a very unconscious, invisible and unmodifiable process. Try to be



something you are not, and you will only attract phonies. Any social interaction which is controlled is killed, and only the dead will orbit.

This method was how Jake and Mavis contacted the Exeter underworld. They could not afford a good hotel, and so were afraid to leave their goods, and so sat in front of the inn, shed their new shells of disciplined industry and waited. Soon enough, a man came up and inquired as to their business. On being told that they had something to sell quickly, they were instructed to wait, and soon another man came up, and it stuck Mavis that, were criminals to become policemen – and run the courts besides – they would be able to wander the streets, pick certain faces from the crowd and jail them by telling the judge just to, well, just look at him! Defiance, resentment, cruel humour and a lifetime of fear, greed and rage – they mark men as surely as if they grow horns – and such predators remain hidden only to those who do not see their own horns.

The man was of medium height, with curly brown hair, low ears, blue eyes and scattered freckles.

“Good morning to ye,” said the man. “I be Angus, though I go by Gus, or Ang if ye prefer. What do ye have?”

“Cloth,” said Jake.

“Cloth. Aye – and which wagon did it tumble from?”

Of course, they could have said that it was theirs, but they couldn’t prove it, and that would have marked them as rank amateurs. “We have a horse-ful.”

“Show it to me,” said Angus.

They retired to the rear of the inn, to the stables, and unlocked their stall. The cloth was stacked in the front – away, of course, from the horse’s fertilizing end – and covered with straw. They took a bundle out into the light. Jake cut the ties with a strong knife and passed it to Angus. The man’s mouth dropped on touching the bundle – he unrolled several feet, running his fingers slowly along its length. Non-chemical sensuality is rare in the underworld, but it radiated from Angus like a deep opium sunset.

“Bugger me with a bargepole!” he muttered. “This is the work of fairies, no doubt.” He stood slowly, his hands unwilling to part with the cloth. His eyes narrowed. “Where be this from?” he demanded.

Jake smiled. “Ye axe only a-cause ye spy an especial value, hey Angy?”

“You’re no cloth soul,” replied Angus, his face softening slightly in a smile. “This be like the butter of a baby’s breath. Where?”

“We can get more,” said Mavis.

“Ah, that is well – whatever witchery is in the making, that is well. So even – these are tiny, tiny fingers at play – but – what a wool to use! It’s a portrait by thumbprint! Where is it from?”

“We have a source,” said Mavis, “but how much is it worth?”

“Worth? Well, as a novelty, a first of its...” He laughed. “Listen, this could make us all legit. This is a find. You bring me glass, I say it is a diamond – does that let us trust each other? I hope so. I can move as much as ye bring us – but if it be regular, then it’s a shop we’ll be wanting, a shop with some snooty fronts to speak sweet to the moneyed. Listen – this is poor

wool that touches like fine silk – damn you for blind fools! Take good wool and this shall hang like water!”

Jake grinned. “This is well.”

“Your secret – is it fairies?”

“Not save we be fairies,” replied Jake. “Blunt and hard fingers are the sole secret.”

Angus frowned. “Not so, fair sir. It would take an infant’s fingers to weave this even. This is wee folk’s work, or sorcery, or a machine of some species. But tell me plain, if its’ source is to remain secret, how long did it take to make this lot?”

Mavis took a step towards him. “We can deliver twice this every month.”

Angus staggered back and raised his hands. “Nay! Ye stretch my ears to the snapping! A month! Nay!”

“Sell as much as we have here, and we return in a month with more,” she said. There is an argument that the greatest pleasure in the world is that of labouring in secret and finding that one’s personal metal is the purest gold – and the joy in her heart certainly supported that belief.

“How much?” asked Jake, his eyes gleaming. The horse snorted and shifted.

Angus calculated rapidly, the skin below his right eye twitching. “Twenty pounds,” he said finally, “some of which I shall have to borrow. Now don’t fuss for more, unless ye be able to vault legit all at once.”

Mavis hesitated. Jake did not.

“Done!” he said. “When can we get the money?”

“Well, let me leg it around town, see, then we’ll meet tonight and, since ye were an hon’rable gentleman and scorned the natural haggle, I shall stand ye a proper dinner. We shall meet here at

sundown and I shall bring ye small and mobile coinage. And I'll leave ye this coin for this bundle here, as I shall need it to extract more coin from my brethren.”

Angus pressed a gold coin into Jake's hand, rolled up the bundle of cloth with acrobatic dexterity, then almost ran from the stableyard.

“Goddamn it on a savage stick!” cried Jake and, grabbing Mavis, sent them lurching through the broken crates and random refuse in a mad and giddy dance.

A gold coin presents many aspects to a drunkard, especially one who believes he has walked the straight and narrow for long enough that he deserves a good pushing over. Ah, addictions do have that wonderful aspect – virtue is seen as a gathering of the right of self-reward, which is always vice – and thus, of course, there is no way out of the trap. So Jake looked at the gold coin and saw the following:

A sky-down view of a whiskey glass

And a beer flagon, when the head is gone

A sign that he was a virtuous soul who deserved a heady night's reward

A loosening of the tight bolts of generosity, and a giddy night of story-telling and back-slapping with new friends

A vagina – perhaps several, perhaps sequential, perhaps all at once

A night that would stand as memorable over the gray wash of hunted, lost or wasted nights

Respect

Love

## Justification

...and many more. It is, in fact, quite a misnomer to say that a gold piece the 'coin of the realm'. It is, in fact, the coin of many realms.

Mavis knew better than to argue with a man bent on drinking. She had on countless occasions placed herself between a thirsty man and his drink, and ended up with a man-shaped hole going straight through her heart. So she settled in and had some tea and watched Jake order loudly, drink slowly, expound pompously, and saw with a heart so used to the sight that it knew every step. Jake the Red was slowly replaced by a drinking man who erased almost every aspect of Jake's being; she almost expected his hair to change from red to a heady froth.

When Angus returned at dusk, Jake was slow, steady, focused and, like all conditioned to failure, belligerent is his good fortune.

Mavis used Angus as a shield, keeping her peace about the existence of the factory and talking over Jake's interruptions about the rates of production, manpower and delivery schedules. She also listened to Angus about the quality of wool, the best sizes and shapes of cloth. Correctly surmising that Mavis could not read, he wrote instructions in a kind of hieroglyphic shorthand common to all illiterate communication. And all the while, deep in the recesses of her maternal heart, a heart empty of men and love and home and family and any beneficial history, a

vision grew of her child growing bright and healthy, nestled in the swaddling cloths of the most finely-woven wool.

Eventually the conversation slowed. Jake's head kept a metronome beat, lowering to drink and rising less and less, before finally resting on the table, rousing slightly only when the innkeeper tried prizing the flagon from his sodden fingers. Angus and Mavis went out to the stable where he handed her a tightly-packed pouch of coins. It took some time for Mavis to count them – the denominations were so disparate that it was clear he had ranged far and wide to gather them. They transferred the rolls of cloth to his horse, and he bade goodnight and rode into the darkness.

Mavis paid the innkeeper for a separate room, one which locked securely. She tucked the pouch deep in her bosom, forming a packed metallic third breast, then sat in bed, her arms folded across her chest.

The night settled in, and the sounds of drinking floated up the stairs. Mavis thought involuntarily of the number of times she had sat thus in bed, waiting for the grim miracle of liquid flowing uphill in the heavy pausing steps of a drunken man making his way up the stairs, like a salmon up a series of carpeted waterfalls. *To spawn*, she thought with a shudder. *I was so used to the idea that men were useful that it was quite a shock to discover that life is easier without them.* Not for the first time, she cursed her ample breasts, and their uncanny ability to

provoke lust in parasitical men. Feeling safe in a well-locked room, she allowed herself to fantasize a little, and dreamt of a house and garden and her child waddling in white clothes...

She awoke to a horrible, familiar sound: a drunken man attempting to enter quietly. Little insect noises came from the door as he tried a key in the lock. Her heart pounding painfully, she sat up and looked wildly around for a place to hide the money. She could find none – there was a bare table, no windows, and the bed was on the floor. She heard the lock click open, and grabbed a wide handful of coins and stuffed them into her undergarments. Torn between flight and feigning, she surrendered to instinct and pretended sleep, holding the bag by her side. The door creaked open and she heard mottled breathing and smelled his fumes.

“Maaavis!” hissed Jake. She did not move. He was close, very close... She felt the bag slowly lift from her hand, heard the rustle of the coins... He straightened and turned away. She took a deep, slow breath, a tear trickling from her eye. He closed the door behind him, and she opened her eyes, half-expecting to see him still looming over the bed. The room was empty; the single candle guttered and went out. Waiting a few minutes, she reached into her groin and gathered the coins, then sat up and tied them up in the pillowcase. Taking her key, she stole out of the room and peeked down from the top of the stairs. The common room was bright with red cheeks, greasy hair and low smoke. Jake stood at the bar, clearly deep into his second wind, ordering a whiskey. Taking a deep breath, Mavis came down the stairs. A drunk’s vision is generally more peripheral than central, and he caught sight of her immediately. His hand grabbed at the money pouch he had tied to his belt.

“Mavis, come to the fire and have a drink with me!” he shouted.

She came up to him. “Ye have the money?” she asked softly.

He grinned and winked. “I’ll treat ye, and let us bury the hatchet somewhere other than each other’s skulls fer once!”

“Good!” she smiled, feeling dizzy. “I was worried – most of it I kept about me, not in that pouch – I was worried about being robbed, in such a hole as this.”

“Robbed?” he cried. “None of my friends here would do such a mischief!”

“I am going out to check on the horse,” she said, stepping back from his hands. “Angus gave us more than we expected, but don’t worry, I’ll keep it safe.”

He stared at her for a long moment. “Aye, well the nag deserves a good once-over. I’ll accompany thee!” He lurched forward, and she steadied him.

“Come on then,” she sighed. He leaned on her heavily as they went out to the stables. The cool night air made her realize how much she was sweating. The horse Jake had stolen, evidently unused to the vapours of drink, snorted and backed away from the door as Mavis unlatched it. Peering in, she gasped.

“That horse is sick, Jake!”

“What? That nag’s as healthy as a goddamned horse, ye dumb nag!”

“Look for yerself!”

He growled and peered forward.

“It’s his foreleg.”

He leaned in.

“Closer – it’s infected.”



He leaned closer. She grasped the metal rung of the lower half of the stable door and swung it shut against his head with all her might. Jake gave out a deep violated groan and staggered back, holding his hair. Mavis lifted her pillowcase of heavy coin and brought it down over the back of his head.

“Ah, ye scurvy bitch!” he groaned thickly, falling to his knees. She struck him again, praying that the fabric would hold. He fell to the ground, his hands wandering, grasping at the air.

“Agh, I’ll find ye and skin ye proper, ye hellish witch! I’ll track ye by the scent of your brat!”

*Of course*, thought Mavis with dull finality. She looked around and saw a rusty horseshoe hanging on the wall. Tearing it down, she gripped Jake’s hair and twisted his face upwards. Breathing a momentary prayer to a very dark god, she brought the horseshoe down, aiming for his eye. She missed and shattered his nose. His body heaved, his animal side rising rapidly through a sea of drink. She raised the horseshoe again and brought it down – the tip plunged into his eye-socket – she was sprayed by the seed of vision. He screamed. Revolted, she let go of his hair, grasped the outside of the horseshoe and leaned forward, pushing it down in terrible inches. His body leapt, violently throwing her clear, and he rolled and thrashed, his arms raising to his face, groping but missing. Ghastly, inhuman noises gurgled; blood sprayed up from his broken nose. Mavis fought an elemental urge to flee and waited until he brought his head up, then grabbed the sack of coins and swung it full at the horseshoe protruding from his eye. She felt the meaty shock all the way up her arm. His body convulsed with incredible violence, then all

animation left him, and he fell forward, the horseshoe striking the sawdust. He breathed in slow gasping fading heaves for a minute, perhaps longer, and then everything was still.

Mavis's vision ran red; she was stunned to find at her core a deep, almost reptilian sense of justice, and prayed for strength to whatever new god had taken her under his dark wing. She tried to roll Jake's body over. She could not, but was able to find his knife and cut the coin-pouch free of his belt.

She stood and talked to the terrified, snorting horse, stroking its neck. She knew she could only calm it to a certain degree without taking it away from the smell of blood, so she spent several minutes trying to get the beast to step over Jake's corpse, and finally it whinnied and almost jumped over it. She tugged it into the yard – and then her heart dropped away as she realized that the gate was locked. Mavis leaned her head against the horse's neck. Sometimes in life we must wait – either will comes to us or it does not. After a minute or so, she raised her head and stepped back. She could leave without the horse, of course, but she would have to leave now. *Did Jake or me tell 'em where we was from? They'll trail me in the morning. Jake knew the way back... Can I find the way, in the night, with half a pound of coin clinking at my waist? I can't claim that he attacked me – he did nothing to me at the inn... I took him out to the stable – none saw him rob me – just that I now have all the money... I could hire a boy to take me – but where, so late? And he would know where I had gone. I can't wander around the town at night with this much coin; ears lurk to hear such sounds... I can't ask for a map now, tonight – there would be too many questions. Stay until dawn?* This thought was terrifying because it

was inescapable. Her mind raced, constructing mad convincing castles. She had not had to lie convincingly for some years, but our false brains are never buried far below our honest ones. Finally, she nodded, took several deep breaths, wiped her eyes, and went back inside.

The innkeeper grinned at her. “Where’s your husband?”

“Face down in the straw, like the baby Jesus,” she said.

“That’s too much drink or too much woman! But we’ll get him back to his room.”

“That’s as ye see fit, but he lost a fair amount of dinner and drink from both ends as he fell.

If your stomach be stronger than his, Samaritan as ye see fit. Me, I’d let him wash himself in the morning. Acting like a newborn don’t mean being treated like one.”

The innkeeper wrinkled his nose and nodded.

“I’m up first thing,” she continued, “and I’ll need a plain scrap of paper on how to ‘scape Exeter and get to Plymouth. He’ll be no help to me come sun-up.”

“Ye need a wakeup?”

“What time does yer stable boy come in?”

“Dawn-ish.”

“If I’m not down a span afore dawn, give us a knock. I need the boy to run an errand for me.”

She bade the man goodnight, went upstairs and closed the door. Our adaptive nature is not designed to switch so suddenly from prey to predator to prey again; Mavis was dizzy, disconnected; her mouth was dry, her forearms hurt from squeezing and plunging. The muscles

of murder are, of course, very rarely called upon, but in justice we are angels and animals, capable of drawing constitutions on paper and swords on those who threaten our young. Long though her night was, Mavis was sustained by the bloody bedrock of just retribution, which was the knowledge that only she or Jake were destined to make it through that savage span of dark.

## CHAPTER FIFTY NINE

### Forgive Us Our Trespasses

THERE WAS NO ACTUAL HOUSE FOR THE MAYOR OF ROMANSLEIGH; Mary took a room at the inn for the time being. The first thing she did was to go over the finances of the county. The results of her tabulations were unsurprising – the same problems faced her as had faced Laurence. The county had a full belly and an empty purse. While she was reviewing the town charter, Orson Andrews came in.

“Good day, Mayor O’Donnel,” he said, seating himself.

Mary stared at him for a long moment. He stared back.

“I have heard that your wife is very happy,” she said. Orson Andrews did not respond. “I don’t mean because there is a woman mayor – what should I be called? Mayor-ess? Mare? My election has pleased many, but your wife is famously happy. I am sure that her contentment is due in no small part to your respect for women. How many bailiffs are there at present?”

“One.”

“But you have deputies.”

“Eight.”

“That seems high.”

“Due to our recent disturbances, I have hired more. There were two six months ago.”

“You refer to the thefts and other problems occasioned by the new loom factory.”

“No – rather the men and women who inhabit it, who do not respect the law.”

“I should say,” said Mary evenly, “that they have as much respect for the law as the law has had for them, but that is neither here nor there. Does this trouble you?”

Orson Andrews pursed his lips. “It does not trouble me, Mayor, but it is troublesome.”

“Hm.”

“And I shall have to hire more at present, due to the new influx of those without property.”

“How are your deputies paid?”

“I have a draw on Lord Carvey’s accounts.”

“That is quite a trust.”

“Yet I cannot draw funds at present.”

“And so you need my funds. Because Lord Carvey has none.” Orson Andrews watched her closely, aware of her sensual pleasure at the utterance.

“Tell me, Mr. Andrews – was it legal what happened to me all those years ago, when I was cast out of the Jiggers?”

He stared at her impassively. “It was neither. It touched the law not at all. There was no binding contract between yourself and the late Farmer Jigger – as there is none between yourself and the current Lord Carvey.”

“Mmm. So, to your view, Lord Carvey cannot meet his financial obligations.”

“That is true. I have received no communication from him, and his banker tells me that there are insufficient funds.”

Mary smiled. “Now, it is the law in this county that – no – you tell me. What is the law as to the management of Lord Carvey’s property if he is unable to meet his obligations?”

“The management of the property reverts to the Crown.”

“And the representative of the Crown is?”

“The Mayor.”

“Myself.”

“Yourself.”

“Ahhh!” sighed Mary, wondering just how long Orson Andrews could go without blinking.

“There are restrictions, of course,” he said. “The land must be sold in open market, to prevent favouritism. You cannot destroy his property. And those in charge – yourself – must meet the financial obligations.”

“And what do you think of these laws?”

“I believe them just.”

“Good.”

Orson Andrews stood and frowned. He leaned forward, placing his knuckles on the table. Mary did not find this threatening, but rather almost unbearably intimate. “Yet justice is not the exclusive province of law,” he said softly. “The law is designed to centralize and codify the natural justice of retribution, and as such can deal with formal contract and common law. It is my absolute belief that your treatment at the hands of the Jiggers was unjust and cruel, yet beyond the realm of the law. It is also my belief,” he said, holding up his hand to forestall her reply, “that the vengeance you are taking on this county is also unjust and cruel, in that many are being made to suffer who did not wrong you themselves.”

“Are you finished?” asked Mary. “May I?”

Orson Andrews nodded.

“I am one step above the Jiggers and Larry. Their wrongs were untouched by law, but my actions are securely nestled in its honourable bosom.”

“Yet they were honest in their opposition to you. You are not in your opposition to them.”

“There is no honour in honesty if there is no possibility of retaliation. If you say to your child: ‘now I will beat you,’ the child may find little love for your candour.”

“These wrongs are for God to avenge, Mary.”

She nodded slowly. “I agree. Sometimes God sends a doctor to save a sick man – and sometimes He sends a woman as His Sword.” Mary smiled. “Call your bailiffs, Mr. Andrews.”



## CHAPTER SIXTY

### And Those Who Trespass Against Us

LADY BARBARA WAS NOT LONELY, but a certain discontent had settled over her since the exodus of her family. Days passed in a strenuous fuss of household organization and forceful finger-pointings. The cook resigned in desperate fear – he has so unoccupied by the demands of preparing Lady Barbara’s standard fare of toast and tea that he was once again tempted by the bottle, and chose to go and find his fortune rather than stay and wait for his misfortune to find him.

She was talking tea on the front balcony when she saw a procession of horses coming up the front path. One of the strange powers of country living is the ability to recognize people at a distance – Lady Barbara saw at once that Orson Andrews rode at the head, with Mary just behind him, and five men bringing up the rear. As she watched in amazement, Mary drew her hood back from her hair and sniffed the air, then darted her head forward and stared at the mansion. Lady Barbara shuddered and rose. She went inside, then walked quickly down the front steps as Mary and the men dismounted.

“Sovereign property, Mr. Andrews,” she cried. “Please remove this vagabond from my lawn!”

Mary held up her hand and walked forward. She stood before Lady Barbara and looked her up and down.

“Good morning,” she said gently. “I picture your bones as strong and your muscles as weak.”

“Can you picture a prison cell,” asked Lady Barbara acidly. “Trespassing is a serious offence.”

“Really?” asked Mary, her eyes widening. “I have never understood trespassing. I mean – we can cross a farmer’s field ten times without penalty should he be in a good mood, yet should he have indigestion one morning, he can throw us in jail!”

“Orson Andrews – please take this mad woman from my house!”

“But perhaps,” continued Mary, walking forward, “you think that the farmer should be consistent and always prosecute trespassers. I ask for your forgiveness, Lady Barbara!” she cried, suddenly falling to her knees on the gravel. “Can you please forgive me for trespassing and let me go? I am a poor girl with nowhere to go!”

“Orson Andrews – this creature is quite mad! Take her away and put her in jail for trespassing – as she has before, and has been warned enough. I am mistress here, and will stand for none of it!”

“Lady Barbara,” said Orson Andrews. “I cannot.”

“Have the laws of the realm ceased? Remove her!” she cried out, backing away from Mary’s grasping hands.

“Forgive me!” begged Mary. Her shoulders shook; her cowl hid her face.

Lady Barbara leaned down and hissed: “You take from me my family; I take from you your liberty!”

“Forgive us our trespasses!” whispered Mary. She lifted her face, tears ran down her cheeks.

“I have come to make amends!”

“Take her away!” shrieked the old woman.

Mary’s shoulders shook herder. Orson Andrews looked at her closely, his heart sick. He, at least, saw. A giggle escaped Mary’s salty lips as she shook her head, still kneeling.

“Is she mad?” asked a deputy.

Orson Andrews shook his head.

“Ohhh, thank you!” cried Mary, throwing her head back and laughing loud and clear. “I am entirely converted to your views, and my conscience is clear at last!” She dug in her pocket and drew forth a ten pound note. “Please – take it!”

“I am going back into my house,” said Lady Barbara decisively. “Larry shall hear of this, Mr. Andrews.”

“But,” giggled Mary, leaping to her feet, “how can you trespass in this manner? But I am kinder than you. You may take a horse and cart and your clothing, and some money as well – either your own, or this note I offer you in goodwill. For this house is mine, by all the laws of your fair realm!”

Orson Andrews stepped forward. “Lady Carvey, your son has become bankrupt, and if you have not the funds to pay for his expenses, the house and all its contents remit to the custody of Mayor Mary O’Donnel for the duration of such time as the bills remain unpaid.”

Lady Barbara stopped in her tracks. Even the birds went silent. She turned around.

“Bank – bankrupt?” Her head tilted to one side. “What did you say?”

Orson Andrews' voice was sorrowful. "Mary is the owner here now, Lady Carvey.

She looked at Mary. "What did you do?"

"I 'did' nothing," replied Mary. "I did *back!*"

"But – but – Orson Andrews – I cannot be compelled to quit my own house!"

"Certainty not," said Mary. "Now, all that is left for you to do is to find a house and call it your own, for this one no longer answers that description! Oh heavens!" she said, cupping her cheeks in her hands. "I thought I had forgotten how to laugh!"

Lady Barbara face crumpled. She sobbed; it sounded like a rock breaking. When she spoke, her voice was hoarse; it was a voice she had never used before.

"But there is nothing worse – you are a woman – listen with your heart – there is nothing worse for a woman, a daughter, a wife, a mother – then to take her home from her, where her children first woke and walked and where – where my husband died... Where my own mother died, where every glass, every cupboard has my fingerprints – my house is my memory, Mary, my life... For all that remains holy within you – do not take it from me!"

Mary walked forward and took Lady Barbara's old hands in her own cold ones. "Am I a woman to you, Mother?" she asked, lowering her head slightly, with genuine curiosity. "For I am none to myself. I grieve for your loss – I grieve for you and your memories, and also that I shall never once experience such a loss as yours, the loss of a fair home and good memories. For my home was taken from me when I was young, and though it held few good memories, it was mine, and I learned in the years of my exile..." Mary placed her head against Lady Barbara's forehead. "...what it was to mourn the loss of even the poorest shelter." She kissed the old woman's hand. "No – go inside, dry your eyes, and gather your things."

She took Lady Barbara by the hand and let her up the steps. “Come – let me help you.”

And they wandered from room to room, and Lady Barbara touched all the objects of her history, and pleaded tearfully for Mary to take good care of them, and agonized over what she should take and what she must leave behind, and eventually the deputies packed as much they could into a cart. Lady Barbara stood on the threshold of the front door and wept as agonizingly as a girl searching for the lost head of a broken doll. And then she climbed into the cart, and a horse was brought, and Orson Andrews drove her away, and she looked through wet eyes wild with loss as Mary stood alone on the front steps – and then lowered her white head as Mary turned, went inside the darkness of the great mansion and closed the door.

## CHAPTER SIXTY ONE

### *Double Jeopardy*

THE WHITE BALCONY REFLECTED THE GLARE OF THE SUN; Mary squinted as she sipped her tea. Her cup was steady in her hand, and as she gazed at it, she wondered if it was the same one Lady Barbara had handed her those months when she had staggered out of the wilderness into this house.

*Even then, I was prepared to – to...* But she could not finish the thought. Something deep, old and venomous snaked up from her bowels and sent the tea cup shivering off the saucer. As it fell, she twisted her foot to block the fall, and the cup glanced off and rolled off into a mossy corner. Mary sighed as the water scalded her toes. Something cold and lonely passed a corridor of her heart, keening softly for a tender touch – she watched it silently, hidden in her walls, until it trailed its arms around a distant corridor – and then raised her eyes to the outside world. The sun struck her face, then her eyes seemed to fall back into her head and she had the distinct impression that her skin was burning, peeling and that she could spit her eyes out through her mouth. Her skin flew away in a flutter, and she opened her eyes again and saw a cuckoo had landed on the white parapet. Her lips drew back.

“I will not take this consequence!” she hissed. “You do it all the time, take over the nest – nature you are too harsh! – what was I supposed to do? Oh, they are blind to me! I was caged – what rules should apes respect in a circus? I was given nothing – let there be no limits to what I shall take! No ‘rules’ gave him this house – rules only kept it his. Until I came along, the

beacon for the beaten... And I have done more to earn this house than he – I am a warrior, as his ancestors were – they took with their swords, I with my tongue! Who is more gentle – who? His blood cut down begging children for this home – I have raised not one finger to make it mine! You gods did nothing to stop his fathers – you grow him straight and so sincere, close to your damned bosoms, and shower him with fine scent and blind books and fat eyes and Italy – he is your son because he won – well, now I have won – take me as your daughter – I have earned some goddamned family!”

There was a cough from the French doors. Mary’s face fell like a latch into place.

“Two men to see you,” said Joyce.

“Send them up.”

Two men came out to the balcony. They were dressed quite well, but travel-stained, and all Mary’s nerves flew from her skin like flying cobwebs of twisting snakes, trying to wrap them, to discover their pores and secret bones. She recognized this as a sign of grave danger, and so let it happen, and watched.

“Good morning, Mayor O’Donnel,” said one of them men. He was in his early forties, with low dark hair, a slightly paunchy face and thick lips. He had an air of patient pragmatism; he swept his wide hat off and bowed. *No balding*, Mary noted. The other man was the same age, but almost bald. He had a slender straight nose, even features, high cheekbones, a wide jaw and a mole on his chin, left of center. He was taller, well built, with a slightly thick middle.

“Good day,” said the bald man. He had a slight tenor twang to an otherwise deep and pleasant voice. His accent was untraceable.

“Good day, sirs,” said Mary. “We can be out or in, but since it looks as if you have been out a lot, in may be better.”

“Nay – we’ll sit here,” said the dark-haired one. “We’re out because we like it out, eh Stephen?”

“That is true,” said the bald man with a smile.

“A drink then?” asked Mary.

“Some water,” they said together. Oddly, they did not seem to notice their simultaneous speech.

Water was brought, and they all sat. The bald man nudged the teacup in the mossy corner to him with his foot, and handed it to Mary.

“We’ve never done a woman before,” said the dark one. They both held their pinkies out while sipping, then placed their glasses at their feet. “So how do you like your new position?” he asked.

Stephen said: “Sorry, we’re so used to each other. I am Stephen Leaking; this is my brother Jack.”

“Twins,” said Mary. They both nodded. “I am very happy here.”

“That is well,” said Jack, “since this may be cause for historical interest in time – England’s first lady mayor.”



Stephen smiled. “Many counties are going over their charters to ensure that cannot happen there, but you at least have won your own nest. Remarkable. We were just talking. Our wives too.”

“‘Joan of Arc of the ballot’, she says.”

“‘And about time,’ mine. And she’s not the only one. Many rough men sleep light these days.” He smiled pleasantly. “From fear of women and desire for France.”

Jack took another sip. “Have you ever been?”

Mary shook her head, reeling in her nets. *France, well-dressed... Are they revolutionaries, trying to recruit me?*

“I wouldn’t go now, regardless of my sympathies,” said Stephen.

“Me neither,” added his brother.

“You’d have no idea how to find your side, and less chance making it to their them alive. Civil war is the marriage of ambition and overcrowding.”

“And starvation...”

“But the King...”

“Or food...”

“Now, neither. And the replacements...”

“Well, beyond awful. What would words mean – I mean a vow when you’re starving – who can eat words?”

“To die with honour is to eat your fill in heaven.”

“Ah, if you had children...”

“Right is right.”

“Blood is right.”

“Unempirical for me, and so I stand.”

“As you please.”

Mary’s wild caution was not relaxed by the fact that both men carried on the above rapid conversation without taking their eyes off her.

“And you?” asked Stephen, leaning forward.

“Well,” said Mary, stretching. “I have never been to France, and don’t read newspapers.”

“But people talk,” said Jack. “Everyone hears stories.”

“As one does about ghosts,” replied Mary. “Yet still I sleep soundly. I take it this is official business.”

Stephen smiled. “Guess.”

“You are magistrates, and are here to sniff me out for treason.”

They both laughed. “Tell, please!” said Jack.

“Your tans are lower than your hair – well not yours, for you have so little. So you wear your wigs when you go to market, in the hopes of intimidating merchants into cheaper prices.”

“And treason?”

“I am a woman born poor, standing in a mansion, in control of all the lands you see. Of course you are worried. You want me to take an oath, which is uncommon enough for a rural mayor. So speak.”

Stephen laughed. “I told you we shouldn’t have gotten these ‘we’re magistrates in search of treason’ tattoos on our foreheads.”

“Only your forehead is big enough for that.”

“Please,” said Mary, holding up her hands. “If you display any more joviality I shall vomit on your laps. Treason carries the death sentence, yes?”

“Yes,” replied Jack, “but these days, with France and all, there is torture as well.”

“So: let us be serious.”

“You are right. Please excuse my brother.”

“Serious!”

They both nodded. “Yes.”

“What do you want to know?”

The questioning which followed alternated between the brothers.

“Are you loyal to the King?”

“Yes.”

“Do you seek any material, economic or political change in the realm?”

Mary squinted. “I am confused – does this include charity, living in this house and being a female mayor?”

The twins frowned, but continued looking at each other; it was as if their ears were silently conversing.

“We rephrase - do you seek any material, economic or political change in the realm outside what is legal?”

“No – I was elected by law. I do not now or have I ever counseled any action or belief contradicted by law.”

“Do you believe in the divine right of Kings?”

“I do.”

“So you will state that the power of our King is granted by God himself and that the King is God’s representative on earth?”

“I will not.”

There was a pause. “Why not?”

“Because there are Kings in Germany, Holland, Denmark and many other countries, and I would not wish to deny their rights of ruling according to divine law.”

“Of course”

“England, then.”

Mary nodded. “I do affirm that the King’s legitimacy in England is derived from divine authority.”

“Do you grant that – may we have some more water? – we usually talk most during these interviews.”

More water was brought.

“Thank you. Do you grant that the King is the legitimate head of the Church of England?”

“Yes.”

“Do you foreswear and reject and doctrines of the Catholic faith?”

“Insofar as these are incompatible with the doctrines of the Church of England, yes. I cannot claim absolute knowledge of all such doctrines.”

“They do change. As such, you reject the authority of the Pope in Rome?”

“I do not.”

“Speak.”

“Since the Pope anoints many European Kings, whose rule is legitimate by divine law...”

“Yes – sorry – the authority of the Pope in England.”

Mary smiled. “I will not make the obvious comment that there is no Pope in England and say that yes, I reject the authority of the Pope in Rome in England.”

“Thanks for not saying that Rome is not in England.”

“You’re welcome.”

“So, you recognize that the King has a legitimate authority over his subjects, including you, whose souls would be damned should they disobey him.”

“I do not.”

“Speak.”

“There are charters the King may not overturn – the Magna Carta being the first – and this natural law would forbid the obeying of edicts contradictory to established charters.”

“Were the King to publish legal commands, can you conceive of a time when you would disobey them?”

“No.”

“Please – take your time. While we do not think it a trick, we have lost before because a man answered so quickly he claimed that he had given himself no time to conceive of any circumstances under which he would disobey the King.

Mary paused, searching the bright white stone if the parapet. The cuckoo was long gone.

“Yes – I can conceive of disobeying the King.”

“Example.”

“If the King sent me a missive asking me to do something not in my power, I would of course disobey.”

“Example.”

“To square a circle or make two plus two equal five.”

“This is unreasonable.”

“Not if the King has lost his reason.”

“If the King were indisputably in possession of his reason, would you ever disobey an edict of his?”

“Yes.”

“Speak.”

“Were I in doubt as to the legitimacy of the edict. Were I to receive a missive instructing me to slay a newborn infant, which would clearly be illegal under most circumstances, unless he were the Anti-Christ or contained a bomb or was a usurper to a legitimate throne, I would disobey the edict until I was able to verify its source.”

“All right. We paint the following scenario: the King stands in front of you and orders...”

“...in good faith...”

“...you to perform a legal action. Can you think of any circumstances under which you would disobey him?”

“Due to the divine right of Kings, I would no more disobey him than I would God Himself.”

“Do you believe in God?”

Mary smiled. “You have no authority to ask that question. That is a matter for an ecumenical council.”

“We represent the King, who is the head of the Church.”

“And as such may ask me any questions regarding civil matters of faith. As to the faith itself, that is a matter between myself, the Church and God himself.”

“Or Herself, it would seem.”

“Yet if you do not believe in God, the divine right of Kings means nothing.”

She nodded. “That is so. And so, gentlemen, you have three choices. You can leave me be, or drag me before an ecumenical council and question my faith. But you and I both know that that would be a very public event, full of press and popular opinion, and the small skill I have shown here is but a taste of what I shall reply in open court. I shall need no Plato for my apology, for I shall make the front page.”

Finally, Stephen and Jack glanced at each other.

“What is the third course?”

Mary stood. “Why, to kill me quietly of course.” She smiled. “I know what I would do if I were in your shoes.”

## CHAPTER SIXTY TWO

### Lunch With Lydia

CRUELTY ORBITS CARELESSNESS, NEVER TOUCHING, NEVER ESCAPING... Laurence spent another sleepless night groping with cold fingers the hard black wound within him. The words he had spoken to Kay whirled around him; he could neither condone nor condemn them. The comprehensibility of motives in any interaction are only as clear to all as they are to the most blind. Strange rage is birthed by someone who acts clearly against our interests and then seems hurt and surprised when we get angry – they hit us, then hold a child up in defense. Kay has no idea what she is doing, thought Laurence, and this idea was terrifying. Then what *is* she doing? He felt he were involved in some sort of invisible chess game with hidden rules and fiery traps. Like most men accustomed to power, his impulse was two-fold – first, he wanted to flee to more primitive territory, where unseen complications could burst like cobwebs before the strong wind of virile action. Equally strongly he felt the paralysis of his powerful will facing true depth for the first time. Some enemies enter our lives who can only be fought by our being who we are most simply, most deeply. All the various hooks our vanity throws overboard – all we think we need to justify ourselves – fame, desirability, wealth, all the endless accolades of unseen eyes – ah here is where we are most vulnerable – here is where a fish large enough, a primitive shark with deep tongue and sharp eyes – here we feel a bite and begin to reel our rods, and are pulled overboard and fall into the deep tide as the fins circle and close...



When it feels as if life is going to swallow us whole, that we are going to lose our very selves, that we are going to dissolve into water so deep we are like sugar cubes in a tart and endless sea, when everything in us struggles wildly against the unacceptable – when we feel: I will give up anything but **that** – why that is precisely what is required.

Laurence was conspicuous, generous, active, intelligent and idealistic – and so was a magnet for certain devils who spied the cave of a strong heart and wanted to feed on its power – just a little, just to dip their little red tongues in his wide arterial rivers – but found that each sip was such ambrosia, such a heady relief from their endless hunger that they could not refrain from sucking, biting, ripping, chewing. Laurence soon experienced admiration and deference as a kind of famished murder, and could not reach through his own ribs to dislodge his voracious parasites. I invited them in, he thought over and over, and I do not know the words to dislodge them...

And it came to Laurence in that moment that he in fact had no friends, and this seemed both such a surprising and fully-formed idea that he could not discern its origin.

*Well, I was always so serious*, he thought – and detected an elusive threat of vanity below that. He had had roommates at university and become quite jovial with them, but a certain reserve had always fallen between them. He was very studious, and he thought in hindsight that rebuffing drinking expeditions in favour of writing essays was probably seen as very snobby. Great – I am a snob among aristocrats. He had never been troubled by loneliness, but it swooped

on him now and carried him off in its claws. I wish to be a foul-weather friend – an odd bird who contacts only for comfort. His father had been the same way, indicating by many a word and gesture that friendship involved far too many compromises to be seriously considered by a man of integrity – and had died surrounded by women.

Died surrounded by women – the phrase made Laurence a little nauseous, and he swung his legs over the bed and leaned forward, pressing his palms against his temples, his elbows on his knees. From this angle he could see a slight paunch pressing against the tie of his pajama bottoms and pinched it in disgust.

Yet what do I really think of women? His mother, Kay, Mary – and Lydia – his only close contacts. His mother – inflexible, insistent, impenetrable... Kay – needy, oddly aggressive, random... Mary – biblical, absolute, haranguing. And Lydia – graceful, soft-spoken, courageous. What kind of company have I been keeping? The bond of family was so deep within him that it had never been questioned. Do I consider myself a revolutionary? I have questioned history, aristocracy, the peasantry, God, country and King – yet **never** the women in my life.

But where would I even **begin**? When any is taken in the direction of first principles, there is no stopping the gathering momentum that starts with things distant and largely hypothetical – society, religion, economics and philosophy – and ends up sweeping with grim momentum into all close habits and associations. Reject the existence of God and sooner or later one becomes an

atheist in all things, and faith in the unseen – in family, culture, history and self will be washed away... And when true sight escapes the vanity of vanity of self-deception, it becomes a bright light that burns in all directions. How much do I really know about those I claim to love? This is a chilling question; even more chilling is: how much do those who claim to love me know about **me**? all these, of course, are mere ghostly precursors to the most terrible demon, the demon whose eyes burn to set us free: how much do I know about **myself**? – the answer to Laurence in the first gray of pre-dawn was: never enough, never enough, never enough...

The devils have arrived to set me free, thought Laurence over and over and he closed his eyes and the bed felt full of imps.

Finally he rose and went to see Lydia. He walked, since he knew she rose late, tired from performing. He paused in front of her home, dreading the sight of her father, then wandered over to a café across the street and paid a small boy to deliver a note to Lydia. The boy looked at him with curious disgust, imagining him the laziest thing on two legs for paying him to cross the road and with a piece of paper.

Laurence read the Times in a desultory fashion – there was much rage and fear about the Reign on Terror in France, and subscriptions were being levied on landowners to pay for English troops to fight the Republicans. Another bill, he thought dismally.

Lydia arrived after about half an hour. Laurence had had enough coffee to feel like a narcoleptic on a tightrope. She looked at his haggard face for a moment, cocking her head.

“You know, you do have leave to call on me at the house,” she said softly.

“Yes, I know,” replied Laurence. He frowned, then stood and held her chair out while she sat. *A little primly*, he thought. “You look lovely this morning,” he said, sitting.

She smiled. “I hope it is not evident of my pathetic desire to see you that I rushed out so quickly.”

“No; I was quite surprised. I made lunch reservations. I was prepared to wait all day.”

“You are a man with a mission,” said Lydia, signaling for the waiter and ordering a coffee and croissant. “They say you should not eat croissants, but rather rub them directly into your thighs.”

“Well, thanks for that picture.”

She smiled. “Perhaps I should order jam and butter as well.”

“Oh, Lydia – it is both good and heartbreaking to see you.”

“All right – the good I understand – and wait in patience for the heartbreaking part.” There was a flicker of nervousness in her eyes, and he could read her thoughts: *I think I know you, but I have been fooled before...*

“What do you think of Mary O’Donnel?” he asked suddenly.

“Well that’s a wakey-wakey question. Begging you pardon – which I do rarely enough – I loathe her.”

Laurence blinked. “You do not love your enemies?”

“That is a philosophy designed to make you indifferent to your allies, and it despise it too. Sorry to be so negative. No – no more coffee for you, if you want to think straight.”

He lowered his arm and smiled. “Who gives you orders?”

“Lord, everyone it seems. My father. My director. My singing teacher. My tutors.” She plucked something off her sleeve. “You, if you like.”

“Sorry. Loathe is such a strong word.”

“Well, what do you loathe? Being told what to do doesn’t count.”

He wrinkled his nose. “Loathe? I don’t think – it’s like – it’s so close to hatred.”

“Which is bad.”

“Well, now I’m in a bind.”

“No you’re not. Speak plain.”

“I suppose to see how we are all one means that to see differences – to feel threatened by them – is to see gaps where in fact they do not exist – to fall into hatred where we should feel empathy.”

“If someone hurt you – and you did not deserve it,” said Lydia evenly, “I would kill them and sing my way to the scaffold.”

“Now that’s unfair,” cried Laurence. “This isn’t about passion. You ask a question for the head then interrupt with an answer from the heart.”

“You’re right – I apologize. Tell me more about hatred. What is it?”

“Hatred is fear of the unknown. Or the over-familiar but threatening.”

Lydia tore off a strip of crust. “Give me an example in your own life.”

*Ask Kay*, he thought, but could not step there. “Well I don’t really hate anyone.”

“So you have no fear of the unknown – or repugnance of the familiar?”

“Not that I know of.”

“What about anger?”

“Sure – I have been angry.”

“When last?”

*Last night.* “That’s too relevant to what I have talked about. But I suppose, like any son, my mother angers me at times, when I am impatient.”

Lydia raised her brows, shook her head and half smiled. “Well, your mother could do it.”

“She can be inflexible, but she means well,” said Laurence in the mechanical tone of an old justification.

*Here is a man who does not know women,* thought Lydia. “How do you know she means well?”

“Mother? Mary?”

“Let’s start with your mummy – sorry, mother.”

“She always has our best interests at heart.”

Lydia clacked her coffee-spoon on the table like a judge. “Tautology. Please rephrase.”

Laurence paused. “She has made many sacrifices.”

“How would that qualify as a virtue?”

“Well, to sacrifice...”

“Someone chooses to sacrifice, that’s their own business. If they sacrifice because it is of value to them, they need no repayment. If not, no one else is responsible for making it valuable. Besides, this is your mother’s philosophy, and so not valid as a yardstick of her moral virtue.”

Laurence frowned. “Do you loathe my mother as well?”

“Now, you answer with the heart. We are asking with the head.”

“All right – how do you know it is my mother’s philosophy?”

“Larry, who sacrifices themselves to you?”

The question fell like a slab of plaster on his head. There was a pause. He scratched his head and glanced upward.

“Should I sacrifice myself to you,” she persisted. “Give up my singing, my family, my education, everything I cherish?”

“God no – that’s what attracted me to... No! I cannot believe it is true! Excuse me,” he said as they drew stares.

“I know – it’s the coffee talking. Forget sacrifice – let us talk about consistency. And here’s where the crossing gets rough, Magellan. If sacrifice is a moral virtue, then – oh I wish someone else were telling you this – you might want to please me in accepting it – no – I trust your integrity, which is why I am questioning it – fight me with everything in your power – if sacrifice is a virtue, then who do you ask to sacrifice themselves to you?”

“Well!” cried Laurence with more than a touch of disdain. “I don’t really need to...” He paused.

“To what?” asked Lydia, and he noticed that she spoke with her mouth full, which indicated deep passion.

“To ask for sacrifice.”

“Why not?”

“I am – I what would I need... Well that would seem weak.”

“So asking for sacrifice is only a value for the weak.”

“It would seem so, my songstress Socrates.”

“Now, the question is: do they require more sacrifice because they are weak, or are they weak because they require sacrifice?”

“Well, I don’t know exactly – what this weakness is. I haven’t really considered it – before. So...”

“So consider it! If you like,” she added demurely – and unconvincingly.

“Weakness,” murmured Laurence, his head humming with the word ‘friend’ – and an almost unbelievable upsurge of sexual desire. He drew the edge of the tablecloth over his lap, noticing Lydia’s smile. “I suppose it would seem to be a lack of purpose.”

*Ah, there’s that blindness to the feminine again,* thought Lydia. “So, all who lack purpose are weak?”

“Sure – let’s try that.”

“A man who drifts through life seeking pleasure alone – no, that doesn’t work, because pleasure is his goal, *a la* Jonathon. A man who drifts around on any current is weak. Yes – that is a kind of weakness.”

“Suppose this man were poor.”

“Well, how would he live?”

Lydia touched Laurence’s hand. “His lack of purpose would have to be subsidized by something. To consume, we have to produce – and if we don’t, then someone else must, or we die.”

“So he becomes a thief.”

“That’s one possibility.”

“What else could he do?”



“He could persuade others that charity is an absolute value, regardless of context or responsibility. Then he can present need, not virtue, as a claim on resources.”

“Yet we patronize artists.”

“Not one who produces nothing – or whose work we do not value.”

“So all charity is weakness?”

“I do not think so – yet charity without reference to values, to free will and responsibility – that is so lazy it is almost cowardly. Help someone you care about because you care about them, but to run around finding victims to save – I cannot consider that virtuous.”

“Why not?”

“Because – because that makes need the highest value, higher than strength or the power to provide. Since weakness needs strength, but strength does not need weakness, weakness must be a subordinate value to strength. It’s like building a pyramid point down.”

“By that reasoning, gazelle are superior to lions, because lions need them but gazelle do not need lions.”

“But the lions, Larry, do not try to convince the gazelles that their most noble goal is to lay down and let the lions eat them. The lions have to catch the gazelles. But animal metaphors are of limited value in questions of free will.”

“Free will – where does free will come in?”

“Well, without free will there can be no values, since values must be chosen; instincts are not ‘values’ because animals cannot choose to reject them. Values can only be established in reference to purpose – and the purpose of all living things is to stay alive. That is why those

without a tangible purpose seem weak – it is not because they have no purpose, but rather that their purpose is the subjugation of others. They offer up their weakness in exchange for power.”

Laurence started. “What?”

Lydia’s eye narrowed. “Tell me – did not Mary’s offer of helping the poor arouse the slightest vanity in you? They are weak – that is what is cried out – you can help them – and so you are strong – and do we not all want that thrill of strength, however false it might be?”

Laurence stared at her.

“You asked me why I loathe Mary, Larry.” *Is that the first time she used ‘Larry’?* he wondered. “Everyone has the choice: own their own lives or blame others. She chose the latter.”

“She is trying to get me to help others.”

“There is a contradiction inherent in her position, but we shan’t get to it today. All I ask is that you consider her position as if she were a man. That is all.” She smiled. “I don’t want to spend the whole morning philosophizing when we could be kissing. So, Mr. Mission Man, let’s dispense with what is on your mind so we can retire to a carriage and you can ravish my lips!”

The disasters of the past few days had fled his mind on the bright wind of considered ideas, but now they rolled back in, like the breath of a fetid swamp.

“Oh Lydia, I have displeased your father terribly.”

She took a short breath and touched her throat.”

“Oh?”

“And it is about to get a lot worse.”

Lydia stared at him blankly, and Laurence suddenly felt that loving a woman so deeply in love with her father was terribly exciting, and terribly dangerous. He passed his hand over his eyes and told her the story of Kay, Adam, the factory, and the ruin of his finances. Her coffee cooled, untouched, in front of her.

## CHAPTER SIXTY THREE

### The Last Feast

MARY HAD BEEN AS INTIMATELY INVOLVED WITH FOOD as only someone who has nearly starved can be. Countless times during her wanderings, she had conjured such fantasy feasts as she was now able to provide.

Gathering her servants together, she wound them into a fever of excitement planning what she called ‘The First and Last Supper’. They sat in the servants quarters and had uproarious fights about what should be served, how it should be prepared, and the order in which it should be presented. Their initial fear of Mary was banished to lurk in the dark wine cellars of the mansion as they laughed around the large scarred oaken table, conjuring fantastic, improbable dishes such as duck *a la* goose, crinoline pudding, inside-out cake, and the enigmatic yet popular ‘banana surprise’, which was widely regarded as best served with two kiwis at the root. A real banana was produced, and an old washerwoman’s demonstration of the best way to eat it made them laugh so hard they thought their eyes would explode.

Finally they narrowed the list down to foods which could be both actually prepared and pleasantly consumed, then took the list into town to get the right ingredients. Since Mary was planning on inviting her newly-released paupers as well as the loom factory workers she also had to eliminate several dishes she considered too rich for their stomachs.

The provisions were bought, the town invited, and there was great anticipation regarding the event. When, however, it was found out that the ‘new poor’ were going to be there, enthusiasm in some quarters vanished. This had been a prosperous village for some years now, and the villagers tended to associate poverty with bad morals, forgetting their own initial resistance to Laurence’s reforms. Of course, Christian charity warred with a distaste for idle vagabondage, but in general the sentiment could be vaguely stirred by fallen women with children, or old men with absent limbs or eyes, but able-bodied and shifty-eyed men did not find the gardens of human sympathy open for their wanderings. Respectable women quickly made their distaste for Mary’s feast clear, and they were quickly followed by less respectable women, who hoped to gain the respect of the more respectable women by imitating their disdain. Husbands of both sorts quickly followed suit; the young men of the village (save for a priggish few) did not share this view, and covered their evident interest in being in the proximity of fallen women through chest-puffing displays of concern for the ‘poor folk up the way’.

In the grim gathering of lean-to’s and single-board huts where those released from the Poor House by Mary had gathered a dim shadow of interest rolled through the slack jaws and drink-sodden fists and rheumy sleepless eyes. Like any with money but no purpose, they wanted for nothing but their own souls. Being sort of soulless, they were keen of sensation, perhaps in the metaphorical belief that an empty house can be filled by external flames. So they jeered and waited and toasted their indifference with other men’s wine.

This is not to say that they were corrupt. In the maze of morality, we can see precious little; the soul holds too many secrets for us to judge the path from innocence to evil. This man is evil? Was he undone in his crib, or was gin mixed into his mother's milk? Who can track the unlighted paths of choice and circumstance? Crimes committed against children dwarf the crimes committed against adults, and it could be that our social world orbits the blank vengeful suns of violated childhoods; they are the awful orbs which rise and set on our entire tapestry of law, religion and custom; they are the hidden physics of our lost world... Is a man a brute because he is poor, or does some devil in him reduce him to poverty in order to free its talons from the prison of self-restraint? A woman corners herself in poverty and strikes out at the world – does she trap herself to liberate her striking? Give a poor woman money, it often falls from her like green water from a duck's back, and only adds to the loss she claims as her right of vengeance. Clear reason does not light these warrens – it shows more of our own hopes and fears than any other soul.

What remedy has nature provided us for essential justice – the judging of causes, not effects? Upright conduct and wide noses, it would seem. To be moral oneself and sniff deeply into the motives of others – deep ethics are essential instincts. To be fooled by evil, to be dragged backwards into a pit of adult abuse often occurs because we feel tainted by evil and so are afraid to sniff – to feel it out. Certainty is the true child of disciplined instincts.

The histories of the poor who lay sodden on the foreign shore of plenty could not be traced by mortal man. Some were mentally ill; was that pure chemical mayhem or the sudden snap of bad

habits? Just as a dissolute man can turn from uneasy health to decrepitude almost overnight, so it may be that neurosis can turn to raving if too long untended. Regardless, there were some who had no real control over their actions – some also who had strong spines but had fallen under the combined dominoes of misfortune, of chances which seemed almost coordinated by ill will, like the pounding flurry of a boxer who no longer hears the referee. These unhappy few must be granted all sympathy and support. There were also the indifferent, the irresponsible, the vengeful, the impulsive, addictive, self-loathing, the fatalists, the altruist extremists who gave all away, including themselves – and the evil, of course – even if we do not grant that all the aforementioned categories are not halting steps towards the darkest destination – those who were truly evil did lie scattered, like black spots on a washed-out negative of the night sky. And *that* kind of virulence has no choice but to spread; evil must believe its own night is inevitable, so it must lure those on the brink and flee those firmly in the light. There were very few in the Poor House firmly in the light, so these kind of poor were herded sheep in a ring of wolves – those unable to become wolves became bald chewed meat.

So it was overall a rather dark tide which flowed to Mary's feast that fateful night. The majority of those who trudged on broken legs to their last feast would have gone even if they knew what smoking secrets the dawn would reveal, for evil does not want death; it wants to make death live, so it kills the living but keeps them walking.

The mansion was ablaze with light – it could be seen for miles – every fire was crammed with logs to a near-inferno level. The first to arrive, as the sun hissed like a burning orb into the

distant sea, glanced at each other in dark glee, the glow of the manor reflected in the balls of their sunken eyes. Their nerves yearned for sensual relief, and the closing fires boded well.

Mary stood on the front steps, holding her hands out as the ragged procession reached her feet.

“Eat till your stomachs rebel – drink until your livers flee!” she cried, and a cheer arose from the throng. They surged up the steps and through the front doors – then stopped in amazement. Their eyes were met by sheer dazzle, by countless lamps and candles and deep fires, by a million points and swathes of light which raced from shiny vases to oiled paintings to constellations of chandeliers. The glossy wood, the terracotta archways, the bright paint all glowed with a light so diverse it admitted no shadows. Their jaws fell slowly; it was as if a celestial painter had opened their skulls and applied a portrait of their heavenly home directly to the roots of their eyes. They entered silently, and all dark hearts scurried to the bases of their respective spines in shock as such beauty – scurried and plotted, awaiting their turn. The maids handed out masks found in a deep cellar from some forgotten ball and they were placed on lank and oily heads, and the light so filled the masks that it spilled over into the periphery and all became dazzled and lost to their histories.

Food filled the house – pastries and ducks and roasts and pheasants and sweet breads and great bowls of butter and cream and there were no plates but they would have been useless anyway because food was grabbed and stuffed and combined in an unholy manner and stuck on pokers and thrust into the flames and thrown and smeared on breasts male and female and it was



all different from the first time the poor fed all those months ago because there was on animal desperation but rather it was a loose form of sensuality that rolled through the crowd like a great and greasy child at play. A piano player was found and in the general rummaging fiddles were found and people slap-drummed the heads of laughing bald men and licked each other's cheeks and in the final room the drink was found and the crush became so great that the glass wall leading to the greenhouse cracked but held – the cuts were minor – and the drink was grabbed and passed and dropped and scrambled for and the room was amazing... The cracked wall of glass reflected the roaring fire like the burning spears of evil fairies and a great energy seemed to enter the mansion, fighting past the heat of the chimneys and leaping over the flames.

Mary listened to the roar of the party – not a single word could be discerned from the wide wall of white revel noise, but she felt her skin ablaze with rampart power, and her ravaging mind seemed quiet at last and she even had a glass of wine and watched chanting men tipping wine, beer and champagne into an enormous Ming vase and then grab others and hold them down while four men poured the liquor-swamp down their throats and once they lost their grip and the vase fell on the face of a man and he sprang up and spat a mouthful of teeth into his hand and hurled them at a cake so hard they disappeared like red bullets deep into the icing. Another couple copulating in a corner pulled a tapestry off a wall to cover themselves and the end trailed in the forge of a fire but others stomped out the blaze and pulled the tapestry from the couple and cheered the man's thrusting buttocks in low guttural growls. And fights erupted and ebbed and songs flashed through the crowd as the musicians played familiar strains and all the old Greek gods lived again in the wild heaving crowds.

Finally, long past midnight, Mary stood on an inner balcony overlooking the crowd and drew forth a pistol. She gazed at it for a moment, smiling at the flames dancing up its oiled barrel. Then she aimed it at the ceiling and fired. The explosion dwarfed the cries and music of the revelers and, their senses tuned to a fever pitch, they turned to cheer Mary (and occasionally call for her to jump) and then trailed off, so complete was the power of Mary's presence from on high.

"Brothers and sisters!" she cried. "Tonight we inhabit this great house built on the blood of our ancestors. Tonight the flow of life is reversed – tonight we take back the bricks laid on the bones of our fathers!"

A cheer, and a pause.

"Tonight there are no rich, no poor, no men or women, no lords and ladies and peasants, no believers and faithless. Tonight we are all equal in the eyes of the goddess! Tonight the rule of law, the law that has laid our Lords high and our own hides low – tonight that law holds no sway. Tonight those with possessions give way to those possessed!"

Another cheer.

"For possessions mean nothing! What joy is kept in these gilded cages? What point in property except to divide brother and brother?"

"No preachin'!" shouted a man. Someone burped, low and loud.

"You think I preach?" shouted Mary, raising a small bag in one hand and pointing at it with her pistol. "You think I preach, not practice? Oh my brothers and sisters – do you want possessions?"

An uncertain ripple of noise wandered through the crowd.

“Do you want to become those we despise?”

Some of the crowd eyed Mary’s pistol and befuddled senses struggled to awake.

“To own possessions is to be possessed, but if I read your greedy eyes aright, you who have adapted to poverty are tempted to adapt to wealth. Do you wish that my brothers? Do you wish to adapt to the station of those who have destroyed us – do you wish wealth, my friends? For I hold it in my hands, and it means nothing to me!”

“Wealth!” “Money!” cried the crowd. “Give us what we want!”

“Do you wish all the wealth I have to offer?”

“Jump!” “Drink!” “Wealth!” “Money!”

“As one voice!” shouted Mary. “Yes or lose – do you wish all the wealth I have in my hands?”

“Yes!” screamed the crowd.

“A final time – shall I make you as rich as myself?”

“Yes!”

“Then take it!” she screamed, and spun her arm in a wide arc, sending a thick scatter of small paper into the air.

There was a great hush in the crowd and the fire popped loudly. The heat was so great from the furnaces that the papers held aloft for a moment like a wild flock of hunting angels and then they slipped through the hot fingers of the rising air and fluttered down to the outstretched hands of the waiting crowd and the papers were grabbed and examined, and it became a great and

terrible game. Most of the assembled could not read, and the jostling was great and the light uncertain, but knowledge of the size and scope of the banknotes began to spread like wildfire, and even those who did not know the meaning of the money were led by the greed of their neighbours and grabbed at the notes and where they were torn there were brutal fights and where the notes went into the fires there were burnt scrabbling hands and pitiful screams and all dark old devils were loosed on the crowd and loyalty and historical travels were utterly sundered and those with one or two notes stood uncertain whether to gather more or flee and were torn down by their brethren and those who tried to edge their way out were also brought down and clothes were torn and fingers and eyes were broken and the others in the rest of the house hurled themselves into the room, drawn like moths to the oldest fires of human greed and the glass wall gave way and shattered and broken glass spun through the grasping fingers and the fight surged against the fire and loosed it from its foundations and it stalked forward on bright famished legs to consume papers and persons as one...

Far out on the road, Laurence drew his horse up short, seeing an odd glow in the distance. Home is so deeply ingrained in our bones that we really need no prompting to know when it is in danger. Laurence, normally a very kind horseman, drove his spurs deep into his beast's side and they flew over the night lands like a ghost trailing the scent of its murderer.

Mary did not know he was coming, of course. She was extraordinarily sensitive, of course, and her sensitivity had been driven underground by cruelty and thus strengthened but she was not able to foretell the future – indeed, she would have been indignant at the suggestion, perceiving it as an insult to her titanic will. But having traveled many hard years to achieve her aims, having hidden her intentions these many months, and a little sickened by the necessity of the fiery carnage within, she walked out the front steps, away from the cries, flames and smoke.

She descended the steps in a great state of relaxation as fire curled its transient fingers up from almost every window, and black-faced people staggered from the house around her and some dropped from the windows in blind panic and occasionally a horrifying man-shaped column of flame could be seen inside, and sometimes this column was red; sometimes it snuffed into agonizing smoke the flames ate cloth and dug into flesh; sometimes it was blue, which was the colour of a burning man with a great quantity of alcohol soaked into his clothing.

Some staggered past Mary and fell on the lawn smoking, groaning, and mothers fell on them and bit their fingers open looking for a banknote and here and there friends guarded or supported the fallen or limping and this was a sight terrible to see because we rarely see the sea as evil until it begins pulling down good sailors.

And what was the state of Mary's mind when she saw those caught in her web? There was an attempt to summon a noble warrior compassion to those fallen on a field of battle, but the effect was largely fleeting... Her devil was sated and withdrew all its unholy energy from her hands and she looked at their limp purity in wonder. Odd stabs of fear struck her, and she

wondered that those lost souls wandering the lawn or falling in sodden heaps did not rise up and tear her limb from limb, but supposed that they had exhausted themselves in bare animal survival and now barely knew where they were.

Her head drew her neck up at the sound of flying hooves. And her devil awoke in her breast and slithered into her flaccid beating heart and spread its dark wings, eclipsing her senses once more.

Laurence's horse shied away from the low stench of boiled blood. The scene struck his senses in successive blows, firing his soul to maddened heights. In his blood was the blood of warriors; he had turned that blood to the combat of want and ignorance; it now found a more natural channel and flowed free and hard. He swung off his horse and strode forward through the darkness, through the smoke and bodies; his hands rose and sang, giddy with glee that they held no sword. He saw Mary standing on the steps and mounted them three at a time. His arms rose – he did nothing to stop them – and his fingers fastened on Mary's neck – and she did nothing to stop him., save that her eyes rose and dared him to extinguish them. He raised off the hot flagstones and threw her against the wall – her head struck the bricks with a brittle eggshell sound and his heart soared.

“Where is my mother?” he shouted, advancing on her.

“Oh Larry!” she cried thickly, raising her eyes to him; red ran down her face as if her dark hair were weeping blood. “I sent her away- I am not such a monster!”

He leant forward, his fingers digging into her shoulders – he could feel the fragile stitching of her skeleton and yearned to tear it apart.

“What happened here?”

Her eyes widened. “I – had a feast – as you did...”

“My home is in flames – what have you done?” He shook her violently.

Her head lolled and snapped forward; her hair spun and sprayed blood in her face. There was terrible groaning release from inside the house as some level or staircase fell to the ground, and a dragon’s breath shot out the front doors; sparks blew into Laurence’s eyes, and he dropped Mary and staggered back involuntarily, crying out. She strode forward, her dress smoking.

“Everyone must adapt to you, Larry Larry quite contrary, mustn’t they? Even before you tore my home from me you we all had to adapt your sunny visions of a better world. And we acquiesced because you were great in your power and feared no man or woman. And then a little farming man, a man who paid you tribute in his heart and hands rose against me and then your power fled before you, didn’t it, and you bowed before him and suffered me to be fed into the jaws of the night, a child of twelve! Had you saved me, I would have been your slave, for you would have earned your power, but as it was I set my teeth and heart to tear into it and take it away. I who could have been a gracious saviour of the age adapted to vengeance though it cost me my soul, and I adapted to goodness to break your power and now all that is left is for you to adapt as you have forced so many others to, for I have burned your home and future as surely as you burned mine, and damned we both shall be, but at least I have chosen my damnation and not just let it be taken from my stupid hands by a poor little girl who, though poor, was rich in justice and can now die content!”

Laurence stood slowly and gripped Mary's neck and stepped forward slowly and steadily, into the furnace, and the burning wind blew her blood and sticky hair in slow snakes around her head and she opened her mouth wide and he saw her teeth and his fingers closed tighter and his heart seemed to erupt in black joy as her eyes bulged and a terrible smile widened her gasping mouth and he suddenly remembered Farmer Jigger and paused, cocking his head to one side, and his fingers opened slightly and he thought of Lydia and prison and his mother and Kay and all those who depended on him and all the blackened eyes at his back and imagined a troop of witnesses in a wooden court and imagined being closed in a dank cell with Mary's dancing and giggling ghost and he strove mightily with his hands which gripped with ape-like muscles and he began to panic because he could not loosen his fingers and then another black and rolling furnace exhalation blew through the open door and he pictured dropping through a trapdoor into the flames his house had become and that could be his home for eternity and then the image of Mary naked with flat breasts and legs blending down into fur dancing on the lip of his blazing hole and drinking water and wiping her lips and lowering food to him and then flicking it into the heart of fire and that she would be mistress of his soul for all time and then his fingers flew apart and he picked up Mary's jerking and coughing frame and walked off the burning porch and as he carried her slowly down the steps the roof of the porch leaned forward and fell over the spot where they both had stood...



He carried Mary over to the road and placed her silent singed body on the grass and then walked back to the pyre of his former home and carried those in danger of its collapse a short distance and then stood watching the flames sending sparks deep into the night sky.

## CHAPTER SIXTY FOUR

### The Twins Report

LORD CERBES MET STEPHEN AND JACK IN A PUB OF THEIR OWN CHOOSING. They ordered two pints and set them down next to each other; he knew their habits well enough to be unfazed by their habit of drinking from which ever flagon was closest.

They began by giving a full report of their interview with Mary; they did not finish each other's sentences, but alternated them with disarming fluidity. After a few minutes, Lord Cerbes found himself dizzy from the natural habit of switching his gaze from one to the other and settled at looking at a small list of banned patrons nailed on the wall behind their heads.

“So finally she counseled that we kill her,” finished Jack.

Stephen took a sip of beer. “Are you not drinking anything?”

“No, thank you. It was well done.” He paused. “Would you say that in your combined experience she was adroit in her responses?”

Stephen cocked his head to the left; Jack's went to the right. “Most impressive,” said Stephen.

“Best we've interviewed,” added Jack. “I would be most interested in upgrading from interview to interrogation.”

“And we would be most within our rights in so doing.”

“Given her answers.”

“But it would be more academic than practical, for she has given up the ghost already.”

“And would in our view be impervious to torture.”

“Well, not impervious, but she would be most unpresentable.”

“Afterwards.”

Lord Cerbes frowned. “I don’t condone killing her, of course.”

“Is that an admission of permission?” asked Jack.

“Or a barrier to the exploration of that option?”

“No – she must be allowed to live. She is powerful and subtle in her thinking; to kill her would amount to saying we have no reply to her arguments.”

Jack smiled. “But we have no reply to her arguments.”

“At the level our questioning was cut off, all depended on her belief in God.”

Prompted by a sudden curiosity, Lord Cerbes asked: “Do either of you believe in God?”

There was a short pause. Stephen smiled. “Unofficially, we do not find it expedient to hold strong beliefs.”

“Explorers go further with neither maps nor destinations.”

“But that is neither here.”

“Nor there.”

“And do you in fact torture subjects?” asked Lord Cerbes.

Jack nodded. “All relativists must fix a certain star for their navigations.”

“Ours is loyalty to the realm.”

“Arbitrary, but immovable.”

Lord Cerbes nodded. “And you possess the power of arrest?”

“We share the designation of Justice of the Peace.”

“And are so imbued.”

“And do you believe that a public interview – and public it shall be, she has aroused much popular sentiment, especially among the fairer sex – you shall be able to catch her?”

There was another pause. Stephen finished Jack’s beer. “That is impossible to say. We cannot be sure the ecclesiastical council will cause her to contradict herself.”

“In what manner?”

“She is a most cunning unbeliever, but she wants to maintain certain – integrity in her unbelief.”

“She will state nothing positively.”

“So our recommended attack would be simple.”

“The council must focus on her theological beliefs.”

“And when they are found wanting...”

“She will, whether she wants or no...”

“Hang high in a public sphere.”

“However, there is a caution.”

“We believe her answers will do much to undermine popular faith in the realm.”

“And there will be certain members of the press who will publish her replies more because of their own revolutionary beliefs...”

“Than any objective public interest.”

“And there could be terrible repercussions...”

“For you, since it is your desire we bring her to London and examine her publicly.”

Lord Cerbes took a deep breath. “It is my belief we shall prevail against her.”

There was a pause.

“Then it shall be as you demand,” said Stephen.

Jack smiled. “But on your head that you demand it.”

## CHAPTER SIXTY FIVE

### Mary Returns to London

LAURENCE FOUND THAT HE HAD TO DEFEND MARY MIGHTILY when the villagers arrived in the morning. There was a great and grim tide of rage against her – she was widely regarded as an incarnation of eternal evil, so completely had she subverted the natural order of the county. The destruction of the seat of historical power was perceived as a lynching offense, but such was the power of Laurence’s authority that she was suffered to be led away by him to the single carriage which had escaped destruction.

She was placed in detention at Orson Andrews’ house, where her wounds were tended to by his not-unsympathetic wife. Laurence then found out that his mother was staying at the inn, and went and had a long and painful interview with her. She had already heard of the destruction of their manor, and he was full of grief in her presence – all their differences of ideology fell away in mourning the loss of their way of life and ancestral home. During their conversation, Laurence suddenly realized that the only original copy of his father’s book on the history of Eastern religions had perished in the blaze, and found himself stung with pain at the knowledge.

When Father Jones arrived with the news that the poor gathered by Mary were being run out of the county, Laurence could not rouse his sickened heart into action, and was afraid to pursue the question of what had happened to those who were wounded in the fire, or the actual number of those who had perished. Father Jones sat with them for awhile, ashen-faced, but lacked the

courage to admit to them the extent of his involvement in the disaster, and so tried to comfort them with an awkward air of hypocritical concern.

Lady Barbara was, to both men's dismay, completely undone; her mind wandered distractedly, and she kept leaping up go over to the few possessions she had saved before leaving and, most often not finding what she was looking for, fell to her knees and sobbed, raising a blanket to her face, her hair wild and wandering, and watching her Laurence's heart slipped another rung to unguessed depths of mystery.

Towards evening, Laurence was informed that two men had arrived in the village asking for the whereabouts of Mary, and he went down to the common room to meet them. Stephen and Jack informed him of their intent to arrest Mary and take her to London for trial, and peppered Laurence with questions as to her conduct and quickly established the following relevant facts:

1. Mary's occupation of the Carvey mansion was perfectly legal
2. She was not allowed to sell or destroy his property while in possession of it, but this did not include the money freely given to her by Kay
3. The law regarding the destruction of property did not include the phrase 'or cause to be destroyed', so if the revelers at her feast had themselves caused the damage, Mary could not be held legally accountable for it.
4. If all the revelers had died or been dispersed by the townspeople, Mary remained the only witness of the events of the previous night.

5. It was imperative that witnesses be produced, for if Mary had incited the riot, she could be convicted for that offense – an offense that could carry the death penalty, at the court’s discretion.
6. If not witnesses could be produced, and Mary declared her loyalty to the realm and belief in God, she could not be found guilty of any crime, and would be able to resume her duties as mayor.

At Laurence’s protestation that the county would no longer accept her authority, Stephen and Jack remained mute, clearly indicating that such matters were beyond her concern. The twins conscripted Father Jones to scour the village and try to find any souls who remained above-ground who had been part of the previous night’s conflagration. Laurence sent word to Orson Andrews to bring Mary to the village for transport to London.

By late evening, it became clear that all witnesses had either died, been driven off or were beyond the reach of the law. Several youths were evasive; several more were nowhere to be found; no progress was made.

Mary was brought down dressed in a flowered dress of Wife Andrews, her head carefully bandaged. Stephen and Jack spoke with her briefly at the inn, then she appeared with her hands bound and her eyes covered. She was placed in Laurence’s carriage. He could not stand the prospect of riding inside and borrowed a horse for the journey to London. Stephen and Jack rode inside with Mary.



The carriage observed London unobserved, but word quickly spread that the famous Mayor O'Donnell had entered the city. She was placed in the room of a nunnery. It was determined by Lord Cerbes, Jack and Stephen that a civil trial would be useless, so her case was handed over to the ecclesiastical authorities, and a council was set to convene as soon as possible. The Archbishop of London was out of town for several days, which allowed voluminous copy to be devoted to Mary, her cause and history, in all London papers. Lord Cerbes was interviewed constantly, while the nuns strove to keep Mary from what they considered to be her certain doom, but Mary, still bound, did not reply to their endless exhortations to admit her faith. Laurence kept to his room at a nondescript inn, refusing all requests for interviews. Kay came to see him, but he refused entrance to even her, which caused her great agony, since her nature naturally interpreted this as a rebuke for her role in the grim affair. She sat in the inn's common room, drinking tea and dithering about whether to wait for Larry to see her or to go back to Romansleigh to be with her mother. She was driven from the room by reporters, and decided to stay for Mary's trial in the hopes of seeing Laurence afterwards.

## CHAPTER SIXTY SIX

### *A Sudden Reacquaintance*

ADAM MET WITH SQUIRE POUNDER AS REQUESTED. The good Squire had adopted a mustache, a cane and a rather exaggerated limp to avoid recognition. Slowed by his hobble, they took some time to reach the bank.

“Now remember,” said Squire Pounder before they entered. “I am George Dawson...”

“Who has recently inherited some capital on the death of an uncle in the West Indies,” smiled Adam. “Yes – I recall.”

“It is important. For both of us.”

“I accept it with all due seriousness. Yet do you think the stagger quite necessary?”

“A man is known by his walk,” replied Squire Pounder. “Remember – I have more experience in business than you.”

“Very well. Good luck to you, Mr. Dawson.”

Squire Pounder grinned and pumped his hand. “And to you, Mr. Footer!”

After waiting for some time, they were finally shown into the office of the loans officer.

Adam blinked at the sight of the man behind the desk.

“Jonathon?” he asked, dumbfounded.

“You know this man?” demanded Squire Pounder. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Well,” stammered Adam. “It is the last thing I could have imagined. Though I am sure you perform the duties of your office with great efficiency,” he added to Jonathon.

“Thank you, I’m sure,” said Jonathon. “What can I do for you, Mr. Footer?”

“Well, we...”

“We have come as two unassuming merchants; Mr. Footer because of the value of a certain idea, and myself, Mr. Dawson, because of a recent inheritance received due to the blessed generosity of a deceased uncle, late of the West Indies...”

“This degree of detail is quite unnecessary,” interrupted Jonathon. “You want a loan. Why?”

“Well...” said Adam.

“On the grounds of a new machine, a machine of enormous, almost unheard of productivity, called a...”

“Power loom,” grinned Jonathon. “I know.”

“Why – yes – you said this was a secret!” said Squire Pounder, turning on Adam suddenly.

Adam was pale. “Well – it is – it was. How do you know?” he asked Jonathon. “Because of your time at the Carvey’s?”

“Well no, not really. I had no interest in business then,” replied Jonathon. “But I had a most enterprising group of workers in here just yesterday asking for a loan. A group of workers who run a factory on Laurence’s lands. A group of workers who, if their figures are any indication, will present you with stiff competition.”

“Thieves!” cried Adam.

“Perhaps,” smiled Jonathon. “But very productive thieves.”

“Did you grant them a loan?” asked Squire Pounder, wiping his brow.

“That is privileged information, of course,” replied Jonathon, “yet I can say that if your figures match theirs, you stand a good chance. It will do the bank good to have two companies in this industry. Makes everyone more efficient.”

“We can do better than them,” said Squire Pounder confidently. “We have contacts overseas!”

“That is certainly of value,” admitted Jonathon, leaning back in his chair and clasping his hands behind his head. “Now, the floor is yours,” he smiled. “Convince me.”

## CHAPTER SIXTY SEVEN

### *The Examination*

THE MORNING OF THE EXAMINATION DAWNED BRIGHT AND CLEAR. A hard rain had been falling all night, and London received the light of sunrise with all the dewy-eyed brightness of a new-bathed baby. The habitual filth of its common streets had been washed by circuitous paths into the swollen Thames, which had the appearance of boiling chocolate. The various animals used to traversing the narrow streets seemed unsteady in their gait, perhaps unused to stepping on hard stones rather than soft refuse.

The ecclesiastical council gathered at dawn. The Archbishop of London, a slow, ponderous man with the unlikely name of Galatius Mercury, gathered with twelve bishops and Lord Cerbes in a large cold room in Whitehall. Archbishop Mercury began the proceedings by setting down an enormous mug of coffee in front of him and apologizing in advance for what he promised would be constant slurping, but it was in fact the only way he could get his bowels to work.

He was a man who seemed to have cultivated the manners of a peasant; this was considered, by many who made it their hobby to trace the habits of high church officials, to be a canny persona, designed to make him more accessible to the ‘common people’. The truth of the matter, however, was that Archbishop Mercury was the son of a peasant who had obscured his past with grim effectiveness – one close friend who knew his secret compared him to a squid which squirts clouds of ink before darting to the bottom; Archbishop Mercury had commented that the

comparison was apt except for the direction. The squid hid the sun in order to escape to the roots of the ocean, while he had hidden his roots in order to gain access to the sun. Thus it was inaccurately surmised that Archbishop Mercury had in at least one of the secret ventricles of his heart strong sympathy for Mary.

The other twelve examiners were fairly undistinguished – men whose only claim to fame was that the examination of their histories would likely be assigned to troublesome graduate students in the distant future.

The room was chilly – early December in London has never been hospitable to large rooms, and the religious air of the meeting escaped the lips of the seated churchmen in hazy puffs. Lord Cerbes sat in the seat soon to be occupied by Mary, and held a thin cigar between his forefingers. He despised this habit of his lost youth – partly because he could never quite master the habit of smoking in a masculine manner, thumb to forefinger; every time he tried it his pinky rose maddeningly. However, since he had been solely responsible for bringing Mary to London, and would face serious consequences should it go poorly, he allowed himself this minor concession to a sleepless night.

Archbishop Mercury was rather renowned for the length of his sentences, and this habit did not take long to manifest itself. “Lord Cerbes,” he said, after a slurp of coffee that sounded like a frog being turned inside out, “we appreciate your presence here at such an early hour, and I personally, having been away for London for a week – and always it would seem at least one

step in front of the papers, or to one side or the other, such that we were involved in a grotesque dance, which it seemed at least one of us had never taken the trouble to learn, and so, it has fallen on me to lead this examination while being little prepared in knowledge or history as to the nature and content of the examinee, this Miss O'Donnel..."

The Archbishop's breath ran out at this point, but as it can be supposed he heard his bowels awakening, he combined an inhalation comparable to a wide wind striking his face with a violent slurp of coffee which sounded like a bugle being horribly overblown and then cracking. All heads shrank back at this sound and then turned quickly as the great doors opened and Stephen and Jack entered, apologizing for their lateness, but apparently their landlady had not tugged at the string they had tied to one or the other's toes and left outside the door. Lord Cerbes rose and gestured for them to sit. "Your graces," he said, "here are Stephen and Jack Truvault, brothers who share the JP position of Croyden, and have been the only ones thus far to have interviewed Miss O'Donnel."

"Ah, then you have much to tell us. Do you wish to submit questions or report independently?" Another slurp, this one with all the drippy explosiveness of a wet wind from the nether regions. Expressions froze, then relaxed as the source of the flapping noise was determined to be the less offensive end of Archbishop Mercury's troublesome digestive system.

Stephen rose. "We shall report. She is self-educated and remarkably intelligent."

Jack rose. "Knowledgeable of law and extremely evasive in her replies."

"Her argument thus far:"

"She grants that the source of aristocratic authority is divine right."

"But is more a proponent of natural law."

“And that there are certain inalienable rights.”

“But she would submit to direct royal command.”

“Within certain conditions.”

“But refused to admit her belief in God.”

“Which the whole foundation rests on.”

“That question she deferred to this council.”

“Ah,” said Archbishop Mercury, leaning forward to sip. Foreheads furrowed, waiting to hear, but the Archbishop merely frowned at something in the mug’s contents and set it back down again. His robes expanded mightily in preparation for a sentence.

“Well, it seems hardly likely that we should be called here – myself especially, I say at the risk of sounding pompous, perhaps even officious, which I strive mightily to avoid, even to the degree of finding something quite ludicrous in this hat, to ask such a simple question as: ‘do you believe in God?’ Let’s see – there are thirteen of us, even if we exclude the laity, who might have cause to speak, of only from experience, not knowledge, so if we include only our church representatives that leaves thirteen of us and only five words. If we extend the question to include her name – and grant ‘Miss’ the status of ‘word’, though it could also be categorized as her name – we have seven words and thirteen of us. We can, of course, append as many ‘holy’s’ and ‘almighty’s’ as we please to make it to thirteen words, yet it seems to me that we still vastly outnumber the problem.”

Lord Cerbes spoke: “It is my understanding that she is – unless her spirit be totally broken – unlikely to say simply ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in answer to the question.”



Mary was brought in some minutes later. Her head was bandaged, her dress simple and clean. She took her place at a low table in front of the rows of spectators. There was a chair, but she stood, gazing at the rows of bishops.

Archbishop Mercury stood. “You understand, Miss O’Donnel, that this is not a court, but rather an ecclesiastical Examination, and as such you will not be tried by a jury of your peers. We sentence you according to the dictates of doctrine and conscience. That sentence, should we believe you to be an unbeliever, will be death. Do you understand everything we have said?”

“No.”

“Please ask about anything which is unclear.”

“I am uneducated, and do not pretend to understand the doctrines of the High Anglican Church. It is my concern that I shall unwittingly profess a belief that may contradict certain doctrines. In order to fully satisfy the examination, I should like to be given leave to question them – you – on matters of doctrine as well, so as to better ascertain the overlap of beliefs between myself and the Church.”

A bishop coughed. “But it is my understanding that you spent some time in a nunnery.”

“That is true, but I was not a nun, and spent my time studying other matters. My understanding of theology is almost non-existent.

Another raised his hand. “But do you not attend church?”

“Due to the rural nature of the congregation, our priest’s sermons were necessarily – metaphorical. So I understand religion in a story-book sense, and am not competent to speak of doctrine.”

“Very well – since this is a matter of life and death, we allow you to ask questions of us. However, I would like to point out that we are not trying to corner you here, or trap you. Our concern is for your immortal soul. We will not try to trick you into heresy. Is that clear?”

“Yes.”

“Now, let us proceed. Miss O’Donnel – do you believe in God?”

“As the question is phrased, it cannot be answered.”

“And why is that?”

“Well, were I to ask you, do you believe in ‘Nog’, what would you say?”

Archbishop Mercury stared at her, settling his rump a little.

Mary smiled. “I submit that you would say that there is no way of answering the question until the word ‘Nog’ were more clearly defined.”

A bishop’s head moved forward slightly. “Miss O’Donnel – do you believe that you have a different idea of God than the majority of the people gathered in this room?”

“I don’t know, since I have never questioned them about the nature of their beliefs.”

An ecclesiastical lip curled. “Well, we cannot in the course of a day provide you with a thorough theological education.”

“No, of that I am sure. Yet do you believe that my answer will save or damn my immortal soul?”

“Certainly.”

“Then if I say ‘yes’ to the question of whether I believe in God, and it turns out that what I believe in is not God, then I am damned.”

Another bishop shook his head. “But child, if you follow the commandments of the Holy Church, you will be surely saved.”

“I agree – and would you say that it is important to follow these commandments blindly, or with a clear understanding?”

Archbishop Mercury said, “Certainly understanding is better – as educated men, it would be perverse to argue otherwise.”

“Well, I am keen to follow the commandments of my Church, if they will save my soul – and now my bishops have commanded me to tell me whether I believe in God, so I consider it crucial to be able to answer accurately.”

A grim bishop scowled. “This is perverse. I refuse to be examined in theology by a peasant girl.”

“I sympathize,” said Mary. “May I please have some water? I have lost a lot of blood recently. Thank you. And I know that to refrain from answering could cause my death at your hands, yet I do wish to please this examination, and of course it would be very easy for me to say ‘yes, I believe in this or that’, but I take these questions very seriously.”

The crowd murmured and buzzed, and pencils scratched madly on paper. To understand the fascination this line of questioning was engendering in the audience, it is important to remember just how deeply-rooted their belief in God was. To even question the existence of God was extremely dangerous. There was no separation of Church and State; the entire edifice of civil authority rested on the existence and infallibility of God. There was no real democracy, so the sole legitimacy of authority was the God appointed Kings to rule the world. The French

Revolution, moreover, had created the impression that to remove religion from the social contract meant loosing murder to run riot in the streets. So both the rulers and the ruled believed that either one believed in God, or the society ceased to exist. Mary's questions were very disturbing because she was like a murderer who was allowed to question the judges on why murder was wrong. If the judges could only answer 'because it is illegal', then their answer amounted to saying: 'it is wrong because we choose to make it wrong', and society's edicts are always weakened when mere preference is revealed where all formerly thought existed absolute ethics. Also, given the extraordinary publicity of the trial, countless pencils scratched whenever Mary spoke – so none of the bishops wanted to push the issue into theology. Neither did Archbishop Mercury, but his integrity outstripped those of his companions, and he also felt a kinship with the thin and bandaged girl before him. He raised his hand, and the assembled crowd hushed somewhat.

“Very well, let us take the questions seriously,” he said. “You say that you cannot describe your faith until we describe God. Very well. God is the supreme creator of the universe, all powerful, all knowing, the cause of everything, who himself is caused by nothing. He is eternal, unchanging, perfect, and has created man in His own image... Yes?”

Mary frowned, and lowered her hand. “Well, this is inexcusably rude, but I am quite full of questions and don't want to forget any of them.”

“Please.”

“I cannot fathom how an entity can be both all-powerful and all-knowing. If he knows everything, he knows what he will do in the future. If, however, he knows what he will do in the

future, he is powerless to change it, and so cannot be all-powerful. So, I cannot understand how he can be both all-powerful and all-knowing.”

“This is easily answered,” said a bishop to the left of the Archbishop, “and is related to a moral question regarding free will, which is: how can God punish a man for actions He already knows will be performed. In other words, how can we have free will if God knows what we are going to do? Is that an accurate restatement?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

“The answer is that to God, all of time is the same moment – there is no ‘future’ or ‘past’ for Him – therefore a man’s moral decision and his soul’s final destination occur at the same time for God. So, in reply to your example, God’s ‘future’ actions do not in any way contradict his ‘current’ knowledge, since these terms do not apply to Him.”

Mary nodded. “Thank you – you have clarified things immensely. So, I understand that, although we measure time as change, since God is eternal and unchanging, our concept of ‘time’ does not apply to Him.”

“That is correct.”

“Now, would you say that we can comprehend this state of timelessness?”

“What? What does that mean?”

“Excuse me,” she apologized. “Please describe to me what is meant by ‘no time’.”

“Well, everything is the same instant.”

“Yet there is no ‘instant’.”

“No – all time is one time.”

“Which itself is not time.”

“No.”

Mary shook her head. Little spots of blood were showing on her bandaged forehead, as if these questions made her brain bleed. “I’m sorry,” she said, “but I cannot solve this riddle – it seems to me that I am saying: this equals ‘y’, and then you say, no, it equals ‘x’, though ‘x’, in fact, does not equal itself. I do not think that we have clarified anything as yet. If, for instance, I ask you if you believe in an entity called ‘Nog’, and you ask me to define ‘Nog’, and I say that human concepts of time do not apply to Nog, you are unlikely to be able to decide whether you believe in Nog or not.”

“Yet these are matters of faith, Miss O’Donnel,” said Archbishop Mercury gently. “They can, no more than love, be pried into their component pieces. Do you believe that the world is round?”

“I do.”

“But you have no proof of this. You haven’t seen it for yourself.”

“There are rational proofs – a ship’s sails vanish over the horizon; the earth’s shadow on the moon is round. Drake has sailed around the world. And although I have not seen all of this myself, I understand the logic, and no-one is trying to tell me that the world is both round and square at the same time, or that the world is a shape which has no shape, or other such contradictory statements.”

“Has God never spoken to you?” he asked softly.

“I don’t understand that question. Do I hear voices in my head? Of course – well all argue with ourselves. But there is no voice which always takes precedence over the others. Do I dream of an all-wise, infinite Father? Of course – but I also dream of fairies with elephant

trunks, yet have not tried to persuade men of science to include this new species in their textbooks!” Mary did not seem angry, but audience could feel a strangeness in the air. An odd sense of awkwardness, incisiveness and barely-contained rage filled the chamber, like her imaginary elephant over that long-gone children’s table...

“Have you eaten, my dear?” asked Archbishop Mercury.

“I was too – too nervous, but I could eat now.”

“Do. I call a recess – I suspect that we have a lengthy day ahead of us.”

The bishops retired to an anteroom, and there was great consternation. Many different oppositions were raised to the current undertaking; they were, generally:

One cannot teach calculus to someone ignorant of calculus.

She was employing sophistical tricks unworthy of being raised before such an august council. (This was quickly shelved; the word ‘sophist’ naturally summoned that of ‘Socrates’, and none wanted that association.)

She was to be restricted to replies of ‘yes’ or ‘no’. (This was also rejected; Archbishop Mercury had given his assent to mutual questioning, and it would appear cowardly to withdraw it after the first skirmish.)

Far from being merely inquisitive, Miss O’Donnel had a hidden agenda, which was Satanic! (This last sally came from a bishop long suspected of using theology as a thin veneer for rank superstition, and he withdrew it grudgingly, under extreme protest.)

Finally, Archbishop Mercury spoke the following:

“My friends, this is not Russia or Germany. England has a long and proud tradition of civil liberties. Now liberty of belief is not one of them. It has been said that the true bargain is between ourselves and the aristocracy, that we legitimize their rule, and they collect our tithes. Now, Miss O’Donnel has caused the destruction of the house of Carvey, and as such represents a grave threat to our sworded brothers. Their laws, due to a curious and unexpected sequence of events – and Miss O’Donnel’s knowledge or manipulation of these laws is a matter of her own conscience – have been turned against them. However, we do not in this land rule the soul with the sword. I suggest that we be allowed to continue with our questioning without reference to God, but instead concentrate of the existence of the soul. If Miss O’Donnel grants that, we have established consciousness without material roots, and can then are in a much better position to prove to her the existence of God. I shall take the lead, for if she does not grant the existence of the soul she is doomed by the laws of the land – for if she does not grant the possibility of damnation, we cannot offer her salvation.”

After some more disagreement, this course of action was established. The bishops returned to the examination room, and the audience quickly took their seats again.

“Miss O’Donnel,” said Archbishop Mercury. “Have you eaten?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“With your permission, we wish to turn our examination to the existence of the soul. Now no doubt you will wish to call it a ‘gool’ or some such word, and we shall try to come to an understanding on those terms. Is that acceptable?”

“Yes.”



“Now, I shall define the soul in such terms, and you shall tell us whether you agree.”

“Very well,” said Mary. “Proceed.”

Archbishop Mercury shot her a glance at the presumption of the last word, and felt a tickle of sweat in one of his armpits.

“The soul,” he said, “is the immaterial and eternal seat of consciousness, which enters the body on conception and leaves it on death. It is the essence of what we term ‘animation’, thought, or life itself. Do you believe in such an entity?”

“I’m afraid I cannot say. Is it my understanding that the Church does not agree with the existence of ghosts.”

“That is correct.”

“That would be an area of exploration otherwise. As to the question of the soul – you say that it is eternal?”

“Yes.”

“And thus is different than all other forms of material life. The same goes for its immateriality, since no known life is either eternal or immaterial. This is also true for inanimate matter. Stones, of course, are neither immaterial nor eternal.”

“That is so.”

“So, would it be true to say that a soul has no characteristics in common with any other known thing?”

“Excluding God and His hosts, yes.”

“You have been so good as to exclude them. Is it also true that we cannot accurately grasp either existence without matter or existence without end?”

“I do not follow.”

“Well, these concepts are entirely defined by negations. For instance, ‘eternal life’ is an oxymoron, since all known life ends, just as all life is material. So, a soul is defined as what life is *not*, and the idea of it being immaterial and eternal is not a positive, but rather a negative definition. Thus, you are attempting to convince me of the existence of a colour which has characteristics simply defined as the opposite of all colours. As such, I do not really understand the definition, and must ask you for more clarity.”

A bishop could not resist. “So it is your belief that the soul does not leave the body after death?”

“Again, I cannot say, since I cannot comprehend what you mean by the soul. You are asking me whether  $2+2=\text{green}$ , or whether a square circle leaves the body after death.”

His eyes narrowed. “You do realize that you cannot abstain from these answers. If a positive agreement is not voiced by you, you are surely doomed!”

Mary’s eyes widened. “But I am not abstaining, gentle sirs. I am not saying: ‘I refuse to answer’. All I ask that I be given clear questions. For the sake of expediency, I will go further and anticipate further questions. You will ask me if I believe the Bible to be the literal word of God, and I shall reply what you have still not told me what God is – and I may further imperil my cause (though not the eternal cause of truth) by remarking that you yourselves do not believe that the Bible is the literal word of God, since Christ himself commands all who wish to follow Him to cast off all property, and it is my understanding that the Church as a whole – as well as yourselves individually – own property far in excess of the national norm. Now, I do not suggest that this indicates any immorality, for it is my understanding that the Church interprets this

commandment to indicate that the salvation of the soul is more important than the retention of property. The Church, then, cannot say that the Bible speaks literal truth.”

“But for heaven’s sake woman!” cried Archbishop Mercury. “What would become of morality in the absence of religion?”

“Let me ask you this, since you have been so generous in admitting my questions. May I sit? I am feeling a little dizzy. Thank you. My question is this: is God infinitely good?”

“Of course.”

“Now is God good because of what He does, or who He is?”

“God does not ‘do’; he simply ‘is’,” replied a bishop.

“Well, in the Old Testament God does many things – He floods and strikes down and rains frogs and parts waters. But if we exclude these acts as metaphorical, how do we know if God is good if He does not act? Or, conversely, if He does act, how are we to judge His actions? Or, even if we do not judge God by his actions or lack thereof, we know that this world is his creation, where millions starve and murder and steal. He gives us the parable of the Good Samaritan, yet He lets millions die when without effort he could save them.”

“That remains the domain of free will! It is up to man to save man. And should immaterial disaster strike a man down, well then he goes to heaven and all is well.”

“Not if he has no chance to repent. A good man sins once and is stuck by lightning on the way to church. An evil man lives to an old age and repents on his deathbed.”

“This is why we should not sin, because death can strike at any time.”

“And were a man to stand idle while another died in agony, we should not count him a good man. Yet we unite ‘God’ with ‘good’, though He does nothing to save the world!”

“God’s actions are not for us to judge. Since we do not possess the gift of omniscience, we must suspend judgement, since we cannot comprehend these things.”

“And believe without reason.”

“Precisely.”

“Then why does the church expend so much energy on theological questions? Augustine writes volumes trying to prove the existence of God and he is sainted. I will be killed for my questions.”

“Because you do not believe already!” cried a Bishop.

“As I have said, I cannot affirm what is beyond my understanding. You will tell me that the universe exists because God created it, which puts forth the axiom that for anything to exist, it must be created. Yet if God is allowed to exist without being created, why not the universe? To the answer of ‘why are we here’, you reply that what we see, who we are, was created by an incomprehensible being for unfathomable purposes – and then you ask if I believe this? It is not an answer! It is incredible!”

“So you do not believe it!”

“I cannot affirm or deny what is insufficiently defined. I am also not a little troubled that you learned gentlemen, who have spent thirteen lifetimes studying it, can do so little to define these matters for me!”

The bishops leaned forward, charging without standing. “But this is little more than rank skepticism! What do you believe in then?”

“I believe that I am standing here speaking with you. I believe in the scaffold being prepared for me. I believe in my neck. And gravity.”

“And on what grounds do you believe that?” asked Archbishop Mercury gently. “Could this not all be a dream?”

“I know that it is not.”

“On what grounds?”

“Dreams contradict themselves; what I wake to remains constant.”

“Now, you do realize that we do not require a positive declaration of disbelief. Abstaining from the question will not save you, Mary. I well understand the questions which bar your heart from God; they are the vultures which circle every man and woman in the question of faith. All I ask is that you consider these facts – and facts they are – and this comes from love within me – partly to save your life, of course, but more from love of your immortal soul, which writhes, I believe, under the heel of your formidable intellect. Across the whole world, in every society, in every land, there exists in almost every soul a deep and abiding faith in God. Do you consider it wise to put your uneducated intellectual judgement against the certainty of countless million human souls? Please,” he said, raising his hands, “the question is partly rhetorical – I intend only to raise some doubt in your skepticism, as it were. Furthermore, let me take my priestly hat off and speak for a layperson. Let us say that the question of existence of God remains open – do you not see the risk of your position? All religions agree that faith is the road to heaven – if there is no God, but you believe anyway, you go to heaven. What have you lost? Some Sunday mornings singing in a warm church. What have you gained – eternal bliss! What about the other option, the option of skepticism? Suppose you do not believe and there is no God. You have gained little – but if you do not believe and there is a God, why then you spend an eternity in endless torment!

“I know that there are many logical reasons to dispute this scale, but I ask you to listen to your heart, not your head, for God speaks in love, not syllogisms. The soul meets God in serenity, in acceptance, in wonder at the complexity and beauty of creation, the wonder and fragility of your fellow man. I have struggled with all the questions you raise, my dear, and I have found that a bird, a sunrise, the birth of a child, are where God’s hand is truly to be seen. It is my belief that the most passionate develop reason out of fear of their passion, and that God is very strong in you. Why else would you fight so hard? I do not doubt that you have suffered greatly in your young life; there has been poverty and want, of course, but what I see is a brilliant mind that has developed in the absence of gentle care and loving guidance. But there are some that are able to see the wonder that you are. We are not all peasants. The Church is here to embrace you, not chastise you. The Church is the great refuge for brilliant minds, for deep and powerful hearts such as yours. You have raised yourself, my dear, and like any child who has been her own parent you have discipline where you should have love, and license where you should have strictness. Your great and obvious powers have hitherto warred with the world – and well I understand that battle, for the world you have known has rejected and tried in its blindness to murder what is best and most pure in your soul. But there is another world, Mary, a world where you can be seen and loved for who you are. A world that will nurture all that is great and magical in your heart. This is the world I offer you. I ask for faith – not in God, for that may be slow in coming for you, but faith in the good motives of those who can see your greatness and love you the more for it. In this circle you shall be accepted for all the qualities that have made you a homeless wanderer. Take that step, Mary. Rise above your anger and take a step towards open arms. Do not let your rage carve the world into the mask of a hunter.”

Mary stood for a long moment after the Archbishop's passionate speech, her head lowered. When she looked up, her eyes were wet with tears. She gazed at Archbishop Mercury for almost a minute.

"May..." she whispered. "May I join this world if I do not affirm that God exists?"

"Were we philosophers, I would say yes. But we are men of God. But I believe that it may be through me that God speaks to you."

Mary smiled and blinked, laughing suddenly. "Funny – I always thought He'd be taller. Sorry – that was just nerves. Of course you tempt me – but in all your heartfelt poetry this one fact stands clear. You claim to value what is most precious in me – and there is more in me that is precious that either of us can know – but what I find eternally precious are my questions, and it precisely this which you require I destroy in order to join you. You do not love me – that would break me – and you cannot claim to speak in love – or you would not make this request. The shadow of the gallows stretch long over this conversation – I know that you wish to save me from death, but by virtue – or the lack of it! – of you being able to save or kill me you cannot offer me my life without destroying what is most precious in me."

There was a sob in the audience. Kay closed her eyes and raised a handkerchief to her face. Outside, the high sun drew a shroud of clouds over its ashen face, and the room darkened.

There was a long pause, then Archbishop Mercury spoke.

“This examination is at an end. Mary O’Donnel, we have found you guilty of heresy against the most Holy Anglican Church, in that you refuse to affirm the existence of God or the immortal soul. Thus you cannot affirm the legitimacy of our civil rulers, since they derive their authority from divine dispensation. This would be considered High Treason in a court of secular law, but has little relevance here.” He took a deep breath. “It is thus the sentence of this court that you be taken to Newgate prison and from there be taken to a place of execution and hung by the neck until you be dead.”

He raised his eyes to Mary. “And may God have mercy on your soul.”

She smiled, her eyes brimming with tears. “And may Nog have mercy on your goal.”

As she was being led away, Kay leapt forward and grabbed Mary’s hand. “Oh Mary – Mary – it is the hardest thing – you are being put to death unjustly.”

“Kay, don’t be silly,” replied Mary. “Would you rather I were put to death justly?”



## CHAPTER SIXTY EIGHT

### *A Night in Newgate*

THERE ARE DISSENTERS TO EVEN THE MOST WIDELY-HELD PREJUDICES, and it is through these dissenters that prejudices fall. There is no fathoming the source of the jailer's sympathy for the rights of women – he may have had a wonderful mother, he may have wanted to be a woman, but the most likely explanation is that, being a jailer, he was exposed to such a wretched procession of men that, were he to believe that women were the inferior sex, he would have expected that every time he climbed from the hellish depths of his job to the light he would find that civilization had been entirely scrubbed from existence by a God who, though He may have been infinite, found that His patience was not.

Whatever the reason for Samuel's sympathy for women, he was very gentle towards his newest and very short-lived inmate. When he heard that he was receiving a heretic, he steeled himself and set his teeth in a grim stance, for he was used to rather wide-eyed lunatics who cursed God in such wild tones that he was generally obliged to grapple and gag them. When he saw a woman, he spoke to the warden, asking why she was given to his care, and received the response that heretics always went in the same cell, at the bottom, and that this one being a woman in form mattered little, since she was a damned, damned, soulless creature anyway.

Samuel was a man of rather unconsidered religious opinions, and did not think deeply on the question of killing people for their religious beliefs, but he could not help but think that Mary

O'Donnell was far from soulless. In fact, he got the distinct impression that she was somewhat overcharged with whatever matter the soul was charged with, and the odd thought struck him that, were she to fall in flames to hell, the entire infernal land would creak and groan under her weight. And should she go to heaven (he thought for a moment before dismissing the thought) the host of angels, though infinite in number, would surely bulge and scatter in the vehemence of her entrance.

Reporters came to speak with her – they were not the sober-suited weighty men of letters who represented the more sedate and conservative elements of the press, but rather a species of spidery unshaven radicals, who trooped in and sat with her for hours, smoking in the grim depths of her cell, scribbling madly by candlelight. Mary spoke softly about matters that Samuel did not follow very well, except that she seemed very much in favour of merchants and very down on the aristocracy. He kept a list of the people who came to see her, though names such as Xavier P. Scribblehead did not give him much faith as to their accuracy.

Finally a woman came down in the early hours of the morning. She was a woman of rare beauty, who seemed to be some sort of celestial squirrel, in that she carried her physical wealth in her plump cheeks. Samuel was unused to beauty, and stared at her in wonder – he felt the radiance of loveliness against his skin in a strangely subterranean manner, as the restless dreams of late afternoon naps are altered when a square of sunlight slowly slide over the sleeper's eyes. He duly wrote down her name, which was odd to him, for his instinct of class – so well-honed in English society – did not indicate her aristocracy. Still, he bowed, for good measure and showed

Lady Bricknell into the cell room. Mary was asleep, her head lolling against the wet brick of the wall. Lady Bricknell put her finger against her lips and soundlessly moved the single chair forward and sat, her knees touching the bars. Samuel shrugged and closed the door softly, leaving the pair in peace.

Lady Bricknell removed her hat and leaned forward; her nostrils widened, as if trying to catch the scent of Mary's dreams.

Mary was in the throes of an old, old dream, wherein she was being chased through a rich mansion by a froth-nosed and silent horse, until she stood in front of a wide glass of French doors overlooking a churning fountain. This was usually her last stand, and the silent horse would burst through the far doors and regard her with black eyes, dripping foam on the oriental rug, and everything was silent save for the soft, soft thuds of foam landing on the carpet, which sounded like a faint irregular heartbeat, and then all of a sudden the horse would rush forward – its legs remaining still – and this would terrify Mary so much she would gasp awake.

But this time there was no fear; she stood her ground and exhaled mightily as the horse struck her, throwing her arms wide, and they sailed through the French doors, as if one, and fell into the deep pool below, and now it was the horse who was afraid, and Mary saw the stars squiggling above the rippling water high above her like mad darting fireflies...

And then there was a struggle to awake, but Mary did not want to awake; she felt at peace under the dark water, and did not want to rise, but something rose under her and propelled her to the surface, and she opened her eyes and saw little points of light flickering above her, and her neck ached.

“Mary,” said a gentle, sad voice, and something in Mary’s memory closed in on itself, and she took a deep breath and stifled a sob and lifted her hand and whispered, “Not yet,” and resumed her seat, the seat she had occupied since the night of the fire, when deep in a cloud of sparks she had lost her breath to Laurence’s grip and stared into his murderous eyes. Normally so wild in the whirlwind of her own passions and terrors, she had felt herself elevated in that moment to a still seat high above herself, where she could watch the mad stampedes of her flaming wildebeests with impunity. Such must the eye of a fighting sailor rest sad and complete should his head fly far above the savagery of a mighty storm and look down through the roiling smoke and jagged lightning to the mad caricature of a headless body fighting for life. But she was able to think clearly, which she was grateful to experience, even if just for a few days before death; which, even in her present state of clarity and calm, could not come soon enough. It struck her that the feelings one possesses on death could be what one feels for eternity, and this is what she would choose among any of the passions which had always torn at her young frame.

“Mary,” the voice said again, and she lifted her head forward, feeling dizzy as the sparkles above her tilted like a swinging night sky. A hooded woman sat across from her. As Mary watched, the woman leaned forward and dipped her head, lifting her cowl. Even in the guttering

candlelight – and even given time’s work on her blonde hair, which is to darken its youthful purity before silvering it in hopeful veneration – she recognized the colour, and so the woman.

“Lady!” she whispered.

“Mary!” cried the woman, giving vent to sobs, and she threw herself at the bars, her hands groping forward, and Mary felt her body rising to meet the fingers, caressing only air, and she fell against the bars and gripped Lady’s hair and surrendered to the infant sensuality of pure touch, and yearned in glowing, aching joy as Lady’s hands roamed over her hair, her face, her shoulders, and pressed her forehead against the bars, to Lady’s kissing lips.

“I know – I remember you don’t like to be touched,” whispered Lady, “but as a sister, which we are to the flesh, the only witnesses to each other’s happiest times...”

Mary cried then; her body, her skin, her very pores cried out to be filled, and she groaned as she pressed herself against the rusty bars and surrendered herself to the wide warmth beyond.

At length her sobs subsided, and she twisted against the wall and let her legs flop long, and Lady sat down too and they linked arms through the bars and held each other’s hands and tickled each other’s forearms and Mary felt a new peace; it was like her spine oozed warm caramel and it filled her flesh to overflowing.

“So did you marry the Josh?” asked Mary, and they laughed, remembering the boy who tied poems to the trees where Lady walked and tossed her hair.

“No, my father married me off to Mr. Bricknell, two counties over, much to the advantage of the family. But then,” she smiled, “he was always good at breeding his livestock.”

They laughed at men then, the laughter that women need to survive some men. Mary touched her lips. “I’m sorry – I’m sorry you lost him.”

“Yes,” replied Lady simply. “But if I am a good woman, and I hope I am, we shall not meet in the afterlife.”

And they laughed again, and cried a little more, and it was the laughter of sisterhood, which outlasts all the terminal affections of men.

“Do you have children?” asked Mary.

“Yes – three – two girls and a boy. Of course, I named my first girl Mary, but she died, poor thing, so I named the second Mary, but she died as well, but the third one is still alive. Not bright, of course, not at all, but you know how shallow and vain blonde girls are.”

“Yes – they are most silly. Are you happy?”

“Well, my husband travels a great deal... You know, I have thought of you often – not every day – everyone says ‘not a day passes when I don’t think of you’ – wait – is that right?”

“A double negative, but right.”

“Well I would say that I thought of you every three days – maybe three and a half. No – three is right. Oh my maths! I would think of you coming to my house and keeping me company.”

“So selfish! But I would live in your attic, quiet as a mouse.”

“Well of course – you always spoiled me. You always watched me. I was very noble in those days. I thought of you as my lady-in-waiting. Now I have two, but they’re not half so clever as you. they don’t tell me stories about armies. I tell them your stories.”

“Now that’s immortality!” smiled Mary, and then she suddenly turned towards Lady. “Stay with me until morning,” she whispered. “I need you, and am more grateful than I can say that you have come.”

“I have buried four children,” said Lady quietly. “Of course I will stay with you – even to the scaffold itself, my sister.”

And Mary closed her eyes for a moment, and then she opened her mouth and they talked until dawn, and all secrets were set free; the memories of secret places, of the places on the riverbank that were best to sit, of the shape of trees long gone and what they suggested, and the funniest habits of people long dead or scattered, of hidden places to avoid scolding, of boys now fathers and the foolishness of their fumbling touches, of learning to dance and the last skinned knees of childhood and all the secret ways children look at the world, all the foolish wonder of our first and most elemental impressions, and as they spoke they both felt that their lives took on some kind of shape, for there can be no plots without reference to our first chapters, and there was nothing between them but sweet words and old scenes, scenes so old they were more fresh than the dank prison they sat in, and they smiled and wept in alternation until it seemed their cheeks were aching mounds of lost salt.

Finally they felt the coming of the dawn – there was no evidence of it in their deep dungeon, but they felt it nonetheless. It was hard to describe Mary’s state – she was not composed, nor serene, but she was very still. Life crouched within her, watching, like a toddler beside the body of a fallen mother.

A priest was brought down, and Samuel entered and unlocked Mary’s cell. The two women stood slowly, stiffly. Mary’s legs buckled, and Lady leaned down and massaged her calves.

“One moment,” said Lady.

“My legs are asleep. Thank you,” added Mary.

Within a few moments, she could stand. “It’s like walking on hooves,” she murmured. They began mounting the stairs towards the surface. The general population of the prison was aware of the presence of their famous guest, and many catcalls and helpful suggestions rang through the frozen air.

“I cannot decide if I want to live,” whispered Mary, and Lady bent her golden head to hear. “If there is an afterlife, I should like to haunt the Archbishop, which would prove him wrong about ghosts, but he would have been right about the soul... No, I would let him be, for uncertainty is best. I wish I had been more uncertain... But then I would have achieved nothing, so... Well at least there will be an end to questions. I am composed, like a sheet of music, and soon I shall be decomposed... Worm to frog, frog to foul, foul to man, man to worm... I could have run at any time. I am glad to finally be considered threatening. You have to fight wildly sometimes for your enemies to notice you. These lies will not be undone in our lifetimes – well mine for certain. They think I am a devil, but the Devil is not a heretic – he believes with every



stone in his heart... That wasn't – my fight. Everything I took away never existed to begin with. Fog curses the dawn. Ah me. The passions lead you here, then vanish to find a new victim. Some newborn child is now crying for no reason, no reason that shall ever be discovered..."

They came out into the street, and policemen kept the crowd back. There were religious fanatics with crude signs of 'REPENT!' and numbered bible verses – *as if I could look them up now*, thought Mary briefly. Some dropped to their knees as Mary was loaded into a cart; they clutched and cried out to the clear heavens and a flurry of pigeons exploded from eavestroughs and scattered short lazy pigeon distances before stumbling to earth.

The colours were bright – so bright, thought Mary, that she wondered whether she had stumbled and dashed her brains out against the cart, and was now seeing with the senses of the soul, and felt a stab of horror that the afterlife might be just – just a continuation of life with all the same confusion – and –

"Mary! My daughter!" screamed a voice, and Mary turned her head to see a wild-haired woman with gray eyes and angular cheeks and red gums. "Twas I who left thee at the Jigger farm – I love thee and will see thee in heaven!"

"She is my daughter, slut!" cried a fat woman with short hair and blood vessels stretching her cheeks. She pushed the first woman in the face.

"My daughter! My daughter!" cried the crowd in great glee, attempting to lift the fat woman. Mary closed her eyes. Her soul was damned, saved, cursed for its hellish pursuits and praised for its heavenly clarity – every thought was called out from the roiling crowd. Mary felt the grating

squiggle of the wagon's wheels as the men pulling her laboured through the crowds. She opened her eyes and saw everything clearly. Each hair on each head stood bright and clustered; each cobblestone was a planet, each beam of wood a wide desert, each thatched roof a frozen waterfall of tight wheat. She saw the alleys slowly swinging past her sight, and wondered where they led, what was the shape of each room behind each barred door.

*Twelve people are fornicating this moment – sixteen children are being born – twelve brides bemoan their dresses – two best men have lost the rings... But it is not I who will end to the world; it is the world that will end to me...*

There was the scaffold, on top of a raised platform. Mary looked down and loosened her fingers from her palms. *I hate that it is a show*, and suddenly could not remember whether she ate the peas she used to do math problems when she was a very young child, when the cook had caught her in the pantry... *If I could eat anything now, what would it be?* she wondered, and the reply came: *myself. I don't care how they remember my end; I am a short morning's entertainment. Should I slap the hangman?* she thought, then saw the Carvey's front lawn and the smoking rolling corpses and thought: *that would be most unjust...*

She stepped down from the cart and Lady crashed through the arms of the policemen and held her tightly, crying over and over: "Don't be afraid, you are loved at once..." She was pulled away and Mary gazed at her face, then blew her a kiss, a tear trickling from her eye. *Does*

*my liver know it will die? My eyes know – they look at nothing but the scaffold – my hands know – they clench and sweat. My feet know not; neither does my hair...*

A priest droned in Latin by her side; she swerved and knocked him with her hip, sending his Bible flying. Then she ran up the steps – there was a great roar in the crowd, and cries of ‘Run, Mary, RUN!’”, and she stood before the hangman who offered her a hood. She nodded – *I would nothing rather than my fellow men.* The rough hood was placed over her head, and she sniffed deeply. *Do they rinse them?* she wondered, but could smell only the slight wood of honest burlap. Then she calmed; then she relaxed; all her muscles seemed to fade into gentle obscurity, and she thought: *here, there – now my body knows – every cell wears a hood and is ready...* And she felt the noose slip around her neck and opened her eyes wide and saw the million million stars of the sun through the burlap and she felt all her mad energy racing around her body – for the first time ever she felt the enormity of her power as it raced from leg to arm to spine, trying each locked door, fumbling for a hidden catch on every smooth and veined wall – and then – and then that energy, whatever it was, the sum total of her being, well then it ceased its mad rummaging – it sat poised in her great heart like a Persian King, like a great sultan, and every pore of her skin opened like an eye, and with great, oceanic calm, she said with one breath:

“Let us see.”

And then she fell – it was short, surprising, and then the starts in her eyes jerked and a terrible strangeness invaded her body and she felt that her head was the only thing about her but

there were great earthquakes below it and the colours displayed themselves like dancers for the last time and then ran together into a white so bright that

And then – and then – well then one of several things happened. First, all the infinite and subtle orchestras of chemistry and electricity ceased their motions and lay stagnant and cooling, and nothing left Mary at all, and she felt no more in death than she had felt before birth, and in an instant she fell from the wild and artistic heights of thought and passion to a flat mattress of pure meat...

Or, second, her goal *did* leave her body and, clutching itself like a sailor attempting to fold a flag in a high wind it was drawn by trackless paths to a place of judgement, where minds more subtle than thought can conceive could judge her rights and wrongs in the proper context of infinite knowledge, which alone can untangle choice from circumstance, imagination from responsibility, ends from means, vengeance from just provocation...

Or – or – or she – or *it*, since it can no longer be he or she – or it fell into the earth and lay in wait, looking at its existence with all the leisure of patient watching and all the knowledge of a finished book, until it found a potential life which warmed its interest, and it flowed into a new vessel to begin its instruction once more...

## CHAPTER SIXTY NINE

### *A Funeral*

*SHE WOULD HAVE WANTED A BIGGER FUNERAL*, thought Laurence as his boots crunched in the deep frost. Unusual snow fell around the smallish party; Lord Cerbes was there, and Lydia and Kay and Jonathon. The ground was cold – so frozen that they heard the undignified axe-like hacking of the earth as they carried the coffin up the winding hill. The path was desperately slippery, which Laurence was grateful for, since it gave him the chance to think of something other than himself. Great grief is a weakness and a memory and a toppling-over of mute history – we are quite buried, and the world is eclipsed.

The depth of his loss surprised Laurence. Lives become intertwined for many, many reasons other than love – and the loss without love is the hardest of all – we lose the hope of love, and mourn for two.

Kay was completely devastated. It was she who had found their mother. She had not been alone at the end – Father Jones was with her, and it was small comfort to her children that she was able to receive her last rites, and to die in the company of a priest. Lady Barbara's religious beliefs had seemed centered around social and class decorum, but she had reverted to a child-like state towards the end, and like most children probably saw God in the details of the wallpaper and the stubble of her priest. While both Laurence and Kay felt awful for being at Mary's hanging when their mother died – and Laurence in particular felt a dull rage at this final, almost

posthumous murder of Mary's, for he did not doubt that his mother died with her nest. Poor Kay, though, was inconsolable. It always falls to women to bring life into this world, and almost always to smooth its passage hence. Perhaps men, being unable to create life, cannot stand in the face of its passing; perhaps the womb is the foundation for the tomb – but for Kay, who always circled her femininity at an awkward distance, not being at her mother's deathbed made her despair of ever being a true woman. Jonathon was very kind to her, however, and suggested that she write her mother's eulogy, which she fell to with great energy and dedication, finding it the hardest thing she had ever done, and welcoming the difficulty with open arms. Jonathon sat with her late into the night. He listened to Kay describe her relationship with her mother, and was wise enough not to say that she must speak only of love and affection, but rather attempt to synthesize the wild complexity into fair and accurate statements, and by about 5 o'clock in the morning, she was relatively satisfied, and completely out of tears.

Now the snow fell, and they made their slow and slippery way towards the late Lord Carvey's grave, for Lady Barbara was of course to lie beside him. It seemed an odd proximity to Laurence, since they had never slept so close together in real life – *save at least twice*, the thought crossed him. Father Jones read the service, and then Kay rose and delivered the following eulogy:

“In her own way, Mother would have liked it that it was snowing today, because we really had to concentrate on our steps, lest we fall. Concentration and discipline were very important to her, and woe betide any who let their mind wander! She lost her husband young, and though she

possessed neither a tender nor sentimental heart, she was very dedicated to raising her children. She was always enormously proud of Larry, and certainly did her best with me, though as a potter the clay that I was, was rarely to her liking.

“She was inflexible, and short-tempered and often hard to get along with – but I reserve judgement on that, to some degree, because both Larry and I were very different from her, and I have yet to experience what it’s like trying to raise children so foreign to my own nature.

“She read – she was very literate, though her husband’s literature was not always to her own liking. She gave Larry and I a love affair with books. She was passionate about the right and wrong way to do things, both ethically and socially, and thought in her own mind that society was likely to come to a very bad end indeed.

“It was, in a sense, her misfortune to be born in a time of great change. The wisdom she tried so hard to bestow on Larry and myself did not always hit the mark. Like most people we thought her ideas antiquated, though it has struck me since that, had we taken her advice, both our home and our mother might have been saved. This is the tragedy of many families – everyone is right, but no-one listens. I was always too busy keeping my mother at bay to really get to know her – perhaps that is why she wanted me to – to get married young – with my own husband and home I might have been strong enough to listen to her. But none of that came to pass, and now I shall think of her in my life to come, and I shall ask her advice in times of trouble, and I shall try to listen to her, in a way I was never able to when she was alive.”

Kay stood still for a moment, then nodded at Laurence, who dug a spadeful of cold ground and threw it on the narrow coffin.





## CHAPTER SEVENTY

### *Laurence's Loss*

FAMILIES CAN BE TIDAL IN THEIR AFFECTIONS TO POTENTIAL MEMBERS; when the tide is coming in, all wrongs are submerged. When the tide is receding, however, hurts rise like rocks and old wrecks. Laurence felt this on entering the Carvey mansion for what he hoped was not the last time. He was without a father – he had felt this ache growing in him for the past few months, and it reached its highest point that morning.

He was shown into the study. Lord Cerbes rose. Lydia was not there.

“Lord Carvey,” said the older man.

“Good morning, Lord Cerbes,” said Laurence. “I am terribly sorry about all that has happened between us. I have no choice but to return the sheep, and I can at least pay for that.”

Lord Cerbes nodded. “Your losses certainly outstrip mine, and for that I am sorry. What will you do now?”

“I have an offer of employment,” he said, passing a hand over his eyes.

“You have always been part of the working class, Laurence,” said Lord Cerbes gently. “And I mean no disrespect by that statement.”

“I am not sure how much I want to say.”

“That is entirely up to you, of course, but it is my belief that what is in our heart regarding others should not remain there.”

“Then – then can I say that I truly hoped to join your family. My intentions towards Lydia were always of the highest...” He paused. “I know that you do not scorn the middle class – perhaps the lower middle class would be more – appropriate – but I can no longer even imagine being able to provide for Lydia in the manner to which she has become accustomed.”

Lord Cerbes looked at him. “Would you like a coffee?”

“Yes, please.”

Coffee was brought. Silver trays and fine china. Laurence closed his eyes, feeling like a first class passenger treading water after the ship has gone down.

“There is, of course, our business matters, which have irrevocably foundered. Now of course marriage is a business matter as well, no matter what the poets say. This is a most delicate matter. Your home is gone, your mother has passed on, Mary is no more, and your sister is engaged to Mr. Eddsworth. Your fortune – were you able to recover any money from Mary?”

Laurence shook his head.

“Your fortune, then, is no more. Yet you are an intelligent young man. It may be said that life has been very keen to impress upon you certain lessons, and sometimes life does not spare the rod in the cultivation of wisdom. I cannot say whether that is true or not, but I do believe that tragedy can bring clarity.”

“It is a lack of clarity which brings tragedy; in that I concur.”

“What was unclear, Laurence?” asked Lord Cerbes, curious.

“What is vanity but a lack of limitations? I was the apple of my mother’s eye, and I ate that apple, mistaking it for truth. Sometimes, when you set out to change the world, the world changes you. I am reduced to poverty because I never saw the poor as human. I took

responsibility for myself and away from others. We are always what we choose to be. I chose to ignore that, and am now no longer what I was. And..."

"And?"

"And I listened to women..."

"Go on."

"I – listened to the wrong women. Lydia always told me the truth. When you don't listen, life yells louder until you do. I thought I was doing the right thing, and when you think something is right, you take all counsel against it as – as – deeply wrong. I alone should take responsibility, I thought. But if responsibility is a value for humanity, and we are all human, then responsibility must be for all..."

"That is so, I think. It is better that this should happen while you are still quite young. You may end up wiser than us all."

"The cost is – is very high. I had planned to live my life without regrets. Everything I have lost – but one – was about the past. I inherited my lands, my house, my station, my family..."

"But one?"

Laurence took a deep breath. "I have lost Lydia, I think; she does not respond to my letters. Lydia was my future."

"That is what we thought. It has been very hard for her."

Laurence nodded. "I cannot ask if there is a chance; her lack of communication is clear."

The door opened, and Lydia entered. "Father, can I speak to Larry alone?"

Lord Cerbes nodded, then shook Laurence's hand and left them.

Laurence could barely look at her. He felt an open wound, an deep need, and sheltered it.

“You deserved a reply,” said Lydia. “For everything we felt, you – oh Larry I am so, so sorry about what has happened. I can’t work, can’t sleep. I feel something unholy has come between us. I cannot match you.” She took a seat, then rose again, shaking her head. “There is no nobility in suffering, but from suffering can come nobility. I was not clear in my warnings, because I wanted you to see for yourself...”

“You were not unclear...” He could not say her name.

She shook her head violently. “Damn it – it was all clear in my head this morning! I cannot reconcile who you were and who you are. It’s like some Greek play... Was this susceptibility a singular weakness? Even that is unfair. I have never experienced what you have experienced. Who have you become?”

Laurence’s shoulders hunched together. “I tried to keep it from you in my letters. There is a purity about you that – that I felt ashamed before. You are – esthetically – you sing about tragedy... Every strong man flees when he feels weak; that is... I wanted to present my best to you – even the desire to do good – what I thought was good – was tribute. Because I did not know myself, I could not give myself, all of myself, to you. I miss my father; I have become a caricature of manhood. I have made mistakes, but I was teaching myself...”

“And I should not care that you are poor. I have money enough... But I will not feel like a woman... No – that is to say you would not feel like a man. That is unfair. But would I have to take care of you? Mary is not the only evil...”

“You do not respect me.”

“No – that is...”

“I can see that; there is something... All I need is the truth. I may have made a mistake later, and woken up to eyes that scorned – not scorned; I know that your intentions are the best...”

“In my mind’s eye, I take you in; that feels wonderful in the moment, but – but I cannot see the long term of that... I know – I don’t know what is idealism and what is nature.”

He took a step towards her. “Lydia, I have been to the very edges of myself. On the porch of my burning home, I almost killed her. Your very life is artistic. I have torn all refinery from my soul. I have been to where I am nothing but a predator, where all the rules of the world come from. I have won what is real in me. You want me to look a certain way; you fell in love with a portrait.”

“I know...” she whispered. “I know. I do now know if I can...”

“And I, too, fell in love with a portrait. You will age; of course beautifully, but who you are as you are now will fade.”

“You are too far ahead...”

“But what I know is that there is an essence to me, and an essence to you. My heart was torn open, and so I can open yours. Life is elemental, that is the life that transcends aging. You will be forever worshipped, as you are now, but I can offer you something true, something that is not worship, but knowledge.”

“But – how? You do not know my essence.” She raised her eyes to his, and a strange thing happened. Her beauty fell away from her face; it was muscles and skin, flesh that was already falling away from itself, to the sink of history. His eyes widened.

“Lydia – I do see you. Our souls spoke to each other at the beginning, and we found reasons for that speaking. Those reasons are not the truth of us. You have great courage; you would kill for your young. You believe in evil; I believe in evil. You do good – I have done good despite myself. We understand the marrow of right and wrong...” But it was no good; he could feel the words draining away from him. Something pressed against his heart, a violence of passion and incomprehension. She felt it, and drew back.

“Larry, I cannot go where you are. It is an experience I cannot have.”

“No...” he murmured, his heart heavy. “This truth is not mine alone, but it is one we cannot share.”

A tear trickled from her eye. “I will always admire you...”

“And I you. And when you sing of passion and loss, I shall hear what you do not. And that will be our epitaph.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTY ONE

### *A Farewell*

NATURE IS NEVER SLOW TO RECLAIM HER OWN. Dorset is covered with little buildings, and they go from spotless to rustic in a single season. The nails are taken, the windows reused, and every passing vagabond takes whatever wood he can find for a little heat. Within a few years, the rain bests the thatch, and within a single generation it can take an anthropological eye to separate an little building from a Roman ruin.

The loom factory was heavily pilfered. The prying fingers of men and the endless drumming fingertips of nature aged it rapidly; the rapidity of its construction helped sag it to pure dilapidation with remarkable efficiency.

When spring came, the fading building seemed from the inside to be a sad cathedral to the universal religion of lost hopes. Warming light began to shine in through the cracked walls and gaping windows; an unusual hot spell managed to wake the cold to milder, and then dry the mildew to a carpenter's tang of dried and unhealthy wood.

But – something seemed to wait in the factory – something slumbered; the hopes had been so great, and the execution so aborted, that some shard of the future seemed to hang in mute expectation with the dust and bird droppings and flickering bats.

So it stood one day in mid April when the sound of horses approached. The thudding and champing drew close, then a group of people could be heard dismounting. A strong pair of hands opened the door, then a curse broke the air as the door collapsed to one side. A man's head peered cautiously in, then withdrew.

"It's a right heartbreaking wreck!" cried a voice.

"Ah yes, Mr. Footer," replied another man, "but we have the capital now, and age is made young in the mirror of bright coin – I feel it in my bones!"

"Right you may be, Squire Pounder, but this be a very aged face to paint young cheeks on."

Laurence entered; his hair and beard were very short, and he looked both younger and a lot less medieval. "Jonathon – come and look at the economics of tomorrow!"

"Wait," called Jonathon from outside. "Kay is stuck in her stirrup!"

"I can do it myself, Jon," said Kay.

Jonathon came in dressed in a suit which did not seem at ease in the country – the fabric seemed to recoil from the omnipresent dust and vegetation.

"It is as I thought," he said. "You would be wiser to redirect your capital from reclaiming this dungeon of dirt and direct it towards a new building, nearer the trade routes."

"An old conversation," replied Squire Pounder, "and one already concluded. We are more interested in our new manager than his old building."

"As you see fit."

"Oh Jon don't be so pompous," said Kay.

"I'm a banker – we are pompous!"



Laurence strode forward and tore the covering from a loom. Dust rose and he stepped backwards.

“Not too bad,” he said, touching the wooden frame. “Not much the worse for wear.”

“And we hire *real* workers this time,” said Adam.

Laurence turned and smiled at him. “I may be wrong, but I believe I have learned just that much about justice.”