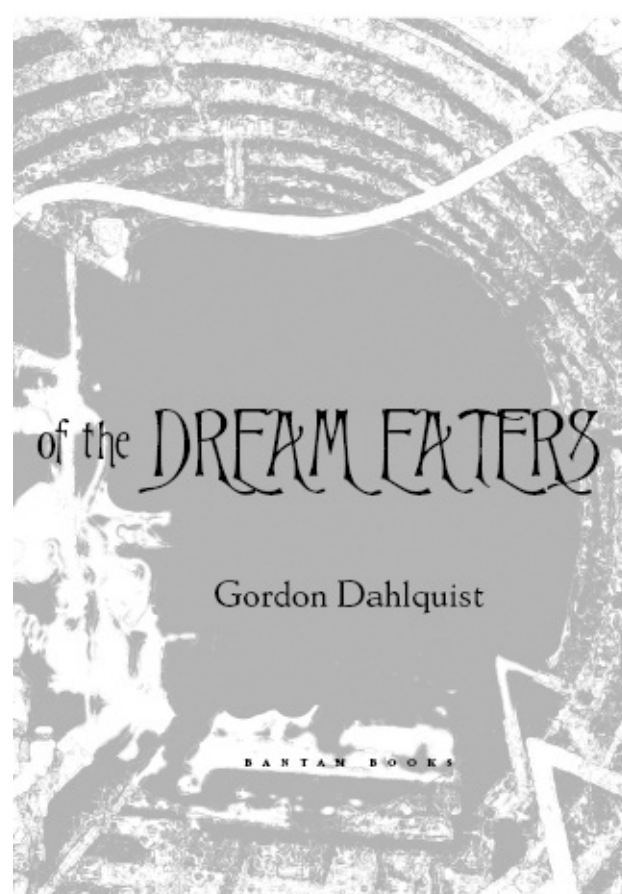




The Glass Books of the Dream Eaters

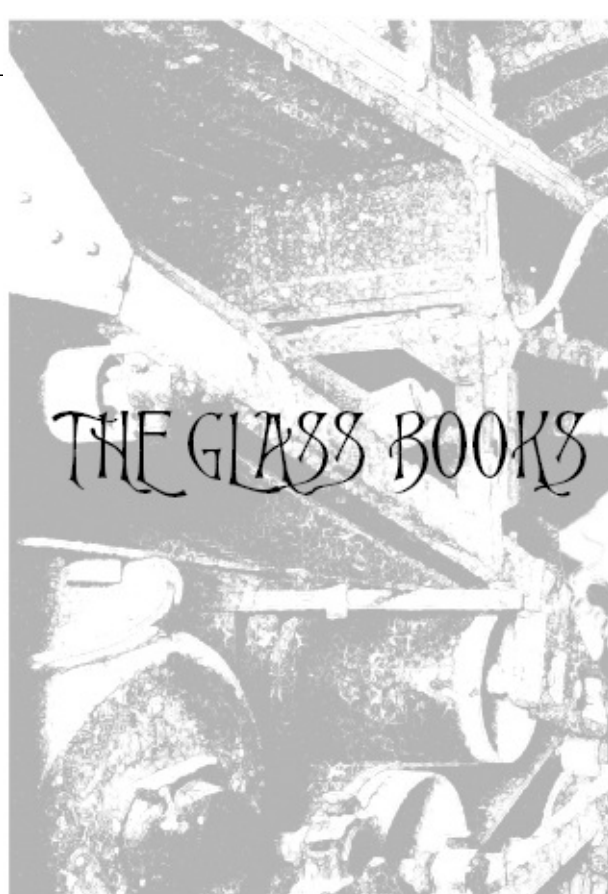
Gordon Dahlquist



of the **DREAM EATERS**

Gordon Dahlquist

BANTAN BOOKS



THE GLASS BOOKS

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Time spent in an imaginary city calls forth a startling array of generosity and patience. To these people, places, and events this book is indebted, and to each I offer my thanks, grateful for the opportunity to do so.

Liz Duffy Adams, Danny Baror, Karen Bornarth, Venetia Butterfield, CiNE, Shannon Dailey, the Dailey family, Bart DeLorenzo, Mindy Elliott, Evidence Room, *Exquisite Realms*, Laura Flanagan, Joseph Goodrich, Allen Hahn, Karen Hartman, David Levine, Beth Lincks, Todd London, the Low East Oval, Honor Molloy, Bill Massey, John McAdams, E. J. McCarthy, Patricia McLaughlin, *Messalina*, David Millman, Emily Morse, New Dramatists, Octocorp@30th & 9th [RIP], Suki O'Kane, Tim Paulson, Molly Powell, Jim and Jill Pratzon, Kate Wittenberg, Mark Worthington, Margaret Young.

My father, my sister, my cousin Michael.

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 the 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 gallant 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 entire 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 grey 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 classic 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, she 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 disappointedly waiting for 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 explanation 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 and 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. The 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 tight 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 kind 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, feathered 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—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 was it 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 for 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 as coarse and unlikely. Shipwreck, as an island girl, she could accept, as she could martyrdom by snake, 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 not 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 factors in her life 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 would 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 middle of the shops, she entered a store whose windows were thick with all shapes of luggage, hamper, 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 waxed 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 five 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 have once 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 himself 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 the coach 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 the bundle to Roger through the open coach door, and then in turn received Roger's black satchel and two thick 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-tunnel. She stared at it and realized that the shifting ground at its base, which she first took to be rain 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 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 open 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 from 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, from 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 him 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 an empty 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, bright 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, her 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, craning 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 as 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 vaguely 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 thick 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, 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 the woman 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 the 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—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 masks 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 was not 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 into 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 reinforced 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 greasy 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

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 time 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 had 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 clatter 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, 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 the left boasting a luxurious collar of black feathers. As they settled themselves in the coach, the one to the right opened her cloak and fanned herself, as if she were over-hot from exertion, revealing a dress of shimmering clinging blue 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 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 and 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, bolstered, she went on.

“One of those ladies who live among novels and flowered sachets—instead of life itself, and life in 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 the 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 silently 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 whingeing 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 other women, 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 them 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 seeming 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, unsparing 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 the others, 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 and 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 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 other coaches already stopped around them, passengers piling out (adjusting cloaks, putting on hats, tapping the 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 a 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 close 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 fixed 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 that 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 sports 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 shrugged 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 for luxurious parties? Did any hotel do such a thing? Obviously so—the mere question told her that—yes. 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 surprisingly 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 needles and 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 Bonifacio 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, petticoats, 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 rare 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 stared 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, it was a 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

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