

SUNDAY, 26 DECEMBER—MONDAY, 27 DECEMBER 1920

Womankind is imprudent and soft or flexible. Imprudent
because she cannot consider with wisdom and reason the
things she hears and sees; and soft she is
because she is easily bowed.

—JOHN CHRYSOSTOM (c. 347–407)

I SAT BACK in my chair, jabbed the cap onto my pen, threw it into the drawer, and abandoned myself to the flood of satisfaction, relief, and anticipation that was let loose by that simple action. The satisfaction was for the essay whose last endnote I had just corrected, the distillation of several months' hard work and my first effort as a mature scholar: It was a solid piece of work, ringing true and clear on the page. The relief I felt was not for the writing, but for the concomitant fact that, thanks to my preoccupation, I had survived the compulsory Christmas revels, a fête which had reached a fever pitch in this, the last year of my aunt's control of what she saw as the family purse. The anticipation was for the week of freedom before me, one entire week with neither commitments nor responsibilities, leading up to my twenty-first

birthday and all the rights and privileges pertaining thereto. A small but persistent niggle of trepidation tried to make itself known, but I forestalled it by standing up and going to the chest of drawers for clothing.

My aunt was, strictly speaking, Jewish, but she had long ago abandoned her heritage and claimed with all the enthusiasm of a convert the outward forms of cultural Anglicanism. As a result, her idea of Christmas tended heavily toward the Dickensian and Saxe-Gothan. Her final year as my so-called guardian was coincidentally the first year since the Great War ended to see quantities of unrationed sugar, butter, and meat, which meant that the emotional excesses had been compounded by culinary ones. I had begged off most of the revelry, citing the demands of the paper, but with my typewriter fallen silent, I had no choice but crass and immediate flight. I did not have to think about my choice of goals—I should begin at the cottage of my friend and mentor, my tutor, sparring partner, and comrade-in-arms, Sherlock Holmes. Hence my anticipation. Hence also the trepidation.

In rebellion against the houseful of velvet and silk through which I had moved for what seemed like weeks, I pulled from the wardrobe the most moth-eaten of my long-dead father's suits and put it on over a deliciously soft and threadbare linen shirt and a heavy Guernsey pullover I had rescued from the mice in the attic. Warm, lined doeskin gloves, my plaits pinned up under an oversized tweed cap, thick scarf, and a pause for thought. Whatever I was going to do for the next three or four days, it would be at a distance from home. I went to the chest of drawers and took out an extra pair of wool stockings, and from a secret niche behind the wainscotting I retrieved a leather pouch, in which I had secreted all the odd notes and coins of unspent gifts and allowances over the last couple of years—a considerable number, I was pleased to see. The pouch went into an inner pocket along with a pencil stub, some folded sheets of paper, and a small book on Rabbi Akiva that I'd been saving for a treat. I took a last look at my refuge, locked the door behind me, and carried my rubber-soled boots to the back door to lace them on.

Although I half-hoped that one of my relatives might hail me, they were all either busy with the games in the parlour or unconscious in a bloated stupor, because the only persons I saw were the red-faced cook and her harassed helper, and they were too busy preparing yet another meal to do more than return my greetings distractedly. I wondered idly how much I was paying them to work on the day a servant traditionally expected to have free, but I shrugged off the thought, put on my boots and the dingy overcoat I kept at the back of the cupboard beneath the stairs, and escaped from the overheated, overcrowded, emotion-laden house into the clear, cold sea air of the Sussex Downs. My breath smoked around me and my feet crunched across patches not yet thawed by the watery sunlight, and by the time I reached Holmes' cottage five miles away, I felt clean and calm for the first time since leaving Oxford at the end of term.

He was not at home.

Mrs Hudson was there, though. I kissed her affectionately and admired the needlework she was doing in front of the kitchen fire, and teased her about her slack ways on her free days and she tartly informed me that she wore her apron only when she was on duty, and I commented that in that case she must surely wear it over her nightdress, because as far as I could see she was always on duty when Holmes was about, and why didn't she come and take over my house in seven days' time and I'd be sure to appreciate her, but she only laughed, knowing I didn't mean it, and put the kettle on the fire.

He had gone to Town, she said, dressed in a multitude of mismatched layers, two scarfs, and a frayed and filthy silk hat—and did I prefer scones or muffins?

“Are the muffins already made?”

“Oh, there are a few left from yesterday, but I'll make fresh.”

“On your one day off during the year? You'll do nothing of the sort. I adore your muffins toasted—you know that—and they're better the second day, anyway.”

She let herself be persuaded. I went up to Holmes' room and

conducted a judicious search of his chest of drawers and cupboards while she assembled the necessaries. As I expected, he had taken the fingerless gloves he used for driving horses and the tool for prising stones from hoofs; in combination with the hat, it meant he was driving a horsecab. I went back down to the kitchen, humming.

I toasted muffins over the fire and gossiped happily with Mrs Hudson until it was time for me to leave, replete with muffins, butter, jam, anchovy toast, two slices of Christmas cake, and a waxed paper-wrapped parcel in my pocket, in order to catch the 4:43 to London.

I used occasionally to wonder why the otherwise canny folk of the nearby towns, and particularly the stationmasters who sold the tickets, did not remark at the regular appearance of odd characters on their platforms, one old and one young, of either sex, often together. Not until the previous summer had I realised that our disguises were treated as a communal scheme by our villagers, who made it a point of honour never to let slip their suspicions that the scruffy young male farmhand who slouched through the streets might be the same person who, dressed considerably more appropriately in tweed skirt and cloche hat, went off to Oxford during term time and returned to buy tea cakes and spades and the occasional half-pint of bitter from the merchants when she was in residence. I believe that had a reporter from the *Evening Standard* come to town and offered one hundred pounds for an inside story on the famous detective, the people would have looked at him with that phlegmatic country expression that hides so much and asked politely who he might be meaning.

I digress. When I reached London, the streets were still crowded. I took a taxi (a motor cab, so I hadn't to look too closely at the driver) to the agency Holmes often used as his supplier when he needed a horse and cab. The owner knew me—at least, he recognised the young man who stood in front of him—and said that, yes, that gentleman (not meaning, of course, a gentleman proper) had indeed shown up for work that day. In fact, he'd shown up twice.

“Twice? You mean he brought the cab back, then?” I was disappointed, and wondered if I ought merely to give up the chase.

“T’orse ’ad an ’ot knee, an’ ’e walked ’er back. ’E was about ter take out anuvver un when ’e ’appened t’see an ol’ ’anson just come in. Took a fancy, ’e did, can’t fink why—’s bloody cold work an’ the pay’s piss-all, ’less you ’appen on t’ odd pair what wants a taste of t’ old days, for a lark. ’Appens, sometimes, come a summer Sunday, or after t’ theatre Sattiday. Night like this ’e’d be bloody lucky t’get a ha’penny over fare.”

With a straight face, I reflected privately on how his colourful language would have faded in the light of the posh young lady I occasionally was.

“So he took the hansom?”

“That ’e did. One of the few what can drive the thing, I’ll give ’im that.” His square face contemplated for a moment this incongruous juxtaposition of skill and madness in the man he knew as Basil Josephs, then he shook his head in wonderment. “’Ad ta give ’im a right bugger of an ’orse, though. Never been on a two-wheeler, ’e ’asn’t, and plug-headed and leather-mouthed to boot. ’Ope old Josephs ’asn’t ’ad any problems,” he said with a magnificent lack of concern, and leant over to hawk and spit delicately into the noisome gutter.

“Well,” I said, “there couldn’t be too many hansom’s around, I might spot him tonight. Can you tell me what the horse looks like?”

“Big bay, wide blaze, three stockin’s with t’ off hind dark, nasty eyes, but you won’t see ’em—’e’s got blinkers on,” he rattled off, then added after a moment, “Cab’s number two-ninety-two.” I thanked him with a coin and went a-hunting through the vast, sprawling streets of the great cesspool for a single, worn hansom cab and its driver.

The hunt was not quite so hopeless as it might appear. Unless he were on a case (and Mrs Hudson had thought on the whole that he was not), his choice of clothing and cab suggested entertainment rather than employment, and his idea of entertainment tended more toward London’s east end rather than Piccadilly or St John’s Wood.

Still, that left a fair acreage to choose from, and I spent several hours standing under lampposts, craning to see the feet of passing horses (*all* of them seemed to have blazes and stockings) and fending off friendly overtures from dangerously underdressed young and not-so-young women. Finally, just after midnight, one marvelously informative conversation with such a lady was interrupted by the approaching clop and grind of a trotting horsecab, and a moment later the piercing tones of a familiar voice echoing down the nearly deserted street obviated the need for any further equine examination.

“Annalisa, my dear young thing,” came the voice that was not a shout but which could be heard a mile away on the Downs, “isn’t that child you are trying to entice a bit young, even for you? Look at him—he doesn’t even have a beard yet.”

The lady beside me whirled around to the source of this interruption. I excused myself politely and stepped out into the street to intercept the cab. He had a fare—or rather, two—but he slowed, gathered the reins into his right hand, and reached the other long arm down to me. My disappointed paramour shouted genial insults at Holmes that would have blistered the remaining paint from the woodwork, had they not been deflected by his equally jovial remarks in kind.

The alarming dip of the cab caused the horse to snort and veer sharply, and a startled, moustachioed face appeared behind the cracked glass of the side window, scowling at me. Holmes redirected his tongue’s wrath from the prostitute to the horse and, in the best tradition of London cabbies, cursed the animal soundly, imaginatively, and without a single manifest obscenity. He also more usefully snapped the horse’s head back with one clean jerk on the reins, returning its attention to the job at hand, while continuing to pull me up and shooting a parting volley of affectionate and remarkably familiar remarks at the fading Annalisa. Holmes did so like to immerse himself fully in his rôles, I reflected as I wedged myself into the one-person seat already occupied by the man and his garments.

“Good evening, Holmes,” I greeted him politely.

“Good morning, Russell,” he corrected me, and shook the horse back into a trot.

“Are you on a job, Holmes?” I had known as soon as his arm reached down for me that if case it were, it did not involve the current passengers, or he should merely have waved me off.

“My dear Russell, those Americanisms of yours,” he tut-tutted. “How they do grate on the ear. ‘On a job.’ No, I am not occupied with a case, Russell, merely working at the maintenance of old skills.”

“And are you having fun?”

“‘Having fun’?” He pronounced the words with fastidious distaste and looked at me askance.

“Very well: Are you enjoying yourself?”

He raised one eyebrow at my clothes before turning back to the reins.

“I might ask the same of you, Russell.”

“Yes,” I replied. “As a matter of fact, I *am* enjoying myself, Holmes, very much, thank you.” And I sat back as best I could to do so.

Traffic even in the middle of London tends to die down considerably by the close of what Christians mistakenly call the Sabbath, and the streets were about as quiet now as they ever were. It was very pleasant being jolted about in a swaying seat eight feet above the insalubrious cobblestones, next to my one true friend, through the ill-lit streets that echoed the horse’s hoofs and the grind of the wheels, on a night cold enough to kill the smells and keep the fog at bay, but not cold enough to damage exposed flesh and fingertips. I glanced down at my companion’s begrimed fingers where they were poised, testing the heavy leather for signs of misbehaviour from the still-fractious beast with the same sensitivity they exhibited in all their activities, from delicate chemical experiments to the tactile exploration of a clue. I was struck by a thought.

“Holmes, do you find that the cold on a clear night exacerbates your rheumatism as much as the cold of a foggy night?”

He fixed me with a dubious eye, then turned back to the job, lips no doubt pursed beneath the scarfs. It was, I realised belatedly, an

unconventional opening for a conversation, but surely Holmes, of all people, could not object to the eccentric.

“Russell,” he said finally, “it is very good of you to have come up from Sussex and stood on cold street corners for half the night striking up inappropriate friendships and flirting with pneumonia in order to enquire after my health, but perhaps having found me, you might proceed with your intended purpose.”

“I had no purpose,” I protested, stung. “I finished my paper more quickly than I’d thought, felt like spending the rest of the day with you rather than listening to my relations shrieking and moaning downstairs, and, when I found you missing, decided on a whim to follow you here and see if I might track you down. It was merely a whim,” I repeated firmly. Perhaps too firmly. I hastened to change the subject. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

“Driving a cab,” he said in a voice that told me that he was neither distracted nor deceived. “Go on, Russell, you may as well ask your question; you’ve spent seven hours in getting here. Or perhaps I ought to say, six years?”

“What on earth are you talking about?” I was very cross at the threat of having my nice evening spoiled by his sardonic, all-knowing air, though God knows, I should have been used to it by then. “I am having a holiday from the holidays. I am relaxing, following the enforced merriment of the last week. An amusing diversion, Holmes, nothing else. At least it was, until your suspicious mind let fly with its sneering intimations of omniscience. Really, Holmes, you can be very irritating at times.”

He seemed not in the least put out by my ruffled feathers, and he arched his eyebrow and glanced sideways at me to let me know it. I put up my chin and looked in the other direction.

“So you did not ‘track me down,’ as you put it, for any express purpose, other than as an exercise in tracking?”

“And for the pleasurable exercise of freedom, yes.”

“You are lying, Russell.”

“Holmes, this is intolerable. If you wish to be rid of me, all you need do is slow down and let me jump off. You needn’t be offensive to me. I’ll go.”

“Russell, Russell,” he chided, and shook his head.

“Damn it, Holmes, what can you imagine was so urgent that I should come all the way here in order to confront you with it immediately? Which, you may have noticed, I have not done?”

“A question you finally nerved yourself up to ask, and the momentum carried you along,” he answered coolly.

“And what question might that be?” I did leave myself right open for it, but once launched in a path, it is difficult to change direction.

“I expect you came to ask me to marry you.”

I nearly fell off the back of the cab.

“Holmes! What do you . . . How can you . . .” I sputtered to a halt. In front of me, the speaking vent in the roof of the cab was rising, and in a moment I could see two sets of eyes, dimly illuminated by the carriage lights and a passing streetlamp. One set was topped by a bowler, the other by a frippery gobbet of flowers, and they passed over us like two pair of roving spotlights, apprehensively examining the two men who were carrying on this lunatic dialogue above their heads.

Holmes lifted his hat and gave them a genial smile. I waggled the brim of my own and gave what I felt to be a look of criminal idiocy, but was apparently only slightly disconcerting. They stared between the reins at us, mouths agape.

“Sumfing Oi can do fer you, sir?” Holmes asked politely, his voice sliding down towards the Cockney.

“You can explain the meaning of this extraordinary conversation which my wife and myself have been forced to overhear.” He looked like a schoolmaster, though his nose was dark with broken capillaries.

“Conversation? Oh yes, sorry, Oi s’pose it sounded sumfing mad.” Holmes laughed. “Amatoor dramatics, sir. There’s a club of us, rehearses parts whenever we come across one another. It’s an Ibsen play. Do you know it?” The heads shook in unison, and the two looked at

each other. "Fine stuff, but taken out of context, like, it sounds sum-mat potty. Sorry we disturbed you." The eyes studied us dubiously for another long moment, then looked again at each other, and the hats sank slowly back into the cab. Holmes began to laugh convulsively in complete silence, and reluctantly I joined him. Some minutes later, he wiped his face with his filthy gloves, snapped the horse back to its trot, and took up a completely different topic.

"So, Russell, this gentleman and his lovely wife are going to number seventeen Gladstone Terrace. Kindly search your memory and tell me where it is to be found." It was an examination, and out of habit, I reviewed my mental picture of the area.

"Another nine streets up, on the left."

"Ten streets," he corrected me. "You forgot Hallicombe Alley."

"Sorry. This is getting far out for my knowledge of the map. I admit that one or two of the areas we've been through I've never seen before."

"I should think not," he said primly. Holmes tended to recall his Victorian attitudes and my gender at the oddest times—it always took me by surprise.

Holmes drew to a halt on a deserted side street and our passengers scurried for the shelter of their dark terrace house, not even waiting for the change from their coin. Holmes shouted a thanks at the closing door; his voice bounced off the disapproving bricks and scuttled off into the night.

"Jump down and get the rug, will you, Russell?"

When we were settled with the thing around our knees, he flicked the reins and the horse circled us back into the main road. We took a different route for our return to the stables, through streets even darker and dirtier than those we had come by. I was enjoying myself again, half-drowsing despite the continuous jolts, when Holmes spoke.

"So, Russell, what say you? Have you a question for me?"

It is difficult to pull away from a man when the two of you are compressed shoulder-to-shoulder and wrapped in a rug, but I managed.

“Come now, Russell, you are a great proponent of the emancipation of women; surely you can manage to carry out your intentions in this little matter.”

“Little?” I seized on the word, as he knew I would. “First you place the proposition in my mouth, and then you denigrate it. I don’t know why I even—” I bit back the words.

“Why you thought of it in the first place, is that what you were about to say?”

Before I could respond, a fast blur shooting out of a dark alley brought Holmes to his feet, nearly knocking me from my perch. A black shape was at the heels of the horse, snarling and snapping with a flash of white teeth as it dodged into the dim light from our lamps. In one smooth movement, Holmes wrapped the reins around his left hand and hauled back on them as he snatched the long whip from its rest with his right, and with considerable accuracy he turned the yaps into yelps. Sheer brute strength brought the horse back onto its haunches and kept it from bolting, but sheer artistry allowed it just enough of its head to resume progress. The animal’s blinkered head tossed and fretted the reins from its shoe-leather mouth to the driver’s arms, and its heavy and graceless neck gleamed with sweat, but it obeyed its driver. In a moment, still on his feet and with both hands now on the reins, Holmes resumed as if there had been no interruption.

“So, why *did* you think of it?” he pressed, his voice calm but with a finely honed edge to it. “Have I given you any reason to believe that I might welcome such a suggestion? I am fifty-nine years old, Russell, and I have long been accustomed to the privacy and freedom of the bachelor life. Do you imagine that I might succumb to the dictates of social norms and marry you in order to stop tongues from wagging when we go off together? Or perhaps you imagine that the pleasures of the wedding bed might prove irresistible?”

My patience broke. I simply could not sit and listen to another peace-shattering, friendship-threatening, and, yes, hope-destroying phrase. I tossed the rug up over him, pulled both knees up to brace my

boots on the top edge of the hansom, then straightened my legs and flipped over the seat backwards, an acrobatic feat I could not possibly have performed had I stopped to think about it first. I staggered on the uneven stones, a jolt of pain shooting through my bad shoulder, but I was off the cab. Holmes shook his arm free of the rug and started to rein in, but the much-abused horse had the bit in his teeth now and fought him, kicking and heaving in the traces. I took three bent steps to the gutter, seized a gin bottle from the night's rubbish, and skipped it across the stones to smash at the horse's feet. It sent him onto his hind legs, the sting of a fist-sized bit of brick brought him down again, and at the third missile he bolted.

By the time Holmes got him under control again, I was gone, having fled through an alley, over a wall, around two corners, and into a sink of blackness. He never caught me.



MONDAY, 27 DECEMBER

A woman moved is like a fountain troubled,
Muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty,
And while it is so, none so dry or thirsty
Will deign to sip or touch one drop of it.
—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564–1616)

IT WAS OF no importance; I knew that even as I had gone off the back of the cab. Arguments were a part of life with Holmes—a week without a knockdown, drag-out fight was an insipid week indeed. Tonight's was hardly a skirmish compared with some of the vicious running battles we had indulged in over the five years I had known him. No, Holmes had been merely venting general irritation through a convenient, if unfortunate, blowhole. I had found him to be particularly irritable when a case was going badly, or when he had been too long without a challenge, and although I was not absolutely certain which was the circumstance that night, I should have put money on the latter. When we met again, it would appear as if it had never happened. On a certain level, it had not.

Still, just then I had felt more in need of a companion in bohemian abandonment than of a sparring partner, and when faced with intense verbal swordplay, I had decided to bow out. Rare for me—one of the things I most liked about Holmes was his willingness to do battle. Still, there it was, and there I was, walking with considerable stealth down a nearly black street at one o'clock in the morning in a part of London I knew only vaguely. I pushed Holmes from my mind and set out to enjoy myself.

Twenty minutes later, I stood motionless in a doorway while a patrolling constable shot his light's beam down the alley and went his heavy-footed way, and the incongruity of my furtive behaviour struck me: Here went Mary Russell, who six months previously had qualified for her degrees with accolades and honours from the most prestigious university in the world, who should in seven—six—days attain her majority and inherit what would have to be called a fortune, who was the closest confidante and sometime partner of the almost-legendary figure of Sherlock Holmes (whom, moreover, she had just soundly outwitted), and who walked through London's filthy pavements and alleys a young man, unrecognised, unknown, untraceable. Not a soul here knew who I was; not a friend or relation knew where I was. In an extremity of exhilaration, intoxicated by freedom and caught up by the power in my limbs, I bared my teeth and laughed silently into the darkness.

I prowled the streets all that dreamlike night, secure and unmolested by the denizens of the dark. Two hundred yards from where Mary Kelly had bled to death under the Ripper's knife, I was greeted effusively by a pair of ladies of the evening. In a yard off what had once been the Ratcliff Highway, I warmed my hands over the ashes of a chestnut seller's barrel and savoured the mealy remnant I found in one corner as if it were some rare epicurean morsel. I followed the vibration of music and was let into an all-night club, filled with desperate-looking men and slick, varnished women and the smell of cigarettes and avarice. I paid my membership, drank half my cloudy

beer, and escaped back out onto the street for air. I stepped over a body (still breathing and reeking of gin). I avoided any number of bobbies. I heard the sounds of cat fights and angry drunks and the whimper of a hungry baby hushed at the breast, and once from an upper room a low murmur of voices that ended in a breathless cry. Twice I hid from the sound of a prowling horse-drawn cab with two wheels. The second time launched me on a long and highly technical conversation with a seven-year-old street urchin who was huddled beneath the steps to escape a drunken father. We squatted on cobbles greasy with damp and the filth that had accumulated, probably since the street was first laid down following the Great Fire, and we talked of economics. He gave me half of his stale roll and a great deal of advice, and when I left, I handed him a five-pound note. He looked after me awestruck, as at the vision of the Divine Presence.

The city dozed fitfully for a few short hours, insomniac amidst the tranquil winter countryside of southern England. There were no stars. I walked and breathed it in, and felt I had never been in London before. Never seen my fellowman before. Never felt the blood in my veins before.

At five o'clock, the signs of morning were under way. No light, of course, though in June by that hour the birds would have almost finished their first mad clamour and the farmers would have been long in their fields. Here, the first indications of day were in the knockers-up with their peashooters aimed at the windows of clockless clients, the water carts sluicing down the streets, the milk carts rattling down the cobblestones, and the strong smell of yeast from a bakery. Soon certain areas vibrated with voices and the rumble of carts, wagons, and lorries bearing food and fuel and labouring bodies into London town. Men trotted past, dwarfed by the stacks of half-bushel baskets balanced on their heads. In Spitalfields, the meat market warned me away with its reek of decaying blood, pushing me off into neighbouring areas less concerned with the trades of early morning. Even here, though, people moved, listless at first, then with voices raised. London

was returning to life, and I, stupefied by the constant movement of the last hours, light-headed and without a will of my own, was caught up, swept along by the tide of purposeful heavy-booted workers who grumbled and cursed and hawked and spat their way into the day.

Eventually, like a piece of flotsam, I came to rest against a barrier and found myself staring uncomprehending at a window into another world, a square of furious movement and meaningless shapes and colours, snatches of flesh and khaki, shining white objects bearing quantities of yellow and brown that disappeared into red maws, a fury as far removed from the dim and furtive London I had emerged from as it was possible to imagine. It was a window, in a door, and the slight distortion of the glass gave it a look of unreality, as if it were an impressionist painting brought to life. The door opened, but the impression of a two-dimensional illusion was curiously intensified, so that the rush of steam-thick, impossibly fragrant air and the incomprehensible babble lay against my face like a wall. I stood fascinated, transfixed by this surreal, hypnotic vision for a solid minute before a shoulder jostled me and the dream bubble burst.

It was a tea shop, filled shoulder-to-shoulder with gravel-voiced men cradling chipped white mugs of blistering hot, stewed-looking tea in their thick hands, and the smell of bacon grease and toast and boiled coffee swept over me and made me urgently aware of a great howling pit of emptiness within.

I edged inside, feeling unaccustomedly petite and uncertain of my (character's) welcome, but I need not have worried. These were working men beginning a long day, not drunks looking for distraction, and although my thin shoulders and smooth face, to say nothing of the wire-rim spectacles I wiped free of fog and settled back on my nose, started a ripple of nudges and grins, I was allowed to push through the brotherhood and sink into a chair next to the window. My feet sighed in gratitude.

The solitary waitress, a thin woman with bad teeth, six hands, and the ability to keep eight quick conversations on her tongue simultane-

ously, wove her way through the nonexistent gaps, slapped a cup of tea onto the table in front of me, and took my order for eggs and chips and beans on toast without seeming to listen. The laden plate arrived before my sweet orange-coloured tea had cooled, and I set to putting it inside me.

When she reappeared at my elbow, I ordered the same again, and for the first time she actually looked at me, then turned to my neighbours and made a raucous joke, speculating on what I'd been doing to work up such an appetite. The men laughed uproariously, saw the blush on my downy cheeks, and laughed even harder before they hitched up their trousers and left in a clatter of scraped chair legs. I eased my own chair away from the wall an inch or two and devoured the second plate with as much pleasure as the first, though with more leisure. I lovingly mopped up the last smear of yolk with the stub of my toast, raised my fourth cup of tea to my cautious lips, and looked out the window beside me—directly into a face I knew, and one which an instant later recognized me.

I signalled her to wait, threaded my way through the burly shoulders and backs, thrust a large note into the waitress's pocket, and fell out onto the street.

"Mary?" she asked, doubtful. "That is you, isn't it?"

Lady Veronica Beaconsfield, a lodgings mate in Oxford who had read *Greats* a year ahead of me, an unpretty person who guiltily loved beautiful things and invested vast amounts of time and money in Good Works. We had been close at one time, but events had conspired to cool her affection, and to my sadness we had not managed to regain any degree of closeness before she went down from Oxford. I had last seen her seven months before, and we had exchanged letters in September. She looked exhausted. Even in the half-light, I could see smudges under her eyes and a look of grimy dishevelment, foreign to her tidy, competent self.

"Of course it's me, Ronnie," I said, cheerfully ungrammatical. "What a surprise to see a familiar face amidst that lot."

I gestured with one hand and nearly hit an enormous navy coming out of the café. He growled at me, I apologised, and he rolled his shoulders and strode off, allowing me to live. Ronnie giggled.

“You still do that, I see, dressing like a man. I thought it was just undergraduate high spirits.”

“‘When we’ve got our flowing beards on, who beholding us will think we’re women?’” I recited. “There’s good precedence.”

“Dear old Aristophanes,” she agreed. “Still, don’t you find it a drawback sometimes, dressing like a man?” she asked. “I thought that man was going to punch you.”

“It’s only happened once, that I didn’t have time to talk my way out of a brawl.”

“What happened?”

“Oh, I didn’t hurt him too badly.” She giggled, as if I had made a joke. I went on. “I had a much rougher time of it once during the War, with a determined old lady who tried to give me a white feather. I looked so healthy, she refused to believe me when I told her I’d been turned down for service. She followed me down the street, lecturing me loudly on cowardice and Country and Lord Kitchener.”

Ronnie looked at me speculatively, unsure of whether or not I was pulling her leg. (As a matter of fact, I was not, in either case. The old lady had been severely irritating, though Holmes, walking with me that day, had found the episode very amusing.) She then shook her head and laughed.

“It’s splendid to see you, Mary. Look, I’m on my way home. Are you going somewhere, or can you come in for coffee?”

“I’m going nowhere, I’m free as the proverbial bird, and I won’t drink your coffee, thanks, I’m afloat already, but I’ll gladly come for a natter and see your WC—I mean, your rooms.”

She giggled again.

“One of the other drawbacks, I take it?”

“The biggest one, truth to tell,” I admitted with a grin.

“Come on, then.”

It was nearly light on the street, but as we turned off into a narrow courtyard of greasy cobblestones four streets away, the darkness closed in again. Veronica's house was one of ten or twelve that huddled claustrophobically around the yard with its green and dripping pump. One house was missing, plucked from its neighbours during the bombing of London like a pulled tooth. The bomb had not caused a fire, simply collapsed the structure in on itself, so that the flowery upstairs wallpaper was only now peeling away, and a picture still hung from its hook twenty feet above the ground. I looked at the remaining houses and thought, There will be masses of children behind those small windows, children with sores on their faces and nothing on their feet even in the winter, crowded into rooms with their pregnant, exhausted, anaemic mothers and tubercular grandmothers and the fathers who were gone or drunk more often than not. I suppressed a shudder. This choice of neighbourhood was typically Veronica, a deliberate statement to her family, herself, and the people she was undoubtedly helping—but did it have to be quite such a clear statement? I looked up at the grimy windows, and a thought occurred.

“Ronnie, do you want me to remove enough of this costume to make it obvious that you're not bringing a man home?”

She turned with the key in her hand and ran her eyes over me, looked up at the surrounding houses, and laughed for a third time, but this was a hard, bitter little noise that astonished me, coming from her.

“Oh, no, don't worry about that, Mary. Nobody cares.”

She finished with the key, picked up the milk, and led me into a clean, uninspiring hallway, past two rooms furnished with dull, worn chairs and low tables, rooms with bare painted walls, and up a flight of stairs laid with a threadbare, colourless runner. A full, rich Christmas tree rose up beside the stairs, loaded with colourful ornaments and trying hard, and long swags of greenery and holly draped themselves from every protrusion. Instead of being infused with good cheer, however, the dreary rooms served only to depress the decorations, making them

look merely tawdry. We went through the locked door at the top and came into a house entirely apart from the drab and depressing ground floor.

The Ronnie Beaconsfield I had known was a lover of beauty who possessed the means of indulging herself, not for the desire of possession, for she was one of the least avaricious people I knew, but for the sheer love of perfection. Her uncle was a duke, her grandfather had been an advisor to Queen Victoria, there were three barristers and a high-court judge in her immediate family, her father was something big in the City, her mother devoted her time to the Arts, and Veronica herself spent most of her time and money trying to live it all down. Even while an undergraduate at Oxford, she had been the moving force behind a number of projects, from teaching illiterate women to read to the prevention of maltreatment of cart horses.

To her despair, she was short, stout, and unlovely, and her invariably unflattering hairstyle should have nudged the wide nose and thick eyebrows into ugliness had it not been for the goodness and the gentle, self-deprecating humour that looked out from her brown eyes when she smiled. That bitterness had been new, and I wondered when it had crept in.

This upper portion of the house was much more the Veronica I knew. Here, the floors gleamed richly, the carpets were thick and genuine, the odd assortment of furniture and objets d'art—sleek, modern German chair and Louis XIV settee on a silken Chinese carpet, striped coarse Egyptian cloth covering a Victorian chaise longue, a priceless collection of seventeenth-century drawings on one wall contemplating a small abstract by, I thought, Paul Klee on the opposite wall—all nestled together comfortably and unobtrusively like a disparate group of dons in a friendly Senior Commons, or perhaps a gathering of experts on unrelated topics trading stories at a successful party. Veronica had a knack.

The house had been converted to electricity, and by its strong light I could see clearly the etched lines of desperate weariness on her face

as my friend pulled off gloves, hat, and coat. She had been out most of the night—on a Good Work, her drab clothes said, rather than a social occasion—and a not entirely successful Good Work at that. I asked her about it when I came out of the WC (indoor, though I had seen the outside cubicles at the end of the yard below).

“Oh, yes,” she said. She was assembling coffee. “One of the families I’ve adopted. The son, who’s thirteen, was arrested for picking the pocket of an off-duty bobby.”

I laughed, incredulous.

“You mean he couldn’t tell? He’s new to the game, then.”

“Apparently so. He’s not very bright, either, I’m afraid.” She fumbled, taking a cup from the shelf and nearly dropping it from fingers clumsy with fatigue.

“Good heavens, Ronnie,” I said, “you’re exhausted. I ought to go and let you have some sleep.”

“No!” She did drop the cup then, and it shattered into a thousand shards of bone china. “Oh, damn,” she wailed. “You’re right, I am tired, but I so want to talk with you. There’s something . . . Oh, no, it’s useless; I can’t even begin to think about it.” She knelt awkwardly to gather up the pieces, drove a splinter of porcelain into her finger, and stifled a furious sob.

Something fairly drastic was upsetting this good woman, something considerably deeper than a sleepless night caused by an incompetent pickpocket. I had a fairly good idea what in general she wanted me for, and I sighed inwardly at the brevity of my freedom. Nonetheless, I went to help her.

“Ronnie, I’m tired, too. I’ve been on my feet—literally—for the last twelve hours. If you don’t mind my disreputable self on your sofa, we can both have a sleep, and talk later.”

The intensity of the relief that washed over her face startled me and did not bode well for my immediate future, but I merely helped her sweep up the broken cup, overrode her halfhearted protestations, and sent her to bed.

There was no need to disturb the chaise longue. She had a guest room; she had a marvellous bathtub long enough for me to soak the aches from both the shoulder and my legs; she had a nightdress and a dressing gown and a deep bed that welcomed me with loving softness and murmured soporific suggestions at me until I drifted off.

I WOKE AT dusk, to complete the topsy-turvy day, and rose to crane my neck at the smudge of heavy, wet sky that was visible between the roofs. I put on the too-short quilted dressing gown that Ronnie had given me and went down to the kitchen, and while the water came to a boil, I tried to decide whether I was making breakfast or afternoon tea. Veronica's idea of a well-stocked kitchen ran to yoghurt, charcoal biscuits, and vitamin pills (healthy body, healthy mind), but a rummage through the cupboards left me with a bowl of some healthy patent cereal that looked like wood chips, though they tasted all right doused with the top milk from the jug and a blob of raspberry jam, some stale bread to toast, and a slice of marzipan-covered Christmas fruitcake to push the meal into the afternoon. After my meal, I washed up, went down for the paper, brought it up along with the mail, lit the fire in the sitting room, and read all about the world's problems, a cup of coffee balanced on my knee and a very adequate coal fire at my feet.

At 5:30, Ronnie appeared, hair awry, mouthed a string of unintelligible noises, and went into the kitchen. In lodgings, she had been renowned as a reluctant waker, so I gave her time to absorb some coffee before I followed her.

"Mary, good morning—afternoon, I suppose. You've had something to eat?"

I reassured her that I had taken care of myself, then poured another cup of coffee from the pot and sat down at the small kitchen table to wait for whatever it had been she wanted to tell me.

It took some time. Revelations that come easily at night are harder

by the light of day, and the woman who had cried out at a minor cut was now well under control. We talked interminably, about her needy and troubled families and the problem of balancing assistance and dependency while maintaining the dignity of all concerned. She enquired as to my interests, so I told her all about the paper on first-century rabbinic Judaism and Christian origins I'd written for publication, and about my work at Oxford, and when her eyes glazed over, I probed a bit deeper into her life. At some point, we ate pieces of dried-up cheese from a piece of white butcher's paper and dutifully chewed at a handful of unpalatable biscuits, and then she opened a bottle of superb white wine and finally began to loosen up.

There was a man; rather, there had been a man. It was an all-too-common story in those postwar years: A friend in 1914, he joined the New Army in 1915, was sent virtually untrained to the Western Front, and promptly walked into a bullet; sent home for eight weeks' recovery, their friendship deepened; he returned to the trenches, numerous letters followed, and then he was gassed in 1917 and again sent home; an engagement ring followed; he returned yet again to the Front, was finally demobbed in January 1919, a physically ruined, mentally frail mockery of his former self, liable to black, vicious moods and violent tempers alternating with periods of either manic gaiety or bleak inertia, when all he could do was silently smoke one cigarette after another, seeming completely unaware of other people. It was called shell shock, the nearly inevitable aftermath of month after month in hell, and every man who had been in the trenches had it to some degree. Some hid it successfully until the depths of night; others coped by immersing themselves in a job and refusing to look up. Many, many young men, particularly those from this young man's class—educated, well-off, the nation's pool of leadership, who died in colossal numbers as junior officers—became fatuous, irresponsible, and flighty, incapable of serious thought or concentrated effort, and (and here was the crux of this particular case) willing to become involved only with women as brittle and frivolous as they were. Veronica no longer wore the ring.

I listened in silence and watched her eyes roam over her glass, the tablecloth, the mail, the dark, reflecting window, anywhere but my face, until she seemed to run down. I waited a minute longer, and when she neither spoke nor looked up, I gave her a gentle prod.

"It does take time, that sort of thing," I suggested. "A lot of young men—"

"Oh, I know," she interrupted. "It's a common problem. I know a hundred women who've been through the same thing, and they all hope it'll solve itself, and every so often it does. But not Miles. He's just . . . it's as if he's not there anymore. He's . . . lost."

I chewed my lip thoughtfully for a moment, and the image of those slick faces in the nightclub came back to me. *Lost* was a good word for a large part of our whole generation.

"Drugs?" I asked, not quite the shot in the dark it seemed, and she looked at me then, her eyes brimming, and nodded.

"What kind?" I asked.

"Any kind. He had morphine when he was in hospital, and he got used to that. Cocaine, of course. They all use cocaine. He goes to these parties—they last all night, a weekend, even longer. Once he took me to a fancy-dress party where the whole house was made over to look like an opium den, including the pipes. I couldn't bear the smell and so had to leave. He took me home and then went back. Lately, I think it's been heroin." I was mildly surprised. Heroin had been developed only a couple of years before I was born, and in 1920 it was nowhere near as commonplace as cocaine or opium or even its parent drug, morphine. I had some personal experience of the drug, following a bad automobile accident in 1914, when it was given me by the hospital in San Francisco—it being then thought that heroin was less addictive than morphine, a conclusion since questioned—but an habitual use of the drug would be very expensive.

"Did you go with him very often? To the same house?"

"The few times I went, they were all different houses, though mostly the same people. I finally couldn't take seeing him like that

anymore, and I told him so. He said . . . he said some horrid, cruel things and slammed out of here, and I haven't heard from him since then. That was nearly two months ago. I did see him, about ten days ago, coming out of a club with a . . . a girl hanging on his arm and laughing in that way they do when they've been taking something and the whole world is so hysterically funny. He looked awful, like a skeleton, and his cough was back. He sounded like he had when he was home after being gassed; it made my chest hurt to hear it. I do get news of him—I see his sister all the time, but she says he never visits his parents unless he runs out of money before his next allowance is due.”

“And they give it to him.”

“Yes.” She blew her nose and took a deep breath, then looked straight at me, and I braced myself.

“Mary, is there anything that you can do?”

“What could I do?” I did not even try to sound surprised.

“Well, you . . . investigate things. You know people, you and Mr Holmes. Surely there must be something we might do.”

“Any number of things,” I said flatly. “You could have him arrested, and they might be able to keep him until the drugs have left his system, though it would probably mean hospitalisation, considering the shape he's in. However, unless he's actually selling the drugs himself, which sounds unlikely if his parents support him, he'd be let free in a few days and would go right back to the source. You'd have put him through considerable discomfort with little benefit. Or, you could have him kidnapped, if you don't mind great expense and the threat of a prison sentence. That would ensure his physical well-being, for a time. You'd want to let him go eventually, though, and then it would almost surely begin again.” It was cruel, but not so cruel as raising her hopes would have been. “Ronnie, you know what the problem is, and you know full well that there's not a thing that you or I or the king himself can do about it. If Miles wants to use drugs, he will. If not heroin, then morphine, or alcohol. As you said, he's just not there, and until he decides to find his way back, the only thing on God's

green earth you can do is make sure he knows your hand is there if he wants it, and leave him to it.” I offered her a pain-filled smile. “And pray.”

She collapsed, and I stroked her hair and waited for the storm to abate. It did, and when she raised her face, I felt a moment’s pity for the man Miles, confronted by this red-eyed, dull-haired, earnest young woman with her Good Works and her small eyes set into an unfashionably round face of pasty skin, now blotched from her tears. For someone terrified of responsibility and commitment, Veronica in her present state would loom huge and hideous, the embodiment of everything his former life held to reproach him with. Despite my harsh words, for her sake I should make an effort.

“Ronnie, look, I’ll see what I can do. I know a man at Scotland Yard”—this was a slight exaggeration—“who might be able to suggest something.”

“You’re right, Mary.” She fumbled with her sodden handkerchief. “I know you’re right; it’s just that it’s so damnable, feeling completely hopeless while Miles is destroying himself. He’s—he was—such a good man.” She sighed, then sat back, her hands on her lap. We sat together as if at a wake.

Suddenly, she looked up at the clock on her wall, and a curious look of shy animation crept onto her face.

“Mary, are you free tonight? I don’t know what you had planned, but there’s someone you might be interested in meeting.”

“Yes, I told you I’m free. I had thought to go up to Oxford for a couple of days, but it’s nothing that couldn’t wait.”

“Oh, good. I really do think you’d like to hear her, and I could introduce you to her after the meeting.”

“Meeting?” I said dubiously. She laughed, her face alive again and the signs of the storm fading fast.

“That’s what she calls it. It’s a bit like a church service, but tons more fun, and she gives a talk—her name is Margery Childe. Have you heard of her?”

“I have, somewhere.” The name brought with it an impression of disdain overlying unease, as if the teller (writer? in a newspaper?) had been uncomfortable with the woman and taken refuge in cynicism. Also a photograph—yes, definitely in a newspaper, a blonde woman shaking hands with a beribboned official who towered over her.

“She’s an amazing person, very sensible and yet, well”—she gave an embarrassed little laugh—“holy somehow. I go to the meetings sometimes, if I’m free. They always make me feel good—refreshed, and strong. Margery’s been very helpful,” she added unnecessarily.

“I’d be happy to go, Ronnie, but I don’t have any clothes other than that suit.”

“There’ll be some stuff downstairs in the jumble box that’ll fit you, if you’re not too particular.”

Thus it was that scarcely half an hour later I, wearing an odd assortment of ill-fitting garments, followed Veronica Baconsfield out of the taxi and across the wet pavement, under the sign that read NEW TEMPLE IN GOD, and into the remarkable presence of Margery Childe.



MONDAY, 27 DECEMBER

Women should keep silence in church; for they
are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate,
as the law says. . . . It is shameful for
a woman to speak in church.

I CORINTHIANS 14:34–35

THE SERVICE WAS well under way when we arrived and found two seats in the back. To my surprise, my first impression was more of a hall filled with eager operagoers than a gathering of pious evening worshipers. The room was a hall, rather than a church or temple, had tiered seating, and was larger than it had appeared from the street. On the raised stage before us stood a small woman, a diminutive blonde figure on the nearly bare boards; she was wearing a long, simple dress—a robe—of some slightly peach-tinted white material, heavy silk perhaps, that shimmered and caught the light in golden highlights as she moved. She was speaking, but if it was a sermon, it did not resemble any I'd heard before. Her voice was low, almost throaty, but it

reached easily into all corners and gave one the eerie impression of being alone with a friend and overhearing her private musings.

“It was shortly after that,” she was saying, “that I went to church one lovely Sunday morning and heard the preacher, who was a large man with a thundering voice, speaking on the text from First Corinthians, ‘Let your women keep silence in the churches.’” She paused and gathered all eyes to her in anticipation, then her mouth twitched in mischief. “I was, as you might imagine, not amused.”

The gust of appreciative laughter that swept through the hall confirmed her audience’s—congregation’s?—endorsement of her attitude and hinted at an admiration that edged into adoration. It was also overwhelmingly soprano, and I took my eyes from the laughing figure onstage and surveyed my fellows.

There were perhaps only two dozen obvious males in a gathering of some 350, and of the ones near me, three looked distinctly uncomfortable, two were laughing nervously, one was scribbling furiously in a reporter’s notebook, and one alone looked pleased. However, on closer examination I decided that this last was probably not male.

The laughter trickled off, and she waited, totally at ease, for silence before starting again.

“I was grateful to that large and noisy man, however. Not immediately,” she added, inviting us to chuckle at her youthful passion, and many obliged, “but when I’d had a chance to think about it, I was grateful, because it made me wonder, Why does he want me to keep silent in church? What would be so terrible in letting me, a woman, talk? What does he imagine I might say?” She paused for two seconds. “What is this man afraid of?”

Absolute silence, and then: “Why, why is this man afraid of me? Here am I, I thought to myself, barely five feet tall in my stockinged feet, where he’s over six feet and weighs twice what I do; he has a university degree, and I left school at fifteen; he’s a grown man with a family and a big house, and I’m not even twenty and live in a cold-water flat. So, can

this man be afraid of me? Can he imagine I'm going to say something that might make him look a fool? Or . . . is he afraid that I might say something to make his God look a fool? Oh, yes, I thought about that for quite some time, I tell you. Quite some time. And do you know what I decided? I decided that, Oh my, yes, this big man with his big voice and his big God in the big church, he was afraid, of little, old, me."

Her eyes flared wide and laughter came again at her mock glee. She held up a hand to cut it short and leant forward confidentially.

"And do you know something? He was right to be afraid."

A second storm of laughter burst through the room, led by the woman herself, laughing at herself, laughing at the absurdity of it, collapsing over a good joke with some friends. After some minutes, she wiped her eyes along with half the room and stood shaking her head slowly as the room settled into silence. When she raised her face, the humour had died in it.

"I didn't really mean it—you know that. Part of me wanted to stand right up and ask him a lot of uncomfortable questions and make him look foolish, but I didn't because, truly, it was too sad. Here this man is working with God, thinking about God, living with God, every day, and still he does not trust God. Deep down, he doesn't feel one hundred per cent certain that his God can stand up to criticism, can deal with this uppity woman and her uncomfortable questions; he does not *know* that his God is big enough to welcome in and put His arms around every person, big and small, believers or seekers, men or women."

She walked over to a small podium and took a couple of thoughtful swallows from a water glass, then resumed stage centre.

"In the book of Genesis, we see two ways of looking at the creation of human beings. In the first chapter, God 'says,' and the power of the word alone is so great, it *becomes*. The word *becomes* light and dark, sun and moon, mountains, trees, and animals as soon as it leaves the mouth of God.

"Then in the second chapter, we see God in another guise, as a potter, working with this sticky red clay and shaping a human being."

Her tinted nails caught the light as her child-sized hands shaped a figurine out of the air, then brushed it away. “Same God, just different ways of talking about His creation. But in either of them—just think about this now—does it say in either of them that God made man *better* than woman? The first account certainly doesn’t: ‘So God created man—humankind—in His own image, in the image of God created He him, *male and female* created He *them*.’ Humankind, male and female together, is in the image of God, not just male humans. The verse nails it down to make sure it’s absolutely clear.”

There was a rustle of disturbance in the hall, and her voice increased in volume to cover it.

“And the other story, about God the sculptor? I’m sure you all know the saying”—her voice climbed and turned saccharin—“that woman was made from man’s rib so she might stand beside him and under his arm for protection.” She made a face as if she’d tasted something disgusting. “Have you ever heard such sentimental, condescending rot?” Her voice control was extraordinary, for she sounded as if she were speaking normally, yet the crack of the last word rose above the combined laughter and a handful of angry voices. “If you want to be logical about it, don’t tell me that the woman was given to Adam as a servant, a sort of glorified packhorse that could carry on a conversation. Tell me what the story really said, that God realised creation was incomplete, so He divided His human creature up, and created Eve, the distilled essence of His human being. With Eve, humanity became complete. With Eve, creation became complete. Adam was the first human, but Eve . . . *Eve* was the crown of God’s creation.”

Now she was having to shout.

“That was what my loud preacher feared, to be told that he and his cronies had no more right to tell me that I couldn’t speak in God’s house than I had a right to tell the sun not to shine. But all that’s changed now, hasn’t it, my friends?” A great roar drowned out her words for the next moments.

“. . . God’s image, you have the God-given right to use your minds

and your bodies. You are in God's image, and I love you. See you Thursday, friends."

Abruptly, she waved, and in a swirl of gold and white she was gone. The place exploded in hundreds of voices raised in shouts of argument, pleasure, friendship, and confusion. Ronnie leant over and spoke loudly in my ear.

"This lot will go and have tea and biscuits next door, but if you'll wait a few minutes, we can go back and say hello, if you'd like."

I would like. I was fascinated, impressed, more than a bit repelled, and altogether extremely curious. The woman had played her audience like a finely tuned instrument, handling nearly four hundred people with the ease of a seasoned politician. Even I, non-Christian and hardened cynic that I am, had found it difficult to resist her. She was a feminist and she had a sense of humour, an appealing combination that was regrettably rare, and she came across as a person who was deeply, seriously committed to her beliefs, yet who retained the distance and humanity to laugh at herself. She was articulate without being pompous, and apparently self-educated since the age of fifteen. Her attitude towards the Bible seemed to be refreshingly matter-of-fact, and her theology, miracle of miracles, was from what I had heard radical but sound.

Oh yes, I should like to meet this woman.

I followed Veronica against the stream of chattering, gesticulating women sprinkled with fuming men to an inconspicuous door set into the wall next to the stage. The large, uniformed man standing guard there greeted Miss Beaconsfield by name and tipped his hat as his eyes gave me a thorough investigation.

Behind the door, the atmosphere was closer to that backstage after a theatre performance than to a vestry following a church service. Swirls of dramatic young women were calling "darling" to one another over the heads of trouser-clad women hauling spotlights and cleaning equipment. Gradually, we insinuated our way through to the hindmost recesses, and as Veronica's face became more and more expectantly radiant, I became

increasingly aware of the depth of her involvement and the degree of her authority in this organisation. We went unchallenged, followed only by envious glances directed at my companion, and these slid into frank curiosity when they took in the peculiarly dressed figure in her wake.

A door closed behind us and the cacophony shut off abruptly. The rough workaday backstage setting was left behind, and we walked through what looked like the corridor of some high-class hotel. A huge flower arrangement occupied a niche, dramatic orange-and-brown lilies and white roses, and Veronica paused to break off two of the latter, handing one to me without a word. Around a corner, she knocked at a door. Muted sounds came from within—several voices—but no answer. She fiddled shyly with her flower, shot me an embarrassed glance, and knocked again more loudly. This time, it opened, to a stout, suspicious woman of about fifty in a grey maid's uniform, complete with starched white apron and cap.

"*Bonjour, Marie,*" Veronica chirped merrily, and stepped forward in expectation of the door being opened, as indeed it was. The woman looked as if she wanted to shut it in my face but did not quite dare.

Margery Childe was holding court. At first glance, it seemed that she was having tea with a dozen or so women friends, but when the eye took in the sitting-at-her-feet attitude and the openmouthed smiles on the faces, waiting for the blessing of a word, tea was the very least of what these women were drinking in. She looked up at our entrance and a smile came over her face as her eyes raked me from head to feet with the thoroughness of the doorman but in a fraction of the time, and then she was greeting Veronica with genuine warmth and affection. Ronnie handed her the flower, laying it into her hand like an offering at an altar, and the tiny blonde woman held it to her nose for a moment before placing it with a tumble of other delicate blossoms that spilled from a low table at her side.

"I'm glad you came, Veronica," she said, her voice sweeter than in public speech but still remarkably low and throaty. "We missed you on Saturday."

"I know," Veronica said eagerly. "I tried to get here, but one of my families—"

"Yes, your families. I was thinking just this morning about that problem you were having with the young girl, Emily was her name? Would you come and talk to me about how she's doing?"

"Certainly, Margery. Anytime."

"Find out from Marie when I'm free in the next day or two; she knows better than I. And you've brought a friend tonight?"

Veronica stood aside and held back her arm for me to come forward into the circle.

"This is Mary Russell, a friend of mine from Oxford."

The eyes that looked up into mine were a curiously dark blue, almost violet, deep and calm and magnetic, and the only truly beautiful element in her face. She lacked the currently fashionable high bones, her lightly tanned skin was ever-so-slightly coarse beneath the professional makeup, her teeth, though not protuberant, were a fraction overlarge, and her nose had at some distant time been broken and inexpertly set. Her looks, however, served only to increase her appeal, to make her seem vital and interesting, where a conventional beauty would have seemed insipid. It was a face to watch and to live for, not one simply to adore. She was calm and sure and filled with a power beyond her years and, I had to admit, enormously compelling. The room waited for me to lay my rose at her feet and do my obeisance so it could get on with its courtly rituals.

Without taking my eyes from hers, I raised the flower with great deliberation and threaded it into a buttonhole, then stepped forward and extended my hand to her.

"How do you do?" I said, and smiled with noncommittal politeness.

There was the briefest fraction of a pause before she sat upright, and her eyes gleamed as she leant forward and put her neat, strong, manicured little hand into mine. Her shake was by nature of an experiment, marginally longer than was necessary, and she sat back with something that might have been amusement in her eye.

“Welcome, Mary Russell. Thank you for coming.”

“Oh, that’s quite all right,” I said blandly.

“I hope you enjoyed the service.”

“It was interesting.”

“Please help yourself to tea or one of the drinks, if you like.”

“Thank you, I will,” I said, not moving.

“I think we may be seeing something of you,” she said suddenly, a sort of pronouncement.

“Do you?” I said politely, making it not quite a denial. Our eyes held for a long moment, and suddenly hers crinkled, though her mouth was still.

“Perhaps you might stay on a bit after my friends have left? I should like a word.”

I inclined my head silently and went to sit in a corner, much amused at the skirmish. This one might be as much fun as Holmes.

The next hour would have been excruciatingly boring had it not been for the undercurrents and interplay that I found absolutely fascinating. She played this room with the same ease that she had played the hall, though to very different purpose. Before, her aim had been exhortation, inspiration, perhaps a bit of thought provocation. Here, she was acting as spiritual counsellor, mother confessor, and guiding light to this, her inner circle, drawing them out and drawing them together into a cohesive whole around herself.

Fourteen women (excluding myself), all of them young (the oldest was thirty-four or thirty-five), all reasonably attractive, all obviously wealthy, intelligent, and well-bred, and all of them with that ineffable but unmistakable air of women who had not sat still during the war. I found out later that of the women present, only two had done nothing more strenuous than knit for the soldiers, and one of those had been saddled with invalid parents. Nine had been VAD nurses at one time or other, three of them from 1915 until the end, nursing convoy after convoy of dying young men in France and southern England and the Mediterranean, sixteen-hour days of septic wounds and pus-soaked

bandages, a baptism of blood for carefully nurtured young ladies. Several had spent months as land girls, backbreaking peasant labour for women accustomed to jumping hunters across hedges rather than wrestling with a plough horse, twisting elaborate paper spills for the fireplace rather than planting potatoes in heavy soil. These were women who had lost brothers and fiancés in the mud of Ypres and Passchendale, who had seen childhood friends return armless, crippled, blind, destroyed, women who had joined their lovers in the glory of a right war, the pride and purity of serving their country at need, and been beaten down, one ideal at a time, until in the end they had been reduced merely to slogging on, unthinking. Fourteen blue-blooded, strong, capable women, the kind of people who invariably made me feel gauche and clumsy, and all of them willing, eager even, to lay the inbred authority and absolute self-possession of their kind, along with the hard-earned maturity of the past years, at the feet of this woman as they had their flowers. She questioned them in turn, she listened with complete attention as each spoke, she elicited comments from specific individuals, and she gave judgement—suggestions, but with the authority of divine power behind her. Each received her share of words with gratitude, clutching them to her with the hunger of a child in a bread line, and when Childe finally stood to indicate that the evening was at an end, each went away with something of the same attitude of skulking off to a corner to gnaw. Finally, Veronica and I were left with her. I was still slumped into my chair, watching. Veronica turned to me.

“Mary, do you want to come back with me tonight? Or you could take a cab later . . . ?” The evening had done her a world of good, I would give Childe that. She was again calm and sure of herself, though she, too, had something of the crust-in-the-corner look to her that made me think she might rather be alone.

“No, Ronnie, I’ll go along to my club later, if that’s all right with you. They’ll give me a room, and I keep clothes there. I’ll send these things back tomorrow—or shall we meet for lunch?” I offered. It

amused me to ignore the woman standing in the background, as it had amused me in our earlier exchange to deny her the last word. I looked only at Veronica, but I was very aware of the other figure, and furthermore, I was conscious of her own awareness of, and amusement at, the undercurrents I was generating.

“Oh, yes, let’s,” Ronnie enthused. “Where?”

“The Elgin Marbles in the British Museum,” I said decisively. “At midday. We can walk around to Tonio’s from there. Does that suit?”

“I haven’t been to the BM in donkey’s years. That’ll be fine. See you then.” She took a deferential leave of Margery Childe and fluttered out.

MONDAY, 27 DECEMBER

The female sex as a whole is slow in comprehension.

—CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA (376–444)

THE DOOR CLOSED behind Veronica, and I was half-aware of her voice calling out to Marie and then fading down the corridor as I sat and allowed myself to be scrutinised, slowly, thoroughly, impassively. When the blonde woman finally turned away and kicked her shoes off under a low table, I let out the breath I hadn't realised I was holding and offered up thanks to Holmes' tutoring, badgering, and endless criticism that had brought me to the place where I might endure such scrutiny without flinching—at least not outwardly.

She padded silently across the thick carpet to the disorder of bottles and chose a glass, some ice, a large dollop from a gin bottle, and a generous splash of tonic. She half-turned to me with a question in her eyebrows, accepted my negative shake without comment, went to a

drawer, took out a cigarette case and a matching enamelled matchbox, gathered up an ashtray, and came back to her chair, moving all the while with an unconscious feline grace—that of a small domestic tabby rather than anything more exotic or angular. She tucked her feet under her in the chair precisely like the cat in Mrs Hudson’s kitchen, lit her cigarette, dropped the spent match into the ashtray balanced on the arm of the chair, and filled her lungs deeply before letting the smoke drift slowly from nose and mouth. The first swallow from the glass was equally savoured, and she shut her eyes for a long minute.

When she opened them, the magic had gone out of her, and she was just a small, tired, dishevelled woman in an expensive dress, with a much-needed drink and cigarette to hand. I revised my estimate of her age upward a few years, to nearly forty, and wondered if I ought to leave.

She looked at me again, not searchingly as before, but with the mild distraction of someone confronted by an unexpected and potentially problematic gift horse. When she spoke, it was in an ordinary voice, neither inspiring nor manipulating, as if she had decided to pack away her power from me. I wondered whether this was a deliberate strategy, putting on honesty when confronted by someone upon whom the normal techniques had proven ineffective, or if she had just, for some unknown reason of her own, decided to shed pretence. My perceptions were generally very good, and although it did not feel like deception, she did seem watchful. Hiding behind the truth, perhaps? Anticipation stirred.

Her first words matched her attitude, as if blunt honesty was both her natural response to the problem I represented and a deliberately chosen tactic.

“Why are you here, Mary Russell?”

“Veronica invited me. I will go if you wish.”

She shook her head impatiently, dismissing both my offer and my response.

“People come here for a reason, I have found,” she said half to herself. “People come because they are in need, or because they have something to give. Some come because they want to hurt me. Why have you come?”

Somewhat unsettled, I cast around for an answer.

“I came because my friend needed me,” I finally admitted, and she seemed more willing to accept that.

“Veronica, yes. How did you come to know her?”

“We were neighbours in lodgings in Oxford one year.” I decided I did not need to tell her of the elaborate pranks we had joined forces on, opting for a dignified enterprise instead. “Ronnie organised a production of *Taming of the Shrew* for the wounded soldiers who were being housed in the colleges. She also hired a hall for a series of lectures and debates on the Vote”—no need to specify which Vote!—“and dragged me into it. She has a knack for getting others involved—but no doubt you’ve discovered that. Her enthusiasms are contagious, I suppose because they’re based in her innate goodness. She even succeeded in getting me involved in one of the debates, and we became friends. I’m not really sure why.” I was astonished, when I came to a halt, at how wordy I had been and how much of the truth I had given this stranger.

“The attraction of opposites, I see that. Veronica is softer and more generous than is good for her, which I doubt would be said about you. The hard and the soft, power and love, tug strongly at each other, do they not?”

It was said in a mode of casual conversation, and followed by a pull at her glass, but the devastating simplicity of her observations immediately raised my defences. However, it seemed that attack was not her intention, because she went on.

“That is the basis of our evening cycle of services, you might say.” She reflected for a moment. “And of the daytime work, as well.”

“A cycle?” I asked carefully.

“Ah, I see Veronica did not explain much about us.”

“Nothing very coherent. A lot of talk about love and the rights of women.”

She laughed, deep and rich.

“Dear Veronica, she is enthusiastic. Let me see if I can fill in the gaps.” She paused to crush out the cigarette and immediately light another one, squinting through the smoke at me. “The evening services are what I suppose you might call our public events. Quite a few of our members came in originally out of curiosity, and stayed. Mondays, the topic is left general. I talk about any number of things; sometimes we have Bible readings, silent or guided prayer, even a discussion of some political issue currently in the news—I let the Spirit lead me, on Mondays, and it’s usually a small, well-behaved group of friends, like tonight. Thursdays are different. Very different.” She thought about Thursdays for a minute, and whatever her thoughts were, they turned her eyes dark and put a small smile on her full lips, and the magnetically beautiful woman I had seen earlier was there briefly. Then she reached down and flicked her cigarette over the ashtray and looked at me.

“Thursdays, I talk about love. It’s a very popular night. We even see a fair number of men. And then on Saturdays, we talk about the other end of the spectrum: power. Sometimes Saturday meetings get quite political, and a lot of our hotter heads are given free rein. We don’t get many men on Saturdays, and when we do, it’s usually because they want a fight. Saturdays can get very exciting.” She grinned.

“I can imagine,” I said, calling to mind the shouts of the “quiet evening” I had witnessed. “And you have other activities, as well?”

“Oh heavens, the evening services are just the tip. Our goal, simply stated, is to touch everything concerned with the lives of women. Yes”—she laughed—“I know how it sounds, but one has to aim high. We have four areas we’re concentrating on at the moment: literacy, health, safety, and political reform. Veronica is in charge of the reading program, in fact, and she’s doing fine work. She has about eighty women at the moment learning to read and write.”

“Teaching them all herself?” No wonder she was exhausted.

“No, no. All Temple members volunteer a certain amount of time every week to one or another of our projects. Veronica mostly coordinates them, though she, too, does her share of actual teaching. It’s the same in each of the four areas. In the health program, for example, we have a doctor and several nurses who give time, but it’s more a matter of identifying the women in the community who need help and putting them into touch with the right person. A woman with recurring lung infections will be seen by a doctor, but also by a building specialist who will look at her house to see if the ventilation might be improved. A woman with headaches from eyestrain will be given spectacles, and we’ll see if we can find a way to put more light into her working area—laying on gas, perhaps, or even electrical lights. A woman ill from exhaustion and nerves who has eleven children will be educated about birth control and enrolled in our nutritional-supplements program along with her children.”

“You haven’t had any problems with the birth-control thing? Legally, I mean?”

“Once or twice. One of our members spent a week behind bars because of it, so we tend to give that information orally now rather than as pamphlets. Ridiculous, but there it is. It’s getting easier, though. In fact, I understand that Dr Stopes—you know her, the *Married Love* woman?—intends to open a clinic here in London specialising in birth-control methods, sometime this spring. She’s going to come speak to our members next month, if you’re interested.”

I grunted a noncommittal noise; I could just imagine Holmes’ reaction.

“And safety?”

“That was a branch off the health program originally, though now it’s almost as large and certainly causes more headaches for us. We run a shelter—for women and their children who are without a roof or in danger from the father. It is appalling how little help is available for a desperate woman who has no relations to turn to. Violent husbands

don't count as a threat in the eyes of the law," she commented, her voice controlled but her eyes dark, this time with anger, and I was briefly aware of her once-broken nose. "So two years ago when one of our members left us two large adjoining terrace houses on the corner, we opened them as a shelter and let it be known that any woman, and her children, of course, who needs a warm, dry, safe place is welcome."

"I can imagine the headaches. I'm surprised you aren't overrun."

"We don't allow them to stay indefinitely. We help them find a job and someone to care for the small children, try to work something out with the husband—the shelter is not meant to be a permanent solution. There are still workhouses for that," she added with heavy irony, though the hardness of her face bespoke her opinion of the institution.

"Only women, then?"

"Only women. We occasionally get men, who think we're a soup kitchen, and we give them a meal and send them away. Men have other options. Women need the help of their sisters, and in fact, that to me is one of the most exciting things about what we're doing, when women of different classes meet and see that we share more similarities than differences, in spite of everything. We are on the edge of a revolution in the way women live in this society, and some of us want to ensure that the changes that are coming will apply to all women, rich and poor alike."

"Most of the women I saw here tonight, even in the service, seemed far from needy," I commented.

She refused to be baited, and smiled gently.

"My ministry is twofold. On the one hand are my poorer sisters, whose needs are immediate, even desperate, but relatively straightforward: spectacles, treatment for tuberculosis, warm clothing for their children. On the other hand are the women you saw tonight at the service, as well as those who refer to themselves as the 'Inner Circle'—young women like yourself who grew into maturity during the War, when it was common to see women doing work that would have been

unthinkable ten years before, as well as older women who were running the country five years ago and are now made to feel harridans and harpies for pushing men out of jobs. My task is to bring the two hands together.” She did not literally clasp her own hands, but the speech had the odour of ink about it, and I suspected it was normally accompanied by the theatrical gesture.

“Poor little rich girls,” I murmured.

“Their needs are real,” she said sharply. “Their hunger is no less acute for being spiritual rather than physical. In some ways, it is greater, because there is no cause to point at, nothing to blame but themselves. An empty cupboard is an inescapable fact; an empty heart can only be inferred from the life lived.”

“And you say they lead empty lives,” I said. I was irritated at the cliché, particularly tonight, with the smell of London’s bleakest districts still in my nostrils. I wanted to push her into spontaneity, even if it meant ignoring my own opinions and playing devil’s advocate to the full. “I should doubt that most of the women in this parish would agree with you. Most of them would be very happy to trade their empty cupboards for the trials of education, physical ease, and leisure. It’s hardly 1840 we’re talking about, is it? Or even 1903. This is nearly 1921, and nobody I know is about to be forced back into whalebone corsets and hobble skirts. Why, half of the women here tonight can probably vote.”

“The vote was a sop,” she snapped. “Granting individual slaves their manumission after a lifetime of service doesn’t alter the essential wrongness of the institution of slavery, nor does giving a small number of women the vote adequately compensate the entire sex for their war-time service—to say nothing of millenia of oppression. All the vote did was break up the underlying unity of feminists and allow the factions to disperse. We allowed ourselves to be misled by a sop,” she repeated. This speech was more personal and had its glints of spontaneity, but it was still ready-made—careful words, though with an angry woman behind them.

“So you use these women; you put them to work on your various projects in order to make them feel useful,” I said.

To my surprise, far from taking umbrage at my words, she subsided with a laugh and winked at me conspiratorially.

“Just think of the vast amount of energy out there waiting to be put to use.” She chuckled. “And no man will touch it. No male politician dares.”

“You have political ambitions, then?” The newspaper photograph came back to me. A donation, had it been? To a Lord Mayor?

“I have no ambitions . . . for myself.”

“But for the church?”

“For the Temple, I will do what needs to be done. Part of that may involve my entering the political arena.”

“Using the vast resources of energy available to you.” I smiled.

“Representing a large number of people, yes.”

“And their bank accounts,” I noted, but she did not rise even to that gibe. Instead, she put on a face as bland as anything Holmes could come up with.

“If you mean the funds our members make available to the Temple, it is true, God has been very good in meeting our needs. Most members tithe; others donate what they can.”

My near accusation bothered her not in the least, and I had the distinct impression that she had searched her own heart on this question and felt certain of the truth in her words. She waited calmly. Her drink was only half-gone—whatever her faults, drunkenness did not seem to be one of them. I changed the subject.

“I was interested in your reading of the text,” I began. “Tell me, was that a personal interpretation of the Creation Story, or was it based on someone else’s work?”

To my astonishment, after all I had asked and intimated in the last few minutes, this apparently innocuous question hit her hard. She sat up, as amazed as if Lady Macbeth had interrupted a peroration to give

a cake recipe, and watched me cautiously through narrowed eyes for a moment before an abrupt question was forced out.

“Miss Russell, what newspaper are you with?”

It was my turn to be astonished.

“Newspaper? Good heavens, is that what you thought?” I didn’t know whether to laugh or to be offended—my only contacts with the profession had tended heavily towards the intrusive and ghoulish. It did, however, explain her odd façade of easy intimacy combined with formal speeches. She thought I was an undeclared journalist, using an unknowing acquaintance to get in and prise at The Real Margery Childe. I decided laughter was more called for, and so I laughed, apparently convincingly.

“No, Miss Childe, I’m not a reporter, or a journalist, or anything but a friend of Ronnie Beaconsfield.”

“What do you do, then?”

I wondered briefly at the question, and realised that I didn’t give off the same air of easy affluence that the rest of them had. It was a pleasing thought, that I was not recognisably of the leisured class.

“I’m at Oxford. I do informal tutoring, and a great deal of research.”

“Into what?”

“Bible, mostly.”

“I see. You read theology, then?”

“Theology and chemistry.”

“An odd combination,” she said, the usual reaction.

“Not terribly.”

“No?”

“Chemistry involves the workings of the physical universe, theology those of the human universe. There are behaviour patterns common to both.”

She had forgotten both cigarette and drink momentarily, and she seemed to be listening to some inner voice, head tipped.

“I see,” she said again, but I thought she was not speaking of my

last sentence. "Yes, I begin to understand. You were interested in the way I read the stories of the Creation of woman. How might you read them?"

"In a very similar fashion, though I imagine we reached the point by rather different means."

"The means does not matter if the result is the same," she said dismissively, reaching down to rub the ash from the tip of her cigarette.

"You are wrong." She looked up, startled more by the edge in my voice than the blunt words themselves. She could not have known that to my mind sloppiness in textual analysis was absolutely unforgivable, far worse than the deliberate falsification of results from a slipshod chemical experiment. I forced a smile to take the sting out of my words, then tried to explain.

"Interpreting the Bible without training is a bit like finding a specific address in a foreign city with neither map nor knowledge of the language. You might stumble across the right answer, but in the meantime you've put yourself at the mercy of every ignoramus in town, with no way of telling the savant from the fool. Finding your way through the English Bible, you're entirely under the tyranny of the translators."

"Oh, for subtle distinctions perhaps. . . ."

"And blatant mistranslations, and deliberate obliteration of the original meaning."

"For example?" she asked sceptically.

"Deuteronomy thirty-two verse eighteen," I said with satisfaction. One single verb in this passage had occupied me and the librarians of the Bodleian for the better part of a month, and its exegesis was one cornerstone of the paper I had just finished and was due to present in a month's time. I was very proud of this verse. It took her only a moment to pull the words from her memory.

"Of the Rock that begot thee thou art unmindful, and thou hast forgotten God that formed thee." She sounded slightly puzzled. The passage was hardly controversial, being merely a segment of Moses' final

exhortation to his wayward people, reminding them to turn from pagan practices, back to the Rock that was their God.

“That’s not what it says,” I told her. “Oh, it’s what the Authorised translation says, but it’s not what the original says. The final phrase, ‘formed thee,’ is nowhere in the Hebrew. The verb used is *hul*, which means ‘to twist.’ Elsewhere, it is used of the movement in a dance, or, as it is here, in childbirth. The verse ought to be translated, ‘You have forgotten the Rock that begot you; you have forgotten the God who writhed in the effort of giving birth to you.’ The purpose of the verse is to remind the people of the intimacy of God’s parenthood, using both the male and the female forms.”

Well, I thought as I watched her face, if the hardened academics react to my paper with even a fraction of her response, it will prove a memorable gathering.

She came out of her chair like a scalded cat, moved across the room, and pounced on a drawer, emerging with a worn volume of soft white leather. She flipped expertly to the place and stared at the words as if she’d expected them to have changed. They had not. She turned and thrust the open book at me accusingly.

“But that’s . . . That means . . .”

“Yes,” I said wryly, pleased with the effect my idea had on her. “That means that an entire vocabulary of imagery relating to the maternal side of God has been deliberately obscured.” I watched her try to sort it out, and then I put it into a phrase I would definitely not use in the presentation in Oxford: “God the Mother, hidden for centuries.”

She looked down at the book in her hands as if the ground beneath her feet had, in the blink of an eye, become treacherously soft and unstable. She turned carefully to the drawer, riffled the gold-edged India paper speculatively, and put her Bible away. She returned to her chair a troubled woman and lit another cigarette.

“Is there more of this kind of thing?”

“Considerably more.”

She smoked in silence and squinted through the smoke. "Yes, I see," she said yet again, her eyes far away. In a minute, she jumped up again and began a prow around the perimeter of the room, and so strong was the image of cat that I should not have been greatly surprised had she leapt up on the sideboard and threaded her way between the bottles. She came back to her chair and stabbed out her cigarette.

"I see now why you've come. You have come to teach me." I felt my eyebrow go up in a movement that was pure Holmes. "Could you teach me . . . to read the original, I mean?" she demanded urgently, as if ready to roll up her silken sleeves at that hour and begin.

"Neither Hebrew nor Greek is terribly difficult to learn," I said noncommittally, then added, "given time."

"You must show me this 'God the Mother.' Why don't I know about this?" Before I could answer, she went on. "It makes all the difference. There is more, you said?"

"It's no fluke. Once you're looking for it, it's everywhere. Job thirty-eight, Psalm twenty-two, Isaiah sixty-six, Hosea eleven, Isaiah forty-two. And, of course, the Genesis passages you cited tonight." That gave her pause.

"Yes, of course. But I never thought . . ." And there was the essence of it, I knew. She had absorbed the words, had hammered a few of them into a shape that suited her purpose, but it had never occurred to her to question the underlying themes, to look for patterns other than those handed down over the centuries, patterns that did not include the uncomfortable idea of the motherhood of the Divine. This woman was no deep thinker; the life of the intellect was foreign to her, and whatever her prayers and contemplations were, they were not analytical. Nonetheless, she was like a substance in a beaker, ripe for the transformation of a catalysing agent. And I had just dropped the first measure of that reagent into her quick, hungry mind. Time to stand back.

As if she had heard my thoughts, she raised her hand to stop me from withdrawing, then dropped it with a rueful smile.

"I'm sorry, I get too excited about things and want to have it all, now. You have your own work to do." The smile became wistful. "All the same, I'd appreciate any help you might give me. If there are any books . . . You can see how important it could be to me, though I realise you haven't the time to wait around here and be my tutor."

I protested that I should be happy to help and that the term's responsibilities had not yet taken hold, and only when the words had left my mouth did I realise that her humility had trapped me as her authority could not, and her expressions of gratitude at my offer had an edge of triumph. Reluctantly, disarmed, I gave her my wry smile, and she laughed.

"I like you, Mary Russell. Please, do come and teach me. I think I shall learn a great deal from you. Even if it isn't about Hebrew or theology."

I laughed then, and she rose and pulled her shoes out from under the chairside table, and we walked through the now-silent maze to the entrance. She talked easily, mostly about flowers and the fact that she no longer had time for gardening, saying possibly that was why her friends (her followers) plied her with roses, though it still made her uncomfortable to accept them.

She was friendly and relaxed and self-deprecating, but I could not feel entirely at ease with her. Precisely what it was about her that I found unsettling, I could not pin down. Partly, it was the childlike size of her, which made me tower awkwardly in my ill-fitting clothes. Partly, it was the way she walked so very close, her shoulder occasionally brushing my sleeve, so that I breathed in her not-unattractive aroma of sweat and hot silk and some subtle and musky perfume. Partly, it was the awareness of how easily she had found a weakness in my ready defences and made me agree to help her. Mostly, though, it was an intangible, a low, pulsing wave of fascination and discomfiture that continued, even now, to radiate from her like some fabulous tropical flower whose heavenly fragrance mesmerises the insects on which it feeds.

It was with relief that I wished her a good night. However, the relief was tempered by a certain wistful regret, and by the awareness that I had not entirely escaped the trap after all.

THE IMPASSIVE DOOR guard got up from his chair and his yellow-back novel to unlock the wide door for me. It was raining still, and though the street was well lit, it was quite deserted.

I hesitated for a moment, half-tempted to telephone for a cab, but the image of Margery Childe as a carnivorous plant and a waft of disapproval from the guard came together, and I realised that despite the wet, I wanted to be out of the building, away from the provocative scent and into the clean shock of the night. I pulled my thin borrowed coat up around my neck, settled my hat low over my spectacles, and set out resolutely towards the brighter lights at the end of the street.

Halfway there, the cloy had rinsed away. The rain had also gained both my shoulder blades and the inside of my shoes, and I was occupied with mordant thoughts about the English climate and ambiguous thoughts about the woman I had left, when a surreptitious movement from inside the unlit doorway I was passing brought me whirling around in a crouch. A tall, indistinct figure loomed up, darkness in a dark place, with a pale slash the only indication of its face. It whispered at me, a sly and salacious hiss that oozed suggestively into the night, barely above the sound of the rain.

“Pretty young ladies like you have no business on the streets at this time of night.”

I froze, but before the first immediate *frisson* of shock could pass on into gooseflesh, I straightened and began to laugh in relief.

“Holmes! Good God, what on earth are you doing here?”

He gathered his dark garments around him and stepped into the dim light, looking for all the world like some Byronic version of a vampire. (Thirty years before, I thought briefly, he'd have been run in, or strung up, for Jack the Ripper.) His face was largely in the shadow of

his wide-brimmed hat, but one corner of his thin mouth was turned up in a familiar sardonic smile. When he spoke, his tones were half an octave lower than usual, which meant that he was feeling inordinately content with life.

“A whim, Russell,” he said, and tilted his head back so I might see his eyes, crinkled in silent laughter. “Merely a whim.”