

# GIRL IN A BLUE DRESS

A Novel Inspired by the Life and  
Marriage of Charles Dickens

*Gaynor Arnold*



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A NOVEL INSPIRED BY  
THE LIFE AND MARRIAGE OF  
CHARLES DICKENS



GAYNOR ARNOLD



CROWN PUBLISHERS  
NEW YORK

FOR MY MOTHER

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A GREAT STORYTELLER

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE MARRIAGE OF CHARLES DICKENS WAS THE INSPIRATION for this book, and I am indebted to the great writer's numerous biographers and critics, not just for the events of his crowded and fascinating life, but for many details from his letters, conversation, and behavior which have helped me form a picture of the man.

However, *Girl in a Blue Dress* is a work of fiction, and in creating my own story of Alfred and Dorothea Gibson, I have taken a novelist's liberties as I explored an imaginative path through their relationship. I have changed many things. I have rearranged their family structures, transposed names and relationships, created some new characters and dispensed with others. I have imagined scenes and dialogues that never existed, in places where the real participants never ventured. I have struck out in new directions where the biographical material is sparse, speculative, or open to doubt—or where I was simply following the threads of Dickens's own preoccupations with things strange, romantic, and melodramatic rather than realistic. At times, characters from his novels make a transmuted appearance as characters in his life.

In spite of these alterations, I have always attempted to keep true to the essential natures of the two main protagonists as I have come to understand them. Above all, in Dorothea Gibson I have tried to give voice to the largely voiceless Catherine Dickens, who once requested that her letters from her husband be preserved so that “the world may know he loved me once.”

**M**Y HUSBAND'S FUNERAL IS TODAY. AND I'M SITTING here alone in my upstairs room while half of London follows him to his grave.

I should be angry, I suppose. Kitty was angry enough for both of us, marching about the room in a demented fashion. *They couldn't stop you*, she kept saying. *They wouldn't dare turn you away—not his own widow.* And of course she was right; if I'd made a public appearance, they would have been forced to acknowledge me, to grit their teeth and make the best of it. But I really couldn't have borne to parade myself in front of them, to sit in a black dress in a black carriage listening to the sound of muffled hooves and the agonized weeping of thousands. And most of all, I couldn't have borne to see Alfred boxed up in that dreadful fashion. Even today, I cannot believe that he will never again make a comical face or laugh immoderately at some joke, or racket about in his old facetious way.

All morning I have waited, sitting at the piano in my brightest frock, playing "The Sailor Hornpipe" over and over again. The tears keep welling from my eyes every time I try to sing the words. But I carry on pounding the keys, and in the end my fingers ache almost as much as my heart.

At last, the doorbell rings, and in seconds Kitty is in the room. She has an immense black veil, a heavy train running for yards behind her, and jet beads glittering all over. "Oh, you should have been there, Mama!" she cries, almost knocking Gyp from my lap with the force of her embrace. "It's completely *insupportable* that you were not!"

I pat whatever part of her I can feel beneath the heavy folds of crepe and bombazine. I try to calm her, though now she is here—so strung up and full of grief, so pregnant with desire to tell me all—I am far from being calm myself. My heart jitters and jumps like a mad thing. I dread to hear what she has to say, but I know of old that she will not be stopped. She is near to stifling me, too; her arms are tight, her veil is across my mouth. "Please, Kitty," I gasp. "You will suffocate us both! Sit down and gather yourself a little."

But she does not sit down. On the contrary, she stands up, starts to wrench off her gloves. "Sit down, Mama? How can I *sit down* after all I have been through? Oh, he might almost have done it on purpose!"

"On purpose? Who? Your father?" I look at her with amazement. What can she mean? What can Alfred possibly have done now? What mayhem could he possibly have caused from beyond the grave? Yet at the same time, my heart quickens with dismay. Alfred always hated funerals, and would not be averse to undermining his own in some preposterous way.

"Oh, Mama!" She throws her mangled gloves on the table. "As if it's not enough that we've had to share every scrap of him with his Public for all these years, but no, they had to bring center stage even today, as if it were *their* father—or *their* husband—who had been taken from them!" She lifts her veil, revealing reddened eyes and cheeks puffed with weeping.

So it is only his Public she inveighs against; nothing more sinister. "Oh, Kitty," I say. "It's hard, I know, but you must allow his readers their hour of grief."

“Must I? Really, Mama, must I?” She takes out her handkerchief. It is silk with a black lace border and I cannot help thinking that she must have outspent her housekeeping with all this ostentation. She dabs at her eyes as violently as if she would poke them out. “You’d have expected, wouldn’t you, that after giving them every *ounce* of his blood every *day* of his existence, at least they’d let him have some peace and dignity at the end?”

“And didn’t they?” My blood runs cold; all kinds of grotesquerie fill my mind. “For Heaven’s sake, child, what did they do?”

“They were like lunatics, Mama.” She takes an angry turn around the curio table, nearly knocking it over.

“Lunatics?” Surely that cannot be the case. Even the most cynical of his critics would not have begrudged him a decent funeral. “Do you mean there was no respect?”

She pauses, shrugs reluctantly. “Well, I suppose there *was* at first. When I looked out of the drawing room window, I even thought how patient they’d all been: men, women, and children standing six foot deep, even though it had been raining for hours. Everyone still and silent, save for the sound of the carriage wheels, and the shufflings and sighings and doffing of hats. But the moment we turned away from the park, some desperate wretch ran out and started pulling at the heads of the horses, crying, ‘No! No! Don’t leave us!’ And then it was as if a dam had burst, and the crowd was a great surge of water, flowing everywhere. It was terrifying, Mama! The horses were rearing, feathers floating in the air. I thought we’d be turned over and trampled to death. Trampled by his very own Public at his very own funeral—how fitting that would have been!” She glares around the room, as if daring the furniture to disagree with her.

So that is all; simply some overexuberance of the crowd. But she is not used to it, of course; she never had to run the gauntlet of the riotous masses in America all those years ago when I’d had to cling to Alfred’s arm as he cleaved through them, smiling as if it were nothing in the world to be pulled about by strangers who thought you belonged to their body and soul. “Poor Kitty,” I say. “How dreadful for you! And yet your most fervent wish was that I had been there to witness it all.”

She looks a little chastened. “But it was your *right*, Mama,” she says, sniffing loudly. “You should have insisted. It is a matter of principle. You should not have allowed Sissy and the others to win again.”

As always, she sees life as a battle. But I am no longer interested in winning or losing, especially with my proud and pretty sister. It’s all too far in the past, and none of Kitty’s ridiculous raging will make one iota of difference now. I look at her sumptuous frock, her extravagant train, her acres of beading, and her very fine, long veil; only the mud around her hem spoils the theatrical effect. “But your clothes seem undamaged, Kitty. Surely the excitement of the Public cannot have been so *very* bad?”

“You think I exaggerate?” she exclaims, casting herself into the fireside chair. “Well, you can ask Michael. He was in the carriage with Alfie and me. If he’d not kept hold of the door handle, we’d have been pitched out on the road! And if I hadn’t clung to the curtains, I’d have cracked my head against the windows or been knocked to the floor! There was such a monstrous *surging* ahead of us that I would not have put it past them to have laid hands on

the coffin itself.” She wipes her nose defiantly. “He would really have belonged to his blessed Public then!”

I am distressed at her ordeal, but there is something in me that wants to laugh, too. I see Alfred in my mind’s eye, throwing back his head and roaring with mirth, but poor Kitty sees only the disrespect. “I’m sure they did not intend to frighten you, Kitty,” I say. “They were simply expressing their grief.”

“Grief? Well, it was a strange kind, then! It seemed more—oh, I don’t know—as if they were some kind of savages and he were some sort of *god*! In Piccadilly they actually pelted the carriages with flowers; at the corner of Pall Mall they chanted his name and pressed their hands to their hearts as if they were holy icons. Ladies fainted and had to be carried away by the dozen. Gentlemen lost hats and gloves—and even boots.” She shakes her head vehemently.

I smile to myself: urchins and pickpockets must have had a fine time.

“I don’t know how they had the gall—taking it upon themselves to wail and sob as if they were widows—when his real widow wasn’t even there!” She leans forward and sets about the fire, wielding the long poker as if she would stab the coals to death. She is all anger; but I can see that she has clearly relished the drama of the day. Why else is she so sumptuously decked out in all the finery of sorrow, the elaborate mourning she knows he hated so much?

“It doesn’t matter,” I say, taking the poker away from her. “The funeral was not for my benefit; it was for theirs. And you saw how much they loved him.”

She turns on me. “Only because they didn’t *know* him. So many times I wanted to push down the carriage window and shout out to them that he was a cruel, *cruel* man. Cruel to his wife, and cruel to his children! And yet you sit here so calm and docile! Aren’t you *angry* at the way he used you? Don’t you want to howl up to Heaven at the unfairness of it all?” She looks as though she will lift up her own head and howl, but instead she gets up and paces the path between the fireplace and the door, her train catching around the chair legs and the soles of her shoes as she turns and turns about.

I knew she would taunt me with complacency; it is her constant theme. Yet, God knows, I have been angry, and jealous, and sorry for myself. But such emotions only feed on themselves. It is not Alfred’s fault that things happened the way they did. “I will not speak ill of him,” I say. “And I trust *you* will not either. Especially today.”

“Well,” she says tartly, “I cannot promise that. After all, it’s such a relief to be free from him. I may find it impossible to hold myself back.”

“What do you mean—*free*?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean! Don’t say you don’t feel it, too—knowing we shan’t have to bow to his opinion on every blessed thing! Doesn’t it fill you with a wonderful sense of liberty?” She spreads her arms in a theatrical gesture, the beads along her bodice shivering in unison.

I cannot endure hearing her say those things, even though I know she doesn’t mean them. “What nonsense!” I say. “Your father was a wonderful man—one of the most wonderful men that ever lived—and you know it.”



“Oh, yes, I know it. We all know it. We couldn’t get away from *the One and Only, You Truly, the Great Original.*”

She may speak sneeringly, but I feel the tears starting to my eyes as I hear those famous sobriquets and see his laughing face come before me again. I must keep steady, though; the poor child has had a wretched time. She’s cold and muddy, and I need to see to her. I push the tea tray forward. “Have some tea to warm up, dearest. Have a little cake, too. Wilson went for it this morning; it’s very fresh.”

She hesitates; she is always tempted by food. She takes off her bonnet and veil, wipes her nose on the silk handkerchief, and pours herself some tea. Then she settles herself snugly on her favorite footstool by my chair. After a while, when the fire has warmed her, she speaks again. She is more composed now: “Every one of the shops closed early, you know. They had black curtains up too, in so many places. And the blinds drawn all along the route. Every man I saw had an armband.” She reaches to take a slice of cake.

“You see, he *was* a Great Man, Kitty. You should be proud of him.”

She doesn’t answer. But I know she is proud of him. Kitty was by far his favorite child. She munches away at the cake. “So, Mama, what will you do now?”

“Do? What do you mean?” I am horrified. I have always hated change, and this past week has brought me change enough. I cannot think that more would suit me.

“Well, I trust you won’t stay cooped up in this dingy set of rooms anymore. It hardly becomes the widow of such a *Great Man.*”

“And what do you suggest I do instead? Move in with you and Augustus?”

She stops eating, flushes red. “Well, of course you may. You are always welcome. But that’s not what I meant...”

No, it was unfair of me to say that. She thinks I am unaware of how Augustus treats her. Out all day and sometimes far into the night. She wouldn’t want me to witness his neglect first hand.

“I simply meant that you are more independent, now. You don’t have to think about whether His Greatness would approve of what you do. All this”—she flings her arms around like a veritable Indian goddess—“was what *he* wanted; what *he* thought fit. Every blessed chair, every cushion, every plate and cup and cake stand! Now you can do anything you choose. You could take a cottage in the country. Return to Chiswick, perhaps? The air would be better for you. And I could still come and visit.”

“I find the air quite well enough where I am, thank you, Kitty.” I glance around at the red plush curtains, the easy, old-fashioned chairs, the Turkish rug, the walnut piano; and I appreciate for the thousandth time how he had such a tremendous instinct for other people’s comfort. I falter, however, as I catch sight of my music on the piano. The page is open still to “The Sailors’ Hornpipe” and I feel his arm, so firm around my waist, as he propels me around my parents’ parlor at breakneck speed. “I think I shall never move from here,” I tell her. “I like it, and I’m used to it. And on the contrary, it makes me happy to know that he chose ‘every chair and cushion and cake stand’ himself.”

“He gave you all the old things he didn’t want anymore,” she retorts. “Why don’t you

admit the Truth for once?"

"The Truth?" I look her in the eye and sigh. "You mean, of course, that I should agree with you?"

"Not necessarily." She tosses her head and the slivers of jet at her ears do a macabre dance. "But now he's no longer here, you don't need to be loyal. You can admit it all now, surely."

"Admit what, Kitty dear?" We have been over this so many times.

"Oh, Mama! Admit that he never gave you anything but heartache. And children, of course," she adds sarcastically.

I won't have that. "If I have had heartache in my life—and God knows I have—your father was not to blame for it. He gave me everything I have valued. If blame there is, well, it is the fault of circumstance."

Kitty glares. "Circumstance? Oh, of course," she says, starting to pleat her handkerchief with angry movements of her fine, active fingers. "*The One and Only* cannot be wrong. *You Truly* remains forever above reproach."

She means to provoke me; but I know her of old, and will not be drawn. "You may prefer to think ill of him, Kitty, but he has always shown a proper regard for me: I have the comfortable lodgings in a nice part of town, with Mrs. Wilson to look after me—and Gyp too, to keep me company." Gyp barks as if he acknowledges the memory. He is old and fat as I am, but still affectionate. I laugh and tickle his nose.

Kitty won't have it. "He gives you a *wretched* apartment in a *wretched* area of town. With one servant, and no carriage—and a dog with a foul temper. A fine arrangement!" She springs up from the little stool, but she forgets the weight of the train she is wearing and staggers a little against the fireguard, making the fire irons crash into the grate.

I want to smile—but I have to hide it. Kitty can't abide being laughed at, any more than the cat. "Mrs. Wilson cooks and cleans for me," I say. "I need nothing more."

"But you never venture out. You're like a hermit. Or a ghost of the past, wandering around the room in the dark. Expecting him to 'turn up,' perhaps?" Kitty brushes the coal dust from her skirt and turns to pour more tea.

"I'm not at all like a hermit. I *see you*. I see O'Rourke."

"Michael? Oh, but he's so thin, and old, and unexciting! He was like a *skelington in a suit* today. You might have thought he was the corpse himself got out of the coffin!"

"Kitty! How can you say such a thing?" (But I can't help thinking that Kitty is, as always, wickedly apt.) "If it were not for Michael, I don't know what I would have done these ten years."

"Don't you? I cannot imagine what he's done for you, other than be two-faced about the whole affair!"

"Two-faced?" I am a little angry with her now. "Why do you persist in saying that? He has been my advocate with your father on every little matter: the rent, the bills, the laundry—"

She rolls her eyes.

"And he's always been most faithful with the books. He gets me every new edition straight

from the press.”

“Does he, though?” She looks at me dully, as if it is no great matter.

“Yes,” I say stoutly. “I think I’m the first person in London to lay eyes on them.” I cast a glance at the dark red line of Alfred’s novels in the bookcase across the room, some of them so battered that they are about to fall apart. “I still read a chapter every day, you know, Kitty. And when I finish each book, I start another. And when I finish them all, I start at the beginning again. When I read, I can hear your father talking to me exactly as if he were in the room; when he used to rush into the parlor, pen in hand: *What do you think of this, Dodo? Do you think this make you laugh?*”

“Or cry, more likely.” Kitty stands by the fireguard, punishing it with her boot.

“Indeed,” I say. “He was a master of every emotion. I knew that from the very first day we met.”

AS I SPEAK, I can see it. My bedroom, with its casement window opening upon the garden, the balmy weather, the fragrance of the lilacs drifting in, the growing dusk as I stand quietly folding sheets and pillowcases. I am completely and utterly content. Every day is tranquil, full of family affection. Every evening I can be sure Papa will come home at seven sharp, and I am equally sure my two little sisters will rush to greet him, pulling his hat and cane from his grasp, and making him sit in a chair while they chatter about their lessons, their games, and what they have seen on their walks.

In those days, on summer evenings, it was our habit to sit together in the garden before supper. And after supper, Papa would read to us in the drawing room, or we’d gather around the piano to sing before Alice and Sissy were sent up to bed. So I had no reason to think that particular May evening would be any different, or at least not different enough to give me a moment’s pause. I suppose I heard the usual click of the gate as my father passed through. I suppose I heard his footsteps coming up the garden path in the usual way. And if I heard some quicker, lighter footsteps alongside his—and I cannot swear I did not—it was of no significance to me. After all, my father often brought home unexpected guests who had to be smiled at and played to. If there *was* such a personage lurking below, I was in no particular hurry to make his acquaintance. So I carried on folding and stacking the linen, making sure the edges all came together neatly, that the corners were well turned.

And then something happened. I can hardly describe it, though I have tried again and again. It was the way the scent of the lilacs and the sound of a clear, cheerful laugh drifted through the window at exactly the same moment. I could hardly tell the sound from the scent; yet each entity seemed completely entrancing and divine. I stood in the middle of the room with the sheet in my hands as if all my senses were in suspension. Yet all the time I could hear my father talking quite normally outside, and I picked out the words “Alfred Gibson” and “supper.” And then the stranger laughed again and I realized that I was trembling—no, more than trembling: giddy. And faint. And hot and cold all at the same time. I was in a complete state of confusion, and yet that confusion was more delightful than anything I had ever known. I lost all sense of reserve and rushed to the window. I think if it had been required of me, I would have waded through oceans to see the owner of that wonderful

laugh. As it was, I could just see the top of my father's head as he called into the house. "Dodo," he said. "There is someone I want you to meet."

Even if I'd wanted to, I could *not* have answered him. I was transfixed by a vision: the figure of a young man standing perfectly still in the spilling lamplight below, dressed in a way I knew was not quite gentlemanly—a scarlet waistcoat, a sky blue coat, and slender trousers of a buff that was almost yellow. He had voluptuous long hair, far too wayward and rich for a man; and deep brown eyes, too wayward and rich for anyone. They shone like stars. His whole face seemed illuminated.

I'm sure I didn't make a sound, or even a movement; but he looked up suddenly as if he knew *exactly* where I was. And he smiled. And bowed. He walked backward to bow; he bowed in the middle of the lawn, an extravagant, theatrical bow—very quick, yet very low. I could not take my eyes off him. He was a complete wonder. He was standing in our garden at Chiswick. And he was coming to supper.

Of course, my father looked up too, calling out in his usual affectionate way: "Ah, there is my Swan! There is my Loveliest of Girls!"

And I called out desperately to stop him going further, lest the stranger would expect beauty and be disappointed. "I am coming," I said as loudly as I could manage. "I am coming!"

I truly cannot imagine how I contrived to get down the stairs, my legs were so tremulous. I must almost have slithered down, as running water finds its level. My skirt seemed to rise up and float around me and all the while I could feel my face burning ever brighter. When I reached the newel post at the foot of the stairs, I clung to it as if I would collapse without it. Our maid, Nancy, stopped at the dining-room door with the extra knives and forks in her hand and looked at me, her eyes round with surprise: "My! You look as if all the blood's gone to your head, Miss Dodo," she said. "I'd sit down for a spell if I was you. Get your nice complexion back."

So I settled my gown, pressed my hands against my cheeks, and waited for my gasping to subside before stepping into the drawing room. The long windows were open, and I could see the garden stretching back, clots of blossom white in the twilight, a hazy blur where the dark hedges met, a hint of high brick wall and the dim shape of the wicket gate. The scent of the lilacs was so rich, I could almost taste it.

My mother and father were sitting outside, but there was no other person with them. I thought for a moment that I must have conjured up some kind of vision, and that there was no such being in the world as the radiant Mr. Gibson with the bright clothes and the wonderful laugh. Then I saw him. He was lying in the middle of the lawn. He had his arms spread, his eyes closed. For a second I thought he might be ill, or even dead. My blood seemed to stop in my veins. But then Alice and Sissy tiptoed forward, fingers on lips, and I realized with relief that they were in the middle of a game. But Mr. Gibson's stillness was amazing; he showed no flicker of life; then, at the very last moment, when my sisters were emboldened to come close, his hands shot out as if they were pistons and entrapped their ankles. And at the same instant he opened his eyes wide and showed his teeth like an ogre. They screamed, and I screamed too, from relief and delight and the general wonder of it all—the young man lying there with such an air of abandon, his poet's hair spread out on the

lawn, his yellow trousers and sky blue coat given up to grass stains, his dignity compromised so thrillingly.

But as soon as he had caught them, he let them go, resuming his apparent slumber in an instant, and they came at him again, giggling and holding their breath. But this time he contrived to miss them entirely, rolling about the lawn with great energy and animation, and somehow managing to grasp at the hem of my gown as I stood looking on. "Aha!" he cried out, tugging the muslin so I had to move towards him, until I was standing right over him. Then, without warning, his other hand reached up and caught me firmly by the waist, pulling me so close that my bosom was almost touching that astonishing waistcoat of his. "What's this, what's this?" he cried out, his eyes still fast shut. "Not Miss Alice, I swear." He fumbled a little at my bodice. "Nor Miss Cecilia either. Good Heavens, something *Even More Delightful!*"

Then he opened his eyes and looked straight up at me. Such a bold and inviting look, yet so full of laughter! From that moment I was completely lost. Indeed, a minute more, and I would have been in his arms on the grass. But he was already jumping up, letting go my skirts and bowing: "Miss Millar, if I am not mistaken! Dear Miss Millar! Can I ever hope to be forgiven? Overexcitement, I'm afraid. A fault of mine when in the company of Your Persons. But if you knew my remorse, Miss Millar, you'd forgive me. I'm struck to the Very Art, indeed I am!"

I don't know how long I would have stayed looking at him—forever, I think. But Papa came towards us, laughing and rubbing his hands: "Dodo will indeed forgive you, my good sir. She is the kindest girl in the world—and the prettiest, although she doesn't like me to say so." I blushed and shook my head. Although I possessed the blue eyes and golden curls young men were supposed to admire, I'd always felt that I was too soft and sleepy looking to be appealing; I'd always wanted to be one of those dark, lively girls with darting eyes and vivacious manners. So I could feel my cheeks flaming afresh as Papa introduced us, saying that his new acquaintance was a writer of plays, and a young man of whom he had great hopes, and that he had been pleased to help him with a little "pecuniary advancement." "I am sure that it will lead to great things, great things," he said. "And the first great thing is that Mr. Gibson's play is to be performed in Stepney a mere week on Friday. He has invited us all to see it. And, more over, Mr. Gibson will be taking a leading part."

Mr. Gibson smiled at me. "I am very ugly," he said.

"Indeed you are not," I protested.

But I was too hasty. I blushed as he added, "In the part, Miss Millar. I am very ugly in the part. I have no end of hair and eye patches. It's capital stuff."

GYP INTERRUPTS MY REVERIE, jumping off my lap and waddling towards Kitty, who is staring deep into the fire. "Well, you say he was master of every emotion," she says. "But it was all for the Public, not us. Sometimes I think the most wretched pauper on the street knew him better than I did."

"How can you say that? You were always his favorite, Kitty—always at the center of his heart."

“So everyone says!” She frowns ferociously. “But what good did that do me? Even the very last day, I had to wait my turn. And then he actually”—she rests her forehead on her hand as she leans against the mantelpiece—“Oh, I hate him for it, Mama!”

She is always saying how she hates him. The poor child confuses hatred with anger and pain. And with love, too, of course. She wants so much to talk about her father but she has no one to confide in. Except me. Yet whatever I say seems to anger her more.

“How can he have done it?” she cries. “He knew I was waiting. He was expecting me, after all. He had clocks; he had that wretched pocket watch of his—and you know how he could guess the time almost to the second. He needed only to open one door—*one door*—and say a kind word to me. He could have explained that he was busy. He could have given me a kiss and asked me to wait an hour or so, as any reasonable person would. But he wouldn’t—or at least he didn’t. So Mrs. Brooks was obliged to sit and make me endless cups of tea, and I had to listen to her going on about the price of sugar and bootblacking, while she knitted potholders by the yard. Sissy and Lou didn’t show a fin. They were apparently Not At Home, but I could hear them opening and closing doors, whispering and laughing. It made my blood boil.”

I feel for her. I, too, remember that house with its background of stifled sounds, that sense of being unwelcome and faintly ridiculous. “They treated you shabbily,” I say. “But don’t blame your father for that. You know how it was when he was writing.”

“Yes, that’s what I mean, Mama. That’s exactly what I mean. Everything revolved around *him*. He never considered the rest of us.” She is up and walking about again; she has her continual nervous energy. “And don’t try to excuse him. Don’t tell me how *good* he was. Don’t tell me that he paid for my clothes and piano lessons and singing lessons—because I know it. I was his child after all; he was obliged to. And don’t for Heaven’s sake say he *wrote* for my benefit because we all know he wrote to please himself. And his blessed Public, of course.”

She circles the room, then sits down, staring gloomily at the carpet. “You know, don’t you, that I almost went away without seeing him? I’d got up to go at least three times, but Mrs. Brooks kept saying, ‘Wait until five o’clock, my dear!’ so I stayed. But when five o’clock came, and no sign of him, I was so cross I put on my bonnet and shawl. Mrs. Brooks had gone and I was buttoning my gloves to go, too. Then—” She stops. She chokes, her voice full of tears. I want to put out my hand and take hers; I want to share that moment with her; I want us to grieve together as a mother and daughter should. But Kitty won’t look at me. She doesn’t want my compassion.

She struggles on: “They say he couldn’t have spoken, let alone called out—but I heard him. Mama, I swear I did. ‘Kitty!’ he said. ‘Kittiwake, come quick!’ He sounded so desperate, and though he needed me so much—yet I still knocked on the door for fear of interrupting him. She gives a dry laugh that doesn’t cover the sob beneath. “And then, even when I was in, I thought I’d made a mistake. He was in his usual place facing the window, his back to me. Everything was as it always was. Then I saw that he was not sitting quite as straight as usual and that his arm hung down a little awkwardly. And then I saw that his pen was rolling on the floor.” Her voice breaks. “Even then I hoped he might be having one of his *little jokes* and in an instant he’d be up, laughing and making me feel a fool. But once I saw his eyes, I knew it wasn’t a joke. He was staring ahead, seeing nothing; but breathing in a rasping kind of way.”

I didn't know what to do, Mama! I shook him, I think. 'Papa,' I said, 'it's Kitty. I've come to you.'" She swallows hard. "I tried to lift him—but he was as heavy as wood. I could not manage to lift his arm, and hold his face against my shoulder. I whispered to him, some nonsense or other. Then there was that dreadful rattle in his throat. And I knew, Mama, *knew!* And then the rest of them came running in. There seemed to be hundreds of their laying hands on him, pushing, pulling, screaming, wrenching him away from me. I was dragged out of the room. Can you believe it—dragged out! I'll never forgive Sissy for that. Never!"

I close my eyes. I cannot bear to think of his last agony, to know that other hands closed his eyes, washed his body, dressed him for the grave. But I have always expected to be shown out, whereas Kitty has hoped otherwise. She turns on me as if I am to blame. She would rather I *were* to blame, I know. "How can he have done that! How can he have kept me waiting until it was too late! How can he have died almost in front of me? Three hours waited, Mama. *Three hours!*" Her voice becomes angrier. "Why did he have to slave away anyway? He was rich enough to keep us all in clover without putting pen to paper ever again. He could have done exactly as he pleased—and taken tea with me every afternoon for a month! But he still set himself those ridiculous deadlines as if he were the most junior of struggling hacks! As if he were paid by the word. As if his life depended on it."

"Because it had, once, my dear. You know that. And as with many habits formed when we are very young, he couldn't rid himself of it. You know, even when we were first married and enjoying a modest success, I'd often find him late at night, fretting over the accounts. *Prepare for the workhouse, Dodo. I cannot make ends meet.*"

"Well, since none of us was ever obliged to don pauper uniform and drink gruel out of metal mugs, he must have realized that that particular danger was past." She wipes her eyes defiantly.

"No, he always feared that one day his ideas might desert him and his money would dissolve. It was always at the back of his mind—even *that* day, I daresay."

"It's ridiculous. Augustus says he could have bought up half London."

"Your husband knows nothing and understands less," I say sharply. "He doesn't have a notion of what your father suffered in his early days, how for years he would wake up night after night, convinced that we were all reduced to bare boards with the furniture gone. The wonder was, Kitty, that he could turn all those anxieties into such marvelous prose."

She jumps up again. "Oh, prose is all very well. You can control prose. And his prose children did what he wanted them to do. But he was never so passionate about his real children—or his wife, for that matter." She paces about the room, colliding with the furniture. "He treated you so *badly*, Mama! How can you forgive him?"

"Many a woman has been treated far worse."

"What kind of reasoning is that? He did what he *had to*, what the law of England demanded, what common decency dictated, and to placate his precious Public. Not an inch more!" She looks around pointedly. "And how could you have let him condemn you to such a *chicken coop* without a fight?"

Poor Kitty, she can only see how *she* would have felt in my place. She would have fought

harder than I did, no doubt. And been even more miserable as a result. "This place may be small, Kitty, but Papa is always here with me. As soon as I open his books, I can hear the cadences of his voice as clearly as when he used to read aloud to me in front of the fire—the villain Botterby, or the Amazing Madame Delgado. I can hear and see his characters as I used to hear and see them. I can see him gesture, and grimace, and alter his voice. And I sit in the chair with tears of happiness running down my cheeks, although there is no one to wipe them *with his big bright Gentleman's Kerchief as what belonged to the Custard of Peru.*"

Kitty shakes her head. She thinks I am a case beyond redemption. And yet she was the most romantic of our children, the one who slipped her silken arms around his neck and willed her enchanted childhood to go on forever. But today, everything about her is sharp, hard, black, and glittery. She gets up and ties on her bonnet. "I'm going, Mama. It's late." She flashes her dark eyes at me. They are so like his.

If only she'd listen. She'd understand the meaning of love then. But I fear Augustus has spoiled her heart forever. "Come, Kitty," I say soothingly. "Come and sit down with me. Let us reminisce as we used, mother and daughter together."

She hesitates, unties her bonnet, then chooses the old chair in the corner, one she used to sit in as a child. "Very well," she says. "Start with that first evening. Remind me how my dear Mama fell in love with the One and Only."



“THAT FIRST NIGHT,” I TELL HER, “YOUR FATHER MADE me laugh so much, I felt quite lifted out of myself; as if I were floating some where near the ceiling. And he looked at me so intently that I thought he must care for me a little. After supper, he sang ‘O Mistress Mine’ while I played the piano, and then he danced a hornpipe—such clever steps—while Alice played. At the end, he caught me by the arm and held me close to his scarlet waistcoat, his arm tight around my waist as he jigged round the room. I felt the beating of his heart as we danced, and was sure he could feel mine. His shirt smelt of lavender, his hand was dry and warm. He whirled me to a standstill, while the room turned and turned around us—and I thought that if I died there and then, I would have no regrets. He kissed my hand when he left and said he would always remember that night. ‘You’re a capital dancer,’ he said. A man could dance with you forever, Miss Millar. A man could be under your spell and dance and dance to the Very Death!’”

Kitty says nothing.

“I didn’t know what to make of him, of course. The young men who usually came to dinner didn’t lie on the grass or prance around the furniture. They didn’t clasp me to their bosom or make declarations of love with their eyes. I went to bed that night in a fever. I even kissed the hand he had kissed, and imagined how it would be to be married to such a man. The next day a short note came to thank my mother for a ‘splendid evening’ and for the company of her ‘three lovely daughters.’ Sissy and Alice were delighted to be mentioned, but there was no special word for me. I was in torment, Kitty. Everything about my life seemed to have changed. I couldn’t believe that folding linen, sewing, and pressing flowers could be all there was to do. I couldn’t imagine that *Alfred Gibson* would spend his time sitting at home, quiet and content. I knew he’d be out lighting up rooms all over London, his arm around the waist of eligible young women who danced with divine skill and sang like divas: clever women, pretty women, women who knew the ways of the world and how to fascinate young men with dazzling waistcoats and dark eyes. I have to confess that I contrived a terrible hatred for them all. Up until then I’d believed my mama when she said that a sensible disposition was worth its weight in gold, but now I wished I were possessed of more fascinating arts. I longed for wit; I longed for a greater knowledge of the world; I longed to know what I should do to make Alfred Gibson love me.”

I look at Kitty. She still does not speak. But she does not interrupt either, so I go on.

“You can imagine my feelings when the time approached for our trip to Stepney: soaring hope on the one hand, enormous dread on the other. To tell the truth, I was so at odds with myself that I found fault with everyone, particularly with my papa, who took to teasing me about the very thing I wanted to know. When I asked him if Mr. Gibson was a good writer, he merely laughed and said, ‘Oh, he’s very comical. Light stuff, of course—well, you’ve seen him—but a way with words, yes, a way with words.’ I asked what he knew about his circumstances, but he was exasperatingly vague: ‘The same as any other young clerk, I suppose. That is to say, on the poor side of adequacy. Although he appears to have a good

tailor and an endless supply of fine waistcoats. But a legal clerk doesn't earn enough to hire a hall and bear all the expenses of a public performance, so I am his benefactor in this instance. However, I hope to recoup my outlay. I understand the house is sold out.'

"I must confess that my heart sank. A clerk! Like Timothy Smallwood who worked for my father and had frayed cuffs and darned mittens and no prospects. 'But you think he will go on?' I asked. 'That he could do great things in the future?'"

"Papa looked at me and said, 'Dorothea dear, I hope this young man has not turned your head. It would be most unwise to encourage him. Most unwise. His circumstances are unstable. He has a headlong nature.'"

Kitty breaks in: "Yes, yes, we know all about your father's misgivings. Go to the night of the play" She is impatient as always, but I indulge her.

"Well, as you know, your father was a triumph. We all rocked with laughter. But in the midst of our mirth he suddenly stopped dead and made us shiver with horror. Then he made us laugh again. The hall was hot and crowded and bright with the limelight—and some of the young clerks had been drinking—but he held them in the palm of his hand. Such silence—and then such roars! You would not have believed it."

"Oh, don't forget I saw him do it. He'd come home and boast about the number of ladies who had fainted at 'The Bells.' And he'd stand there and recite it for me all over again." She takes up his attitude: "*And the bells ring on, sparing no tenderness for little Dick Crawley as he lies upon the gravestone in the churchyard below. They do not know him, and he does not know them. He is insignificant and small; he is lost and alone. Alone, Ladies and Gentlemen! Alone in the greatest metropolis of this great country of ours. And though the bells ring out with all their might, Dick cannot hear them. He is beyond hearing. He is beyond sight. He is beyond pain. He is beyond all the tribulations of this earth. He is dead.* And he'd sob, Mama! There in the middle of the drawing room! How he felt for his own writing! How he felt for little Dick Crawley! More than for any of us!"

She's wet eyed, though, and I ache to comfort her. "Come here." I pat the stool beside me. "Come to your mother." I would go to her, but getting up from the chair is difficult for me now. And Gyp is fast asleep.

She turns away abruptly. "No. This is all foolish, Mama. It does us no good. I have wept enough today; I cannot squeeze a single drop more." She gets up. "Anyway, I am expected home."

"Are you?" I look at her directly.

She drops her eyes. "People may be calling."

"Not at this hour, surely."

"So many people spoke to me, Mama. So many strangers ..."

"Yes. I can imagine that. Your father's life touched everyone, people we didn't know and won't ever see. Many will want to pay their respects. But no one would intrude upon your privacy *today*."

"No, I suppose not." She is irresolute for once.

"You could stay the night." I am reluctant to ask her, for she has always refused in the past

but today, wrung out as she is, I feel she may not have it in her to resist. She hesitates, and knowing once her mind is made up there is no going back, I add quickly: "We can be cozy together, just as in the old days. You can send a note to Augustus. Wilson will see it's sent."

She nods, and for a moment she is my eager little girl again. She heads for the writing desk in the corner. It's the one he bought for a shilling from a pawnshop in Camden Town, the first piece of furniture we ever had. He stood it next to the window in our parlor at Mrs. Quinn's. The pens ranged neatly along the top, paper set ready. He'd sit at it for hours, by turns writing and looking out of the window. His unruly hair would fall forward, and time after time he'd push it back as he raised himself from his seat to spy out what was happening below. Then finally he'd jump up and throw his pen down and say we'd both needed a breath of air. *Com on, Dodo, get your shawl. Let's have a lark!* And he'd find it for me before I could call to mind where I had left it, and he'd be bundling me up in it and pushing me ahead of him down the narrow stairs before I could protest that the dinner would be spoiled. And now Kitty sits at the same desk, her black skirts awkwardly crammed into its slim knee-hole. Her attitude is so like his, head held slightly to one side, fingers holding the pen quite high up so that the ink does not stain her fingers. But Kitty lets her pen rest. "I think Augustus may not be at home. I believe he intended to dine at his club."

Poor child. She can see the empty rooms, the unlit fires, the careless servants. I cannot help it: I must speak. "Kitty dear, what can be so important that it takes him away from you now? Today of all days? He should be with you. It is his duty."

I regret the word "duty"—and indeed she is on me in a flash: "Mama, it is not his character to be *dutiful*. I did not marry him for *duty*. Augustus and I allow each other to follow our own inclinations and don't impose upon each other, thank the Lord." She glares at me. "I've had enough of being under the thumb." She puts down the pen, crumples the notepaper in her hand, and throws it into the fire: "I need not write. Augustus will do as he pleases."

"That much is evident. And he does nothing to please *you*."

"And you can see that, can you? From the wretched apartment where you meet no one? Where you have hidden from the world for ten years? How dare you make judgments?" She almost overturns the desk as she rises to her feet, her face red.

"I try not to judge. But I see that you are lonely, Kitty, and it breaks my heart. I always had such hopes for you. And so did he."

"Oh, no. He had no hopes. Except for me to stay in thrall to him. That's why he never wanted me to marry."

"You're wrong, Kitty. He knew you were young and headstrong. He was merely trying to protect you from adventurers."

"Well, he should know all about that. After all, what was he when he met you? A nobody. No money, no prospects, no family to speak of. He was an adventurer if ever there was one. And you ignored your father in order to marry him, as I did Augustus!"

It's true, of course. I can hardly condemn her behavior when mine was much the same. Once I'd seen Alfred that fateful night, I was determined to have him. I had never before been so determined about anything. So before our foray into Stepney I did everything to make myself desirable. I knew nothing of the world, but I knew that every young gentleman

I had ever met had remarked on the beauty of my eyes and complexion. But I'd also noticed that after this initial salutation, they had allowed their eyes to stray to my bosom, which seemed to be a source of great fascination. So I took out my needle and altered my best blue gown so that the bodice dipped a little lower; and when the evening of the outing came, I got Nancy to lace it as tight as she could. When she had finished, it was difficult to breathe, but the effect in the glass was gratifying. Finally, she pinned up my hair with an ostrich feather and I put on my pearl necklace to offset the whole effect.

I was, admittedly, too grand for Stepney, and when we went backstage after the play everyone stared at my finery. Alfred was still in his stage costume, although he had removed his wig and false beard. "Ah, Miss Millar!" he said, as we squeezed through the low door into a small room with a quantity of candles burning on every surface. "Take care you do not set your fine blue gown alight—or I should be obliged to douse you with water and roll you on the ground till you were quite put out!"

Alice and Sissy giggled. My parents looked rather taken aback. But he did not seem to notice, and continued in his extravagant way: "Well, dear sir and Benefactor, what did you think? A little rough-and-ready for such sophisticated theater-goers as yourselves, I daresay?"

"Not at all. It was excellent. Excellent. Very droll and so forth." My father had regained his composure, was smiling around as if the play, the dressing room, the candles, and Mr. Gibson himself, were all his own work.

"We all laughed so much." Alice was shy of him now, half-hiding behind Mama's gown.

"I was frightened when the young man turned into Captain Murderer." Sissy, more forward as always, approached the rough table at which he sat, and started to finger the paints and powders that were so enticingly laid out in front of him. Suddenly he caught her hand in his and his face contorted: "Don't touch the pretty paints, my child—or *I'll eat your heart and lungs alive!*"

Sissy jumped back. Then he laughed, his face unfolding into its usual cheery look. "Like that, you mean?"

Sissy turned bright scarlet. Tears started from her eyes. I took her by the hand and said sternly, "You have frightened her, Mr. Gibson. She doesn't understand that you were acting a part. She is only a child."

He looked at me in his observant way. I felt suddenly embarrassed by my blue silk, my pearls, my low-cut bodice, as if my intention were all too clear to him. He inclined his head. "Indeed. You are right." He turned to Sissy. "Miss Cecilia, I apologize. And as a recompense would you care to see what I have here—" He lifted his hand to his ear and suddenly there appeared a bonbon wrapped in pretty paper. Sissy's eyes shone with desire, but she would not take it from him. He laid it on the table. "And what have we here?" A second bonbon appeared from his other ear. He laid it next to the first. "They are yours, little ladies. But you must claim them for yourselves. If we see things we like, we must claim them, mustn't we, Miss Millar?" His direct look again. I felt my face more aflame than all the candles.

But he had already turned from me and in an instant was deep in conversation with Papa about receipts and costs and all manner of business things. Alice and Sissy snatched the bonbons as quickly as if they were treasure from a sleeping dragon, and hid themselves

behind the swirl of my skirts. Mama, fanning herself with the playbill, said the low-ceilinged room was too hot and airless for her, and she would wait for us in the carriage. “Good evening, Mr. Gibson,” she said. “It has all been very novel. Very novel indeed. But the children are far too excited. They are not used to such outings. I’m afraid if I do not take them away now, they will never sleep.”

She ushered them back through the door. I did not follow. I was afraid that if I did, my acquaintance with Mr. Gibson might end abruptly here in this cramped room with its roaring candles, cracked looking glass, and strange greasy smell. Papa could not be relied on to promote our connection; I had to be bold for myself. I let my shawl slip a little lower over my shoulders, and put my head on one side. “Have you written *other* plays, Mr. Gibson?”

“I am halfway through another, Miss Millar. It’s steaming along nicely.” He applied a handful of white grease to his face with a flourish, leaving only his dark eyes visible. Then he wiped his face with a cloth, swiftly taking away the black lines that had aged him so convincingly.

“And is it another comedy?”

“Tragicomedy, Miss Millar. I like the scope for rhetoric.” He opened his eyes wide, and laughed his loud, cheerful laugh.

“And will we be able to come and see that, too?”

“By all means. That is to say, if it is ever put on in public. I rely on your good father, my excellent Benefactor, in that respect.”

“And will you enable Mr. Gibson to put it on, Papa?”

He rubbed his hands. “Well, indeed. We’ll see, we’ll see. One step at a time!”

“Oh, Papa, you must!” I grasped his hand and gave him my most earnest look.

Papa laughed. “You have an excellent advocate here, Mr. Gibson. I cannot resist her.”

“Indeed, who could? An angel in blue, with eyes to match. Miss Millar, I am in your power.” And he sank to one knee.

But the reality was that I was in his. And, sadly, he did not seem serious. But I pressed my advantage. “Then will you call again at our house for supper? This day week, perhaps?” I could sense Papa’s disapproval at my forwardness, but I felt reckless.

Alfred laughed. “I should be delighted. Although you must promise not to exhaust a poor clerk with your wild dancing—”

“With *my* dancing, Mr. Gibson?”

“Indeed. Do you not remember? The Scottish reels, the polka, the hornpipe? You would not let a man rest!”

“I remember the wildness seemed to come *from you*, sir.”

“Not at all! You were ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’! Wasn’t she, Mr. Millar?”

Papa frowned. “She was my usual lovely Dodo. The kindest, sweetest girl in the world. And not to be trifled with. Now, Dodo, we must be on our way.” He took me by the arm. “Mr. Gibson, I give you good night.”

“WELL?” KITTY SAYS. “You do not answer my question. Was Papa not an adventurer?”

“Not at all,” I say. “He was merely poor. And *my* father was simply trying to protect me, knowing I’d had a soft upbringing and hardly knew how to manage my ribbon allowance, let alone feed a whole family. But all fathers suspect their daughters’ lovers, I imagine. Including yours.” I turn and smile at her.

“Oh, Mama, I am sure you are right. Augustus has many good qualities, believe me.” She comes and plants a kiss on my cheek. Gyp wakes and shakes himself. I ease him down upon the rug and suddenly Kitty is taking his place, depositing herself and her heavy complement of petticoats upon my lap, clasping her arms around my neck, laying her cheek next to mine. I have so longed to be close to her, I hardly dare to move. We sit, silent, watching the coal flame and fall until it is quite dark outside and Wilson comes in to light the lamps. She starts when she sees us thus entwined.

“Sorry, madam. I didn’t realize Mrs. Norris was still here. Beg pardon, miss.” She stands, a little flustered—two grown women embracing on a chair.

“That’s all right.” Kitty gets up, smooths down her skirts. “I’ve decided to stay the night.”

“Yes, miss—madam. And will you be wanting supper?”

“What culinary delights can you tempt me with?”

“I don’t know about *curinaly*. But there’s cold mutton and potatoes. And I’ve done some soup.”

Kitty pulls a face. “I suppose that will do. Have you any wine, Mama?”

That’s Augustus’s influence. But I don’t generally keep wine. Apart from the tonic variety Dr. Phelps prescribed after Ada was born. “No,” I say. “You’ll have to make do with water.”

“There’s a flagon of stout in the kitchen, miss, if you’re so inclined.” Wilson’s lighting the lamps, and at last it feels as though the long day’s almost over.

“Very well, I’ll have some of that.” Kitty turns to me, suddenly alert. “They had hot punch at the house, to warm us up. It was not a patch on Papa’s, though.” She looks around in a distracted way. “It’s a pity we can’t make some now.”

I feel cheered at the thought. “Maybe we could. It’s not difficult. Oranges, lemon, brandy ...”

“But you have no brandy, Mama.”

“No.”

“And no oranges neither,” adds Wilson, on her way out. “I’d have got some if I’d a known we was having special treats.” She shuts the door, pointedly.

Kitty laughs, rolls her eyes, and mimics Wilson’s voice and manner: “*If I’d a known we was having special treats, I’d a gorn and laid down and died.*”

I put my fingers on my lips. Wilson is a good creature and I don’t want her offended. But Kitty is so sharp in her observations I cannot help but laugh. “You could have written characters, you know. You have his talent for it.”

“Could I? He never thought so. He never encouraged me.”

“That’s not true. He was always proud of what you wrote. He’d bring things for me to look

at. He'd say, *That child's a marvel! An Infant Phenomenon!*"

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"Babyish stories and poems! Silly little plays. Nothing as I grew older."

"And *were* there things you wrote as you grew older?"

She colors. "No." She was too busy rebelling to spend time with her pen. "But he stopped me doing everything I wanted to. I could have been an actress. But he said the theater wasn't a life for a lady. While all the time he was—"

"Let's have supper," I say, pushing myself up from the chair. "And go to bed early. We are both tired out."

KITTY MAKES a good supper and downs the glass of stout that Wilson brings her. Then she asks me to play for her, and I do—although she is the better pianist. All those lessons, that endless practicing! She stands behind me now, her hands on my shoulders, and we sing the old favorites, all the choruses from Christmases past when we were all together. When we retire she is so exhausted she can hardly undress herself. I help her off with her clothes as if she were a child—although when she was a child it was somewhat simpler. Now she has such layers and accoutrements, such panels and streamers!

"Don't you think you've overreached yourself with all this ... extravagance? Your skirt has enough petticoats to stand up on its own."

The skirt indeed *does* stand up unaided, as if there were a third person in the room standing guard near the grate. I lay the veil and the bonnet on my ottoman and try to collapse the skirt so it can dry before Wilson takes a brush to it tomorrow. There's mud up to six inches all around the hem; the funeral carriages must have churned it up. I finger the dead, dull crepe. It's ugly, and it's made Kitty ugly—a thing he'd never have wanted. *Black extinguishes the spirit*, he'd say. *It makes women into walking mausoleums.*

Kitty doesn't counter my remark; she's almost asleep on her feet. I struggle with the hooks of her corset, and as my fingers touch her spine I realize how thin she is. Even as a girl, I was never thin. *A buxom beauty*, he called me when we were first married. He said my body was the softest in the world. But now there is far too much of it. Kitty, by contrast, looks half-starved.

She falls into bed as if insensible. I remove my own clothing slowly, but without help. I keep my laces loose, so the matter is accomplished easily enough. I find myself eager for the sheets, for the presence of another human being. For the first time in ten years my bedfellow will be someone other than Gyp. I am aware of a need I have not admitted to myself that almost overwhelms me as Kitty turns and snuggles deep into my bosom. She says, "Mama, you are so vast, I shall get lost in you," and goes to sleep in an instant. But even in sleep she stays tense, brittle. From time to time she twitches and gives a moan, just like her father. Who had also said he wished to lose himself in me.

THE DOORBELL RINGS AT NINE O'CLOCK. No one respectable calls this early. I am dressed and having my breakfast, but Kitty is still asleep. I hear a voice on the stair; it is Augustus.

"Hallo, Ma. Kit here?" he says in his unceremonious way as he pushes through the door with his hat in hand. He is still in evening clothes, but looks rabbity and stained.

"Good morning, Augustus. Yes, of course she is. Where else does she have to go?"

"She hasn't been home all night."

"No. And neither have you. I daresay it's only now that you are aware of her absence."

"I was away from home, yes. She knew that." He throws down his opera hat, picks a plum from the bowl on the table, and bites into it. "But it don't do to leave the servants in the dark. I was called for, you know."

"How inconvenient." I cannot believe that I once thought him handsome. In the morning light his long whiskers are sparse and gingery and he smells of tobacco smoke and whisky.

"It *was* actually, Ma. *Very* inconvenient."

"May I remind you that Kitty's father was buried yesterday? She needed human company last night. As did I."

He has the goodness to be taken aback. "Well, yes. Sorry. My condolences and all that. But you can't say you're a normal sort of widow-woman. Any more than she is a normal daughter. You both hated the Great Man when he was alive." He sits down opposite me at Kitty's place and starts to help himself to tea and toast.

"I certainly did *not*. And I think you'll find Kitty didn't either."

"Well, she made a good show of it. Anyway, I went to the Abbey, didn't I? Kept up appearances. Didn't let the home contingent have it all their own way. And what a fracas there was! All that shouting and sobbing. Enough to give a man a headache for weeks. And then they went and put O'Rourke and Alfie in the carriage with her, and stuffed me in with some strange ladies at the back. Mind you—"

"I don't want to hear."

"No." He laughs. "Anyway, she's wanted now. Lawyers and such."

"She's asleep."

"Then be so good as to get her up, Ma." He mimes the action, as if I am stupid and don't understand English. The reek of whisky is intense across the table. His eyes are bloodshot and unreliable.

"There's no hurry, Augustus. I don't believe he's left her anything. Except perhaps her books."

"There must be a fortune *somewhere*, Ma. All that beavering away as if his life depended on it. And she's his eldest."



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