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'Fantastic. Somewhere between Dickens, Sherlock Holmes and Rider Haggard.
I was in seventh heaven' Kate Mosse, author of *Labyrinth*

G.W. DAHLQUIST



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ONE

Temple

From her arrival at the docks to the appearance of Roger's letter, written on crisp Ministry paper and signed with his full name, on her maid's silver tray at breakfast, three months had passed. On that morning, her poached eggs steaming their silver bowl (gelatinous, gleaming), Miss Temple had not seen Roger Bascombe for seven days. He had been called to Brussels. Then to the country house of his infirm uncle, Lord Tarr. Then he had been required at all hours by the Minister, and then by the Deputy Minister, and finally by a pressing request from a cousin desperate for discreet advice about matters of property and law. But then she found herself in the same tea shop as that same cousin—the over-fed, over-wigged Pamela—exactly when Roger was said to be soothing her distress. It was quite clear that Pamela's only source of disquiet was a less than ready supply of buns. Miss Temple began to feel tremulous. A day went by with no word at all. On the eighth day, at breakfast, she received the letter from Roger regretfully severing their engagement, closing with the politely expressed desire that she take pains to never contact nor see him in any way for the complete remainder of her days. It contained no other explanation.

Such rejection had quite simply never occurred to her. The manner of dismissal she barely noticed—indeed, it was just how she would have done such a thing (as in fact, she had, on multiple galling occasions)—but the fact of it was stinging. She had attempted to re-read the letter, but found her vision blurred—after a moment she realized she was in tears. She dismissed the maid and unsuccessfully attempted to butter a slice of toast. She placed the toast and her knife carefully on the table,

stood, and then walked rather hurriedly to her bed, where she curled into a tight ball, the entirety of her small frame shaking with silent sobs.

For an entire day she remained indoors refusing all but the most bitter Lapsang soochong, and even that watered down (without milk *or* lemon) into a thin, rusty beverage that managed to be both feeble and unpleasant. In the night she wept again, alone in the dark, hollow and unmoored, until her pillow was too damp to be borne. But by the next afternoon, her clear gray eyes ringed red and her sausage curls lank, waking in pallid winter light (a season quite new to the warm-blooded Miss Temple, who judged it objectively horrid), the bedding tangled about her, she was once more determined to be about her business, and brisk.

Her world had been changed—as she was willing to admit (she had a young lady's classical education) did happen in life—but it hardly meant she was obliged to be docile, for Miss Temple was only docile on the most extraordinary occasions. Indeed, she was considered by some a provincial savage if not an outright little monster, for she was not large, and was by inclination merciless. She had grown up on an island, bright and hot, in the shadow of slaves, and as she was a sensitive girl, it had marked her like a whip—though part of that marking was how very immune from whips she was, and would, she trusted, remain.

Miss Temple was twenty-five, old to be unmarried, but as she had spent some time disappointing available suitors on her island before being sent across the sea to sophisticated society, this was not necessarily held against her. She was as wealthy as plantations could make her, and sharp-witted enough to know that it was natural for people to care more for her money than for her person, and she did not take this point of materialist interest to heart. Indeed, she took very little to heart at all. The exception—though she found herself now hard-pressed to explain it, and though lacking explanations of any kind vexed her—was Roger.

Miss Temple had rooms at the Hotel Boniface, fashionable but not ridiculous, consisting of an outer parlor, an inner parlor, a dining room, a dressing room, a sleeping room, a room for her two maids, and a second dressing and sleeping room for her aged Aunt Agathe, who lived on a small plantation-derived stipend, and who generally alternated between meals and slumber but was enough respected to be a suitable chaperone, despite her lack of attention. Agathe, whom Miss Temple had

only first met upon her disembarkation, was acquainted with the Bascombe family. Quite simply, Roger was the first man of reasonable status and beauty to whom Miss Temple had been introduced, and being a young woman of clarity and loyalty, she found no further reason to search. For his part, Roger gave every impression of finding her both pretty and delightful, and so they were engaged.

To all accounts it was a good match. Roger's expressed opinion aside, even those who found Miss Temple's directness difficult would admit to her adequate beauty. They would also happily admit to her wealth. Roger Bascombe was a rising figure in the Foreign Ministry, cresting the verge of palpable authority. He was a man who looked fine when well-dressed, displayed no flagrant vice, and who possessed more chin and less stomach than any the Bascombes had produced in two generations. Their time together had been brief but, to Miss Temple's experience, intense. They had shared a dizzying variety of meals, strolled through parks and galleries, gazed deeply into each other's eyes, exchanged tender kisses. All of this had been new to her, from the restaurants and the paintings (the scale and strangeness of which prompted Miss Temple to sit for several minutes with a hand pressed tightly over each eye), the variety of people, of smells, the music, the noise, the manners and all the new words, and further to the particular strength of Roger's fingers, his arm around her waist, his kindly chuckle—which even when she felt it came at her expense she strangely did not mind—and his own smells, of his soap, his hair oil, his tobacco, his days in meeting rooms amidst piles of thick documents and ink and wax and wood varnish and felt-topped tables, and finally the, to her mind, devastating mixture of sensations she derived from his delicate lips, his bristling side whiskers, and his warm searching tongue.

But by Miss Temple's next breakfast, though her face was blotched and swollen about the eyes, she met her eggs and toast with customary ferocity, and met the maid's timorous gaze just once with a narrow peremptory glance that served as a knife drawn across the throat of any speech, much less consolation. Agathe was still asleep. Miss Temple had been aware (from the husky, insistent, violet-scented breathing) that her aunt

had lingered on the opposite side of her door through the day of her (as she now thought of it) Dark Retreat, but she wanted no part of that conversation either.

She launched herself out of the Boniface, wearing a simple but frankly quite flattering green and gold flowered dress, with green leather ankle boots and a green bag, walking crisply toward the district of expensive shops that filled the streets on the near bank of the river. She was not interested in actively buying anything, but had the idea that looking at the assembled goods of the city—of the world—making their way from so many different lands to this collection of shops might serve as a spur to new thinking about her own new state of affairs. With this in mind, she found herself eager, even restless, moving from stall to stall, her eyes roving without lingering over fabrics, carved boxes, glassware, hats, trinkets, gloves, silks, perfumes, papers, soaps, opera glasses, hairpins, feathers, beads, and lacquered items of all kinds. At no point did she actually stop, and sooner than she had imagined possible Miss Temple found herself on the district's other side, standing at the edge of St. Isobel's Square.

The day above her was a cloudy grey. She turned and retraced her steps, gazing still more intently into each exotic display, but never—if she herself were a fish—finding the item that would hook her attention into place. On the Boniface side again, she wondered exactly what she thought she was doing. How, if she was with clarity embracing her new sense of loss and redefinition, did nothing—not even an especially cunning lacquered duck—generate interest? Instead, at each object, she felt herself driven onward, prey to some nagging urge she could not name, toward some unknown prize. That she had no conscious idea what this prize might be irked her, but she took comfort from the implication that it did exist, and would be potent enough to alert her when it came into view.

So, with a resolute sigh, she crossed back through the shops for a third time, her attention entirely elsewhere, confident, as she crossed the square toward the nest of monumental white stone buildings that made up the government Ministries, that her interest was—in a word—disinterested. The matter lay not so much with the perceived faults of her own person, if any, nor the perceived superiority, if any, of a rival (whose identity she was, out of idle curiosity alone, in the back of her mind trying to guess), but merely that her own case was the best example at hand. Or it was the

only example? Still, it did not mean she was *troubled* by it, or that she'd no perspective, or that for any future affections of the now-beyond-her Roger Bascombe she would give two pins.

Despite these absolutely rational thoughts, Miss Temple paused upon reaching the center of the square, and instead of continuing on to the buildings where Roger was undoubtedly even now at work, she sat on a wrought-metal bench and looked up at the enormous statue of St. Isobel at the square's center. Knowing nothing of the sainted martyr and in no way devout, Miss Temple was merely disquieted by its vulgar extravagance: a woman clinging to a barrel in surging surf, clothes torn, hair wild, ringed by the flotsam of shipwreck, with the water about her churned to froth by a roiling tangle of serpents that wrapped around her flailing limbs, coiled under her garments and wound across her throat even as she opened her mouth to cry to heaven—a cry one saw to be heard by a pair of angels, winged, robed, and impassively gazing down from above Isobel's head. Miss Temple appreciated enough the size of the thing and the technical achievements involved, but it nevertheless struck her coarse and unlikely. Shipwreck, as an island girl, she could accept, as she could martyrdom by snakes, but the angels seemed fatiguingly presumptuous.

Of course, as she looked into the unseeing stone eyes of the forever serpent-beset Isobel, she knew she could have scarcely cared less. Her gaze finally followed her true interest, toward the nest of white buildings, and so, quickly, she formed a plan, and with each step of that plan, a perfectly sound justification. She accepted that she was forever divided from Roger—persuasion and reunion were no part of her aims. What she sought, what she in fact required, was information. Was it strict rejection alone—that Roger would rather be alone than be burdened with her? Was it a matter of personal ambition—that she must be shunted aside in favor of promotion and responsibility? Was there simply another woman who had supplanted her in his affections? Or was there something else that she could not presently imagine? They were all equal in her mind, of neutral *emotional* value, but crucial as far as Miss Temple's ability to situate herself in her new loss-inflected existence.

It would be simple enough to follow him. Roger was a man of habits, and even when his hours of work were irregular he would still take his mid-day meal, whenever he did take it, at the same restaurant. Miss Temple found an antiquarian book shop across the street where, as she

was obliged to purchase something for standing so long watching through its window, she on impulse selected a complete four-volume *Illustrated Lives of Sea Martyrs*. The books were detailed enough to warrant her spending the time in the window, apparently examining the colored plates, while actually watching Roger first enter and then, after an hour, re-emerge, alone, from the heavy doors across the street. He walked straight back into the Ministry courtyard. Miss Temple arranged for her purchase to be delivered to the Boniface, and walked back into the street, feeling like a fool.

She had re-crossed the square before her reason convinced her that she was not so much a fool as an inexperienced observer. It was pointless to watch from *outside* the restaurant. It was only from inside that she could have determined whether or not Roger dined alone, or with others, or with which particular others, with any of whom he might have shared significant words—all crucial information. Further, unless he had merely thrown her over for his work—which she doubted, scoffing—she was like to learn nothing from observing his working day. It was after work, obviously, that any real intelligence would be gathered. Abruptly, for by this time she was across the square and in the midst of the shops, she entered a store whose windows were thick with all shapes of luggage, hampers, oilskins, gaiters, pith helmets, lanterns, telescopes, and a ferocious array of walking sticks. She emerged some time later, after exacting negotiations, wearing a ladies' black traveling cloak, with a deep hood and several especially cunning pockets. A visit to another shop filled one pocket with opera glasses, and a visit to a third weighed down a second pocket with a leatherbound notebook and an all-weather pencil. Miss Temple then took her tea.

Between cups of Darjeeling and two scones slathered with cream she made opening entries in the notebook, prefacing her entire endeavor and then detailing the day's work so far. That she now had a kind of uniform and a set of tools made everything that much easier and much less about her particular feelings, for tasks requiring clothes and accoutrements were by definition objective, even scientific, in nature. In keeping with this, she made a point to write her entries in a kind of cipher, replacing proper names and places with synonyms or word-play that hopefully would be impenetrable to all but herself (all references to the Ministry were to "Minsk" or even just "Russia", and Roger himself—in a complex

train of thought that started with him as a snake that had shed his skin, to a snake being charmed by the attractions of others, to India, and finally, because of his still-remarkable personal presence—became “the Rajah”). Against the possibility that she might be making her observations for some time and in some discomfort, she ordered a sausage roll for later. It was placed on her table, wrapped in thick wax paper, and presently bundled into another pocket of her cloak.

Though the winter was verging into spring, the city was still damp around the edges, and the evenings colder than the lengthening days seemed to promise. Miss Temple left the tea shop at four o'clock, knowing Roger to leave usually at five, and hired a carriage. She instructed her driver in a low, direct tone of voice, after assuring him he would be well paid for his time, that they would be following a gentleman, most likely in another carriage, and that she would rap on the roof of the coach to indicate the man when he appeared. The driver nodded, but said nothing else. She took his silence to mean that this was a usual enough thing, and felt all the more sure of herself, settling in the back of the coach, readying her glasses and her notebook, waiting for Roger to appear. When he did, some forty minutes later, she nearly missed him, amusing herself for the moment by peering through the opera glasses into nearby open windows, but some tingling intuition caused her to glance back at the courtyard gates just in time to see Roger (standing in the road with an air of confidence and purpose that made her breath catch) flag down a coach of his own. Miss Temple rapped sharply on the roof of the coach, and they were off.

The thrill of the chase—complicated by the thrill of seeing Roger (which she was nearly certain was the result of the task at hand and not any residual affection)—was quickly tempered when, after the first few turns, it became evident that Roger's destination was nowhere more provocative than his own home. Again, Miss Temple was forced to admit the possibility that her rejection might have been in favor of no rival, but, as it were, immaculate. It was possible. It might even have been preferable. Indeed, as her coach trailed along the route to the Bascombe house—a path she knew so well as to once have considered it nearly her own—she reflected on the likelihood that another woman had taken her place in

Roger's heart. To her frank mind, it was not likely at all. Looking at the facts of Roger's day—a Spartan path of work to meal to work to home where undoubtedly he would, after a meal, immerse himself in still more work—it was more reasonable to conclude that he had placed her second to his vaulting ambition. It seemed a stupid choice, as she felt she could have assisted him in any number of sharp and subtle ways, but she could at least follow the (faulty, childish) logic. She was imagining Roger's eventual realization of what he had (callously, foolishly, blindly) thrown aside, and then her own strange urge to comfort him in this sure-to-be-imminent distress when she saw that they had arrived. Roger's coach had stopped before his front entrance, and her own a discreet distance behind.

Roger did not get out of the coach. Instead, after a delay of some minutes, the front door opened and his manservant Phillips came toward the coach bearing a bulky black-wrapped bundle. He handed this to Roger through the open coach door, and then in turn received Roger's black satchel and two thickly bound portfolios of paper. Phillips carried these items of Roger Bascombe's work day back into the house, and closed the door behind him. A moment later, Roger's coach jerked forward, returning at some pace into the thick of the city. Miss Temple rapped on her coach's ceiling and was thrown back into her seat as the horses leapt ahead, resuming their trailing surveillance.

By this time it was fully dark, and Miss Temple was more and more forced to rely on her driver that they were on the right path. Even when she leaned her head out of the window—now wearing the hood for secrecy—she could only glimpse the coaches ahead of them, with no longer a clear confidence about which might be Roger's at all. This feeling of uncertainty took deeper hold the longer they drove along, as now the first tendrils of evening fog began to reach them, creeping up from the river. By the time they stopped again, she could barely see her own horses. The driver leaned down and pointed to a high, shadowed archway over a great staircase that led down into a cavernous gas-lit tunnel. She stared at it and realized that the shifting ground at its base, which she first took to be rats streaming into a sewer, was actually a crowd of dark-garbed people flowing through and down into the depths below. It looked absolutely infernal, a sickly yellow portal surrounded by murk, offering passage to hideous depths.

“Stopping, Miss,” the driver called down and then, in response to Miss Temple’s lack of movement, “train station.” She felt as if she’d been slapped—or at least the hot shame she imagined being actually slapped must feel like. Of course it was the train station. A sudden spike of excitement drove her leaping from the cab to the cobblestones. She quickly thrust money into the driver’s hand and launched herself toward the glowing arch. Stopping Station. This was exactly what she had been looking for—Roger was doing something *else*.

It took her a few desperate moments to find him, having wasted valuable seconds gaping in the coach. The tunnel opened into a larger staircase that led down into the main lobby and past that to the tracks themselves, all under an intricate and vast canopy of ironwork and soot-covered brick. “Like Vulcan’s cathedral.” Miss Temple smiled, the vista spreading out beneath her, rather proud of so acutely retaining her wits. Beyond coining similes, she had the further presence of mind to step to the side of the stairs, use a lamp post to perch herself briefly on a railing, and with that vantage use the opera glasses to look over the whole of the crowd—which her height alone would never have afforded. It was only a matter of moments before she found Roger. Again, instead of immediately rushing, she followed his progress across the lobby to a particular train. When she was sure she had seen him enter the train, she climbed off of the railing and set off first to find out where it was going, and then to buy a ticket.

She had never been in a station of such size—Stopping carried all traffic to the north and west—much less at the crowded close of a working day, and to Miss Temple it was like being thrust into an ant-hill. It was usual in her life for her small size and delicate strength to pass unnoticed, taken for granted but rarely relevant, like an unwillingness to eat eels. In Stopping Station, however, despite knowing where she was going (to the large blackboard detailing platforms and destinations), Miss Temple found herself shoved along pell-mell, quite apart from her own intentions, the view from within her hood blocked by a swarm of elbows and waistcoats. Her nearest comparison was swimming in the sea against a mighty mindless tide. She looked up and found landmarks in the ceiling, constellations of ironwork, to judge her progress and direction, and

in this way located an advertising kiosk she had seen from the stairs. She worked her way around it and launched herself out again at another angle, figuring the rate of drift to reach another lamp post that would allow her to step high enough to see the board.

The lamp post reached, Miss Temple began to fret about the time. Around her—for there were many, many platforms—whistles fervently signaled arrivals and departures, and she had no idea, in her subterranean shuffling, whether Roger's train had already left. Looking up at the board, she was pleased to see that it was sensibly laid out in columns indicating train number, destination, time, and platform. Roger's train—at platform 12—left at 6:23, for the Orange Canal. She craned her head to see the station clock—another hideous affair involving angels, bracketing each side of the great face (as if keeping it up with their wings), impassively gazing down, one holding a pair of scales, the other a bared sword. Between these two black metal specters of judgment, Miss Temple saw with shock that it was 6:17. She threw herself off the lamp post toward the ticket counter, burrowing vigorously through a sea of coats. She emerged, two minutes later, at the end of an actual ticket line, and within another minute reached the counter itself. She called out her destination—the end of the line, round-trip—and dropped a handful of heavy coins onto the marble, pushing them peremptorily at the ticket agent, who looked beakily at her from the other side of a wire cage window. His pale fingers flicked out from under the cage to take her money and shoved back a perforated ticket. Miss Temple snatched it and bolted for the train.

A conductor stood with a lantern, one foot up on the stairs into the last car, ready to swing himself aboard. It was 6:22. She smiled at him as sweetly as her heaving breath would allow, and pushed past into the car. She had only just stopped at the top of the steps to gather her wits when the train pulled forward, nearly knocking her off her feet. She flung her arms out against the wall to keep her balance and heard a chuckle behind her. The conductor stood with a smile at the base of the steps in the open doorway, the platform moving past behind him. Miss Temple was not used to being laughed at in any circumstance, but between her mission, her disguise, and her lack of breath, she could find no immediate retort and instead of gaping like a fish merely turned down the corridor to find a compartment. The first was empty and so she opened the glass door

and sat in the middle seat facing the front of the train. To her right was a large window. As she restored her composure, the last rushing view of Stopping Station—the platform, the trains lined up, the vaulted brick cavern—vanished, swallowed by the blackness of a tunnel.

The compartment was all dark wood, with a rather luxurious red velvet upholstery for the bank of three seats on either side. A small milk-white globe gave off a meager gleam, pallid and dim, but enough to throw her reflection against the dark window. Her first instinct had been to pull off the cloak and breathe easily, but though Miss Temple was hot, scattered, and with no sense of where she was exactly going, she knew enough to sit still until she was thinking clearly. Orange Canal was some distance outside the city, nearly to the coast, with who knew how many other stops in between, any one of which might be Roger's actual destination. She had no idea who else might be on the train, and if they might know her, or might know Roger, or might in fact be the reason for the journey itself. What if there were no destination at all, merely some rail-bound assignation? In any case, it was clear that she had to find Roger's location on the train or she would never know if he disembarked or if he met someone. As soon as the conductor came to take her ticket, she would begin to search.

He did not come. It had already been some minutes, and he had only been a few yards away. She didn't remember seeing him go past—perhaps when she entered?—and began to get annoyed, his malingering on top of the chuckle making her loathe the man. She stepped into the corridor. He was not there. She narrowed her eyes and began to walk forward, carefully, for the last thing she wanted—even with the cloak—was to stumble into Roger unawares. She crept to the next compartment, craned her head around so she could peer into it. No one. There were eight compartments in the car, and they were all empty.

The train rattled along, still in darkness. Miss Temple stood at the door to the next car and peered through the glass. It looked exactly like the car she was in. She opened the door and stepped through—another eight compartments without a single occupant. She entered the next car, and

found the exact same situation. The rear three cars of this train were completely unoccupied. This might explain the absence of the conductor—though he still must have known her to be in the rear car and if he had been polite could have taken her ticket. Perhaps he merely expected her to do what she was doing, moving ahead to where she should have been in the first place, if she hadn't been so late to reach the train. Perhaps there was something she didn't know about the rear cars, or the etiquette on this particular trip—would that explain the chuckle?—or about the other passengers themselves. Perhaps they were in a group? Perhaps it was less a journey and more of an excursion? Now she despised the conductor for his presumption as well as his rudeness, and she moved forward in the train to find him. This car as well was empty—four cars!—and Miss Temple paused at the doorway into the fifth, trying to recall just how many cars there were to begin with (she had no idea) or how many might be normal (she had no idea) or what exactly she could say to the conductor, upon finding him, that would not reveal her complete ignorance (she had no immediate idea). As she stood thinking, the train stopped.

She rushed into the nearest compartment and threw open the window. The platform was empty—no one boarding, and no one leaving the train. The station itself—the sign said Crampton Place—was closed and dark. The whistle blew and the train—throwing Miss Temple back into the seats—lurched into life. A chill wind poured through the open window as they gathered speed and she pulled the window closed. She had never heard of Crampton Place, and was happy enough not to be going there now—it struck her as desolate as a Siberian steppe. She wished she had a map of this particular line, a list of stops. Perhaps this was something she might get from the conductor, or at least a list she could write down in her book. Thinking of the book, she took it out and, licking the tip of the pencil, wrote “Crampton Place” in her deliberate, looping script. With nothing else to add, she put the book away and returned to the corridor and then, with a sigh of resolve, stepped into the fifth car.

She knew it was different from the perfume. Where the other corridors were imbued with a vague industrial mixture of smoke and grease and lye

and dirty mop-water, the corridor of the fifth car smelled—startling because she knew them from her own home—of frangipani flowers. With a surge of excitement, Miss Temple crept to the nearest compartment and slowly leaned forward to peer into it. The far seats were all occupied: two men in black topcoats and between them a woman in a yellow dress, laughing. The men smoked cigars, and both had trimmed and pointed beards, with hearty red faces, as if they were two examples of the same species of thick, vigorous dog. The woman wore a half-mask made of peacock feathers that spread out over the top of her head, leaving only her eyes to pierce through like gleaming stones. Her lips were painted red, and opened wide when she laughed. All three were gazing at someone in the opposite row of seats, and had not noticed Miss Temple. She retreated from view, and then, feeling childish but knowing nothing else for it, dropped to her hands and knees and crawled past, keeping her body below the level of the glass in the door. On the other side, she carefully rose and peered back at the opposite row of seats and froze. She was looking directly at Roger Bascombe.

He was not looking at her. He wore a black cloak, closed about his throat, and smoked a thin, wrapped cheroot, his oak-colored hair flattened back over his skull with pomade. His right hand was in a black leather glove, his left, holding the cheroot, was bare. At a second glance Miss Temple saw that the right gloved hand was holding the left glove. She also saw that Roger was not laughing, that his face was deliberately blank, an expression she had seen him adopt in the presence of the Minister or Deputy Minister, or his mother, or his uncle Tarr—that is, those to whom he owed deference. Sitting against the window, the seat between them unoccupied, was another woman, in a red dress that flashed like fire from beneath a dark fur-collared cloak. Miss Temple saw the woman's pale ankles and her delicate throat, like white coals beneath the flaming dress, flickering in and out of view as she shifted in her seat. Her darkly red mouth wore an openly provocative wry smile and she puffed at a cigarette through a long black lacquered holder. She also wore a mask, of red leather, dotted with glittering studs where the eyebrows would be, and then—Miss Temple noted with some discomfort—forming a gleaming tear, just ready to drop from the outer corner of each eye. She had obviously said whatever the others were laughing at. The woman

exhaled, a deliberate stream of smoke sent to the other row of seats. As if this gesture were the conclusion of her witticism, the others laughed again, even as they waved the smoke from their faces.

Miss Temple stepped clear of the window, her back flat against the wall. She had no idea what she ought to do. To her right was another compartment. She risked a peek, and saw the far seats occupied with three women, each with a traveling cloak wrapped around what seemed to be, judging from their shoes, elegant evening wear. Two wore half-masks decorated with yellow ostrich feathers while the third, her face uncovered, held her mask on her lap, fussing with an uncooperative strap. Miss Temple pulled her own hood lower and craned to see that the other seat held two men, one in a tailcoat and one in a heavy fur that made him seem like a bear. Both of these men wore masks as well, simple black affairs, and the man in the tailcoat occupied himself with sips from a silver flask, while the man in the fur tapped his fingers on the pearl inlaid tip of an ebony walking stick. Miss Temple darted back. The man in the fur had glanced toward the corridor. In a rush she scampered past Roger's compartment, in open view, and through the connecting door to the previous car.

She shut the door behind her and crouched on her hands and knees. Interminable seconds passed. No one came to the door. No one entered in pursuit, or even curiosity. She relaxed, took a breath, and brought herself sharply to task. She felt out of her depth, beyond her experience—and yet, frankly, Miss Temple had no confirmation why this must be true. Despite being assailed with sinister thoughts, all she had definitely learned was that Roger was attending—without obvious pleasure, nor anything more evident than obligation—an exclusive party of some kind, where the guests were masked. Was this so unusual? Even if to Miss Temple it was, she knew this did not figure, so much was strange to her sheltered life that she was no objective judge—had she been in society for an entire season, this kind of entertainment might seem, if not so routine as to be dull, at least a known quantity. Further, she reconsidered the fact that Roger was not sitting *next* to the woman in red, but apart from her—in fact, apart from everyone. She wondered if this was his first time in their company. She wondered who this woman was. The other, in yellow with the peacock feathers, interested her much less, simply for having been so vulgarly receptive to the more elegant woman's wit.

Clearly the men were unconcerned about hiding their identities—they must all know each other and be traveling as a group. In the other compartment, all being masked, perhaps they didn't. Or perhaps they did know each other but were unaware of it *because* of the masks—the whole pleasure of the evening would lie in guessing, she realized, and in remaining hidden. It struck Miss Temple as perhaps a great deal of fun, though she knew that her own dress, if fine for the day, was nothing to wear to such an evening, and that her cloak and hood, though they protected her identity for the moment, were nothing like the proper party mask everyone else would have.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a clicking sound from the other corridor. She risked a look and saw the man in the fur—quite imposing when not seated, nearly filling the corridor with his wide frame—stepping out of Roger's compartment and closing the door behind him. Without a glance toward her, he returned to his own. She sighed, releasing a tension she had been unable to fully acknowledge; he had not seen her, he was merely visiting the other compartment. He must know the woman, she decided, even though he could have stepped into the compartment to speak to any person in it, including Roger. Roger saw so many people in his day—from government, from business, from other countries—and she realized with a pang how small her own circle of acquaintance actually was. She knew so little of the world, so little of life, and here she was cowering in an empty train car, small and ridiculous. While Miss Temple was biting her lip, the train stopped again.

Once more she dashed into a compartment and opened the window, and once more the platform was empty, the station shuttered and dark. This sign read Packington—another place she had never heard of—but she took a moment to enter it into her notebook just the same. When the train began to move again she closed the window. As she turned back to the compartment door she saw that it was open, and in it stood the conductor. He smiled.

“Ticket, Miss?”

She fished her ticket from her cloak and handed it to him. He took it from her, tilting his head to study the printed destination, still smiling. In his other hand he held an odd metal clamping device. He looked up.

“All the way to Orange Canal, then?”

“Yes. How many more stops will that be?”

“Quite a few.”

She smiled back at him, thinly. “Exactly how many, please?”

“Seven stops. Be the better part of two hours.”

“Thank you.”

The clamping device punched a hole in the ticket with a loud snapping sound, like the bite of a metal insect, and he returned it to her. He did not move from the door. In response, Miss Temple flounced her cloak into position as she met his gaze, claiming the compartment for herself. The conductor watched her, glanced once toward the front of the train and licked his lips. In that moment she noticed the porcine quality of his heavy neck, particularly how it was stuffed into the tight collar of his blue coat. He looked back at her and twitched his fingers, puffy and pale like a parcel of uncooked sausages. Confronted with this spectacle of ungainliness, her contempt abated in favor of mere disinterest—she no longer wanted to cause him harm, only that he should leave. But he wasn't going to leave. Instead, he leaned closer, with a feeble kind of leer.

“Not riding up with the others, then, are you?”

“As you can see, no.”

“It's not always safe, a young lady alone . . .” He trailed off, smiling. The conductor persisted in smiling at all times. He fingered the clamping device, his gaze drifting toward her well-shaped calves. She sighed.

“Safe from what?”

He did not answer.

Before he could, before he could do anything that would cause her to either scream or feel still more galling pitiful disdain, she raised her open palm to him, a signal that he need not answer, need not say anything, and asked him another question.

“Are you *aware* where they—where *we*—are all going?”

The conductor stepped back as if he had been bitten, as if she had threatened his life. He retreated to the corridor, touched his cap, and turned abruptly, rushing into the forward car. Miss Temple remained in her seat. What had just happened? What she'd meant as a question the man had taken as a threat. He must *know*, she reasoned, and it must be a place of wealth and influence—at least enough that the word of a guest might serve to cost him his position. She smiled (it had been a satisfying little exchange, after all) at what she had learned—not that it was a surprise. That Roger was attending in a subordinate position only rein-

forced the possibility that representatives from the upper levels of government might well be present.

With a vague gnawing restlessness, Miss Temple was reminded that she was actually getting hungry. She dug out the sausage roll.

Over the next hour there were five more stops—Gorsemont, De Conque, Raaxfall, St. Triste, and St. Porte—every name going into her notebook, along with fanciful descriptions of her fellow travelers. Each time, looking out the window, she saw an empty platform and closed station house, with no one entering or leaving the train. Each time also she felt the air getting progressively cooler, until at St. Porte it struck her as positively chill and laced with the barest whiff of the sea, or perhaps the great salt marshes she knew to exist in this part of the country. The fog had cleared, but revealed merely a sliver of moon and the night remained quite dark. When the train started up again, Miss Temple had at each station crept into the corridor and carefully peered into the fifth car, just to see if there was any activity. Once she had a glimpse of someone entering one of the forward compartments (she had no idea who—black cloaks all looked the same), but nothing since. Boredom began to gnaw at her, to the point that she wanted to go forward again and get another look into Roger's compartment. She knew this to be a stupid idea that only preyed upon her because of restlessness, and that further it was times like these when one made the most egregious mistakes. All she had to do was remain patient for another few minutes, when all would be clear, when she could get to the very root of the whole affair. Nevertheless, her hand was in the act of turning the handle to enter the fifth car when the train next stopped.

She let go of it at once, shocked to see that all down the corridor the compartment doors were opening. Miss Temple ducked back into her compartment and threw open the window. The platform was crowded with waiting coaches, and the station windows were aglow. As she read the station sign—Orange Locks—she saw people spilling from the train and walking very near to her. Without closing the window she darted back to the connecting door: people were exiting from a door at the far end, and the last person—a man in a blue uniform—had nearly reached it. With a nervous swallow and a flutter in her stomach, Miss Temple

stepped silently through the door and rapidly, carefully, padded down the corridor, glancing into each compartment as she passed. All were empty. Roger's party had gone ahead, as had the fur-coated man.

The man in the blue uniform was also gone from view. Miss Temple picked up her pace and reached the far end, where an open door and a set of steps led off the train. The last people seemed to be some yards ahead of her, walking toward the coaches. She swallowed again. If she stayed on the train, she could just ride to the end and take the return trip easily. If she got off, she had no idea what the schedule was—what if the Orange Locks station were to close up like the previous five? At the same time, her adventure *was* continuing in the exact manner she had hoped. As if to make up her mind, the train lurched ahead. Without thinking Miss Temple leapt off, landing with a squawk and a stumble on the platform. By the time she gathered herself to look back, the train was racing by. In the doorway of the final car stood the conductor. His gaze was cold, and he held his lantern toward her the way one holds a cross before a vampire.

The train was gone and the roar of its passage faded into the low buzz of conversation and the clops and jingles and slams of the travelers climbing into their waiting coaches. Already full coaches were moving away, and Miss Temple knew she must decide immediately what to do. She saw Roger nowhere, nor any of the others from his car. Those remaining were in heavy coats or cloaks or furs, a seemingly equal number of men and women, perhaps twenty all told. A group of men climbed into one coach and a mixture of men and women piled into two more. With a start she realized that there was only one other coach remaining. Walking in its direction were three women in cloaks and masks. Throwing her shoulders back and the hood farther over her face, Miss Temple crossed quickly to join them.

She was able to reach the coach before they had all entered, and when the third woman climbed up and turned, thinking to shut the door behind her, she saw Miss Temple—or the dark, hooded figure that Miss Temple now made—and apologized, situating herself farther along on the coach seat. Miss Temple merely nodded in answer and climbed aboard in turn, shutting the door tightly behind her. At the sound, after a moment to allow this last person to sit, the driver cracked his whip and the

coach lurched into motion. With her hood pulled down, Miss Temple could barely see the faces of the other passengers, much less anything out the window—not that she could have made sense of what she might have seen anyway.

The other women were at first quiet, she assumed due to her own presence. The two across from her both wore feathered masks and dark velvet cloaks, the cloak of the woman to her left boasting a luxurious collar of black feathers. As they settled themselves in the coach, the one to her right opened her cloak and fanned herself, as if she were over-hot from exertion, revealing a dress of shimmering, clinging silk that seemed more than anything else like the skin of a reptile. As this woman's fan fluttered in the darkness like a night bird on a leash, the coach filled with perfume—sweet jasmine. The woman sitting next to Miss Temple, who had preceded her into the coach, wore a kind of tricorne hat rakishly pinned to her hair, and a thin band of cloth tied over her eyes, quite like a pirate. Her wrap was simple but probably quite warm, made of black wool. As this was not quite as sumptuous, Miss Temple allowed herself to hope she might not be so out of place, as long as she kept herself well concealed. She felt confident her boots—cunningly green—if glimpsed, would not make her look out of place.

They rode for a time in silence, but Miss Temple was soon aware that the other women shared her own sense of excitement and anticipation, if not her feeling of terrible suspense. Bit by bit they began making small exploratory comments to one another—first about the train, then about the coach or about each other's clothing, and finally, hintingly, at their destination. They did not at first address Miss Temple, or indeed anyone in particular, merely offering comments in general and responding the same way. It was as if they were not supposed to be talking about their evening at all, and could only proceed to do so by degrees, each of them making it tacitly plain that they would not be averse to bending the rule. Of course Miss Temple was not averse in the slightest, she just had nothing to say. She listened to the pirate and the woman in silk compliment each other on their attire, and then to both of them approve of the third woman's mask. Then they turned to her. So far she had said nothing, merely nodding her head once or twice in agreement, but now she knew they were all examining her quite closely. So she spoke.

“I do hope I have worn the right shoes for this cold an evening.”

She shifted her legs in the tight room between seats and raised her cloak, exhibiting her green leather boots, with their intricate lacing. The other three leaned to study them, and the pirate next to her confided, "They are most sensible—for it will be cold, I am sure."

"And your dress is green as well . . . with flowers," noted the woman with the feathered collar, whose gaze had moved from the shoes to the strip of dress revealed above them.

The woman in silk chuckled. "You come as a Suburban Rustick!" The others chuckled too and, so bolstered, she went on.

"One of those ladies who live among novels and flowered sachets—instead of life itself, and life's gardens. The Rustick, and the Piratical, the Silken, and the Feathered—we are all richly disguised!"

Miss Temple thought this was a bit thick. She did not appreciate being termed either "suburban" or "rustick" and further was quite convinced that the person who condemns a thing—in this case novels—is the same person who's wasted most of her life reading them. In the moment, as she was being insulted, it was all she could do not to reach across the coach (for it was an easy reach) and take sharp hold of the harpy's delicate ear. But she forced herself to smile, and in doing so knew that she must place her immediate pride in the service of her adventure, and accept the more important fact that this woman's disdain had given her a costume, and a role to play. She cleared her throat and spoke again.

"Amongst so many ladies, all striving to be most elegant, I wondered if such a *costume* might be noticed all the more."

The pirate next to her chuckled. The silken woman's smile was a little more fixed and her voice a bit more brittle. She peered more sharply at Miss Temple's face, hidden in the shadow of her hood.

"And what is your mask? I cannot see it . . ."

"You can't?"

"No. Is it also green? It cannot be elaborate, to fit under that hood."

"Indeed, it is quite plain."

"But we cannot see it."

"No?"

"But we should like to."

"My thinking was to make it that much more mysterious—it being in itself, as I say, plain."

In reply the silken woman leaned forward, as if to put her face right

into the hood with Miss Temple, and Miss Temple instinctively shrank back as far as the coach would allow. The moment had become awkward, but in her ignorance Miss Temple was unsure where the burden of *gaucherie* actually lay—with her refusal or the silken woman's gross insistence. The other two were silent, watching, their masks hiding any particular expression. Any second the woman would be close enough to see, or close enough to pull back the hood altogether—Miss Temple had to stop her in that very instant. She was helped, in this moment, by the sudden knowledge that these women were not likely to have lived in a house where savage punishment was a daily affair. Miss Temple merely extended two fingers of her right hand and poked them through the feathered mask-holes, straight into the woman's eyes.

The silken woman shot back in her seat, sputtering like an over-full kettle coming to boil. She heaved one or two particularly whinging breaths and pulled down her mask, placing a hand over each eye, feeling in the dark, rubbing away the pain. It was a very light touch and Miss Temple knew no real damage had been done—it was not as if she had used her nails. The silken woman looked up at her, eyes red and streaming, her mouth a gash of outrage, ready to lash out. The other two women watched, immobile with shock. Again, all was hanging in the balance and Miss Temple knew she needed to maintain the upper hand. So she laughed.

And then a moment after laughing pulled out a scented handkerchief and offered it to the silken woman, saying in her sweetest voice, "O my dear . . . I *am* sorry . . .," as if she were consoling a kitten. "You must forgive me for preserving the . . . *chastity* of my disguise." When the woman did not immediately take the handkerchief Miss Temple herself leaned forward and as delicately as she could dabbed the tears from around the woman's eyes, patiently, taking her time, and then pressed the handkerchief into her hands. She sat back. After a moment, the woman raised the handkerchief and dabbed her face again, then her mouth and nose, and then, with a quick shy glance at the others, restored her mask. They were silent.

The sounds of the hoofbeats had changed, and Miss Temple looked out of the coach. They were passing along some kind of stone-paved track. The country beyond was featureless and flat—perhaps a meadow,

perhaps a fen. She did not see trees, though in the darkness she doubted she could have had they been there—but it did not *seem* like there would be trees, or if there had been once, that they had been cut down to feed some long-forgotten fire. She turned back to her companions, each seemingly occupied with her own thoughts. She was sorry to have ruined the conversation, but did not see any way around it. Still, she felt obliged to try and make amends, and attempted to put a bright note in her voice.

“I’m sure we shall be arriving soon.”

The other women nodded, the pirate going so far as to smile, but none spoke in reply. Miss Temple was resilient.

“We have reached the paved road.”

Exactly as before, all three women nodded and the pirate smiled, but they did not speak. The moment of silence lengthened and then took hold in the coach, each of them sinking deeper, as the air of solitude intruded, into her own thoughts, the earlier excitement about the evening now somehow supplanted by an air of brooding disquiet, the exact sort of gnawing, unsparring unrest that leads to midnight cruelty. Miss Temple was not immune, especially since she had a great deal to brood about if she were to shift her mind that way. She was keenly reminded that she had no idea what she was doing, where she was going, or how she would possibly return—and indeed, more than any of these, what she would return *to*. The stable touchstone of her thoughts had disappeared. Even her moments of satisfaction—frightening the conductor and besting the silken woman—now struck her as distant and even vain. She had just formed the further, frankly depressing, question “was such satisfaction always at odds with desire?” when she realized that the woman in the feathered cloak was speaking, slowly, quietly, as if she were answering a question only she had heard being asked.

“I have been here before. In the summer. It was light in the coach . . . it was light well into the evening. There were wildflowers. It was still cold—the wind is always cold here, because it is close to the sea, because the land is so flat. That is what they told me . . . because I was cold . . . even in summer. I remember when we reached the paved road—I remember because the movement of the coach changed, the bouncing, the rhythm. I was in a coach with two men . . . and I had allowed them to unbutton my dress. I had been told what to expect . . . I had been promised this and more . . . and yet, when it happened, when their promises began

to be revealed . . . in such a desolate locale . . . I had goosebumps everywhere.” She was silent, then glanced up, meeting the eyes of the others. She wrapped her cloak around her and looked out the window, smiling shyly. “And I am back again . . . you see, it gave me quite a thrill.”

No one said a word. The clattering hoofbeats changed once more, drawing the coach onto uneven cobblestones. Miss Temple—her mind more than a little astir—glanced out the window to see that they had entered a courtyard, past a large, tall iron gate. The coach slowed. She could see others already stopped around them, passengers piling out (adjusting cloaks, putting on hats, tapping their walking sticks with impatience), and then a first glimpse of the house itself: splendid, heavy stone, some three tall stories high and without excessive ornament save for its broad windows, now streaming out welcoming golden light. The entire effect was of a simplicity that, when employed on such massive scale, bespoke a hard certainty of purpose—in the same way as a prison or an armory or a pagan temple. She knew it must be the great house of some Lord.

Their coach came to a halt, and as the last person in Miss Temple took it upon herself to be the first person out, opening the door herself and taking the coachman’s large hand to aid her descent. She looked up to see, at the end of the courtyard, the entrance to the house, double doors flung open, servants to either side, and a stream of guests disappearing within. The massive splendor of the place amazed her, and she was again assailed by doubt, for surely once inside she would have to remove her hood and cloak and be revealed. Her mind groped for a solution as her eyes, brought back to their task, scanned the milling crowd for a glimpse of Roger. He must already be in the house. Her three companions were all out of the coach and had begun walking toward the doors. The pirate paused for a moment, looking back, to see if she was with them, and in another sudden decision Miss Temple merely gave in answer a small curtsy, as if to send them on their way. The pirate cocked her head, but then nodded and turned to catch up with the other two. Miss Temple stood alone.

She looked about the courtyard—was there perhaps some other way inside?—but knew that her only hope, if she wanted to truly discover what Roger was doing and why, in service to this, he had so peremptorily thrown her over, was to present herself at the grand entryway. She fought the urge to run and hide in a coach, and then the urge to just put things

off long enough to record her most recent experiences in the notebook. If she must go in, it was better to go in at the proper time, and so she forced her legs to take her with a sureness of step that her racing heart did not share. As she got closer she moved among the other coaches, whose drivers were being directed by grooms toward the other side of the courtyard, more than once causing her to dodge rather sharply. When her path was finally open, the last of the other guests—perhaps her three companions?—had just cleared the entryway and vanished from her view. Miss Temple lowered her head, throwing more shadow over her face, and climbed the stairs past footmen on either side, noting their black livery included high boots, as if they were a squadron of dismounted cavalry. She walked carefully, raising her cloak and her dress high enough to climb the stairs without falling, but without being so vulgar as to expose her ankles. She reached the top of the stairs and stood alone on a pale marble floor, with long, mirrored, gas-lit hallways extending before her and to either side.

“I think perhaps you’re meant to come with me.”

Miss Temple turned to see the woman in red, from Roger’s car. She no longer wore her fur-collared cloak, but she still had the lacquered cigarette holder in her hand, and her bright eyes, gazing fixedly at Miss Temple through the red leather mask, quite belied their jeweled tears. Miss Temple turned, but could not speak. The woman was astonishingly lovely—tall, strong, shapely, her powdered skin gleaming above the meager confines of the scarlet dress. Her hair was black and arranged in curls that cascaded across her bare pale shoulders. Miss Temple inhaled and nearly swooned from the sweet smell of frangipani flowers. She closed her mouth, swallowed, and saw the woman smile. It was very much how she imagined she had so recently smiled at the woman in blue silk. Without another word, the woman turned and led the way down one of the mirrored halls. Without a word Miss Temple followed.

Behind, she heard a distant buzz, of movement, of conversation, of the party itself—but this was fading before the sharp report of the woman’s footfalls on the marble. They must have gone fifty yards—which was but

half the length of the hall—when her guide stopped and turned, indicating with her outstretched hand an open door to Miss Temple's left. They were quite alone. Not knowing at this point that she could do anything else, Miss Temple went into the room. The woman in red followed, and shut the heavy door behind them. Now there was silence.

The room was spread with thick red and black carpets which absorbed the sound of their passage. The walls were fitted with closed cabinets, and between them racks of hooks, as if for clothing, and a full-length mirror. A long, heavy wooden work table was shoved against one wall, but Miss Temple could see no other furniture. It looked like some kind of attiring room, for a theatre, or perhaps sport, for horseback riding, or a gymnasium. She imagined a house of this size might well have its own anything it wanted, if the owner was so inclined. On the far wall was another door, not so fancy, set into the wall to look at first glance like one of the cabinets. Perhaps that led to the gymnasium proper.

The woman behind her said nothing, so she turned to face her, head inclined so as to shadow her face. The woman in red wasn't looking at Miss Temple at all, but was fitting another cigarette into her holder. She'd dropped the previous one on the carpet and ground it in with her shoe. She looked up at Miss Temple with a quick ghost of a smile, and strode over to the wall, where she jammed the new cigarette into one of the gas lamps and puffed on the holder until it caught. She exhaled, crossed to the table and leaned back against it, inhaled, and exhaled again, gazing at Miss Temple quite seriously.

"Keep the shoes," the woman said.

"Beg pardon?"

"They're quaint. Leave the rest in one of the lockers."

She gestured with the cigarette holder to one of the tall cabinets. Miss Temple turned to the cabinet and opened it; inside, hanging from hooks, were various pieces of clothing. On the hook right in front of her face—as if in answer to her fears—was a small white mask, covered in closely laid small white feathers, as if from a dove or a goose or a swan. Keeping her back to the woman in red, she threw off her hood and tied the white mask into place, weaving the strap beneath her curls, pulling it tight across her eyes. Miss Temple then shucked off her cape—glancing back once to the woman, who seemed to be smiling with wry approval of her progress—and hung it on a hook. She selected what seemed to be a dress

from another hook—it was white, and silken—and held it out in front of her. It wasn't a dress at all. It was a robe, a very short robe, without any kind of buttons or sash, and quite thin.

“Did Waxing Street send you?” the woman asked, in a disinterested, time-passing tone.

Miss Temple turned to her, made a quick decision, and spoke deliberately.

“I do not know any Waxing Street.”

“*Ah.*”

The woman took a puff of her cigarette. Miss Temple had no idea whether her answer had been wrong—whether there had been a right or wrong answer—but she felt it was better to tell the truth than to guess foolishly. The woman exhaled, a long thin stream of smoke sent toward the ceiling.

“It must have been the hotel, then.”

Miss Temple said nothing, then nodded, slowly. Her mind raced—what hotel? There were hundreds of hotels. *Her* hotel? Did they know who she was? Did her own hotel supply young women as guests to luxurious parties? Did any hotel do such a thing? Obviously so—the mere question told her that—yet Miss Temple had no idea what this meant as far as her own disguise, what she ought to say or how she was expected to behave or what this exactly implied about the party, though she was beginning to have suspicions. She looked again at the wholly inadequate robe.

She turned to the woman. “When you say *hotel*—”

Her words were cut off brusquely. The woman was grinding out her second cigarette on the carpet, and her voice was suddenly annoyed.

“Everything is waiting—it's quite late. *You* were late. I have no intention of serving as a nursemaid. Get changed—be quick about it—and when you're presentable, you can come find me.” She walked directly toward Miss Temple, reached out to take hold of her shoulder—her fingers surprising hard—and spun her so her face was half-way into the cabinet. “This will help you get started—given the fabric, think of it as an act of mercy.”

Miss Temple squawked. Something sharp touched the small of her back, and then shifted its angle, driving upward. With a sudden ripping sound, and a simultaneous collapse of her garment, Miss Temple realized

that the woman had just sheared through the lacings of her dress. She whirled around, her hands holding it to her bosom as it peeled away from her back and off of her shoulders. The woman was tucking something small and bright back into her bag, crossing to the small inner door, and jamming a third cigarette into her holder as she spoke.

“You can come in through here.”

Without a further glance at Miss Temple the woman in red opened the door with impatience, paused to get a light from the nearest wall sconce, and strode from view, pulling the door behind her so it slammed.

Miss Temple stood, at a loss. Her dress was ruined, or at least ruined without immediate access to new lacing and a maid to tie it up. She pulled it off of her upper body and did her best to shift the back section around so she could see it—fragments of green lacework were even now tumbling to the floor. She looked at the door to the hallway. She could hardly leave like this. On the other hand, she could hardly leave in her corset, or in the pitifully gossamer silk robe. She remembered with relief that she did still have her cloak, and could surely cover any less than decorous attire with that. This made her feel a little better and, after a moment of steady breathing, she was in less of a hurry to escape, and began to wonder once more about the woman, the party, and of course, never far from her thoughts, Roger. If she could return to fetch her cloak at any time and simply put it over her corset or ruined dress, then what was the harm in perhaps investigating further? On top of this, she was now intrigued by the reference to the hotel—she was determined to find out if such things happened at the Boniface, and how other than by continuing could she pursue her brave plan? She turned back to the cabinet. Perhaps there were other things than the robe.

There were, but she wasn't sure if she was any more comfortable at the thought of putting them on. Several items could only be described as undergarments, and probably from a warmer climate than this—Spain? Venice? Tangier?—a pale silken bodice, several sheer petticoats, and a pair of darling little silk pants with an open seam between the legs. There was also another robe, similar to the first, only longer and without any sleeves.

The ensemble was all white, save for the second robe, which had a small green circle embroidered repeatedly as a border around the collar and the bottom hem. Miss Temple assumed this was why she was allowed to keep her shoes. She looked at her own undergarments—shift, petticoat, cotton breeches, and her corset. Except for the corset, she didn't see too much of a difference between what was in the cabinet and the items on her body—save for the former being made of silk. Miss Temple was not in the habit of wearing silk—and it was only rarely that she was provoked into a choice outside her habits. The problem was getting out of her corset and then back into it, without assistance. She felt the silken pants between her fingers and resolved to try.

Her fingers tore behind her at the knotwork of the corset, for now she was concerned about taking too long, and did not want anyone coming in to collect her when she was half-naked, and once she was free of it—and taking deeper breaths than she was used to—she pulled the corset and her shift over her head. She pulled on the silk bodice, sleeveless, with tiny straps to keep it up, and tugged it into place over her bosom. She had to admit that it felt delicious. She pushed her petticoats and breeches down to the floor and, balancing on one foot and then the other, kicked her shoes free of them. She reached for the little pants, feeling a strange thrill at standing in such a large room wearing nothing but the bodice, which did not stretch below her ribs, and her green ankle boots. Stranger still, pulling on the pants, was how she felt somehow even more naked, with the open seam along her delicate curls. She ran her fingers through them once, finding the exposure both exquisite and a little frightening. She removed her fingers, sniffed them by habit, and reached for the silken petticoats, holding them open and stepping through the circle one foot at a time. She pulled them up, tied them off, and then reached again for her corset.

Before she put it on, Miss Temple stepped in front of the large mirror. The woman who started back was unknown to her. It was partially the mask—the experience of looking at herself in a mask was extremely curious, and not unlike running her fingers along her open pants. She felt a tingle crawl down her spine and settle itself right among her hips, a ticking restless hunger. She licked her lips, and watched the woman in the mask of white feathers lick hers as well—but this woman (her pale arms bare, her legs muscular, throat exposed, roseate nipples at plain view

through the bodice) licked them in quite a different way than seemed normal to Miss Temple—though once she saw that image, its sensation was, as it were, taken into her, and she licked them again as if some transformation had indeed been made. Her eyes glittered.

She dropped the corset back into the cabinet and put on the robes, first the shorter one with sleeves, and then over it the larger, almost like a tunic, with the borders of green embroidery, which did in fact have several hooks to keep it closed. She looked at herself again in the mirror, and was happy to see that together the two layers of robe provided enough of a barrier for decency. Her arms and lower legs were still semi-visible through their single layers, but the rest of her body, though suggested, could not in any detail be seen. As a final precaution, because she had not fully lost her sense of place or perspective, Miss Temple fished in the pocket of her cloak for both her money and her all-weather pencil, which was still rather sharp. Then she knelt on alternating knees, stuffing the money into one boot and wedging the pencil into the other. She stood, took a couple of steps to test comfort, closed the cabinet, and then walked through the inner door.

She was in a narrow unfinished hallway. She walked a few paces in gradually growing light and reached a turn where the floor slanted up toward the bright light's source. She stepped into glaring light and raised a hand to block it, looking around her. It was a kind of sunken stage—above and around it rose a seating gallery pitched at a very steep angle, covering three sides of the room. The stage itself, what she took for playing space, was taken up with a large table, at the present moment flat but with a heavy apparatus underneath, which, she assumed from the large, notched curve of steel running the length of the table, could tilt the table to any number of angles, for better viewing from the gallery. Behind the table, on the one wall without seating, was a common, if enormously large, blackboard.

It was an operating theatre. She looked to either side of the table and saw holes that dangled leather belts, to restrain limbs. She saw a metal drain on the floor. She smelled vinegar and lye, but beneath them some other odor that prickled the back of her throat. She looked up at the blackboard. This was for teaching, for study, but no mere man of science

could afford such a home. Perhaps this Lord was their patient—but what patient would want an audience for his treatment? Or patron to some medical prodigy—or himself a practicing amateur—or an interested spectator? Her flesh was chilled. She swallowed, and noticed something written on the board—she hadn't seen it from the entrance because of the light. The surrounding text had been erased—indeed, half of this word had been erased—but it was easy to see what it had been: sharp block printing, in chalk, the word “ORANGE.”

Miss Temple was startled—indeed, she may have squeaked in surprise—by a throat being cleared on the far side of the stage, from shadow. There was an opposite, rampway rising up from the floor she hadn't seen, hidden by the table. A man stepped into view, wearing a black tailcoat, a black mask, and smoking a cigar. His beard was elegantly trimmed, and his face familiarly ruddy. It was one of her two dogs from the train, who had been sitting across from Roger. He looked at her body quite directly, and cleared his throat again.

“Yes?” she asked.

“I have been sent to collect you.”

“I see.”

“Yes.” He took a puff on the cigar but otherwise did not move.

“I'm sure I'm sorry to make anyone wait.”

“I didn't mind. I like to look around.” He looked again, frankly examining her, and stepped fully up from the ramp into the theatre, raising his cigar hand above his eyes to block the light. He glanced over the gallery, to the table, and then to her again. “Quite a place.”

Miss Temple adopted, without difficulty, a knowing condescension. “Why, have you never been here?”

He studied her before answering, then decided not to answer, and stuck the cigar into his mouth. With his hand free, he pulled a pocket watch from his black waistcoat and looked at the time. He replaced the watch, inhaled, then removed the cigar, blowing smoke.

Miss Temple spoke again, affecting as casual an air as possible.

“I have always found it to be an elegant house. But quite . . . particular.”

He smiled. “It is that.”

They looked at each other. She very much wanted to ask him about Roger, but knew it wasn't the time. If Roger was, as she suspected, pe-

ripheral, then asking for him by name—especially a guest in her strange position (as much as she did not fully understand what that was)—would only arouse suspicion. She must wait until she and Roger were in the same room and—while both were masked—try to engage someone in conversation and point him out.

But being alone with anyone was still an opportunity, and despite her terrible sense of disquiet and unease, in order to try and provoke this canine fellow further, she let her eyes wander to the blackboard, looking fixedly at the half-erased word, and then back to him, as if pointing out that someone had not fully done their job. The man saw the word. His face twitched in a quick grimace and he stepped to the board, wiping the word away with his black sleeve, and then beating ineffectually on the sleeve to get rid of the chalk smear. He stuck the cigar in his mouth and offered her his arm.

“They *are* waiting.”

She walked past the table and took it, bobbing her head as she did. His arm was actually quite strong and he held hers tightly, even awkwardly, as he was so much taller. As they walked down the ramp into darkness, he spoke, nodding his head back to the theatre. “I don’t know why they had you go through there—I suppose it’s the shortest way. Still, it’s quite a sight—not what you’d expect.”

“That depends,” Miss Temple answered. “What do *you* expect?”

In response, the man only chuckled, and squeezed her arm all the harder. Their ramp made a turn just like the other had, and they walked on level ground to another door. The man pushed it open and thrust her deliberately into the room. When she had stumbled several steps forward he came in behind and closed the door. Only then did he let go of Miss Temple’s arm. She looked around her. They were not alone.

The room was in its way the opposite of where she had changed clothes, for just as it was on the opposite side of the theatre so it must be used for an opposite kind of preparation—an entirely different kind of participant. It felt like a kitchen, with a flagged stone floor and white tiled walls. There were several heavy wooden tables, also fitted with restraints, and on the walls various bolts and collars, clearly meant for securing the struggling or insensible. However, and strangely, one of the wooden

tables was covered with an array of white feather pillows, and on the pillows sat three women, all wearing masks of white feathers and white robes, and each of them dangling their naked calves off of the table, the robes reaching just below their knees. All of their feet were bare. There was no sign of the woman in red.

No one was speaking—perhaps they'd gone silent at her arrival—and no one spoke as her escort left her where she was and crossed to one of the other tables, where his companion, the other dog-fellow, stood drinking from a flask. Her escort accepted the flask from him, swallowed manfully, and returned it, wiping his mouth. He took another puff from his cigar and tapped it against the edge of the table, knocking a stub of ash to the floor. Both men leaned back and studied their charges with evident pleasure. The moment became increasingly awkward. Miss Temple did not move to the table of women—there wasn't really room, and none of the others had shifted to make any. Instead, she smiled, and pushed her discomfort aside to make conversation.

“We have just seen the theatre. I must say it is impressive. I'm sure I don't know how many it will seat compared to other such theatres in the city, but I am confident it must seat plenty—perhaps up to one hundred. The notion of so many attendees in such a relatively distant place is quite a testament to the work at hand, in my own opinion. I should find it satisfying to be a part of that endeavor, however much as a tangent, even as a distraction, even for only this evening alone—for surely the fineness of the facility must parallel the work done in it. Do you not agree?”

There was no reply. She continued—for this was often her experience in public conversation and she was perfectly able to press on, adopting the pose of the knowing veteran.

“I am also, of course, happy for any excuse to be wearing so much silk—”

She was interrupted when the man with the flask stood and crossed to the far door. He took another nip and stuffed the flask into his tailcoat as he walked, then opened the door and closed it behind him. Miss Temple looked at the remaining man, whose face in the interval had gone even redder, if that were possible. She wondered if he were in the midst of some kind of attack, but he smiled passively enough and continued to smoke. The door opened again and the man with a flask poked his head through, nodded to the man with the cigar, and disappeared from view.

The man with the cigar stood and, smiling once more at them all—the gaze of each woman following him closely—crossed to the open doorway. “Any time you’re ready,” he said and walked out, closing the door behind him. A moment later Miss Temple heard the distinct sharp click of that door being locked. Their only path led back to the theatre.

“You’ve kept your shoes,” said one of the women, on the right.

“I have,” said Miss Temple. It was not what she wanted to talk about. “Have any of you been *in* the theatre?” They shook their heads no, but said nothing more. Miss Temple indicated the restraints, the bolts, the collars. “Have you looked at this room?” They blandly nodded that they had. She became almost completely annoyed. “He has locked the door!”

“It will be fine,” said the woman who had spoken before. Miss Temple was suddenly caught up—did this voice seem familiar?

“It is merely a room,” said the woman in the middle, kicking at one of the leather restraints hanging near to her leg. “It’s not what it is used for *now*.”

The others nodded blankly, as if no more needed saying.

“And what exactly would *that* be?” demanded Miss Temple.

The woman giggled. It was a giggle she’d heard before too. It was from the coach. This was the woman who’d let the men unbutton her dress. Miss Temple looked at the other two—seeing them in such different apparel, such different light—were they the pirate and silken woman whose eyes she had poked? She had no idea. She saw that they were smiling at her too, as if her question had indeed been very foolish. Were they drunk? Miss Temple stepped forward and grasped the woman’s chin, tilting her face upwards—which she passively, strangely, allowed—and then lowered her own face to the woman’s mouth and sniffed. She well knew what alcohol—particularly rum—smelled like, and its squalid influence. The woman wore perfume—sandalwood?—but there was another odor that Miss Temple did not recognize. It was not alcohol, or indeed anything she had smelled before—nor, further, did the odor emanate from around the woman’s mouth (again occupied with giggling), but higher on her face. The odor was vaguely mechanical, almost industrial, but it wasn’t coal, nor rubber, nor lamp oil, nor ether, nor even burnt hair, though it seemed adjacent to all of these unpleasant smells joined together. She could not place it—not in her mind, nor on the woman’s body—was it around her eyes?—behind the mask? Miss Temple released

her and stepped away. As if this were a signal to all three of them, they hopped off the table as one.

"Where are you going?" Miss Temple asked.

"We are going in," said the one in the middle.

"But what have they told you? What will happen?"

"Nothing will happen," said the woman on the right, "save everything we desire."

"They are expecting us," said the woman on the left, who had not yet spoken. Miss Temple was certain it was the woman who had arrived wearing the blue silk dress.

They pushed past her to the door—but there was so much more to ask them, so much more they could say! Were they invited guests? Did they know of any hotel? Miss Temple sputtered, dropping for the moment her condescending pose, crying to them all. "Wait! Wait! Where are your clothes? Where is the lady in red?"

All three erupted into stifled laughter. The one in front opened the door, and the one in the rear dismissed Miss Temple with a derisive flip of her hand. They walked out, the last closing the door behind them. There was silence.

Miss Temple looked around her at the cold, menacing room, her early confidence and pluck having quite ebbed away. Obviously, if she were bold, the path to full investigation lay up the dark ramp and into the theatre. Why else had she met the challenge of changing clothes, of formulating questions, of coming *all this way*? At the same time, she was not a fool, and knew enough that this room and the theatre, this party—all legitimately disquieting—could well pose a keen danger to both her virtue and her person. The outside door was locked, and the men outside that locked door horrid. The room held no cabinets or alcoves in which to crouch concealed. She pointed out to herself that the other women—who must know more than she—were unconcerned. The other women might equally be whores.

She took a breath, and chided herself for so brusque a judgment—after all the women had been finely dressed. They might be unchaste, even slatternly, they might indeed be here by way of some hotel—who knew the complications of another's life? The true question was whether this

must lead per force to a situation beyond her skills to manage. There were great gaps in Miss Temple's experience—which she would freely acknowledge, when pressed—that were only generally filled in with equally great swathes of inference and surmise. About many of these things she nevertheless felt she had a good idea. About others, she preferred to find pleasure in mystery. In the matter of the strange theatre, however, she was determined that no gaps, so to speak, should be filled at all.

She could at least listen at the door. With care she turned the knob and opened the door perhaps an inch. She heard nothing. She opened it a bit wider, enough to insert her head through the gap. The light looked the same as before. The other women had only just gone out—she could only have dithered for the space of a minute. Could it be that the crowd was so soon in hushed concentration? Was there already some ghastly tableau on display? She listened, but heard nothing. Peering around the corner, however, just gave her the glaring light in her eyes. She crept forward. She still heard nothing. She lowered herself to a crouch, then to her hands and knees, all the while gazing up the ramp at an uncomfortable angle. She saw and heard nothing. She stopped. She was at the point where any further movement would reveal her to the gallery—she was already fully visible from the stage, had anyone been there to see her. She shifted her gaze to the table. There was no one upon it. There was no one at all.

Miss Temple was extremely annoyed, if also relieved, and further, more than a little curious as to what had actually happened to the three women. Had they merely gone out the other side? She resolved to follow them, but happened in crossing the stage to glance up again at the blackboard, the glaring light now out of her eyes. In the same block letters, someone had inscribed, "SO THEY SHALL BE CONSUMED". Miss Temple visibly started, as if someone had blown in her ear. The words had definitely not been there before.

She whirled around to the gallery seats again, looking for anyone hiding on their hands and knees. There was no one. Without delay she continued across to the first ramp and down it, rounding the corner to the door. It was closed. She put her head to the door and listened. She heard nothing—but this meant nothing, the doors were thick. Tired as she was of unnecessary stealth, she again turned the knob with excruciating patience and opened it just enough to peek through. She widened the

opening, listened, heard nothing, and widened it again. Still nothing. Annoyance getting the best of her, Miss Temple opened the door completely, and gasped with shock.

Strewn across the floor were the tattered, savaged remains of her hooded cloak, her dress, her corset, and her undergarments—all slashed beyond repair, nearly beyond recognition. Even her new notebook had been destroyed—pages torn out and scattered like leaves, the binding snapped, the leather cover pitted and gashed. Miss Temple found herself shaking with outrage, and with fear. Obviously she had been discovered. She was in danger. She must escape. She would follow Roger another time, or she would engage professional operatives, men who knew their business—stout fellows who would not be so easily tricked. Her efforts had been ridiculous. They might well be her undoing.

She crossed to the wall of cabinets. Her own clothing was destroyed, but perhaps one of the others held something she could use to cover herself. They were all locked. She pulled with all her strength, to no avail. She looked around for anything to force the cabinet doors, to pry them open, but the room was bare. Miss Temple released a cry of guttural frustration, an unexpectedly plangent whine—which when she heard it herself, with a certain shock, made clear the true extent of her desperate position. What if she were discovered and her name made known? How could she distinguish herself from any of these other similarly clad women? How could she face Roger? She caught herself. Roger! It was exactly the thing to restore her resolve. The last thing she wanted was to be in any way subject to his scrutiny—the very thought of it filled her with rage. *He* filled her with rage. In that moment she despised Roger Bascombe and was newly determined to get free of this horrid predicament and then, at her leisure, dedicate herself to ruining him utterly. And yet, even in the act of imagining that ruin, and herself sneering in triumph above him, Miss Temple felt a stab of pity, of proprietary concern for what the foolish man had managed to become involved in—what depravity, what danger, what career-destroying scandal was he here so blithely courting? Was it possible he did not understand? If she were to somehow speak to him, could she apprise him of his peril? Could she at least divine his mind?

Miss Temple walked to the hallway door and opened it. The hallway seemed empty, but she craned her head out as far as she could, listening

closely. One way took her back to the front, to the thick of the party and directly past—she assumed—other guests, servants, *everyone*. It would also take her to the coaches, if in her present costume she were able to get out of the house without being discovered, exposed, ridiculed, or worse. The *other* way took her deeper into the house, and deeper into danger but also deeper into intrigue. Here she might legitimately hope to find a change of clothing. She might find an alternative route to the coaches. She might even find more information—about Roger, about the woman in red, about the Lord in residence. Or she could find her own destruction. While Miss Temple posed the question to herself as one of “running away” versus “bravely pushing on” it was also true that going deeper into the house, though more frightful as a whole, served to postpone any immediate confrontation. If she were to go back to the entrance she was certain to run into servants at least. If she went forward anything at all might happen—including an easy escape. She took one more look toward the great entrance, saw no one, and darted in the opposite direction, moving quickly and close to the wall.

She came to three successive doors on her side and one across the mirrored hall, all of which were locked. She kept walking. Her shoes seemed impossibly loud on the tiled floor. She looked ahead of her to the end of the hallway—there were only two more doors before she'd have to turn around. Another door across the hall—she glanced backwards again and, seeing no one, dashed across to it. The handle did not budge. Another look—still no one—and she trotted back to the other side, and up to the last door. Beyond it, the hallway ended in an enormous mirror that was inset with panes and posts to look like one of the great windows that faced out from elsewhere in the house—only the view here was ostentatiously and pointedly turned inward, as if to confide that (frankly, behind doors) such an interior view was truly the more important. To Miss Temple it was chastening, for she saw herself reflected, a pale figure skulking on the border of opulence. The earlier pleasure she'd felt upon seeing herself so masked was not wholly absent, but tempered with a better understanding of a risk that seemed to be its twin.

At the final door her luck changed. As she neared it, she heard a muffled voice and sounds of movement. She tried the knob. It was locked. There

was nothing else for it. Miss Temple squared her shoulders and took a deep breath. She knocked.

The voice went silent. She braced herself, but heard nothing—no steps to the door, no rattle of the lock. She knocked again, louder, so that it hurt her hand. She stepped back, shaking her fingers, waiting. Then she heard quick steps, a bolt being drawn, and the door snapped open a bare inch. A wary green eye stared down at her.

“What is it?” demanded a querulous male voice, openly peeved.

“Hello,” said Miss Temple, smiling.

“What the devil do you want?”

“I’d like to come in.”

“Who the devil are you?”

“Isobel.”

Miss Temple had seized the saint’s name on instinct, from nerves—but what if it gave her away, if there were another Isobel who was known to be somewhere else, or didn’t look anything like her, some fat blotchy girl who was always in a sweat? She looked up at the eye—the door had not opened a jot farther—and desperately tried to gauge the man’s reaction. The eye merely blinked, then quickly ran up and down her body. It narrowed with suspicion.

“That doesn’t say what you want.”

“I was directed here.”

“By whom? By *whom*?”

“Whom do you think?”

“For what purpose?”

Though Miss Temple was willing enough to continue, this was going *on*, and she was acutely aware of being so long visible in the hallway. She leaned forward, looked up to the eye, and whispered, “To change my *clothing*.” The eye did not move. She glanced around her, and back to the man, whispering again. “I can hardly do so in the *open air* . . .”

The man opened the door, and stepped away, allowing her to enter. She took care to scamper well past his possible grasp, but saw that he had merely closed the door and indeed stepped farther away. He was a strange creature—a servant, she assumed, though he did not wear the black livery. Instead, she noted that his shoes, though they had once been fine, were scuffed and clotted with grime. He wore a white work smock over what looked to be a thoroughly simple and equally worn brown

shirt and pants. His hair was greasy, smeared back behind his ears. His skin was pale, his eyes sharp and searching, and his hands black as if they had been stained with India ink. Was he some kind of printer? She smiled at him and said thank you. His reaction was to audibly swallow, his hands worrying the frayed hem of his smock, and then study her while breathing through his open mouth like a fish.

The room was littered with wooden boxes, not as long or deep as a coffin, but lined with cushioning felt. The boxes were open, the tops haphazardly propped up against the wall, but their contents were not apparent. In fact, they all seemed empty. Miss Temple took it upon herself to glance into one of them when the man snapped at her, traces of spittle lancing into the air with his vehemence.

“Stop that!”

She turned to see him pointing at the boxes and then, his thoughts shifting, to her, her mask, her clothing.

“Why did he send you here? Everyone’s supposed to be in the other rooms! I have work to do! I can’t—I won’t be the butt of his jokes! Hasn’t he done enough to me already? Hasn’t his lap-dog Lorenz? Do this, Crooner! Do that, Crooner! I have followed every instruction! I am just as responsible for...my own designs—one momentary, regrettable lapse—I have agreed to every condition—submitted utterly, and yet—” He gestured helplessly, sputtering at Miss Temple. “*This torment!*”

She waited for him to stop speaking and, once he did, to stop huffing like an ill-fed terrier. On the far side of the room was another door. With a serious nod and a respectful dip of her knee, Miss Temple indicated this door and whispered, “I will trouble you no further. If you-know-who *does* happen to question me, I will make plain that you were solely focused on your task.” She nodded again and walked to the door, very much hoping it was not a closet. She opened it and stepped into a narrow hallway. Shutting the door behind her, Miss Temple sagged with relief against the wall.

She knew there was no time to rest and forced herself on. The hallway was an unadorned servants’ corridor, allowing swift, undisturbing passage between vital parts of the house. With a surge of hope, Miss Temple wondered if it might lead her to the laundry. She padded as softly as her

boots would allow to the door at the far end. Before turning the knob, she noticed a metal disc the size of a coin fixed to the door with a tiny bolt. She swiveled it to the side and revealed, set into the wood, a spy hole. Obviously this was so a careful servant could be sure not to interrupt his master with an untimely entrance. Miss Temple fully approved of this engine of discretion and tact. She stood on her toes and peeked in.

It was a private closet, luxurious in size, dominated by a large copper bath. On a table sat an array of bathing implements—sponges, brushes, bottles, soaps, and stacks of folded white towels. She saw no person. She opened the door and crept in. Immediately, she lost her footing—her heel skidding on the wet tile floor—and sat down hard on the floor in an awkward, spragging split. A sharp ripping sound told her the outer robe had torn. She froze in place, listening. Had anyone heard? Had she actually yelled? There was no answering sound from beyond the open closet door. Miss Temple gingerly stood. The floor had been liberally splashed with water, a number of used towels dropped without care on the floor, crumpled and soaked. She carefully leaned over and dipped her fingers into the bath. It was tepid. No one had been in the tub for at least thirty minutes. She dabbed her fingers on one of the towels—no servant had been in the room either, or all would have been cleared and swabbed. This meant that either the occupant was still there, or that the servants had been warned away.

It was then that Miss Temple noticed the smell, drifting in from the room beyond. She probably hadn't detected it immediately because of the residue of flowered soaps and oils, but as soon as she had taken a step toward the door her senses were assailed with the same strange unnatural odor she had found on the masked woman's face, only now much stronger. She put a hand over her nose and mouth. It seemed a mixture of ash and burnt cork perhaps, or smoldering rubber—she wondered suddenly what burning glass smelled like—yet what were any of those smells doing in the private quarters of a country mansion? She poked her head out of the bathing closet and into a small sitting room. A quick glance took in chairs, a small table, a lamp, a painting, but no source of new clothing. She stepped across to the far doorway leading out, which was when she heard the noise.

Heavy footsteps, approaching nearer and nearer. When they had practically reached her—when she was just about to bolt back to the closet—the footsteps stumbled and Miss Temple heard the distinct screech and crash of something heavy being knocked into something else, which in turn toppled to the floor and shattered. She flinched to see a spray of China blue glass jet through the open doorway past her feet. A pause. The footsteps resumed, again lurching, and faded away. Miss Temple risked a peek around the corner. At her feet were the scattered remains of an enormous vase, the lilies that had been inside, the broken marble pedestal it had rested upon, and an end table knocked askew. The room held a large canopied bed with all its linen stripped away. Instead, the bed held three wooden boxes, identical to those the strange servant had opened in the room off the hall. These too were open and lined with felt—orange felt, as she now fully took in, recalling the word on the blackboard. The boxes were all empty, but she picked up one of the discarded lids and saw that letters—also in orange—had been stenciled on the wood: “OR-13”. She looked at the other two lids and saw that they had in turn been stenciled “OR-14” and “OR-15”. She snapped her head up to the archway. The footsteps had returned, careening even more recklessly. Before Miss Temple could do a thing to hide there was a thicker, meaty crash, and then another silence.

She waited, heard nothing, and crept to the archway. The smell was even stronger. She gagged, holding part of her sleeve across her nose and mouth. This was another sitting room, more fully furnished, but with every item covered by a white cloth, as if this part of the house were closed. On the floor, poking from behind a white-shrouded sideboard, were a pair of legs: bright red trousers with a yellow cord on the outside seam, stuffed into black boots. A soldier’s uniform. The soldier did not move. Miss Temple dared to step into the room and look at him fully. His coat was also red, draped with golden epaulettes and frogging and he had a thick black moustache and whiskers. The rest of his face was covered by a tight red leather mask. His eyes were closed. She did not see any blood—there was no immediate indication that he had hit his head. Perhaps he was drunk. Or overwhelmed by the smell. She poked the man with her foot. He did not stir, though she saw from his gently moving chest that he lived.

Wadded up in his hands—and perhaps tripping on this had been his

difficulty—was a black cloak. Miss Temple smiled with satisfaction. She knelt and gently prized it free, and then stood, holding it open before her. There was no hood, but it would cover the rest of her very well. She smiled again with cunning and knelt at the man's head, carefully unfastening his mask and then peeling it away from his face. She let out a gasp. Around his eyes the man bore what looked like a strange brand, an impression on the skin, as if a large pair of metal glasses had been pressed into his face and temples. The flesh was not burned, but discolored a visceral shade of plum, as if a layer of skin had been rubbed away. Miss Temple examined the other side of his mask with distaste. It did not seem fouled or bloody. She wiped it on one of the white chair covers. It left no stain. Still, it was with distrust that she pulled off her own white mask and exchanged it for the red. She then pulled off her white robes and wrapped herself in the black cloak. There was no mirror, but she still felt as if she had regained some of her footing. She stuffed the discarded things into the sideboard and made her way to the next doorway.

This was quite large, clearly the main entrance to this suite of rooms, and it opened directly onto a crowd of finely dressed guests moving purposefully past her down a large, well-lit corridor. A man noted Miss Temple's appearance in the doorway and nodded, but did not pause. No one paused—in fact there seemed to be some hurry. Happy not to be causing alarm, Miss Temple stepped into the moving mass and allowed herself to be swept along. She was mindful to hold her cloak closed, but otherwise had leisure to study the people around her. They all wore masks and elegant evening wear, but seemed a variety of types and ages. As she shuffled along several others nodded or smiled to her, but no one spoke—in fact, no one was speaking at all, though she did sense an occasional smile of anticipation. She was convinced that they were all going toward something that promised to be wonderful, but that very few, if any, of them actually knew what it was. As she looked ahead and behind, she saw it was really no great group in the corridor—perhaps forty or fifty. Judging from the number of coaches at the front of the house, this was but a fraction of those attending the party. She wondered where everyone else was, and how they had explained the absence of this group. Further, where were they going? And how long was the corridor? Miss Temple decided that whoever laid out the house was unhealthily fixated with *length*. She stumbled abruptly into the person ahead of her—at this

point a short woman (which was to say, of her own height) in a pale green dress (a color similar to Miss Temple's own, she noted with a pang) and an especially ingenious mask made from strings of hanging beads.

"O I am so sorry," Miss Temple whispered.

"Not at all," the woman replied, and nodded at a gentleman in front of her, "I trod on *his* heel." They were stopped in the hall.

"We are stopped," observed Miss Temple, trying to keep up the conversation.

"I was told the stair is quite narrow, and to be careful with my shoes. They never build for ladies."

"It is a terrible truth," agreed Miss Temple, but her gaze had shifted over their heads, where indeed she saw a line of figures winding their way up a spiral staircase, fashioned of bright metal.

Her heart leapt in her throat. Roger Bascombe—for it could be no one else, despite the plain black mask across his eyes—was even as she watched moving around the upper spiral, and for the moment facing her directly. Once more, his expression was guarded, his hand tapping impatiently on the rail as he climbed, one step at a time, other guests immediately above and below him. He so disliked the crush of a crowd—she knew he must be miserable. Where was he going? Where did he *think* he was going? Then all too brusquely Roger had reached the top, a narrow balcony, and disappeared from sight.

Miss Temple turned her gaze to the people around her—she had shuffled another few steps forward, her thoughts fully awl— and realized the woman in green had been whispering. "I'm sorry," Miss Temple whispered back, "I was suddenly distracted with excitement."

"It is very exciting, isn't it?" confided the woman.

"I should say it is."

"I am feeling quite girlish!"

"I expect you speak for everyone," Miss Temple assured her, and then blithely wondered, "I did not expect so many people."

"Of course not," answered the woman, "for they've been very careful—the hiding of this group within the larger function, the subtlety of our invitations, the concealment of identity."

"Indeed." Miss Temple nodded. "And what a cunning mask you have."

“It *is* very cunning, is it not?” The woman smiled. By this time she had taken a half-step back so she could walk next to Miss Temple and they could speak lower without attracting the attention of others. “But I myself have been intending to compliment your cloak.”

“Ah, well, that is kind of you to say.”

“Rather *dramatic*,” the woman muttered, reaching to touch a border of black ribbon edging the collar that Miss Temple had not noticed. “It looks almost like a soldier’s.”

“Is that not the fashion?” Miss Temple smiled.

“Indeed”—here the woman’s voice went lower still—“for are *we* not soldiers now, in our own way?”

Miss Temple nodded, and spoke in quiet solidarity. “My feeling is the same.”

The woman met her gaze significantly, and then ran her eyes quite happily over the cloak. “And it is quite long—it covers you completely.”

Miss Temple leaned closer. “So no one will know what I am wearing.”

The woman smiled wickedly and leaned in closer still. “Or if you are wearing anything at all . . .”

Before Miss Temple could respond they were at the foot of the staircase. She gestured for the woman to go first—the last thing she wanted was for these impulsive words to prompt her companion to look under her cloak from below. As they rose, she looked down—there were only a scattered dozen people still in the corridor. Then she swallowed—for behind them all, advancing slowly, almost as if to herd them like sheep, was the woman in red. Her gaze fell across Miss Temple, who could not suppress a flinch, and then slid past her toward the balcony. Miss Temple kept climbing and was soon around the other side of the spiral, out of sight. When she once more rotated out into the open she steeled herself to merely face upward into the green woman’s back. The nape of her neck prickled. It was all she could do not to look, but she held to her will, resisting the destructive urge—sure she’d been discovered. Then the green woman stopped—there was a delay above them. Miss Temple felt fully exposed, as if she wore no cloak and no mask, as if she and the woman in red were alone. Again, she sensed that gaze boring into her and distinctly heard those footfalls she remembered from the mirrored hall. The woman was coming closer . . . closer . . . she had stopped directly below. Miss Temple looked down—and for a terrible flashing moment met that pair

of glittering eyes. Then, an infinitesimal shift, and the woman was looking—or trying to look, partially blocked by the step she was standing on—up her cloak. Miss Temple held her breath.

The woman above her climbed on, and Miss Temple followed, aware that as she moved her cloak by necessity opened around her feet, but she was unable to look down again to confirm if the woman had recognized her, or had merely examined her along with all the others. Three more steps and she was on the balcony, walking across it and through a small, dark door. Here the woman in green paused, as if to suggest they continue together, but Miss Temple was now too frightened of exposure and wanted to hide alone. She nodded to the woman, smiling, and then walked deliberately in the opposite direction. It was only then she actually perceived where she was.

She stood in an aisle that ran along the top of the steeply raked gallery, looking down at the operating theatre. The gallery itself was largely full, and she forced herself to search for an empty seat. On the stage she saw the man from the train, the very large man in the fur coat—no longer wearing the coat, but still fingering his silver walking stick. He glared up at the gallery, impatiently waiting for people to situate themselves. She knew how bright the light in his eyes actually was, that he could not see, but nevertheless felt his gaze restlessly pass over her, hard as a rake across gravel, as she stepped to the far aisle. She dared not stray from the upmost row—the lower one sat, the more visible one was from the stage—and was relieved to find an empty seat three places in, between a man in a black tailcoat and a white-haired fellow in a blue uniform with a sash. As each was some inches taller than she, Miss Temple assured herself that she was less visible between them—though what she felt was fully trapped. Behind her, she knew the woman in red must have entered. She forced her gaze to the stage, but what she saw didn't help her fears in the slightest.

The powerful man extended his hand into the shadow of a rampway and pulled it back, now gripping the pale shoulder of a masked woman in white silk robes. The woman walked carefully, blinded by the light, allowing the man to guide her. He then—with no ceremony at all—hoisted her with both hands into a sitting position on the table, legs

dangling. He scooped up her legs and pulled them around to the table front, rotating her. He was obviously speaking to her, too low for anyone else to hear, for with a shy smile she laid back on the table, and shifted her body to be properly in the center. As she did this, the man matter-of-factly positioned each of her ankles to opposite corners of the table and threaded a leather belt around them. He tightened the belts with a sharp tug and let the slack drop. He moved up to her arms. The woman said nothing. Miss Temple was unsure which of the three women was on the table—perhaps the pirate?—and while she was trying to guess, the man bound the woman's arms. Then, carefully, he cleared away her elegantly curled hair and threaded another belt across her pale, delicate throat. This was also tightened, in a firm but not so muscular manner, leaving the woman completely secured. The man then stepped behind her and took hold of a metal handle, like that of a pump. He pulled it. The machinery answered with a percussive snap, loud as a gunshot, and the top of the table lurched upwards, rotating toward the gallery. Three more snaps and the woman was perhaps half-way to being vertical. He released the handle and walked off the stage into shadow.

The woman had no particular expression, aside from a bland smile, but this could not disguise the fact that her legs were shaking. Miss Temple risked a glance over the shoulder of her neighbor, back toward the door, and quickly turned her eyes back to the stage. The woman in red stood directly in the doorway, as if on guard, glancing idly across the crowd as she worked a new cigarette into her holder. Miss Temple's only other escape would be to vault onto the stage and rush down a rampway, which was hardly possible. Restlessly, she looked across the crowd herself, trying to find some idea, some new avenue. Instead, she found Roger, directly in the center of the gallery, sitting between a woman in yellow—she must be the laughing woman from his train compartment—and, of all things, an empty seat. It must be the only empty seat in the theatre. Somewhere behind her, Miss Temple smelled burning tobacco. She was certain that seat belonged to her scarlet nemesis—but what could explain the connection of that woman and Roger Bascombe? Was she some diplomatic figure—or a mysterious courtesan, or decadent heiress? Simply by collecting Miss Temple at the door, she proved herself part of whatever the crowd had here gathered to watch. Roger had been with her on the train—but did that mean he knew what they'd see as well? But

then, with a sudden stab of doubt, Miss Temple wondered instead if the seat *she* occupied had been the woman's—but what could she possibly do now?

The powerful man returned to the light, now bearing in his arms another of the white-robed women. This was certainly the one in blue silk, for her long hair was undone and trailed down toward the floor. He walked to the center of the stage, in front of the table, and cleared his throat.

“I believe we are ready,” he began.

Miss Temple was surprised at his voice, which far from being harsh or commanding, was faint, almost a rasp, if still in a bass register. It emerged from his throat like something scarred, no longer whole. He did not raise his voice either, but relied on other to pay attention—and his bearing was such that his audience did so completely. He cleared his throat again and lifted the woman in his arms, as if she were a text he would expound.

“As you can see, this lady has become fully subject. You will understand that no opiates nor other coercive medicines have been employed. Further, while she seems quite helpless, this is merely what has become her preferred state. It is hardly a necessity. On the contrary, a high level of responsiveness is perfectly within her grasp.”

He swung the woman's body in such a way as to lift the upper half and sweep her legs into position beneath it, dropping her feet to the floor. He then stepped away, releasing his grip. The woman tottered, her eyes still glassy, but she did not fall. Without warning he slapped her sharply across the face. A gasp rippled across the gallery. The woman reeled, but she did not go down—on the contrary, one of her own arms shot out toward the man's own face, ready to strike. He caught her hand easily—he had clearly expected her blow—and then slowly lowered her arm to her side and released it. She did not move to swing again, and in fact her staid manner was as if the slap had never occurred. The man looked up into the gallery as if to acknowledge this, and then reached again toward the woman, this time putting his powerful hand around her throat. He squeezed. The woman reacted violently, clawing at his fingers, slapping at his arm, then kicking at his legs. The man held her at arm's length and did not waver. She could not reach him. The woman's face was red, her breath labored, her struggles more desperate. He was killing her. Miss Temple heard a murmur of shock from the uniformed man next to

her—a murmur echoed elsewhere in the crowd—and felt him shift in his seat, as if he was going to stand. Anticipating this exact moment of protest, the man on stage released his grip. The woman staggered, her breath a series of ragged whoops—but her struggles soon abated. At no time did she refer to the man. After a minute or so regaining her strength, she stood once more with a placid stance and blank expression, exactly as if he were not there at all.

Again, the man looked up at the gallery, registering his point, and then stepped behind his subject. In a swift movement he flipped up the back of her robes and plunged his hand beneath them, deliberately digging. The woman stiffened, wriggled, and then bit her lip—the rest of her facial features consistently blank. The man remained behind her, his unseen fingers working. His expression remained impassive—he might have been repairing a clock—as before him the woman’s breathing deepened, and her posture subtly shifted, leaning forward and placing that much more of her weight on her toes. Miss Temple watched, rapt—she knew what access the woman’s silken pants would provide and exactly where he was occupied—as the slow arc of accelerating pleasure took hold on the woman’s face—an audible gasp, a blush spreading over her throat, her clutching fingers. Again, abruptly, the man removed his hand and stepped away, taking a moment to wipe his fingers on the back of her robes. For her part, once he was clear, she immediately relaxed into her passive stance and expression. The man snapped his fingers. Another man stepped from the shadows—Miss Temple saw he was her own canine escort from earlier—and took the woman’s hand. He led her down the rampway and out of sight.

“As you see,” the man on stage continued, “the subject is both highly responsive and content to remain within her self. Such are the *immediate* effects, along with varying degrees of dizziness, nausea, and narcolepsy. It is why, during these early stages, supervision—protection—is of vital concern.” He snapped his fingers again and from the opposite rampway emerged the second canine escort, guiding the last of the three women in white. She was led to the powerful man, walking perfectly normally, where she curtsied. He took her hand from the escort (who departed the stage) as she straightened, and turned her to face the gallery. She curtsied again.

“This lady,” the man went on, “has been our subject for three days. As

you see, she remains in complete control of her faculties. More than this, she has been *liberated* from strictures of thought. She has in these past three days embraced a *new method of life*.”

He paused for his dramatic words to register fully, and then continued, a note of dry disdain audibly rising in his voice.

“Three days ago, this woman—like so many others, like so many others here this evening, I presume—believed herself to be in *love*. She is now positioning herself, with our assistance, to be in *power*.” He paused and nodded to the woman.

As she spoke, Miss Temple recognized the low voice of the woman in the feathered cloak. Her tone was the same as when she told the story of being with the two men in the coach, but the cold dreamy distance with which she spoke of herself gave Miss Temple chills.

“I cannot say how I was, for that would be to say how I was a child. So much has changed—so much has become clear—that I can only speak of what I have become. It’s true I thought myself to be in love. In love because I could not see past the ways in which I was subject, for I believed, in my servitude, that this love would release me. What view of the world had I convinced myself I understood so well? It was the useless attachment to another, to *rescue*, which existed in place of my own action. What I believed were solely consequences of that attachment—money, stature, respectability, pleasure—I now see merely as elements of my own unlimited capacity. In these three days I have acquired three new suitors, funds for a new life in Geneva, and gratifying employment I am not permitted”—here she shyly smiled—“to describe. In the process I have happily managed to acquire and to spend more money than I have hitherto in my entire life possessed.”

She had finished speaking. She nodded to the gallery, and took a step backwards. Once more the escort appeared, took her hand, and walked her into darkness. The powerful man watched her exit, and turned back to his audience.

“I cannot give you details—any more than I would provide details about any of you. I do not seek to *convince*, but to offer *opportunity*. You see before you examples of different stages of our Process. These two women—one transformed three days since, the other just this night—have accepted our invitation and will benefit accordingly. This third . . . you will watch her transformation yourselves, and make your own

decisions. You will bear in mind that the severity of the procedure matches the profundity of this *transformation*. Your attention—along with your silence—is quite the limit of what I ask.”

With this, he knelt and picked up one of the wooden boxes. As he crossed with it to the table, he casually pried the top back with his fingers and tossed it aside with a flat clatter. He glanced at the woman, who swallowed with nervousness, and placed the box onto the table, next to her leg. He pulled out a thick layer of orange felt, dropped it onto the floor, and then frowned, reaching into the box with both hands, performing some adjustment or assembly. Satisfied, he removed what looked to Miss Temple like an overly large pair of glasses, the lenses impossibly thick, the frames sheathed in black rubber, trailing hanks of copper wire. The man leaned across the woman’s front, blocking her from view, and tossed her white mask to the side. Before they might know her identity, he lowered the strange piece of machinery onto her open face, tightening it with short powerful movements of his hands that caused the woman’s legs to twitch. He stepped back to the box. The woman was breathing hard, her cheeks were wet, the sleeves of her robe balled up in her fists. The man removed a wickedly toothed metal clamp, attached one end to the copper wire, and secured the other inside the box to something Miss Temple could not see. Upon his doing this, however, the thing inside the box began to glow with a pallid blue light. The woman caught her breath and grunted with pain.

In that exact moment, Miss Temple did the same, for a sharp stabbing sensation pricked her spine directly between the shoulders. And as she turned her head to see the woman in red was no longer in the doorway, she felt from her other side that woman’s breath in her ear.

“I’m afraid you must come with me.”

Throughout their passage from the darkened gallery, across the balcony, and down the stairs themselves, the woman had maintained the pressure of her pinpoint blade, convincing Miss Temple not to call out, pretend a faint, or even to trip her adversary so she might fly over the railing. Once they had reached the long marble corridor, the woman stepped away and tucked her hand back into a pocket—but not before Miss Temple could

note the bright metal band across her fingers. The woman glanced up to the balcony, to make sure no one had followed, and then indicated that Miss Temple should lead the way back down the corridor toward the rest of the house. Miss Temple did so, desperately hoping for an open door she could dash through, or the intervention of some passer-by. She already knew that there were other guests—that the events in the operating theatre were hidden from outside eyes within the larger gathering taking place in the whole of the house. If she could only reach *that* collection of people, she was certain she would find aid. They passed several closed doors, but Miss Temple's journey to the staircase had been so focused on the people around her that she had little memory of anything else—she'd no idea where these might go, or even if one of these doors might be where she had entered. The woman drove her ahead with sharp shoves past any landmark where she thought to linger. At the first of these offensive gestures, Miss Temple felt her sense of propriety to be fully overwhelmed by her fear. She was frankly terrified what was going to happen to her—that she could be so subject to abuse was just another sign of how low she had fallen, how desperate her straits. At the second shove, a rising level of annoyance was still nevertheless overborne by her own physical frailty, the woman's weapon and obvious malice, and the knowledge that, as she could certainly be accused with trespassing and theft, she had no legal ground to stand on whatsoever. At the third such shove, however, Miss Temple's natural outrage flared and without thinking she whipped round and swung her open hand at the woman's face with all the strength in her arm. The woman pulled her head back and the blow went wide, causing Miss Temple to stumble. At this the woman in red chuckled, insufferably, and once more revealed the device in her hand—a short vicious blade fixed to a band of steel that wrapped across her knuckles. With her other hand she indicated a nearby doorway—by all appearances identical to every other in the corridor.

“We can speak in there,” she said. Glaring her defiance quite openly, Miss Temple went in.

It was yet another suite of rooms, the furniture covered with white cloths. The woman in red closed the door behind them, and shoved Miss Temple toward a covered divan. When Miss Temple turned to her, eyes quite blazing, the woman's voice was dismissive and cold.

“Sit down.” At this, the woman herself stepped over to a bulky armchair and sat, digging out her cigarette holder and a metal case of cigarettes. She looked up at Miss Temple, who had not moved, and snapped, “Sit down or I’ll find you something *else* to sit on—*repeatedly*.”

Miss Temple sat. The woman finished inserting the cigarette, stood, walked to a wall sconce and lit it, puffing, and then returned to her seat. They stared at each other.

“You are holding me against my will,” Miss Temple said, out of the hope that standing up for herself had prompted this conversation.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” The woman inhaled, blew smoke away from them and then tapped her ash to the carpet. She studied Miss Temple, who did not move. The woman did not move either. She took another puff, and when she opened her mouth to speak, smoke came out along with her words.

“I will ask you questions. You will answer them. Do not be a fool. You are alone.” She looked pointedly at Miss Temple and then, shifting her voice to a slightly more dry tone of accusatory recitation, began in earnest. “You arrived in a coach with the others.”

“Yes. You see, I am from the hotel,” Miss Temple offered.

“You are not. It will not aid you to lie.” The woman paused for a moment, as if trying to decide her best course of questioning. Miss Temple asserted herself.

“I am not afraid of you.”

“It will not aid you to be stupid either. You came on the train. How did you know what train to take? And what station? Some person told you.”

“No one told me.”

“Of course someone told you. Who are your confederates?”

“I am quite alone.”

The woman laughed, a sharp scoffing bark. “If I believed that, you’d be headfirst in a bog and I’d be done with you.” She settled back into her chair. “I will require names.”

Miss Temple had no idea what to say. If she simply made up names, or gave names that had nothing to do with the matter, she would only

prove her ignorance. If she did not, the risk was even greater. Her knee was trembling. As calmly as she could, she put a hand on it.

“What would such a betrayal purchase me?” she asked.

“Your life,” answered the woman. “If I am kind.”

“I see.”

“So. Speak. Names. Start with your own.”

“May I ask you a question first?”

“You may not.”

Miss Temple ignored her. “If something were to happen to me, would this not be the most singular signal to my confederates about the character of your activities?”

The woman barked again with laughter. She regained control over her features. “I’m sorry, that was so very nearly amusing. Please—you were saying? Or did you want to die?”

Miss Temple took a breath and began to lie for all she was worth.

“Isobel. Isobel Hastings.”

The woman smirked. “Your accent is . . . odd . . . perhaps even fabricated.”

As she was speaking in her normal voice, Miss Temple found this extremely annoying.

“I am from the country.”

“What country?”

“This one, naturally. From the north.”

“I see . . .” The woman smirked again. “Whom do you serve?”

“I do not know names. I was given instructions by letter.”

“What instructions?”

“Stopping Station, platform 12, 6:23 train, Orange Locks. I was to find the true purpose of the evening and report back all I had witnessed.”

“To whom?”

“I do not know. I was to be contacted upon returning to Stopping.”

“By whom?”

“They would reveal themselves to me. I know nothing, so I can give nothing away.”

The woman sighed with annoyance, stubbed out her cigarette on the

carpet, and rummaged for another in her bag. "You've some education. You're not a common whore."

"I am not."

"So you're an *un*-common one."

"I am not one at all."

"I see," the woman sneered. "Your expenses are paid by the work you do in a *shop*." Miss Temple was silent. "So tell me, because I do not understand, just who are you to be doing this kind of . . . 'investigation?'"

"No one at all. That is how I can do it."

"Ah."

"It is the truth."

"And how were you first . . . recruited?"

"I met a man in a hotel."

"A *man*." The woman sneered again. Miss Temple found herself studying the woman's face, nothing how its almost glacially inarguable beauty was so routinely broken by these flashes of sarcastic disapproval, as if the world itself were so insistently squalid that even this daunting perfection could not stand up against the onslaught. "What *man*?"

"I do not know him, if that is what you mean."

"Perhaps you can say what he looked like."

Miss Temple groped for an answer and found, looming out of her unsettled thoughts, Roger's supervisor, the Deputy Foreign Minister, Mr. Harald Crabbé.

"Ah—let me see—a shortish man, quite neat, fussy actually, grey hair, moustache, polished shoes, peremptory manner, condescending, mean little eyes, fat wife—not that I saw the wife, but sometimes, you will agree, one just *knows*—"

The woman in red cut her off.

"What hotel?"

"The Boniface, I believe."

The woman curled her lip with disdain. "How *respectable* of you . . ."

Miss Temple continued. "We had tea. He proposed that I might do such a kind of task. I agreed."

"For how much money?"

"I told you. I am not doing this for money."

For the first time, Miss Temple felt the woman in red was surprised. It was extremely pleasant. The woman rose and crossed again to the sconce,

lighting a second cigarette. She returned to her seat in a more leisurely manner, as if musing aloud. "I see . . . you prefer . . . leverage?"

"I want something other than money."

"And what is that?"

"It is my business, Madam, and unconnected to this talk."

The woman started, as if she had been slapped. She had been just about to sit again in the armchair. Very slowly, she straightened, standing tall as a judge over the seated Miss Temple. When she spoke, her voice was clipped and sure, as if her decision had already been made, and her questions now merely necessary procedure.

"You have no name for who sent you?"

"No."

"You have no idea who will meet you?"

"No."

"Nor what they wanted you to find?"

"No."

"And what *have* you found?"

"Some kind of new medicine—most likely a patent elixir—used on unsuspecting women to convert them to a lifetime spent in the service of corrupted appetites."

"I see."

"Yes. And I believe *you* are the most corrupted of them all."

"I'm sure you are correct in every degree, my dear—you have much to be proud of. Farquhar!"

This last was shouted—in a surprisingly compelling voice of command—toward a corner of the room blocked from view by a draped changing screen. Behind it Miss Temple heard the sound of a door, and a moment later saw her escort from before emerge, his complexion even redder, wiping his mouth with the back of a hand. "Mmn?" he asked; then, making the effort to swallow, did so, and cleared his throat. "Madam?"

"She goes outside."

"Yes, Madam."

"Discreetly."

"As ever."

The woman looked down at Miss Temple and smiled. "Be careful.

This one has *secrets*.” She walked to the main door without another word and left the room. The man, Farquhar, turned to Miss Temple.

“I don’t like this room,” he said. “Let’s go somewhere else.”

The door behind the screen led them into an uncarpeted serving room with several long tables and a tub of ice. One of the tables held a platter with a ravaged ham on it, and the other an array of open bottles of different shapes. The room smelled of alcohol. Farquhar indicated that Miss Temple should sit in the only visible chair, a simple wooden seat with no padding, a high back, and no arms. As she did, he wandered over to the ham and sawed away a chunk of pink meat with a nearby knife, then skewered the chunk on the knife and stuck it into his mouth. He leaned against the table and looked at her, chewing. After a moment he walked to the other table and leaned against it, tipping a brown bottle up to his teeth. He exhaled and wiped his mouth. After this moment of rest, he continued drinking, three deep swallows in succession. He put the bottle on the table and coughed.

The door on the far side of the room opened and the other escort, with the flask, stepped in. He spoke from the doorway. “See anything?”

“Of what?” Farquhar grunted in reply.

“Fellow in red. Nosing about.”

“Where?”

“Garden?”

Farquhar frowned, and took another pull from the brown bottle.

“They saw him out front,” continued the other man.

“Who is he?”

“They didn’t know.”

“Could be anybody.”

“Seems like it.”

Farquhar took another drink and set the bottle down. He nodded at Miss Temple.

“We’re to take her out.”

“Out?”

“Discreetly.”

“Now?”

“I expect so. Are they still occupied?”

"I expect so. How long does it take?"

"I've no idea. I was eating."

The man in the door wrinkled his nose, peering at the table. "What is that?"

"Ham."

"The drink—what's the drink?"

"It's . . . it's . . ." Farquhar rummaged for the bottle, sniffed it. "Spiced. Tastes like, what's it . . . cloves? Tastes like cloves. And pepper."

"Cloves make me vomit," the man in the doorway muttered. He glanced behind him, then back into the room. "All right, it's clear."

Farquhar snapped his fingers at Miss Temple, which she understood to mean that she should stand and walk to the open door, which she did, Farquhar following after. The other man took her hand and smiled. His teeth were yellow as cheese. "My name is Spragg," he said. "We're going to walk quietly." She nodded her agreement, eyes focused on the white front of his dress shirt, stained with a thin spatter of bright red blood. Could he have been just shaving? She pulled her eyes away and flinched as Farquhar took her other hand in his. The two men glanced at each other over the top of her head and began to walk, holding her firmly between them.

They made directly for a pair of glass double doors, covered with a pale curtain. Spragg opened the doors and they stepped out into a courtyard, footfalls rustling onto gravel. It had become cold. There were no stars, nor any longer palpable moonlight, but the courtyard was ringed with windows that threw out a general glow, so it was easy enough to see their path, winding among shrubbery and statues and great stone urns. Across, in what must be another wing of the house, Miss Temple fancied she could see the movements of many people—dancing perhaps—and hear the faint strains of an orchestra. This must be the rest of the party, the main party. If only she could break free and run across to it—but she knew that while she might stamp on the foot of one of her escorts, she could not do it to both of them. As if they knew her thoughts, both men tightened their grip on Miss Temple's hands.

They guided her toward a small darkened archway, a passage running between wings of the house, for gardeners or others having no acceptable business indoors. It allowed the three of them to skirt the main party completely, as well as the main entrance to the great house, for when

they had emerged on the other side, Miss Temple found herself at the large cobblestone courtyard where the coaches were waiting, and where she had so long ago—so it seemed—arrived.

She turned to Farquhar. “Well, thank you, and I am sorry for the inconvenience—” but her attempts to extricate her hand were of no avail. Instead, Spragg gave her right hand to Farquhar to hold as well, and stalked off to where a small knot of drivers huddled over a hot brazier. “I will go,” insisted Miss Temple. “I will hire a coach and leave, I promise you!” Farquhar said nothing, watching Spragg. After a moment of negotiation, Spragg turned and pointed to an elegant black coach, and began walking to it. Farquhar pulled Miss Temple to join him.

Farquhar looked at the empty driver’s seat. “Who’s up?” he asked.

“Your turn,” answered Spragg.

“It isn’t.”

“I drove to Packington.”

Farquhar was silent. Then, with a huff, he nodded at the coach door. “Get in then.”

Spragg chuckled. He opened the door and climbed in, reaching out with both of his meaty hands to collect Miss Temple. Farquhar huffed again and hoisted her up, as if her weight meant very little. As Spragg’s hard fingers grabbed her arms and then her shoulders, Miss Temple saw her cloak fall quite away from the rest of her body, giving both men lurid views of her silken underthings. Spragg pushed her roughly onto the seat across from him, her legs awkwardly splayed and her hands groping for balance. They continued to stare as she collected the cloak tightly around herself. The men looked at each other. “We’ll get there soon enough,” Farquhar intoned to Spragg. Spragg merely shrugged, his face an unconvincing mask of disinterest. Farquhar closed the door of the coach. Spragg and Miss Temple gazed at each other in silence. After a moment, the coach swayed with the weight of Farquhar climbing up into the seat, and after another moment, lurched forward into life.

“I heard you mention Packington,” Miss Temple said. “If it is convenient, you may leave me off there, where I can meet the train with little trouble.”

“My goodness.” Spragg smiled. “She’s a *listener*.”

“You were not exactly whispering,” replied Miss Temple, not liking his tone—in fact, not liking Spragg at all. She was annoyed with herself for not managing her cloak when she entered the coach. Spragg’s gaze was positively crawling across her without shame. “Stop looking at me,” she finally snapped.

“O what’s the harm?” He chuckled. “I saw you earlier, you know.”

“Yes, I saw you earlier as well.”

“Earlier than that, I mean.”

“When?”

Spragg picked a bit of grime from under his thumbnail. “Did you know,” he asked, “that in Holland they’ve invented glass that works like a mirror on one side, and a clear picture window on the other?”

“Really. Well, how do you beat that for cleverness?”

“I don’t think you do.” Spragg’s smile widened further into satisfaction, if not outright malice. Miss Temple blanched. The mirror where she’d changed her clothes, where she put on the feathered mask and licked her lips like an animal. They had watched her through all of it, watched her together, as if she were an Egyptian vaudeville.

“My Lord it’s hot in here.” Spragg chuckled, tugging at his collar.

“I find it quite cold, actually.”

“Perhaps you’d like a drink to warm you up?”

“No thank you. But may I ask you a question?”

Spragg nodded absently, digging in his coat for the flask. As he sat back and unscrewed the cap, Miss Temple felt the coach shift. They had left the cobblestones for the paved road that must lead to the border of the estate. Spragg drank, exhaling loudly and wiping his mouth between pulls. Miss Temple pressed on. “I was wondering . . . if you knew—if you could tell me—about the other three women.”

He laughed harshly. “Do you want to know what *I* was wondering?”

She did not answer. He laughed again and leaned across to her. “*I* was wondering . . .” he began, and placed his hand on her knee. She swatted it away. Spragg whistled and shook his hand, as if it were stinging. He sat back and took another pull on the flask, and then tucked it away in his coat. He cracked his knuckles. Outside the coach was darkness. Miss Temple knew she was in a dangerous spot. She must act carefully.

“Mr. Spragg,” she said, “I am not convinced we understand one another. We share a coach, but what do we really know about the other person? About what advantage that person can offer—advantage, I must point out, that may remain secret from other interested parties. I am speaking of money, Mr. Spragg, and of information, and, yes, even of *advancement*. You think I am a wayward girl without allies. I assure you it is not the case, and that it is indeed you who is more in need of *my* assistance.”

He looked back at her, impassive as a fish on a plate. In a sudden movement, Spragg leapt across the coach and fully onto her body. He caught up both her hands in his and blocked her kicking legs with the bulk of his middle, crushing them to her so she could not swing with any force. She grunted with the impact and pushed against him. He was quite strong, and very heavy. With a quick jerk he adjusted his grip so that one of his large hands held both of hers, and with his free hand ripped at the ties of her cloak, tearing it away from her. Then the hand was pawing her body as it has never been touched before, with a crude insistent hunger—her breasts, her neck, her stomach—his mauling touch so rapidly invasive that her understanding lagged behind the spasms of pain. She pushed against him with all of her strength, with such a desperate exertion that she was gasping, her breath now coming in sobs. She had never in her life known that she could struggle so, but still she could not move him. His mouth lurched closer and she turned her head to the side, his beard scratching her cheek, the smell of whisky suddenly overwhelming. Spragg shifted again, wedging his bulk between her legs. His free hand took hold of an ankle and roughly pushed it up, forcing her knee toward her chin. He let go, doing his best to pin it in place with his shoulder, and dropped his hand between her thighs, pulling apart her petticoats. Miss Temple whined with fury, thrashing. His fingers tore the silk pants, blindly stabbing her delicate flesh, digging deeper, catching her with his ragged nails. She gasped with pain. He chuckled and drew his wet tongue across her neck.

She felt his hand leave her, but sensed through the movements of his arm that it was occupied elsewhere—with loosening his own clothing. She arched her back to throw him off. He laughed—he *laughed*—and shifted his grip from her wrists to around her throat. Her hands fell free.

He was choking her. His other hand was back between her legs, pushing them apart. He pressed his body nearer. In a moment of clarity, Miss Temple recalled that the leg bent awkwardly against her chest wore the shoe which held her sharpened all-weather pencil. It was within her reach. She desperately groped for it. Spragg leaned away from her, allowing himself the pleasure of looking down between them—at the spectacle of their bodies—one hand choking her, the other wedging her thighs apart. He was about to thrust himself forward. She drove the pencil deep into the side of his neck.

Spragg's mouth opened with surprise, the hinges of his jaw twitching. His face went crimson. Her fingers were still gripping the pencil and she wrenched it free, ready for another blow. Instead, this released a thick pulsing jet of blood that sprayed like a fountain across her body and onto the walls of the coach. Spragg gasped, groaned, rattled, jerking like a puppet above her. She kicked her way free—she was screaming, she realized—everything wet and sticky, blood in her eyes. Spragg dropped with a thud between the seats. He thrashed for another few moments and became still. Miss Temple held the pencil, breathing hard, blinking, covered in gore.

She looked up. The coach had stopped. She groaned aloud with dismay. She heard the distinct crunch of Farquhar jumping down from the driver's seat. With a sudden thought she threw herself on top of Spragg's leaden body and pawed at his coat, trying to locate the pockets in the dark, hoping he had a knife, a pistol, any kind of weapon. The latch turned behind her. Miss Temple wheeled and, bracing her legs, threw herself forward just as Farquhar pulled open the door. She cannoned into his chest, flailing with the pencil, screaming. His hands came up instinctively to catch her, and she stabbed over them at his face. The tip of the pencil ripped deeply into Farquhar's cheek, dragging an ugly gash, and then snapped. He howled and flung her away. She landed heavily and rolled, the breath knocked from her body, her knees and forearms stinging from the gravel. Behind her, Farquhar was still howling, mixed with inarticulate curses. She crawled to her hands and knees. She looked at the broken stub in her hand and let go of it with an effort. Her fingers felt tight and strange. She wasn't moving quickly enough. She needed to be running. She looked back at Farquhar. One side of his face seemed

split in two: the lower half dark and wet, above it almost obscenely pale. He was silent. Farquhar had looked into the coach.

He reached into his coat and removed a black revolver. With his other hand he fished out a handkerchief, flapped it in the air to open it, and then pressed it against his face, wincing at the contact. When he spoke, his voice was run through with pain.

“God damn . . . God damn you to hell.”

“He attacked me,” Miss Temple said, hoarsely. They stared at each other.

She very carefully shifted her weight so she could straighten up, sitting on her heels. Her face was wet and she kept having to blink. She wiped her eyes. Farquhar didn't move. She stood, which took a bit of an effort. She was sore. She glanced down at herself. Her underthings were ripped apart and soaked with wide scarlet stripes, clinging and torn—she may as well have been naked. Farquhar kept staring at her.

“Are you going to shoot me?” she asked. “Or shall I kill you as well?”

She looked around her. Near her on the ground she saw a jagged stone, perhaps twice the size of her fist. She bent over and picked it up.

“Put that down!” Farquhar hissed, raising the pistol.

“Shoot me,” Miss Temple replied.

She threw the stone at his head. He squawked with surprise and fired the pistol. She felt a scorch along the side of her face. The stone sailed past Farquhar and slammed into the coach. This impact, occurring in nearly the same moment as the shot, caused the horses to leap forward. The open coach door smacked into the back of Farquhar's head and spun him off balance toward the advancing rear wheel. Before Miss Temple could quite understand what she was watching, the wheel clipped the man's legs, and with a shocked cry he toppled beneath. The wheel went over Farquhar's body with a hideous snapping sound and he rolled to an awkward stillness. The coach continued away, out of her sight and hearing.

Miss Temple fell onto her back. She stared up into the depthless black sky, growing cold. Her head swam. She could not tell what time had passed. She forced herself to move, to roll over. She vomited onto the ground.

After another set of trackless minutes, she was on her hands and knees. She was shivering, a mass of aches and dizziness. She touched the side of her head, and was surprised to realize she was no longer wearing the mask. It must have come off in the coach. Her fingers traced a raw line above her ear, scored by Farquhar's bullet. Her throat heaved again as she touched it. It was sticky. She smelled blood. She had never known so much blood at a time, to know that it had a smell at all. She could not now imagine ever forgetting it. She wiped her mouth and spat.

Farquhar remained in place on the ground. She crawled to him. His body was twisted and his mouth was blue. With great effort, Miss Temple pulled off his coat—it was long enough to cover her. She found the revolver and shoved it into one of the pockets. She began to walk down the road.

It was an hour before she reached the Orange Locks station. Twice she'd staggered from the road to avoid a coach on its way from the great house, crouching on her knees in a field as it passed. She had no idea who might be in them, and no desire to find out. The platform itself was empty, which gave her hope that the train was still running—as the occupants of the coaches she had seen were gone. Her first instinct was to hide while she waited, and she had curled herself into a shadowed corner behind the station. But she kept catching herself nodding into sleep. Terrified of missing the train if it should come, or of being discovered in so vulnerable a state by her enemies, she forced herself to wait on her feet, until she was weaving.

Another hour passed, and no other coaches had arrived. She heard the whistle of the train before she saw its light, and hurried to the edge of the platform, waving her arms. It was a different conductor who lowered the steps, openly staring as she climbed past him into the car. She lurched into the corridor and bent down for the money in her other shoe. She turned to the conductor—she had lost her ticket with her cloak and her dress—and stuffed a note worth twice the fare into his hand. He continued to stare. Without another word she made her way down toward the rear of the train.

The compartments were all empty, save for one. Miss Temple glanced into it and stopped, looking at a tall, unshaven man with greasy black

hair and round spectacles of dark glass, as if he were blind. His equally unkempt topcoat was red, as were his trousers and his gloves, which he held in one hand, a thin book in the other. On the seat beside him was an open razor, lying on a handkerchief. He looked up from his book. She nodded to him, and just perceptibly dipped her knee. He nodded in return. She knew that her face was bloody, that she was dressed in rags, and that yet somehow he understood that she was more—or other—than this appearance. Or was it that in this appearance she was revealing her true nature? He smiled faintly. She wondered if she had fallen asleep on her feet, and was actually dreaming. She nodded again and made her way to another compartment.

Miss Temple dozed with one hand on the revolver until the train reached Stopping, early in the morning, the sky still thick with shadow. She saw nothing more of the man in red, nor of anyone she recognized, and was forced to pay three times the usual fare to get a coach to the Boniface, and then to bang on the glass front of the hotel with the revolver to be let in. Once the staff was convinced who she was and allowed her to enter—faces white, eyes wide, jaws gaping—she refused to say another word and, clutching the coat around her body, went directly to her rooms. Inside was warm and still and dark. Miss Temple staggered past the closed doors of her sleeping maids and her sleeping aunt to her own chamber. With the last of her strength she dropped the coat behind her to the floor, tore away the bloody rags and crawled naked but for her green boots into the bed. She slept like a stone for sixteen hours.