

THE COTTAGE

It was by sheer fluke that I met Yvonne. Never had a hole, a few cubic centimetres of liberated air - and rain - played such a crucial part in a romance, for if her tyre had not been flat, she would have just got into her car and driven away from that supermarket I rarely visited, and I would have missed her by a quarter-of-an-hour, and probably for ever. Like the gentleman before me I saw stopping to stand over her - a blonde woman with dreamy eyes, around thirty, crouching down in a short dress with a jack, dirty smear on cheek - I was told - quite curtly - that she could fix it herself, *thank you very much*. I put my shopping in the boot and went to turn on the ignition, but I was too fascinated to leave. She drove a 2CV and its ugliness only served to make her look more graceful and attractive. I was so pleased my mother had left her umbrella in the car because when it started to rain I rushed out with it before any other male onlooker could get there. In the end she was persuaded to swap broolly for jack, having hurt her thumb. It was then that I noticed she was wearing no rings.

A week later, I was in town when another sudden downpour drove me into the nearest refuge – an art shop. My eyes were drawn to a beautiful impressionistic painting of a cottage in yellow stone. As I stood admiring the picture, my skin prickled as I sensed someone close to my left shoulder and I inhaled a fragrance which was familiar and which could have come from that garden painted in bold, vivid oils. I knew then it was her. I turned and looked again into those soft dreamy blue eyes, looked down that elegant, proud nose and admired her silky blonde hair trembling in the draught blowing from the door.

“What a lovely place to live,” she said quietly, almost to herself, as if she was alone.

“Have you been following me?”

“It must be in the Cotswolds.....yes and no.....I saw you dash out of the rain and followed you in. Any objections?”

“It reminds me of a village called Stanton.....that’s my mother’s umbrella, by the way...”

“Here. ...have it back.....Stanton..... I’ve heard of Stanton. My friend Carole was looking to buy a place near there..... I didn’t really have time to say a proper thank you for changing the wheel.....”

The rain was dancing on the pavement. We both looked with no confidence at the battered umbrella. The gallery had a coffee corner and one small table was still vacant. She noticed it too and we sat down. I tried to avoid staring at her – I didn’t want to make her feel uncomfortable – but it was difficult; she was the loveliest woman I had ever seen. *Had* she been following me? The way she spoke had the same peculiar – magical? – effect as the ugly contraption she drove; it was a gruff, dark-vowelled Leicester accent, dotted with dialect and dropped aitches, which she made no attempt to polish. Originating from near Oxford, I would pull her leg about it – provoking her to speak even more broadly. Over coffee, I kept wondering why she was still unattached at thirty and examined her for some flaw I had failed to spot. She did have a strange habit of gnawing at her lip and the inside of her mouth – even in public – while staring with those dreamy eyes at nothing, contorting her beautiful oval face into the oddest – almost ugly - expressions. Was that it? Was it done unconsciously or deliberately? She seemed the very opposite of vain – gloriously so.

My marriage hadn’t worked out, and she told me on our first proper date that she had just ended an abusive relationship - never tiring of telling her partner – a music teacher who couldn’t cope - what a useless, drunken wanker he had become. She asked me if I would have offered to fix the puncture if she’d been obese. I shook my head, said *No Way* and she laughed. Beauty, artlessness

and humour are rare in a woman and so on our third date I proposed.

We had not been long married when her friend Carole did move to the Cotswolds with her partner Dominic and opened a restaurant. It wobbled for a while but gradually steadied itself, and in those early days we went down on quite a few weekends to lend a hand and boost morale, resisting - often with wavering resolve - their invitation to go into partnership and expand the place, a small inn to the south of Cheltenham. We had family commitments in our home town and preferred, when we thought about it long enough, the security of our jobs; me at a very cosy and hermetically sealed County Hall, and Yvonne in a nice girls school, teaching English and helping with Special Needs.

On our first trip south, we took a wrong turn and found ourselves in a narrow lane which was threatening to disappear altogether, and just as we thought we had better squeeze into a field entrance and turn around, a GIVE WAY sign promised salvation. The road we turned right onto was only marginally more negotiable than the lane, and after a hundred yards or so we pulled into a lay-by to study the map. That was when we noticed the cottage to our right and both let out a simultaneous gasp of admiration. It might have been the one in the picture.

It was a sunny April day. Trees were in first leaf and the hedgerows lustrous with white blossom. We opened our doors and heard a symphony of birds, and went to take a closer look. The garden, swaying with daffodils, tulips and hyacinths, with splashes of red in camelias and mulberry bushes, was a series of terraces divided by stone steps which led to the front door of a building in warm, honey stone. A white-haired man had leant his hoe against the wall and was sitting down on a bench to smoke a pipe. A woman in a pinafore came out, put a mug into his hand and went back in. When he saw us he raised his hand in greeting. It was a tableau of perfect serenity and beauty and neither of us needed to make a comment. We took a mental picture - at least I did - and returned to the car. Within five minutes we were in a prosaic, workaday small town and not many miles after that we found our friends' inn.

That June, we did a detour and found the cottage again. This time the scene had been transformed; the spring flowers had retreated, and we saw roses, lupins and hollyhocks; the yellow stone was disappearing under red and pink ramblers. It might sound like an estate agent's blurb to describe it as a cottage for all seasons, one aspect giving way to another, designed to create continuous delight within and without - but I don't care - for so it was. Envy prickled me again and the gentle life there became my dream - not the tedium of paper-pushing, not the stress of catering - but just the being amidst the slow, imperceptible growth of stems and breaking of buds into glorious bloom. My dream would have to wait of course, but I resolved to make it come true one day, if not there, then somewhere similar.

I pretended to myself that the couple had either retired or managed to sustain themselves from whatever grew in the rich soil I imagined at the back. The cottage was more often in my thoughts than it should have been; I conjured up the no-nonsense flagstones of the kitchen with its range and stack of logs; a sturdy table made of local oak; the fragrant loaves the lady baked. In the lounge I laid a thick carpet and placed armchairs and a sofa in satin around a roaring log fire. There was a radio but no television; I saw the white-haired man in shirtsleeves with the paper on his knee, drifting off slowly into a contented snooze. A great heap of a cat snored on the rug at his feet. At night, the intense silence was broken only by owls hooting; bats from the spinney nearby flickered around the windows as the couple lay in their huge bed, without a single care to

trouble their slumbers.

The years began to pass. I sometimes toyed with the idea of doing something more humane than sit at a computer at County Hall crunching figures in the accountancy department, but the money was good. Besides, *humane* implied closer contact with people and I was not sure I liked that idea enough to take such a radical step. It began to annoy Yvonne that her job was becoming more demanding - much more demanding than mine and far less well paid. It annoyed me that she had to spend so many weekday evenings marking, preparing and recording progress. Progress, after twelve years, was something our marriage had stopped making and even a separation looked on the cards. Two things pulled us round; our eleven-year-old daughter and a good counsellor. She told us we had to find more to do in common at weekends and suggested bird watching. The delight we found in that together, and the laughter squabbling ducks on the canal and squabbling birds around feeders provoked, refreshed our marriage and rekindled our love for each other.

I awoke one morning and realised I was fifty-four. The one consolation was that my cottage dream, as I neared retirement, was coming closer to becoming possible. However, we went down less and less often to our friends and eventually hardly at all. One Christmas, Yvonne showed me the card we had received from Carole. She was leaving Dominic because of his moods and his drinking. Yvonne divulged to me that Carole had had other men and swore me to silence. But who would I tell? Certainly not Dominic. We were not that close. Anyway, he probably knew all that by then. And there was me thinking they had it made. Yvonne was surprised I hadn't noticed the tension in the air the last time but all I could remember vaguely was a row about monkfish which was over in seconds. To me it was nothing extraordinary - they had always been on the edge of a disaster in the kitchen, to which Yvonne responded with one of her shrugs which meant - this time - that men failed to notice these things. I wondered if the place would be sold and how much moral support Carole might be in need of. But no, Yvonne wanted to stay well out of it. A year passed. Our daughter left home to marry an Italian and settle near Florence. We didn't like him very much. County Hall were desperate to make redundancies and the deal was very tempting. I took it. The parents we had been there for were whittled down to one, and one day, after dreaming vividly of the cottage, I said to Yvonne that I was fed up of flat countryside and the plain town we lived in.

"You're fifty-five next year. You could take your pension early - reduced, I know - but we could manage easily."

She had been complaining more and more about the ingratitude of parents and the it's-all-about-me-culture which was taking over school life. There was one particular pupil who infuriated her by pretending to be polite when Yvonne and the rest of the group knew perfectly well it was all sarcasm - so cleverly done that Yvonne could not tell her off without looking unfair. So I thought it was the right time to bring up a move south again.

"Think about it. You're fed up at work. Your sister's around to keep an eye on your mum. We'd only be a couple of hours away."

"A couple of ours away where?"

"In the Cotswolds."

We had talked often of moving though not recently. But she still insisted, as adamantly as ever, on staying put. For her mum's sake; for the few at school who appreciated her. She didn't notice, but I could see the signs of stress around those lovely, dreamy eyes, and she would sit some

evenings staring at nothing for ages.

Then, one night, out of the blue, she said “Shall I tell you why you keep thinking about that damned cottage? Because you’ve never really been happy – deep down – with your life....and with *me*...”

Her words – and the vehemence with which she spoke them – made me go cold. This was a territory I had no wish to explore. I told her she was crazy. But it sounded lame.

“No. Listen. More than that. You’re unhappy with yourself. Something’s missing and you blame this town. You’ve underachieved – that’s why you write those unpublishable stories. Your life has been a damned waste – sitting on your arse clockwatching in that monstrosity of a building....A waste of a life....Well, mine wasn’t.....”

She faltered and, biting her lower lip, began to stare at the wall – and at the truth.

“Yes, Yvonne. My life has been a bloody waste. That’s why I want a proper one now. I won’t wait much longer. I can’t.”

The voice didn’t sound like mine and I didn’t mean it to sound like an ultimatum. Fortunately, the phone rang and the tension ebbed.

The silent stalemate might have continued for a long time, but when Yvonne was repeatedly kicked by an autistic child she was trying to help one morning not long after that conversation, one sticking point – *the sake of the children* - began, like an old tooth, to come loose.

Then Dominic called to say he had a new partner - commercial and sexual - so I persuaded Yvonne to accept his invitation to go down, and being nosy, she agreed. I deliberately took that old wrong turn and pulled in to admire the cottage. The old couple had gone, of course. Their rustic bench had doubtless long ago turned to ashes. It was May, and instead of glorious flowers there was grass and thistles and nettles. One of the windows was broken and boarded up. But there was no FOR SALE sign.

“What a terrible shame,” I muttered, and added whimsically “This explains my dream the other night - the cottage ghost was telling me to come and save it. Look, the rainy windows are weeping and saying they need somebody to love it again.”

Yvonne told me to stop talking rubbish and said she was hungry. Further along the road, on the edge of that town curiously called Pitherstock, was a pub which we had never, in all those years, visited. It turned out that the portly landlady could do us a sandwich and nothing more. We accepted. There was one customer - an ancient man in the bay window seat, feeding crisps to an ancient dog. The landlady was in a mood to chat and I asked her about the cottage. She tutted.

Did we mean Jinx Cottage? It brought its owners bad luck. Now, Yvonne is a rational materialist and could not help but take issue. How could glass, stone and tiles conspire to produce a jinx?

“I don’t believe in jinxes. Lots of people have bad luck. How can houses be blamed? Don’t suppose you’ve got any peanuts....”

Yvonne had once tried to convince me that one of her problems had been shyness - even into her early twenties - until years of dealing with bullies and imbeciles – she meant head teachers - had abraded her of it. I loved her outspokenness, but recently she had become quite abrupt - even with strangers. But the landlady took no offence, tore a packet of peanuts from a card and looked across at the old man.

“George here will tell you about the cottage better than me. Lived here nigh on ninety years, haven’t you George? Seen ’em all come and go.”

I asked how long it had been empty.

“T’ain’t empty,” he wheezed. “One of the Hobbis lads still lives there. Made a bad marriage and

came back home afore his parents died.”

The Hobbises, it turned out, had been the proud owners we had glimpsed twenty-three years before. The son, Clive, was *a bad lot*, an alcoholic, whom the landlady had banned for life. “Came in here drunk as a lord and wrecked the bar when I refused to serve him! The elder brother wants to sell but Clive won’t budge. The longer he stays, the worse it’ll get. Be worth next to nothing in the end.”

My accountant’s ears pricked up at this - but before I could enquire further about the elder brother and his whereabouts, Yvonne wanted to know more about the jinx. George was only too willing to oblige. It turned out that the original owner had murdered his wayward wife there in 1887 and been hanged for it. Some subsequent owners had seen ghosts and sold up. Others had had accidents there or developed terminal illnesses. The Hobbis couple were just the last in a line of tragedies. He had fallen off the roof and broken his neck.

“And barely two months later, old woman Hobbis was bringing Clive’s dinner to table when she just keeled over and died. Her artery’d ruptured. One second asking if he wanted sauce, next second dead as a doornail.”

George was enjoying telling the tale and seemed very satisfied with such a dramatic death.

“Clive said it was just awful...Peas and potatoes and gravy everywhere....”

The landlady smirked and shook her head, eyes closed, at George’s dark joke. He remained deadpan. He looked at me and said he could see a glint in my eyes and knew what it meant. But if I was thinking of buying the place, he added, every owner he’d known had had the same attitude as my wife.

“Soon changed their old tune though...best look elsewhere, young man.....another pint of best, Marion, if you would.....”

“And I suppose the ghost broke the window that’s boarded over,” said Yvonne suddenly, carefully picking up debris from around her plate. She said this without a hint of sarcasm.

George shook his head and told us that Clive had thrown something at his brother Kenneth in a temper and missed.

“Bad blood between them two. One day it’ll come to grief. Mark my words.”

“Oh George!” said Marion. “You’re such a Jeremiah!”

“Anyhows, Clive tells me how he sees the woman, though...frilly lace sleeves and collar....But he don’t bother about her...sits there in his armchair with his beer while she hovers, telling him to *look* where she’s pointing....or so he reckons...makes me hair stand on end when he starts...”

“You ain’t got no hair, George.” said Marion.

“Well, it would do, if I had.”

“But,” said Yvonne. “If he’s a boozer, he probably sees snakes and all sorts.”

“Well, we wouldn’t sleep there, would we Toby?” he concluded, patting his dog.

Before we left, while Yvonne was in the toilet, I asked Marion where I might find Kenneth Hobbis. I was in luck. He had offered to pay for the damage to her bar and she had saved his phone number.

While I felt a little daunted by those country tales, on Yvonne they had the opposite effect. They sparked off the defiant streak in her I loved. She began to lampoon the ridiculous credulity of the rustics. A man falls off a roof - was it the cottage’s fault that it had a roof? Was the roof to be blame for being near vertical? What about gravity? Was that supernatural?

“Still, I suppose if nothing ever happens, a roof accident is big news. When is this area ever mentioned on Midlands Today?? You want to live here? It would drive me mad. I know it’s a nice part of the world...to visit....”

“Well isn’t that enough? You talk to next to nobody back home. Why should it be any different or more difficult being a misanthrope down here?”

“I’m not leaving Mum, and that’s that. Once she’s gone, then I’ll think about it. Now leave it....” That stubborn stare again. I wondered what private resentments she might be nurturing behind those eyes.

Three weeks later Yvonne’s mother did leave us, curiously with an aneurism. That jinx, a voice whispered, might not be all bad, and my better self felt instantly appalled to live in the same head.

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I felt tempted on several occasions to phone Kenneth Hobbis and ask for first refusal, whenever the cottage became available. If Clive was such a boozier, it might be sooner rather than later. The death of Yvonne’s mother meant that we would be nearly three hundred thousand pounds richer and my dream seemed tangibly close. Yvonne went back to school in late August with what I thought was more determination than enthusiasm, and in the face of more unpleasantness it faltered and then failed. She gave in her notice and would leave at Christmas. More difficulty with a certain girl and her indignant parents caused her to lose her temper - and then take stress leave due to insomnia and depression. It was tacitly agreed that she should not return. September succeeded where July and August had failed. The mild, sunny weather was ideal for walking and Yvonne cheered up a little. Then good news came from Carole and Dominic. Their respective partners had left and they were reconciled. We went down to celebrate with them. He would keep his nose out of the kitchen and stick to wine - no spirits. We had a look at the cottage and it seemed even sadder. I decided then to do a little research on a certain historical event. I phoned the Cheltenham paper and was connected to a very helpful young woman reporter called Karen Edwardes who ran a feature called **From The Archive**. She had never heard of the jinxed cottage and promised to investigate. I mentioned George at The Fox Inn. I thought no more about it until a few weeks later a rolled-up newspaper was delivered. On an inside page, under a photograph of the cottage looking very sorry for itself, I read the following:

Did a ghastly murder over a hundred years ago seal the fate of this once idyllic cottage? When George Mason, architect, stonemason and builder, discovered that his young wife Susan, nineteen years old, had been unfaithful to him, he took an axe to her and removed her head with one blow. He showed no remorse and was hanged in Cheltenham a month later. The cottage passed to his younger brother Charles - who fled with his wife and small children after “Objects were raised up and thrown by a malign and insubstantial force.” In subsequent years, there were two suicides there, and an uncanny number of accidents. Other ghostly sightings were reported and at least two clerics performed exorcisms. Between the wars the “jinx” went into abeyance - until in 1942 a Mrs Perkins, a widow from London, was found at death’s door in the back garden with deep wounds to her head. An intruder was suspected but no-one was ever arrested.

The article went on to mention two more - quite unremarkable events - including the roof-top plunge of Sam Hobbis to his death. It concluded:

The solitary occupant of the cottage - a Mr Clive Hobbis, son of the deceased, refused to comment when I called, but a local man, long retired gardener Mr George Stubbs, told me that

he had no doubt that the place was haunted.

“Haunted by *Clive*,” said Yvonne as she threw down the newspaper I had passed her. I was reading another sheet which had been rolled up inside - a photocopy of quite dense and tiny print on which the reporter, Karen Edwardes, had used a highlighter pen. It was a report of court proceedings dated July 27th.

Mason told the Court that he had been so sorely provoked by his wife’s contemptuous aspersions as to his manhood that he had been driven into a blind rage, destructive of all rational thought. He swore that he had no recollection of attacking her, having swooned due to intoxication and a great passion. He had woken from his seizure to find her terrifically mutilated, and suspected an intruder had carried out the crime.

The jury had evidently taken this mitigation and plea little into account, returning after half an hour to pronounce him guilty. I passed this sheet of paper to Yvonne who read it and said “I wonder what she actually flung in his face? She wouldn’t say - George, I abhor and despise your manhood - would she? How explicit were people in those days? *George, you’ve got such a weedy prick, what did you expect?*”

“We’ll never know stuff like that, will we? Nobody dared to write it down.”

“No,” she replied “But those naughty words must have been bandied about. Otherwise, we wouldn’t have them. I bet they weren’t a lot different to us once they’d shut their front doors. And I wonder what pet words lovers used in the nest? *You may insert you wotsit in my you-know-what now, dearest...I’m ready...*”

I told her not to be so vulgar. I re-read the old article.

Poor Susan. If she’d married where her heart lay - George was nearly forty and she twenty - then she would have no doubt had a long, happy life.

“What untold tales there are in the graveyards,” I said more to myself than her. “Young wife’s coffin sits on top of her husband’s. He had his version of the marriage and she died knowing the true one.”

“Hold on,” protested Yvonne. “Wives are more probably *underneath* husbands. They died in childbirth! And besides, what about his floosies in town she never knew about - until her fanny started itching? They’re all liars in their coffins!”

I was about to say that it was good that our versions coincided but it was dangerous ground. Her eyes said the same. It was nearly six thirty. The silence was awful so I turned the regional news on, whose jolly presenters Yvonne couldn’t stand.

So, she was in the kitchen washing pots when the cottage suddenly appeared on the screen, fronted by a policeman and a tape forbidding entry. I turned up the volume and shouted her to come.

“According to his elder brother,” the reporter said “There was nothing of value on the premises, and the thieves would have left disappointed. Clive Hobbis had been killed for nothing. Police are appealing for information.”

“The brother did it!” declared Yvonne, eyes wide.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Oh, yes, of course, you’re right. It was the ghost. The Return of the Jinx.”

And at that very second, the reporter mentioned the sinister reputation of the cottage.

“There you are!” said Yvonne in triumph. “Clive’s brother would tell that rubbish to the BBC -

as a smokescreen...he has a damned good motive. I bet the police suspect him.”

I told her that the truth would be much more prosaic. The burglar had read in the paper about Clive being the sole occupant. An easy target. A mischievous gleam came into her eye. I had started the ball rolling, she said, by contacting the reporter. I was an innocent accessory to murder. Maybe, if it came out how keen I was to live there, I would even become a suspect!

“What a devious, suspicious mind you’ve got!” I retorted. “You should have been a crime writer. It’s a break-in - and that’s that. As for the brother, he’ll have a solid alibi, you bet.”

“If he had, I’d be even more suspicious. He might have paid somebody to do it - and used that somebody as his alibi - and vice-versa.”

“Give over! He was probably in the next county buying a pig. Would he murder his own brother for a house?”

Yvonne’s raised eyebrows supplied the answer.

I kept thinking about Kenneth Hobbis’s phone number I had saved. A strange reluctance prevented me from phoning- and not just respect for a proper time of mourning to elapse. I tried to analyse how I felt and each time fell into a turbulence of contradictions in which I recognised inertia, uncertainty and - yes - foreboding. Perhaps we were better to stay as we were, visiting, not inhabiting that tranquil world. Perhaps the cottage would be a bad investment, with deathwatch beetle, woodworm or dry rot lurking in its innards; and there, a shadow beyond these practical phantoms was the question - did I want to walk over flagstones which had carried the weight and blood of at least two murder victims, through spaces which had staged such shocking events? The other matter which deterred me - and I could hardly face it directly then - was Yvonne’s deteriorating mental health.....

Yet the more I hesitated, the more I feared that my golden dream might elude me. And then, one early October afternoon, Yvonne came back from the supermarket in angry tears. Girls she had not even taught, who had moved on to the Upper School, had subjected her to a tirade of vile abuse at the checkout. She had been humiliated twice - once by them and then by herself, having made the error of launching a counter-attack, much to the amusement of other shoppers.

“The ugly fat bastards just stood there - lapping it up, like they do their cheap cakes and Daily Star. I hate this fucking town! This has finished me. We *will* move!”

I made her a cup of chamomile tea and told her to calm down. She should, I said, ignore them if it happened again.

“No. I’ve had enough. They’re ungrateful little slags and so are their parents. We’ll go where nobody knows me. Put a bid in for the cottage - cash.”

This threw me into stammering confusion which further annoyed her. Why, she screamed, was I suddenly getting cold feet after years of going on about it? Had I suddenly started to believe in the jinx?? I managed to manufacture a weedy guffaw and told her of my practical concerns - plus my anxiety about how isolated we would be in ever more dangerous times.

“We’ll get surveys done,” she said, calming herself, “.....and if there’s a problem, we’ll lower the bid....It’d be a great project for us - to restore it to what it was. We could grow all our food...and buy a vicious guard dog.....and you could hire a vicar to do another exorcism if you’re frit...”

“Even without the ghost it would be hard work....”

“Oh come on. We’re in our fifties, not sixties. We’ll jump in the car tomorrow and ask Marion at The Fox - or that old fellow -”

“George -”

“- How to contact the brother.”

I showed her the number on my phone. It looked a little sinister - 401300 - the zeros looked like frightened eyes. I told her I'd got it from the landlady. She looked at me and said “It was a bloody awful experience. I never want to go there again.”

“To the Cotswolds?”

“No, you prune. To Asda. Phone him.”

The voice at the other end was gruff and impatient....a criminal voice? I quickly explained how I'd come by his number and said how sorry I was to hear of his brother, adding that I didn't wish to appear too forward or premature in contacting him. To this he said nothing, so I carried on.

“If you're selling the cottage, how much would you want, subject to survey?”

He said he had had it valued a while back.

“Three hundred.....and eighty thousand.”

I told him that it looked as if a lot of work needed doing - and that was a bit more than we were hoping to pay. He would have no agency fee and I could get an ex-colleague to do the paperwork - free of charge. When there came no reply I was afraid he'd cut me dead.

“There's a long garden to the rear *and* an outhouse,” he finally said. “Original bakery and brew house....Could be converted into a holiday let.....Lot o' potential. I'll take not a penny less than three seventy. There's no problem with probate....Clive had nobody - I'm his nearest and dearest.”

“Can we have a day or two to think it over?”

“Till Monday. Then I shall place it with an estate agent.”

He agreed to leave the keys with Marion at The Fox. The police had finished with their investigations.

We went on-line to read about signs of infestations, and with pictures we had printed off, we set off the next morning. It was with the weirdest feeling - of meeting up with our destiny - that we mounted those old stone steps to the front door. Old Mr Hobbs in shirtsleeves who had raised his meaty arm in greeting nearly a quarter of a century ago, seemed now - in my recollection of that scene - to be beckoning us in.

We found ourselves standing in the kitchen, on a large brown filthy carpet. In the centre were very dark stains.

“Oh God!” said Yvonne. “Fancy leaving that for us! Is it fitted?”

It was not, so we carried the table off into a corner, rolled the carpet up as quickly as possible and dumped it outside. Clive's blood had not soaked through to the flagstones. These were of light grey slate - the soft yellow sandstone was obviously not hard-wearing enough for generations of feet.

“They must be the originals,” I said. Perhaps onto one of these Susan's head had rolled and come to rest. Yvonne was staring down, doubtless having similar thoughts. Did severed heads contain enough oxygenated blood to permit a few seconds of thought - or even longer? Yvonne shuddered and a little groan escaped her lips.

“I wonder if -”

“Don't! Leave it!” she said. “The past is over and done with.”

She went to the sink and tried the old taps. They worked. In the cupboard we discovered an electrical unit to heat the water. She tore the yellow net curtains down and let more light in. The window frame was sound. She opened the window and breathed in fresh autumn air.

“That carpet was so foul,” she said. “Years of spilt gravy, fag ash and God knows what else.” The wide fireplace, boarded up, had a horrible gas fire in front of it. It would have to go. We would burn logs or buy a range. The electric cooker was ancient and filthy, as were the cupboard units. The whole room needed gutting.

The central passage led to a spacious lounge on the left and at the end to a staircase. In the bedrooms we rolled back the carpets and saw no tell-tale holes of infestation. In the loft there was hardly any junk and the timbers, in torchlight, seemed fine. A thorough survey would have to be done, of course, but the place seemed in much better condition than we had feared. We went to the main bedroom window and Yvonne shivered.

“I wonder if this one of the cold spots - the most haunted bit - where nothing George did could please her.....Oh God! How ugly!”

I followed her gaze into the garden and saw a calor gas tank. It would have to be screened off with trellises...sweet peas, clematis...and tomato vines. Then I truly appreciated the garden which stretched for about sixty yards. Instead of the present wilderness, I imagined rows of peas, potatoes, carrots and greens - and strawberries! - all thriving in dark soil - and at the very end wooden poles overwhelmed with red flowers, dark leaves and runner beans. In one corner we could build a chicken run....On the left, stood the outbuilding. It was a cottage in miniature with a chimney. I could almost smell the bread Yvonne might bake, and saw myself stirring the wort for my beer and hedgerow wines. Beyond the hedge there was pasture where sheep were grazing, then a spinney, and beyond that a river straddled by a bridge, more pasture and a wooded hillside, a patchwork of autumn shades

Over the next few weeks, formalities were completed and in early November we moved in.

*

The mild weather held and so we decided to tackle the front garden first. While Yvonne furiously scrubbed the slabs of the path clean of lichen and other discoloration, I pruned the overgrown ramblers and bush roses, and clipped the hedges. Within days, the terraces were clear and a huge pile of weeds which I had cut up for compost was settling down in one corner inside a wooden frame. Now, surely, the early flowers and perennials which had retreated to their secret bulbs and roots would return in triumph and glory the following year! I imagined spreading the dark compost around their stems in the spring. A succession of snowdrops, crocuses, daffodils, roses, lilies, gladioli and dahlias would force people to stop and admire them as we had once done. Although we had agreed that it would be best to renovate the rooms and gardens gradually, at our leisure whenever the mood took us, we worked in fact as if possessed, as if the New Year was our undeclared deadline. I hired a rotovator and within one day, beginning at first light and hardly stopping before the late afternoon twilight, I churned the back garden out of its weed-choked chaos into a dark, furrowed potential for new energy and productiveness, ready for winter frosts to kill and rot the roots and stems of the invaders, ready for new seeding and planting in March and April. I sent for a seed catalogue and over a glass of wine we sketched out a plan.

The window frames and doors were generally free of rot, so while the rain still held off I burnt away the old paint and primed them, restoring the fresh smile of the cottage. We stood in the lane to appreciate it and even George, out with his dog, had to admit it was good to see it restored. We bought a rustic bench kit and took pleasure in accusing each other of incompetence as we slowly screwed it together. At last, we sat down on it, and gazed out over the golden fields and

woods, feeling more content and closer than we had for ages. Yvonne's dreamy eyes stared less into space and she seemed to be putting behind her the disappointing last years of a career to which she had been originally called; I never gave mine a second's thought.

We hired a skip and threw out every last trace of Clive. We began to decorate - upstairs first - postponing the essential rooms below so that our determination should not waver. While we worked on the two bedrooms, contractors installed a new bathroom and kitchen. The walls there were replastered and, once dry, painted a cool blue. We opened up the fireplace built of beautiful stone and bought in a store of logs. Eventually there remained only the lounge to do - a room we had not used as it was so depressing. This had been Clive's den, and if there was a ghost, it was one he had created with the fug of his roll-ups and his general - shall I be polite and say, aura? We had debated whether to have a dividing wall put in to create a separate dining room but decided to leave it as was, with a dining area at the front end, leaving the rest of the space to relax in - and maybe to invite a few guests now and then. Next year, the back window would come out to be replaced by glass doors opening onto a new patio where we could barbecue and enjoy the sun in the afternoon and evening as it sank into the distant woods.

A house which appeared ancient outside had undergone a miraculous metamorphosis inside, a transition from impoverishment and neglect into modern chic. The notion of a fusty Victorian spirit haunting those freshly decorated walls and smart fittings seemed...well... ludicrous. Occasional visits to The Fox brought enquiries from Marion the landlady about our progress inside and congratulations on the frontage.

"We left the biggest job till last." I said one night. "The lounge. Been living in the kitchen."

"Have you seen Susan Mason, yet?" asked George from his corner.

It unnerved me a little that he knew her name even though she must have died over thirty years before he was born - until I remembered that it had been mentioned in the local paper. I asked him slyly if he had read the report, but he shook his head. He said he didn't need to read it. It had been such a terrible event that it had been talked about for years afterwards - and her headless ghost had been used to scare naughty village children into obedience.

Yvonne put down her glass and put her palms to the side of her head in a fair imitation of The Scream. "Yes, George. I seen her. Coming down the stairs with 'er 'ead tucked 'neath her arm." This made Marion giggle and me wince.

"You don't want to mock the Departed, Missus," said George, resting his hands and chin on his walking stick. "They say the poor woman can't rest. She has unfinished business. And Clive has now - because of that two-faced brother of his'n."

"Oh what rot you talk, George!" exclaimed Marion. "That's nothing but horrible rumour."

I sensed that Yvonne felt encouraged at that point to expound her theory on Clive's demise so I nudged her. Marion went on to be so adamant in her defence of Kenneth that an intervention would have been unwise. There was, she declared, not a nicer man around.

"Total opposite of that waster Clive -"

"Bad luck to speak ill of the dead, Marion -"

"Not speaking ill, George - only the truth!"

She looked straight at me and pointed.

"Clive used to sit at your table, and before they brought the smoking ban in he fell asleep one night and burnt a dirty great mark on it. Ken took it off to his workshop, stripped it down, stained it and polished it up better than new. Charged me nothing."

"So, he's a French polisher?" asked Yvonne.

“One of the best in the county. Can turn his hand to anything. He sounds a bit rough but he has a heart of pure gold.”

George looked at us, rolled his eyes and shook his head. While Marion was busy changing a barrel, he said “Two-faced bugger he is. Made poor old Clive’s life a misery. *She* don’t know the half of it. Clive were simple-minded. Brother should have helped him sort the cottage and gardens out after the old woman died, but he just wanted him out. Clive just gave up. He should come back and haunt him.”

Marion, struggling back up from the cellar, caught the back end of George’s statement and sighed at him.

“Well,” I said “If Clive - or Susan - are still around, then they must have moved into the lounge out of the way. Everywhere else has been gutted or replastered.”

George took a swig of his ale and drew his rough hand across his mouth, before fixing me with his watery eye.

“*She* ain’t gone nowhere then. It were in the sitting room Mason done her in.”

At this, in my mind, I skim-read the old report the reporter had sent me. I was certain the room had not been mentioned.

“Give it a rest George! You’re putting the wind up Richard, you are.” said Marion. “As white as a sheet he is, look.....”

Yvonne looked at me and said with a laugh that I really had gone pale.

“If you two had said there was only the kitchen left to do, George would have had her bumped off in there, the big tease!”

“Oh no, Marion!” he retorted. “I seen the stain on the stone floor. My friend Clifford showed it me under the rug when we were kids. He and his folks used to live there in the thirties. One day they was there, next they’d gone. Never saw him again....”

“Did they leave their dinner uneaten on the table?” asked Yvonne.

“Eh?”

“Never mind.”

It was already December and we were determined to get the living room done in time for New Year and a house-warming party. Having been Clive’s den, this room would be our biggest challenge. We had already decided on a crimson carpet and intended to emulsion the long walls white with a hint of something. Clive’s clapped-out furniture, including a filthy pink footstool, a torn leather armchair, a white glossed bookcase and limp rags of curtains had been dumped, leaving only the carpet as the last record of his lifestyle. Not only was it very old-fashioned with swirls of incongruous colours but there were stains which looked like booze and food.

Concentrated in an area where his chair had stood were burn-holes, conjuring up images of the drunken sot dropping his fags as he dozed off. I reckoned that only his retardant gunge building up over the years in the pile had saved him from incineration. Yvonne stared at the carpet and said it had probably been laid by the old couple. I imagined with a wry smile how furious and disappointed the burglar must have been with his pickings, so furious that he had taken it out on poor Clive’s head. Yvonne’s loathing gaze now turned to the wallpaper.

“I bet this was on the first time we drove past,” she muttered.

The room smelt bad. The odour built up overnight when we kept the door shut to stop it infiltrating the rest of the house. It was a cocktail of stale tobacco, food, booze and something else - something like hot rubber. No wonder the brother had despaired of ever coming into his inheritance. Few prospective buyers could have tolerated five minutes in a place impregnated

with Clive, even if he could have been persuaded to put it up for sale.

We decided to leave the carpet down so that we could roll up all the stripped wallpaper into it. We made a start but soon found, to our dismay, that the paper had been stuck onto previous layers. Our vision of smooth emulsioned walls looked doomed. Could they be plastered without stripping them all the way back, a huge time-consuming chore? Out of frustration, we had our first serious row for weeks. I, a corner-cutter, thought the surface could be scored over to provide a key for new plaster; Yvonne, a perfectionist, told me I was idle and that all the layers would have to come off. I told her she was nuts and began to cut a deep groove in the vile pattern - urns and garlands - with the corner of my scraper. Like Hardy to my Laurel, she responded by slapping more hot water onto the paper and attacking it in utter fury, making hardly an impression. I stood back in smug, I-told-you-so triumph.

“Are you just going to stand there or get stuck in?” she shouted.

“I can’t if I don’t agree with you! It’ll take for ever *your* way.”

“Any plasterer will tell you you have to have a proper surface. Why are you so impractical?”

“You’re a teacher. What do you know about plastering?”

“*Were* a teacher! But I evidently know a bit more than ...oh BUGGER!”

In her anger she had dug in the scraper too hard and gone straight through the wall! We stood back and looked in silent disbelief. How could there possibly be a hole? I rapped the wall with my knuckles. It was hollow - and then it dawned on me what had been done. Putting my fingers in, I pulled at the plasterboard, causing Yvonne to protest that I was making the hole bigger. I fetched a torch and shone it into the cavity. The false wall was mounted on battens which had been screwed onto the original stone. But the problem didn’t stop there. Through the hole the hot smell had intensified and I realised with a very heavy heart what it was. I tore a section away in the vicinity of a wall socket. Wires were protruding from the bottom of a vertical ducting straight into the socket, and they looked old and very soft. I ran into the kitchen and threw the switch in the fuse box.

“We could have gone up in smoke at any time,” I explained to an astonished Yvonne. I made a phone call and within the hour the contractor who had installed our kitchen was in the lounge shaking his head. In his view, the wiring was well over fifty years old and would have to be replaced. If we decided, as Yvonne had suggested, to rip out the false walls then channels would have to be cut into the original stone, but a mixture of the sandstone dust and a grout would make them undetectable. He had a free day later in the week and, in view of our good custom, quoted us a very fair price.

We spent the next few hours tearing down the plasterboard and unscrewing the battens. Having cleared the room we felt pleased to have revealed the original beautiful stone. The only eyesore remaining was that carpet. The gripper rods had been screwed down into rawlplugs and I thought they would mostly come up without too much of a fight. Yvonne studied the carpet again with disgust, said she had the horrors at it and would not touch it. So it was left to me to get down on my knees, detach it around the edges and roll it up. I was afraid what might be lurking beneath the underlay, but to my relief it was all clear. What had been a disaster in the morning had become by late afternoon a blessing. We had the original room again in all its golden glory. Even the gloomy clouds had dispersed and as we stood discussing what homely touches we could add (our furniture was in store) a shaft of light from the setting sun came in through the back window. Immediately Yvonne put her hands to her face and screamed.

The sunbeam had illuminated what looked a little like a woman’s profile on the central flagstone. I shivered. For a while we stood petrified until the light faded, taking the face with it. Yvonne

forced a laugh and declared it to be a discoloration of the stone. Remembering what George had said in *The Fox*, I made no comment. While Yvonne swept up I fetched a bowl of water and scrubbed at the patch. As the water dried I was relieved to see the "face" had almost completely gone.

We would have no electricity for four days. Before night fell, Yvonne rummaged out our stock of candles and I built a log fire in the kitchen. We went to *The Fox* to eat and perhaps had a glass of wine too many. As we tottered back along the lane under an array of stars and guiding moon we switched our torch off. I pointed out and named several constellations and she laughed, saying I was making them up, but as we rounded the final bend we stopped and stared. Had she really taken a nightlight up to our bedroom? We took a few more steps and the flicker in the window immediately went out. I assured her that it was a trick of the moon shining in the glass. She said nothing but as soon as we entered the kitchen she whispered *she's here*. Thinking she was trying to spook me, I laughed, but she insisted. "No, no. She is!" I told her to pack it in and shone the torch into the kitchen to locate the candles. The logs had turned to grey ash. I grabbed a candle, lit it, stuck it to a saucer and gave it to her. I followed her along the passage and watched her slowly climb the stairs as the light of the candle danced around her on the walls and ceiling. She turned to look at me in the torchlight, screwing up her eyes because she was blinded by it.

"Aren't you coming up? I'm spooked. I can't see you.....and I'm cold."

"You spooked? You're having me on."

"No. Come on. I want you."

"In a minute. I just want to check on something."

I quietly opened the lounge door and the chill struck me. I let the torchlight wander around the walls for a while before daring to shine it at the slab I had scrubbed. A faint profile had returned, and the mouth seemed even a little more open. I spread a newspaper over it and hurried up to bed. Yvonne was icy cold and we clung to each other for warmth. After we had made love, I blew out the candle and she went straight to sleep, snoring very softly. An owl began to witter at regular intervals and my scalp tingled. I imagined the room below, empty, silent and in total darkness. Down the years, how many words had been spoken there in love and anger, going all the way back to that awful event? I shivered as the owl hooted again and turned to look out of the window at the stars. Those two murders, I told myself, were part of the past not the present. The planet had moved on. Some of those stars had gone out and only their escaping light survived. I pictured the stones in the lounge wall. They were of both the past *and* the present. This seemed to contradict all my rational thinking. Then the rocking chair appeared in my thoughts.

What an odd feeling it had been for me when, on clearing out the attic prior to our move, I had come across the long forgotten baby rocking chair our tiny daughter had sat in. I could grip the chair and rock it in exactly the same way I had rocked it over twenty years before. It was as if no time had passed. The purple stain in the brown fabric where - I suddenly remembered - blackcurrant juice had been spilt had not faded. It was a solid object but the events which had brushed it - those things which were supposed to be of importance - were only phantoms.....some, even, spectres. In a quarter of a century the chair had remained patiently in one place - ignored, forgotten and unused - while we had made a million tracks in all directions. In a peculiar way, this permanence - in contrast with our restlessness - blessed it with a strange dignity, which, in conjunction with its sentimental value rendered its disposal unthinkable. As I lay there in bed it sat above me in the cottage loft, and would do so until we were dead and new

hands would throw it into a skip.

These strange, morbid thoughts would not let me sleep. Slowly, in my mind, I descended the stairs into the lounge, then hovered over the newspaper, and finally the slab. Had it been an irregular gush of blood from the open neck, it would have meant far less than the “face” which, by sheer accident, it had formed. I felt a weird pang of guilt to have tried scrubbing it out. It belonged to the lady, so it mattered. The notion that it might even resemble Susan Mason made me shudder again. Yvonne turned over and her snoring stopped. The sudden silence was so intense that it became oppressive and impossible. It was like a pane of glass under increasing tension, and therefore bound to shatter, inviting, no demanding, that a noise be made to destroy it. I longed for the owl to hoot again, but heard instead a faint cry and sat bolt upright, my ears ringing like alarm bells. But the noise had not come from downstairs as I first feared, but from Yvonne. She had moaned in her sleep, and was muttering again. I put my ear close to her mouth to try and understand. It sounded like another language.

“Yvonne, are you alright?” I whispered.

“There you are,” she said in an odd voice. “If you want it, you look for it.”

I had disturbed a dream. There would be no point asking her what I should look for because she never remembered her dreams. I convinced myself that she was only recalling what George had said in the pub. I turned onto my back and concentrated hard on the practicalities of putting the living room to rights. I furnished it bit by bit, rearranged things, laid down a nice circular rug, hung pictures which Yvonne had painted, lit a log fire in the grate.....and the next thing I knew, I was opening my eyes to look out on a grubby dawn.

“You were talking in your sleep last night,” I said, coming back indoors from the barbecue, carrying a panful of bacon and eggs and a pot of coffee. “I’ve never heard you do that before.”

“What was I saying?”

“Mainly mumbo-jumbo. Then you said I should look for something. Like George said Clive had been told to do by Susan.”

“No. She must have possessed me.”

She stood up and went whooping around the kitchen like a ghost. I decided not to mention what she’d said on our return from the pub. She’d been quite drunk and would be embarrassed to be reminded. I found the weather forecast on my phone. It was due to get colder for a while and I suggested going to stay with Dominic and Carole until the electrics were done. But Yvonne wanted to wash down the walls, ceiling and floor.

“But there’ll be dust everywhere when they cut the channels out,” I said.

She also wanted to put new skirting board over the tired old one and stain it.

“But Yvonne, shouldn’t we wait until the dirty jobs are done?”

She was one of those people who, once their minds are made up, are hard to budge.

“We could get a moulding to cover up the gap between the wall and the new board,” she said.

She hadn’t even heard me. She was staring again. I told her that all the gripper rods would have to move a couple of inches further in if we fitted a new skirting board over the top of the old. I suggested taking the old one out completely. She replied that she had tried to loosen it with a knife but it was nailed in.

“I reckon the heads are buried. Couldn’t budge it....*Gripper rods*? They’re coming up anyway. Not having a fitted carpet....having rugs...or a large square one in the middle....haven’t decided yet. Nice breakfast....”

It was pointless to argue with my wife over matters of taste. To me, it made more sense to seal in

the stain with a fitted carpet, but she would have found that argument ludicrously superstitious so I kept quiet. While she washed up I went into the lounge with a knife to see if I could loosen any of the skirting. There was only one short section in a corner which would move. The rest had been attached, I reckoned, with long countersunk screws and the heads concealed, probably with putty, and painted over. They would be impossible to find. So Yvonne's idea made sense.

We drove to a hardware shop in town and chose the thinnest board we could see. Against all the odds I managed to persuade her to postpone delivery until the following week when Mr Golby, our contractor, had been and gone. She agreed as long as I promised to attach the loose piece of skirting board properly.

"I was going to anyway!"

"When?"

"Today, tomorrow, Wednesday...I told you I will. Does it matter? Is it so urgent?"

"Let's phone Dom and Carole and see if they've got a room till Thursday. It's too cold to stay at the cottage."

"That's what I suggested."

"When?"

"This morning. I knew you weren't listening!.....Are you feeling okay?"

"Fix the skirting board and we'll give them a ring."

I accused her of losing the plot - the job was not a priority. Thus started one of those silent, stubborn disagreements I so hated.

I came back into the house having boiled up more coffee on the barbecue to find her kneeling in the corner with the drill and a box of screws. She had a knife at the back of the board. I asked her what she was trying to do.

"It's not quite square - can't you see? A bodged job. I want to get it out completely and then refit it - properly. But there's something holding it in."

I fetched the torch and shone it into the crack she had opened up. There was a nail penetrating another piece of wood underneath. I got my fingertips inside the gap and pulled. Off it came. The nail was short and the piece of wood underneath was matt green, about three inches in depth. It served as a piece of infill, about a foot in length.

"Guess what." I said. "I reckon we've uncovered the original skirting."

"Blimey. So this was just put over the top all the way round to hide it?"

"Looks that way. Somebody had the same idea as you. Happy now?"

"I will be when you drill new holes to put it back straight. So it's firm."

She got to her feet, put wisps of hair behind an ear and sipped her coffee. She was lovely. I put my arm around her waist and kissed her cheek.

"You're a bloody madhead when you get a bee in that bonce of yours."

"Well," she retorted "You should be less of a procrastinator. I'll phone Carole while you fix it. If you *can*..."

Ignoring the taunt, out of curiosity I put the knife behind the green lath and it fell out. Great. Another job. I found myself looking at the ancient right-angle where floor met wall - except that it didn't quite. There was a two inch gap stuffed with tiny pebbles and some had already spilled out. *Amazing* - I whispered to them - *back into the light after a century and more sitting in the dark.*

Yvonne brought me another cup of coffee but had put sugar in it. I told her and she looked distant and puzzled. She asked when I had I stopped taking sugar.

"Yvonne, *are* you feeling alright?"

She didn't answer and just stood there humming a tune. The strange look which I hadn't seen too often since our move had come back into her face and it alarmed me. One eyelid was flickering. "Are you going to sweep that mess up or leave it for me to do?"

"Will you please stop looking for a fight, Yvonne? I'll do whatever you tell me to."

She picked up a dustpan and brush as I scraped out the mess with the knife. She crouched down and swept the floor clean. I picked up the drill in self-righteous anger and she said "And are you going to leave *that* in there?"

"For pity's sake, woman, what's got into you? Leave what, exactly?"

"That. *Look....*"

She put her cheek close to the floor and pointed. I shone the torch inside the gap and saw something brown and coarse. I put in my finger and thumb and drew out some sacking, inside which I could feel a book.

"There you are," she said in the adamant tone she had spoken in her sleep. "Now drill the damned hole properly will you?"

I concealed my unrepeatable reply by turning on the drill and made two decent holes in the stone. I replaced the green lath and then the skirting, making sure it was straight and firm. I gathered up my tools, and, while she was in the kitchen, I took the book upstairs and put it under our mattress.

I was about to start reading it that afternoon - a quick glance had shown me it was an old diary written in beautiful longhand - but Yvonne came up to pack a few things for our few nights away. I put it back under the mattress quickly as she came into the room. It would have to wait.

Dominic and Carole had decided to employ a young chef and stay out of the kitchen altogether, so they were more relaxed than I had known them for years. The food was delicious and we had a lovely time. Yvonne was also relaxed and so like her old self that I couldn't get rid of the feeling that something malign in the cottage really had affected her. Or maybe she was less of a rationalist, and more affected by tales of ghosts than she claimed to be. And then the awful thought that she really was in the early stages of dementia began to prey on my mind again, particularly when she had to be reminded, as we drove home, that Carole had left Dominic. She laughed and pretended that it was a mental lapse, but a glance at her profile showed me that she was puzzled and was trying to track it down in her memory. As we got nearer to home the diary began to dominate my thoughts. Without looking at it in detail, I knew whose diary it must be. It had been waiting in the dark, embracing its secrets, for over a hundred years - and by pure chance I had found it. With a head full of fancies, I turned onto the drive - and saw a male face at the top window. Yvonne had dozed off in the car and I left her there while I looked around. My first suspicion was that it was Kenneth Hobbis - he had probably kept a key. But a thorough search found no-one in hiding, and when I looked under the mattress the diary had disappeared. I decided that Yvonne must have seen me hide it but could not think of a way to mention it without appearing sly and underhand.

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Almost as soon as we returned to the cottage, Yvonne lapsed into a dark, silent depression punctuated by more outbursts of impatience and verbal aggression. The restoration of light and heat ought to have been an incentive to her to take an interest again in the lounge but she was merely content to have our furniture delivered from storage and left it entirely to me how to

arrange it. I also fitted the skirting board and varnished it but she only put her head around the door, nodded and closed it.

“I want new furniture” she whispered one evening. “The old doesn’t belong. In there.”

“Well – let’s go and have a look for new stuff then in Cheltenham – or Gloucester. Great!”

But she made no reply. Nothing I said could persuade her to think again about décor. She said she had taken against the room because it was so long and narrow, and preferred to sit in the kitchen. To my disquiet, her gnawing at her bottom lip had become a constant habit, almost a nervous tic.

More alarmingly, her desire to recycle our rubbish had developed into an obsession. Taking scissors, she would cut up banana skins, peelings and vase flowers into the tiniest pieces and add teabags, even eggshells, standing at the draining board, moving mechanically, humming to herself, until the trance broke, and then, whatever the weather, even in the foulest, she would march out to the compost heap, crouch down and churn in her mixture. Such bizarre, futile behaviour I could only construe as a despairing substitute for her abandoned career, in which short-term goals and learning targets for her pupils had been the norm with which she had to deal.

One day I noticed something new and peculiar about the compost. It was dotted with fragments of shiny paper. With sinking heart I realized that she had cut up photographs – family photographs. I found the empty albums in the dustbin. Afraid of provoking a terrible rage, I said nothing – even though it was obvious I had been meant to find them. Surely the depression, like a fever, would break – if only the spring would come. But time seemed to slow the more I willed it to pass over the awful barrier of December. The weather was as bleak as our mood and we hardly saw a sunny day. Spring and the reemergence of those precious bulbs seemed hopelessly distant. Whatever I suggested – a visit to the cinema, a walk, a day or two away – she would quietly reject with a slow shake of the head, moving the tip of her tongue around her cheek, clacking top against bottom teeth, staring at nothing, before returning to that huge book she was reading, *Domby and Son*, whose pages she turned very slowly or not at all, gnawing over and over again at her poor swollen lip.

I was torn between the fear of leaving her on her own and the need to escape. So I would invent jobs to do in the garden, pruning, weeding, forking in the same areas, activities ultimately as futile as Yvonne’s.

“What’s it about?” I asked one afternoon.

“What’s what about?”

“That book. It’s taking you for ever.”

“Oh...lots of things. A nasty, arrogant man.”

“Is that all?”

“His daughter loves him but he doesn’t love her....”

“Isn’t that.....a bit depressing?”

She shrugged.

“What isn’t?”

Once I dared to mention the doctor but she flared up.

“I’ll not swallow pills! It *will* pass. It’ll soon be New Year. I’ll be okay, so stop WORRYING.”

I persuaded her to accept Dominic and Carole’s Christmas invitation, and we went. But the merry-making and glitter made her seem even more gloomy. I noticed Carole watching her

biting her lip and, in her temporary absence from the table, she asked me what was wrong. "She's hardly touched her meal. That's not like her at all. She's lost weight."

So many explanations wanted to come out at once that I said nothing.

We decided not to stay the night and drove home. I told her how much I loved her and how concerned I was. She could only smile weakly and promised to be better when the days began to grow longer. I suggested again that she go to the GP but she did not erupt and only said she would work through it herself, and for a while she did make more of an effort.

The early days of New Year were brighter, and some skies were as blue and fleecy as early summer. She would stand then at the bedroom window for ages and look out, as if in admiration of the scene. But it was an illusion, much as those skies were. Her dreamy eyes were really in a faraway place where I could not reach her. One afternoon she came stomping down the stairs in fury.

"There's a man down at the river shooting ducks!" she exclaimed. "Mallards. Is that legal?"

"Mallards aren't protected. Two a penny."

"Two a penny? Is that all you can say? Don't you care?"

"I never said I didn't care, Yvonne. What do you want me to do?"

"Go out and tell him to bugger off. If you don't, I will!"

I pulled on my boots and a coat but when I reached the bridge there was no sign of him, and no dead ducks.

One day in mid-January, there came a rap at the door. A very smart man in a suit announced himself as Kenneth Hobbis. We had only ever spoken on the phone and I was surprised to see he looked nothing like the face I had imagined then - or had seen, or imagined I'd seen - at the window. He had heard, he said, how much work we had put into restoring his childhood home and wanted to give us a belated welcome gift - a bottle of champagne. I took it from him and asked him in. After I'd taken him on a tour of the house, at which he kept whistling in admiration, I led him into the kitchen. Yvonne was sitting listening to music on the radio with that remote look which now dominated her face. She focused on Hobbis - as he swept his expert hand across our patchy oak table - and quite brusquely asked him what he thought he was doing. "This is the gentleman who sold us the house, Yvonne. Mr Hobbis..... Surely you remember him?"

"Did we see you at The Fox once?" she asked. She had completely the wrong end of the stick, and to cover my embarrassment I popped the champagne cork and fetched down three glasses while he admired the new kitchen, telling us he could do us a fair price on restoring the table if we were so minded. When he saw there was a glass for him too he put up his hands and shook his head. *He never touched alcohol.*

At this Yvonne gave a strange laugh. "You don't? But Marion said you were a drunk."

I wanted the floor to swallow me up but Hobbis took this in his stride and even seemed amused by her queer manners.

"I think you're mixing me up with my brother Clive," he remarked. "He had the genes from my father's side. The Hobbises were big drinkers. Dad had had a couple when he fell off the roof. I'm a Conway - took after my mother."

"And did you ever see the ghost, like Clive? He told George at The Fox he did."

Kenneth glanced at me, smiled and rolled his eyes. I told Yvonne to change the subject.

"It's okay, Mr Hind, honest. Me, I never saw anything, but Clive and my dad said they could sense her some nights. Particularly if they stood in a certain place - but it was all to frighten me

and Mum, I reckon, and -”

“In the front corner of the lounge, right hand side,” she said.

Hobbis stared at her. “How did you know that?”

“It’s my favourite place. I don’t know why I said it...I won’t go in there anymore....There’s a face on the slab...*He* tried to scrub it away.....”

Hobbis frowned at this nonsense and said he ought to be on his way.

“No, go and show him, Richard!”

To placate her, I took Hobbis into the lounge and rolled back the carpet. He smiled and said it had been there when his parents had moved in in the fifties.

“I suppose if you screw your eyes up and use your imagination you can just about see a nose and chin,” he said. “Dad used to tease my mum about it when he’d had a drink. I reckon it’s a really old paint spill scrubbed out.”

“Not Susan Mason’s blood then?” I replied mock-dramatically.

“You heard that one at The Fox? One of Clive’s tall stories.”

“No. George Stubbs.”

At this he laughed and said we ought to pay no attention to him.

“Bigger liar than Tom Pepper! *Blood!* According to one story, Mason came back from The Fox drunk, she had a go at him about...you know...his Brewer’s Droop....and he knocked her block off in the garden - not in here!”

We went back into the kitchen and, relieved, I told Yvonne what Kenneth had said. She poured herself more champagne and took a large gulp. Her eyes were very bright and dreamy. Her jaw was in constant motion.

“So, *you* don’t think this place is jinxed, then?” she asked.

“No way! Some people have more bad luck than others. Way of the world.”

“And did you murder Clive?”

He gaped and looked at me to help him out. But I was speechless. He thanked me for allowing him in and with a nod and a curt word to Yvonne he left. Outside I apologized to him.

“My wife hasn’t been well. I’m mortified you had to hear that.”

He said that he loved his brother and had tried to help him. The police had no idea who the killer was. He had been on holiday in Prague with his wife and another couple at the time.

“Just tell Mrs Hind that. A lot of folk - tittle-tattlers - round here jumped to the same conclusion. But it couldn’t be wronger. Good morning.”

I watched him walk down the path and went back in. The bottle was nearly empty. I told her as calmly as I could how embarrassed I had been and told her what Kenneth had told me about Prague. Her reaction to this left me feeling utterly wretched and close to tears.

“I told you he’d have a solid alibi. He paid somebody and went to Prague.”

“This....is.....rubbish, Yvonne. Stop it!”

“Didn’t you see him flinch when I said it? It’s what the police do when the suspect’s relaxed.

They just come out with it. Why are you so stupid and blind??”

She picked up her glass and hurled it against the wall.

“Yvonne. I’m making an appointment for you at the doctor’s. This can’t go on. You need help.”

*

The consultant asked to see me on my own while the nurse stayed with Yvonne. Her condition, he said, did not fit the normal profile of dementia. In his opinion, short-term memory loss was

not proven by the tests he had done and he wondered if the aggression and depression were a sign of something else troubling her - or if there was a history of mental illness in her family. I had known all her close relatives including grandparents, two aunts and an uncle. None had deteriorated mentally.

In the end, he decided she should be prescribed, as a first step, anti-depressants and a drug which relieved anxiety. In the car going home from Cheltenham I told her what the consultant had asked me about her family.

"He asked me the same," she said. "So when I told him *definitely not*, he must have thought he'd better ask you - in case I was so crazy I couldn't remember - or in case I was lying."

"You're not mad, Yvonne. I don't know what's got into you but it worries me. You'll think I'm crazy - but I'm going to say it anyway. Sometimes you behave as if you're possessed."

"Ridiculous!"

"No. That night when we came back from the pub..."

"Why don't you go in there tonight and tell George - that she got me??"

"Calm down. Listen. It's not just the way you lose your rag over nothing and the comments you make. When we make love - *when!* - you're different. Demanding, impatient - as if I'm not enough for you."

"Rubbish! You're a wonderful lover."

"You don't hear yourself. You're elsewhere. And...and you keep biting your lip. Perhaps you just *imagine* - at some level - that the Mason woman.....*has* possessed you. The mind can play strange tricks. You've been under such strain - your mother dying suddenly, and -"

"Leave it! I don't want to hear any more of this.....*SHIT!*"

That tone of voice! Then she began to laugh for no reason, pointing at me, saying *look at your face!* and an icy fear gripped me.

I had to go back to the supermarket that evening for the fish we'd forgotten and when I returned she was drinking wine in the kitchen. The bottle was nearly empty and I'd only be gone less than an hour. She was in a temper. On the news the Secretary of State had said something derogatory about teachers and their low expectations and she was writing a furious letter. The pen was shaking in her hand.

"I'm going to give that chinless wonder a piece of my mind!"

I took the pen from her gently and put it on the table.

"Yvonne, let it go. It's over. You did your best."

"No. I must. He can't get away with it!"

"Yvonne. It would never even reach his desk."

"It's alright for you - y-you just did a *job*. All my life I wanted to be a teacher - even as a young girl. To help people understand things they otherwise never have dreamed of....to see confusion vanish and faces light up....."

"But you achieved those things many times over.....you just forget.....you mustn't lose sight of that.....it's not your fault if things changed..."

"What would those pioneers think now who campaigned for education for all? The profession belittled by political opportunists and pygmies, their integrity questioned...children rejecting learning - for this *vile* culture of celebrity, fashion and make-up.....and you hated me being a teacher. You won't say it but you really hate *me*...you think I had an affair...you even think that Morwenna's not yours...that's why you hate her!"

"What nonsense!! Stop it, Yvonne! No - leave the bottle alone."

She began to sob and howl. She was very drunk. I told her that at all costs we needed to get away - somewhere warm and sunny - a change of air and scenery to help her recover. I picked her up and carried her upstairs to bed, promising to bring her some supper and her tablets. She lay on the bed and stared at me.

“This is my home. I’m staying. You think it’s the jinx don’t you?”

“No.....of course not..... but what do you think it is?”

“I keep having confrontations with pupils and parents in my head. But I’ll get over it. Now just get me my dinner.”

When I came back with her salmon half-an-hour later she was fast asleep.

“You were talking in your sleep again last night.”

I poured her a cup of tea.

“It sounded....as if you were having sex.”

“Really? And I slept through it - just my luck.”

“But not with me. It sounded like John....or Joe.”

Yvonne never blushed but now she did - and dropped her toast butter-side down on the floor. She got up and went to the sink. For a long while neither spoke; there was such a tension neither knew how to earth it. At last I said, with fast beating heart, “If there’s something you *really* do need to get off your chest, you’d better come out with it.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“Then why are you embarrassed?”

“Are you deaf? Nothing. It was a dream.”

“You never remember them.”

“I remember this one now. The man was and wasn’t you. But it was just a dream. Why won’t you believe me?”

“Okay.....Let me make you some more toast.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“But you had no supper...I’m really worried that you’re not eating. Carole noticed how thin you were.”

We were very quiet for the rest of the day. She stared into her own thoughts - memories? - which I could not share. I was shut out. I decided not to press matters. The past was over. I pressed my mental blender button and all those colours and shapes turned into white light.

That evening I told her that I couldn’t sleep in the same bed as she was so restless. She made no protest. For the first time in many years we slept apart, and from the spare room I could hear her moaning again. In despair, I clapped my hands over my ears. All night, I lay awake wishing we could have our old, uneventful, monotonous - and usually happy - life back, and not this dream turned nightmare.

The next morning I woke late to find her packing a case. I asked her where we were going. Nowhere, she said.

“*I’m* going. To stay with Carole. For a while. She said I could.”

“You’re leaving me???”

“No. Of course not. I need to let you have a break from me until I’m better. My mind’s made up. It’s useless to argue. I can help with the business and run a few errands to take my mind off things. It’s so dead here. It will do me good. And you.”

“What *things*?”

She pretended she had not heard, just carried on packing. I left her to it. I drove her to Carole's and by the time we arrived she already seemed more relaxed and chatty. There were quite a few guests in the main room to take advantage of Dom's special lunch deal and I was persuaded to stay. The atmosphere in the room was cheerful in contrast to the wintry gloom. The food was imaginative and tasty. Under Carole's influence, Yvonne revived even more and I was pleased to see her only sip at her wine in usual fashion. I was next to Dominic and that good wine loosened his tongue enough for him to ask me if everything was alright between us. We had never been particularly close - Yvonne and Carole were the good friends - and at first I resented a curiosity which went beyond the borders of conversation we normally had - the state of the economy and rugger. Dom's tipsy whisper was inept and Yvonne smiled to hear it.

"Richard reckons I'm either senile or possessed."

Carole laughed and I made an effort too as Yvonne continued. "But me, I reckon it's just the winter blues...in *that* place. There's just silence all day and if somebody cycles past, I run out to look. I never dreamt I was such a townie."

Carole looked a little embarrassed and said that the days getting longer now would cheer us all up. She turned to me and added "I'll find her a few things to do to keep her out of mischief." Yvonne came out to the car to say goodbye even though I'd told her to stay out of the steady rain. She gave me a big hug.

"I'll be alright. I'm not going crazy and I'm not going senile. A break will do us both good."

"I hope so."

"Just give me a few days. I'll surprise you."

Before I left her I wound the window down and plucked up the nerve to ask her what she had done with the book.

"I imagine it's still where I put it," she said.

*

All the way home I reflected on the past few weeks and came to the conclusion that Yvonne was having - or had had - some kind of slow-motion nervous breakdown, even though nervous breakdowns had gone out of fashion. I would put the cottage on the market. For her to return there was out of the question. Although the thought of selling caused me pain, another course of action, which would allow just *me* to stay, was unthinkable.

Once home, I pulled up the mattress expecting to see the book but it wasn't there. And then it dawned on me, spookily, what she had meant. In the corner of the lounge, I prised off the smart new skirting board, undid the screws on the old and removed the green lath. There, pushed further in than it had been, was the book.

I took it into the kitchen and put it down on the table while I made supper. I dropped another log onto the fire and sat in the rocking chair with the book on my knee. As I opened it, in spite of the warmth, an icy surge ran along my spine. Did my hand make it shake or vice versa? I listened intently but could only hear the crack of bark as the reviving fire licked around it. On the left hand page inside the cover I read

THE PRIVATE THOUGHTS OF SUSAN JAMES

ANNO DOMINI 1887 FEBRUARY

and on the right hand page those thoughts began.

My dearest, my loveliest Victoria - I have never felt so alone and friendless. In desperation I have begun a journal to assuage my fears. May your spirit, which I sense is ever close, be a confidante in my thoughts and dreams as I prepare to embark on a new and uncertain life. For I have finally consented to be married to a man I do not think I love. How I would have welcomed the advice of a beloved sister, of a sister taken from the world in so a cruel a fashion, during the most selfless act a woman can perform. I pray you will come into my dreams with your good counsel yet. You know as well as I, that Mr Mason is a respectable and kindly man, and generous in his intent to pay for our Father's treatment. This should be reason enough to love him dearly, and in a sense I do, but not in the way that a wife should, I think, love a husband. You and Jonathan, Victoria, were so patently in love but were compatible in both age and appearance, and, I will venture to say, mutually appealing in a physical as well as a spiritual dimension. Mr Mason is not a repulsive man but I doubt whether I will ever be able to admire him in a manner which can engage feelings other than respect and gratitude for his magnanimity. How I wish that I had been ugly that he might have applied his attentions elsewhere. But what then of poor Father and his lungs?

I am plagued by a terrible and wicked thought which I must commit to paper or else go mad with it. It is this: Mr Mason, as a man of almost forty and rather overweight, may live only a few more years, in which case I would then be free, a rich young widow, to help Father and to pursue the dreams of my own heart. There! It is written. And out and away from me. May I now have some relief! Is it so bad, Victoria, to

harbour such thoughts? Can I be the only young wife married to an older man to have them? My mind is in moral turmoil. Am I entirely to blame?

February 20th

Victoria, having consented to be married, I tell myself that I must accept the consequences. Having refused Mason the once, I ought to curse my weakness, for now I shall have to put all my own ambitions in painting, writing and music to one side in order to be his companion and helpmeet. I shall be secure, no doubt, in the cottage he has designed and built, and this comforts me a little. But only a little. Part of me resents him - not for his plainness and the disparity in our ages - but for his infringement on my precious freedom. I dreamt even of establishing a school as Miss Eyre did - to shine the light of learning into dark corners of ignorance! Perhaps I even shall - perhaps the bakehouse at the cottage would serve as a schoolroom for the local children. Surely Mr Mason would indulge such an act of Charity - particularly if I oblige him well as a wife.

I pray to God to resent him less with time, as fervently as I pray that he make not too many demands of me in the marital couch. The loss of my maidenhood, I must confide to you, dear Vicky, and to these empty pages, is a source of dread. Although I find his company not intolerable I have no inclination to lie with him, and indeed the very thought is repugnant to me. How shall I conceal this from him? And in three short weeks it will happen. But how should I behave in our intimacy? Our mother is too embarrassed to answer my questions and she will only say that, as in a dance, I should let Mr Mason lead the way. Then she averts her eyes and goes back to her accursed sewing. Did she provide as little guidance to you, dear Victoria, on the eve of your marriage to Jonathan? I can only surmise that Mr Mason, being a mature man, will guide me through the marital act - but this thought too fills me dread, for no doubt he will judge me against any other woman he may have known carnally. I am terrified

that I will be unable to fulfil his wishes and that the act will not only prove unsatisfactory to him but also physically painful to me - especially after Mother said that I should lie on a towel as there will be a little blood. Is it not deplorable that our sex is left in such a state of ignorance in such vital matters? She cannot of course admit to her own prenuptial anxieties and speaks only of the blessing the birth of a child will bring. This fills me with a fury I cannot express. Blessing? Shall I be blessed in the same way as you, dear sister? I cannot look on the child which you bore in sacrifice of your own life without, I must confess, feelings of resentment. Am I so unnatural to feel such an emotion towards your daughter, my niece, and to have no maternal inclination of my own? Shall I prove as bad a mother as a wife? None of this can be told to a soul, only to these pages. I feel almost mad with worry and can only hope that, written down, all these fears shall be nullified. Perhaps, when a year has elapsed, I shall read these lines again, laugh at them and think what a silly goose I am. George will no doubt prove a good husband - and if a child comes, I shall learn to love it.

February 23rd

Once more am I thrown into confusion! Jonathan, having learnt of my engagement, came to visit, and in a private moment declared his love for me! He wishes us to be married! Thus, he has answered a secret prayer I have prayed ever since your death, Victoria, yet how can I break my promise to Mr Mason, having already refused him the once? What scandal and shame would be attached to my name, were I to follow my heart, not least by making what would be condemned by him, and no doubt our neighbours, as an unnatural match? I absolutely refused to hear Jonathan and left the room to flee upstairs. I cannot deny that I have harboured more than sisterly feelings towards him even when you lived, but I must tell myself that his attentions are motivated primarily by the desire for Toby and little Emma to have a mother, a state which is wholly unattractive to me. And yet, even so, since his declaration I can do

little but daydream of becoming his wife one day - as I feel sure you would have wished. Would that I knew my own heart! I am quite determined to leave all to Providence and be as a boat taken wherever the tide of events may flow.

March 24th

I have scarce been able to contain my impatience to record my nuptial experiences, dearest Vicky! What a goose! Our Honeymoon week in Weston was blessed with a mild if breezy weather, and our lodgings by the sea were respectable. George was at all times kind and attentive and all my worst fears regarding the consummation of our marriage proved spurious! I bled only a little and in matters physical, George was not of such a dimension to occasion me pain or discomfort. My grotesque imaginings - provoked by the sight of the stallions at the race course - proved wholly false! In fact, I felt very little, neither pleasure nor pain, and in less than a moment the act was completed. George said nothing - not to ask me how I felt, not to express his feelings, except to sigh strangely at the end - and soon he was snoring. I stole out of bed to wash myself clean of his emissions - a fishy-smelling phlegm - how can God permit the human being to be conceived of such disgusting matter?? - and then lay listening to the waves a while until sleep overtook me. The next day, I awoke to find myself alone, George having risen early to take a stroll ere breakfast. A note on my dressing table told me simply that he would welcome "marital intercourse" weekly, on Saturdays, when he would feel less fatigued. Thus, he spared us both the embarrassment of having to broach the delicate subject. Upon reading such a wise, considerate letter, I could not help but cry tears of relief! I know now that I can look forward to George being an avuncular companion - his anecdotes are a constant source of merry entertainment - with only a few moments of physical intimacy to endure.

The cottage is ready and in a most advantageous position two miles from the small town of Pitherstock. The two gardens, front and back are long, and, running east-west,

ensure that the sun will shine his blessing on them the whole day. We move in within the week.

March 28th

George insists that I, as the wife of a professional man, should benefit from the attentions of a servant, and he has secured for a period of twelve months the services of a young woman, daughter of the farmer from whom he acquired the land for this cottage. She will sleep in the bakehouse. Being quite at a loss as to how to manage a household, although I protested a little at first, I think I shall welcome the help of a practical woman, as I have less idea of a fair price for apples than any child! She is called Hannah and is my senior by five years. George assured himself first that she has experience of all matters culinary, domestic and commercial, and is respectable. He has told me he believes the wife of a practical man should be a practical and useful person, and not an ornament in the old-fashioned manner. He has no time for the Aristocracy, the Idle Rich and those Lesser Ones who ape their airs and graces. In this respect, I am in complete agreement with him, only too well aware of how bereft of purpose my mother's life has been.

Hannah will, I am sure, teach me how to be a good wife to George. And, if I am quite honest, I shall welcome company in this delightful but isolated place. Hannah is to visit on Thursday to take tea with me.

April 1st

Hannah duly called at four o'clock today. She is a pleasant woman with striking dark eyes and a healthy bloom. She has the local brogue much more broadly than I, but speaks sensibly and intelligently. Had she been extravagantly and not simply dressed, who would take her at sight for a farm girl? Her person caused me to think of Miss Austen whose aristocratic characters are frequently more stupid and more vulgar than

those designated their social inferiors! Hannah has a slightly roguish (?) twinkle in her eye and a ready wit, but was deferential when I explained - as George insisted I should, in order to establish my authority - what my expectations were about her conduct. I emphasized the importance of propriety as regarding the avoidance of profanity in speech, the consumption of intoxicating liquor and association with male friends while on the property. To these stipulations she made no objection and assured me that, after abandoning only in January her widow's weeds - she a widow at only five-and-twenty! - she had no inclinations of a romantic nature. At this, I know I blushed deeply, and felt, if Truth be told, quite foolish, me still two years from coming of age, to be laying down the Law to a woman of maturity and experience. She told me, without a tear, without a qualm, that her husband, being overfond of his tankard, had been killed in a tavern brawl in Pitherstock, and that I should entertain no concerns as to her drinking, she being utterly disinclined to take up that most dangerous habit.

In response to my speech about rules, she began to enumerate all the advantages she would bring to the household. She would show me the arts of baking and brewing, of purchasing goods with prudence, attending to quality and price, of caring for fowls she would have brought from her farm - and would teach me skills in a wide range of domestic areas. She took her leave at five, as pleased as I was with our arrangements. Curtseying, she left with an enigmatic wink of the eye. Prior to her arrival, I had composed my face in the hall mirror to give it an air of authority. As I went back inside, having watched her down the garden path, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and realised that this had been the face she had seen in despite of my attempt to appear stern - the face of a mere girl. Hence the wink?

April 8th

Victoria, imagine my utter embarrassment! Today, I answered a knock at the door, and whom should I find on the threshold but your husband, Jonathan! Not with the

children, but quite alone. He must have seen the agitation his arrival caused in me - my face went hot and my breast began to heave as I tried to catch my breath, with the result that I could hardly speak. I showed him into the sitting room and insisted on fetching him some lemonade - even though Hannah, being in the house, could have fetched it - not because the weather, being chill and damp, made it necessary, but because I could thereby take deep breaths and regain my composure alone in the kitchen. In spite of the tolerably happy beginning to our marriage, I must confess myself unable to suppress thoughts of Jonathan and of his quiet offer, as the snatch of a tune heard in the street will not cease plaguing the inner ear.

He apologized for coming unannounced, but having had business in the next village to Pitherstock he had decided to ride over to see how I was settling in. Hannah tapped the door and requested permission to go to the farm for eggs, but I insisted she postpone this for a time, giving no reason. She smiled - slyly I thought - and withdrew. She had, I realised, simply come to stare at my visitor.

Jonathan, I must say, was the model brother-in-law and gentleman. We spoke of the cottage, its design, its garden - and of family matters. Within half-an-hour he had gone, giving me a brotherly peck on the cheek and a squeeze of my hand - but the intense gaze of his eye spoke the same emotion I felt but was determined to suppress. This aroused, I must confess, something so overwhelming in me that I was forced to sit down. I was weak and trembly - and an aching desire in my innermost private *self* - of an incompleteness yearning to be fulfilled - caused me tremors of almost physical pain. Never have I experienced such an inner turmoil. These then, must be the true feelings a man may incite in a woman, and as I write this with shaking hand I am still shocked at the intensity of them. Had he embraced me, I would have had no power to resist, and know now for certain that I can never be alone with him again. Dare I say more? To these empty pages no-one will read? Yes, yes, yes I must - or else be driven mad by these thoughts!

*Since the loss of my maidenhood, I have entertained - unwillingly at first - lustful fancies of Jonathan and have been unable to resist taking private **pleasure** in them, inventing grotesque images to address the extreme and extensive arousal within my womanly **self**. I feel shame to write of such matters, but it cannot be helped. Were I a Roman, I could confess my sins in whispers to a priest, but have no such kind ear at my disposal. My guilt can only be assuaged in this private way with a pen. But my guilt does not stop at the mental betrayal of my husband. In addition, I ask myself whether our sex in general is in gross error to expect more from the conjugal act than is physically possible, only to wonder then whether I am a lewd exception and a freak to dream of such possibilities. This causes me agonies of self-reproach. If only you could be with me, Vicky, to put my feverish mind at rest. To maintain my mental equilibrium and to curtail my unseemly speculations, I have to believe that my conjectures as to the potentialities of conjugal pleasure are false, and that the act of union is as paltry and unrewarding for all women as it is for me with George. Just as men's fingers, hands and noses vary so little, may not their unseen parts vary little too? And are not all men designed by the Almighty to impart their secretion as promptly as George to better ensure the procreation of offspring? Though I have imagined, dear Victoria, that the glow about you was due to the bliss you shared in privacy with Jonathan, I now convince myself that it was due in most part to the delight of being a mother to Toby and the prospect of being likewise to little Emma. Those motives are surely God-given; Satan must conjure those base impulses of physical desire - and henceforward I must - and shall suppress them -*

I broke off because Hannah wished to speak to me. She spoke of mundane matters at first but turned our talk round to my visitor after a while. She must have seen how this disconcerted me, but would insist on calling him a "fine-looking gentleman" and condoling with us on our sad loss of a sister and a wife, adding how well she knew herself

the pain of loss.....and longing for a mate. This latter phrase she added after a pause with that roguish glint in her dark eyes and I can only think she relished - having intentionally provoked? - my embarrassment at its double meaning. I am sure I did not imagine this, but how could I censure her for a meaning which she could innocently disclaim, thereby making plain what unseemly thoughts I was capable of? Nevertheless, I dismissed her from my presence with the clear instruction that neither my brother-in-law nor other family matters were to be subjects for discussion between us in future. At this she smiled sweetly, curtsied and left me. I know she witnessed my discomfort over his arrival; I know she senses what I feel for him; I feel as if she reads my every secret thought as easily as I read these lines. And I am most unhappy.

The script was often hard for me to decipher and the prose so dense and archaic that I had to keep going back to appreciate it fully. Eventually, I began to copy it out in my laptop – using a font approximate to her handwriting - to make better sense of it.* I had made efforts to get into Eliot and Austen but always given up. When my eyes had grown too tired to read any longer, I took the book upstairs to bed with me. The house felt so desolate without Yvonne. I closed my eyes and tried to picture Susan. The profile on the lounge floor became pale-cheeked and the eyes earnest and sad. She moved around the room in a pretty blue dress. I dressed Hannah in more robust style. With a florid complexion, she smiled at me as she went about her kitchen chores and gave me a knowing wink. Then I slept without dreaming.

The morning was fine and the frost was soon melting in the patches where the strengthening sun could reach. As it was the second week of February and such a fine day I had the urge to plant those first-early potatoes I'd sent for. But first, I decided to send Yvonne a text. *Thinking of selling cottage. Agreed?* Not five minutes later, came her reply - *Don't you DARE!* x Thus encouraged, I lugged the seed potatoes out into the garden, calculated, dug two long furrows and pushed them into the soil which, six inches down, was surprisingly not that cold. I searched in vain for a momento - a coin, a clay pipe, a brooch - dropped by a previous incumbent. Here, Susan must have stood in warmer months, the last of her young life, looking at the distant wood and its long-fallen generations of trees, just as I stood looking then at bare branches, hoping to see a green haze, the first sign of change. Perhaps she had walked in that early wood for relief. I thought of all the leaves which had uncurled, faded and fallen since then, and of the new life-forms their rotting had nourished, wondering if she had entertained similar thoughts - which were almost religious.

*Occasionally, I would be forced to rephrase (in red, as above) where deletions had been made or gaps left, particularly in very intimate entries where Susan had clearly been reluctant to discuss delicate sexual matters, and reluctant to use words which might well have been part of her *passive* vocabulary. (I referred to the Internet and was astonished to find a website with Victorian obscenities – though it was of course impossible to decide the extent of Susan's knowledge of them, her being from a sheltered, respectable home. That said, at other times, particularly later in the diary, she would be amazingly explicit – and even crude.)

I felt close to her but knew the notion of closeness was absurd. She lay in some local graveyard, unlamented for a century, her ambitions unfulfilled, beneath a slab of sandstone, the least durable of material, encrusted with lichen, turned illegible. And yet, and yet...of all people on earth, was I not the closest to her? Below my pillow lay her diary.

“Did you really mean me to find and read it, Susan?” I whispered. “Have you really been waiting all these years for me - for us - to come?”

A robin alighted on the handle of my spade and cocked his head at me, as if questioning my sanity. Then he was gone. I decided to walk towards those trees along the path where, no doubt, Hannah had come and gone, carrying her farm eggs. What had altered? I thought again of our daughter Morwenna’s rocking chair. On that solid landscape we were all shadows drifting by.

The spinney rooks were discussing or disputing landing and nesting rights. It struck me that their ancestors had done likewise in the trees long vanished and had even looked down on the foundations of the cottage.

The spinney was cold and damp. It was impossible to believe that those winter-scorched grasses and stalks would soon be overwhelmed by anemones, then bluebells - features of the true miraculousness most people either took for granted or ignored. Suddenly, I felt unwelcome there and turned to look back at the cottage, my home. It looked wonderfully and naturally permanent in its setting, and beyond it I could see for miles. The pinnacles of Gloucester cathedral’s tower glinted in the sun. This was my dream - and unable any longer to stem the tide of pressure built up over weeks, I began to weep.

As I picked my way back through the thawing puddles, a man - the shepherd? - was hailing me from the direction of his bleating herd. He came closer, looking grim, seeming bent on telling me off - no doubt for being there while his sheep were lambing. But when I waved and smiled, he smiled and his grimace melted.

“Mr Hind? From yon cottage?”

“Yes.”

He studied me more closely, looking concerned. He asked if I was alright. As he was a total stranger, I said I was upset because my wife was ill. He sympathised and admitted he had heard something of it at The Fox. I remembered then mentioning it to Marion one night the previous week when I had popped in to buy peanuts for Yvonne.

“Bad business there with Clive Hobbis and all,” he drawled, and I agreed.

“Yes,” he said. “Cain and Abel job, that...”

This startled me. But I shook my head and replied that I had met Kenneth - a decent enough guy - and reported how much he deplored the rumours being spread about him. The farmer shielded his eyes and glanced at the sun, weakening now in the mist.

“*Deplored* be buggered,” he sneered. “Common knowledge round here how much they hated each other. Fought like cat and dog. I was allays a-pulling ‘em apart when we were at school. Kenny were bigger and older - and a right bully. Clive got his revenge though. Made sure the place would never sell. Told Kenny in front of everybody in the Fox bar, he’d never come into his inheritance.”

“But Kenneth was in Prague when Clive got killed!”

“Too true. But there’s ways and means. I know of a bloke in Pitherstock’d kill your granny for a week’s wages.”

“Police haven’t arrested him.”

“No, but my brother knows a Cheltenham bobby - says they can’t pin anything on him, but they

ain't looking for anybody else. Everybody knew round here Clive hadn't got two brass halfpennies. Why target him?"

"But it was in the paper - about the cottage. Maybe villains from Cheltenham..."

"Naw - I'm telling you - when that article appeared, Kenny saw his chance. Especially with the mention of the jinx. Godsend!"

All of a sudden, Yvonne's crazy theory seemed vindicated...and it *was* my fault - at least in part! Now the farmer looked at me narrowly.

"You don't believe in it, do you? The jinx?...Hey, *you do!*"

"Rubbish!"

"It *is* rubbish! Clive and his dad used to plague the mother with ghosts when they'd had a drink, God rest her poor soul...and then he spread the story to put buyers off the cottage - another way of winding up Kenny."

"But George at The Fox -"

"George Stubbs! That silly old bugger! He was Clive's accomplice. Any strangers in the pub asking about the cottage, they got the old, old tale - headless ghosts, stuff being thrown about, doors banging shut, blood on the floor, the works. I couldn't believe it when it all appeared in the paper. Well, rebounded on Clive, *big time*, not that he deserved it, poor lad."

"I'm thinking of putting it on the market. My wife can't settle."

"The jinx!" he said with a laugh.

"No, no, I told you, she's not so well."

I made an excuse about being cold and hurried off.

I had been about an hour at the front window watching the light fade, looking for signs of snowdrops, when my mobile rang. I was expecting Yvonne, but it was Hobbis. He had heard a rumour that I wished to sell up. I racked my brains. I had had a few at The Fox the previous night - but surely I had not revealed a plan not even half-formed? Had the farmer just given him a ring?

"Where on earth did you hear that, Mr Hobbis?"

"Is it true?"

I denied it, though I sounded less than convincing.

"I hear your crazy Missus has done a bunk."

"What business is that of yours? How dare you!"

This then was the unvarnished version of Hobbis - the one I had first encountered on the phone. The one with the champagne, sticking his ugly nose in to have a good gawp around, was the imposter. Instantly, I knew he *was* Cain to Clive's Abel. He told me he would welcome first refusal if I sold, and I played him along.

"So, how much would you be prepared to offer?"

"The same as you paid me."

Immediately I thought of the candle and the face at the window. Was it paranoia to conclude that he was the ghost?? I took a deep breath and kept my cool.

"Well, Mr Hobbis, we've spend at least twenty-five thousand putting it straight - from the way Clive left it."

"Okay - I'll give you an extra five. Buyer's market - unless they're desperate to buy - like you was. You could hang on for months and months for a better price. Especially with the reputation the place has....and if it's driving your missus round the twist..."

"You think you've stitched us up like a pair of kippers, don't you? Well - my wife is not as nutty

as you think...she saw straight through you. She's visiting friends if you must know.....and if you think a few cheesy ghost stories can frighten us into selling this place back to you, then you have a very low opinion of our intelligence. Thank you for the champagne. Good evening - please don't call again."

For consolation, I cooked myself some tagliatelli with prawns in a rich garlicky tomato sauce and drank a bottle of red. I thought over what the shepherd had said about Clive's cultivation of the ghost story. Maybe, as part of a campaign to deter potential buyers - and to infuriate his brother further - he had played up the story of the bloodstain on the floor.

I rolled back the rug and was subjecting the faint outline to torchlight from various angles and distances when a completely novel thought hit me like a train. I got very close and sniffed the redness. If Kenneth was a furniture restorer, then he would have a whole range of varnishes, resins and colour agents at his disposal. Was it too fanciful to suppose that he had decided to carry on where his brother had left off? The face at the window! A lookout? Was Kenneth downstairs touching up or altering the profile on the floor when we had arrived back from Dom's?? The back garden would provide an easy escape route into the fields.

That it would all prove enough to frighten us into selling would be a gamble. Perhaps my suspicious mind was jumping to mad conclusions after a few glasses of wine, but maybe Hobbis's plan all along had been to get someone else to renovate the cottage for him for little or nothing. If he had hatched a plan to kill his brother, scaring us off would be no big deal.

Unable to make up my mind, I built up the fire and made a mental note to change the locks. As the flames curled around the log, I settled down in the rocking chair with the diary and my laptop..

April 9th

Last night, how could I sleep? Am I such a wicked girl to think of Jonathan and to look beyond my present circumstances, tolerable in general as they now are, to a time when the Law, moral and mundane, will allow me to respond positively to his overtures? What a terrible irony and quirk of Fate that he did not think to make his proposal earlier - due to the very custom which propriety demands of widows and widowers. I could have brought such solace to him and to me. I debated all night whether you would raise your voice against a match some would deem perverse and unbiblical, Victoria - but despite my fervent prayers you did not answer.

It has been a dismal day and my spirits are low. I miss the bustle and lively company of our brothers, the cries of the street hawkers, the comings and goings of our neighbours and the rumble of carriage wheels on the cobbles. I miss my cat Nelson whom George

refused to have as cats make him sneeze. In my isolation, when I have wearied of reading and playing my piano, what is there to do but reflect on my ~~predicament~~ situation, especially on a wet day when all thoughts of a walk must be dismissed?

But here was a novelty! Hannah had brought some strawberry plants from her farm and as the rain had abated a little, I readily offered to help plant them out in the garden. But George returned unexpectedly early and flew into a rage to see me outdoors "like a common farm wench" getting my hands dirty. I pointed out to him calmly that this outburst entirely contradicted his desire for me to be a practical wife, but it only enraged him further to be confronted with his own inconsistency. This scene took place in the sitting room while Hanna was still out at the back but George was so loud that she must have heard him scolding me like a child, for she said afterwards, while he was upstairs, that the effort and the fresh air had put a glow into my pale cheeks - knowing perfectly well, it seemed to me, as well as I, that the glow was due to the shame of being so upbraided within earshot of a servant. I could make no reply for mortification, but as she turned away she winked at me in that mysterious, increasingly disconcerting manner. Later, she promised me that the rich soil would, if we had a fair spring, ensure a fine June crop of sweet berries.

April 10th

George's outburst was a culmination of a perceptible alteration in his behaviour. Of late, he has been less attentive and genial than he was as a suitor and groom. There have been periods of silence and once he told me not to play my piano - even soft-pedalled - as it was "rattling his brains". He has taken to drinking more wine than his wont. When I dared to ask him this evening if there was anything troubling him - was I a disappointment to him? - he responded, with a wistful smile, that it was nothing of the kind - only matters of business with which he would not trouble "my pretty young head."

Then he decided to turn in for an early night, stumbling upstairs as he went.

Imagine my humiliation when Hannah mentioned to me before retiring herself - she must have been listening at the door! - that "poor Master" had a lot to contend with because a neighbour of her father's - an unpleasant fellow called Hazel - was refusing to pay him for a barn and other outbuildings. So, my maid knows my husband's business better than I!

April 1th

This morning, over breakfast, George was in low spirits and said there was a matter he had to raise with me - the health of my Father. He was waiting for a large account to be settled and, having ordered large amounts of materials for another project in expectation of being paid, he was temporarily short of funds. Therefore, he would have to suspend his payment of Father's medical bills, but only for a little while - and in between times, I would have to offer up prayers for him and seek the good attentions of the Almighty. I know George has no religious beliefs and I took this to be a flippant remark. So now, my chief reason for marrying has been suspended, possibly nullified. I have been thinking of beginning a novel to while away the long hours - about a woman who is forced to eschew all aspirations to educate and accomplish herself in order to oblige her family, in similar vein to Dickens's Dorrit who sacrifices her childhood for the benefit of a selfish Father, so imprudent in his finances, that he is committed to the Marshalsea for debt. Written by a young woman, by me, with direct experience of such a situation, might it not have an immediacy and appeal to a generation of women thus thwarted? For there are many these days courageous enough to challenge the dominance of the male sex. Is life so much better for us now than in our grandmothers' day? May we vote? Have we access to the major centres of learning? I have seen my own mother reduced to silent tears, after daring to express a political opinion at table. Why have I, an intelligent young woman, been so limited in my choice? I am well

read - far better read than Mr Mason who contents himself with the newspaper and technical journals. I am acquainted with the travails of Clara Wieck struggling to be free of a tyrannical father so that she may marry her Robert Schumann. I love Elizabeth Bennett and Emma Woodhouse for their independence of mind and spirit, yet I, their intellectual and moral, though not social, equal have had to offer myself as ransom for my Father's sake. And now probably in vain! Were it not for the mistakes of his investments, I might have been as free as Emma!

Why does a good God allow our circumstances to be so constrained? - and allow the interests of others to crowd out our dreams - flowers which can never fruit - or only ripen as mental phantoms to torment us cruelly with their fragrance and savour, just beyond our grasp? George is in bed as I write this, sweetest Victoria. Am I not a lucky bride that, upon waking, above all events in my long day, this dark hour of silence and solitude is what I look forward to most?

April 12th

I have decided to write no more during the day when Hannah is about. For I suspect she spies on me. Today, she came into the sitting room but did not knock as I have stipulated, pretending that she thought I was elsewhere. Immediately, I snapped my book shut which she noticed, for she asked with that roguish glint of eye if I were writing a story. I was, I admit, rather curt with her but this did not seem to signify as she went about her dusting humming a tune. I left the room for a moment and returned to find her turning these pages! I snatched the book away, admonishing her for her impudence, but still she smiled, unabashed, and explained that she could barely read and had simply been admiring my pretty hand. I realised then that I had left the wainscot slightly open where I keep this, and going to the window, I pushed it to with my foot. I turned to find her locking away so I was persuaded she had not guessed my secret. Even so, for a few days I will put my diary elsewhere and keep my eye on her and on my corner.

Her behaviour today was a further symptom of a growing impertinence. She is often familiar and less than respectful - yet without doing or saying anything explicit enough to warrant censure. This unsettles me - and she knows it. When she was showing me her - admittedly delicious - recipe for rabbit pie and inviting me to try my hand, I forget to flour the joints so she almost slammed down the flour tin next to me as a reminder - with a smile - yet bordering on a leer. I could almost hear her thinking - silly young goose. Her impertinence lies not in the words she uses but in her tone and gestures. If I accused her, I would look foolish because she would be all innocence. It is a game she plays with me - and I can only lose. I considered even inventing a lie about her to tell to George so that he might dismiss her.

After dinner, when Hannah had retired to the bakehouse, I told George of my embarrassment's, but his reaction was disconcerting. He laughed when I could give no clear reason or cite any offensive words. She was, he insisted, an uncomplicated girl incapable of styness. Besides, he had given a commitment to her father and unless she behaved outrageously he was not prepared, as a matter of honour to break his word. How ill this avowal sat with his broken promise to my Father! When he had finished eating, he said he had business at The Fox - whence he returned two hours later quite intoxicated. Mr Mason begins to reveal much more of another self - with which I am quite disgusted. But what am I to do? Should I run away? How could I - and bring shame upon my parents?

April 13th

This morning, Hannah told me that "Master" had raised my concerns with her as he had gone out to work. I crimsoned deeply, I know, for she smiled roguishly, and then falsely, knowing that her plan to unsettle me was bearing fruit. The glint of her eye belied the pledge she then made to think more carefully in future of how to be more "obliging". She assured me that she was not aware her "bold" manners - result of a childhood

plagued, she said, by two teasing elder brothers - had crept into her dealings with me. She confessed that she thought of me more as a younger sister than as a Mistress, a fault which she would try her very hardest to remedy. This declaration of affection was so transparently feigned that I almost burst out in a temper - but how could I when it was made with such an expression of sincerity? She had, in this fashion, so successfully trumped my ace card - my complaint to George - that to refute her assurance or to complain further about her would have seemed contemptible and churlish, and I was forced to look away from her shining eyes in which she even managed to manufacture, I swear, a tear.

As soon as she left me, I broke into sobs of fury and despair. I cannot beat her in argument or tactics; I cannot arrange her dismissal; I have to pretend, as I pretend to George on Saturday nights, that I am not disgusted and not discontent. So now, I have to invent a second mask to hide behind - from my own maid! Shall I lose my mind? I have ceased to be me in public and can only be so in private solitude, over a diary. I am plagued even by terrible temptations to take my own life.

I would write to my Mother to describe my state of mind and its causes - but how can I mention those things which are the proper concern only of a married couple? In my mind I compose letters to her so full of vague allusions and repellent euphemisms that they are ridiculous. What should I write instead? Mother, Mr Mason is not a proper husband - (Is he? How can I tell?) - Mr Mason drinks; he snores; he is moody; he neglects and ignores me; he takes the side of my maid and disdains my opinion; he will not honour his pledge to Father - (though she shall find that out soon enough!) How many of those criticisms might appertain equally to my own Father? Should I write a postscript - that my maid is underhand and hypocritical? All laughable. Victoria, I despair. Please come to me in a dream - hold my hand and take me with you.

April 14th

This morning, Hannah, without saying a word to me, had moved the sitting room furniture into different positions. This was a further challenge to my authority. Though I have come to hate the room in any case - its very narrowness puts me in mind of my husband's restricted intellect - and how I dread the sterile evenings spent there in his company! - this was a provocation I could scarce ignore. I summoned and commanded her to restore everything to its previous place - whereupon she had the temerity to question me. Was the settle not cosier alongside the hearth, rather than opposite? Would Master not prefer his armchair nearer the fire? Should we not rather wait upon his opinion when he came home? I must have displayed so indignant an air that she straightway curtsied and began to move things back - albeit with a concern for exactitude so exaggerated that she surely meant to mock and infuriate me. I was determined not to show my irritation and went upstairs. When I returned she had gone into the kitchen, having left - quite intentionally - the poker stand on the hearth rug. Had I taken her to task for this, she would, of course, have denied that it was a deliberate act. Thus, she sets traps for me. I must avoid them. I am more determined to set a trap for her and arrange her dismissal. But how? Shall I leave money lying, or a partly drunk bottle of George's wine for her to find and be tempted? Wine partly finished? Here? There is no such thing!

But this evening, what humiliation I have suffered! Hannah must have spoken to George about her rearrangement of the room, for, after we had dined, he had her move his chair, and the table where he rests his wine and glass, to the fire. As she turned to leave, she gave me such a smile and wink of mockery and triumph! I shall and must find the means to have her dismissed...

April 15th

It is Sunday morning and George has not yet risen, so in the absence of Hannah, returned to her farm for a half-day. I take advantage of my solitude to write.

*My fortunes, low as they were, have taken a turn even for the worse. Last night, George was unable to perform as a husband again and blamed this at first on the state of his mind, seeming to forget that at dinner and afterwards he had consumed nearly two bottles of wine. I tried to assure him that his problem would be temporary - and that it did not signify - which comment he took as an indication of my indifference. It annoyed him, he shouted, that I took so little pleasure in his attentions, and he declared that to be the underlying cause of his lack of **erection**. This awful word caused me to crimson and he misconstrued my embarrassment as an admission that he had hit on the truth. Dear Victoria - it is true - I do not take any pleasure - but I cannot pretend what I do not feel - and how should a woman behave during intercourse? When I could not convince him that he was wrong in his inferences he almost became violent and pushed me out of the room.*

Evening

When George finally came down for a late breakfast I had resolved to tell him I was unhappy. Hannah had returned early with a fowl for dinner, so I dismissed her from the kitchen to the bakehouse as I am sure she hovers to listen.

Before I could speak my mind George said he had something to tell me. His business affairs were more difficult than he had admitted - and this was why he had been drinking a little too much. He reddened a little and admitted that alcohol was a well-known cause of - what he referred to - as his "little difficulty". I did not know where to look. He apologised for his intemperate behaviour of the previous night and even took my hand. I burst into tears and he embraced me.

I thought that this would be an ideal occasion for me to show how good my wifely qualities might be, and said that it was a disgrace that his customer, Hazel, was refusing to settle

his bill and I offered to be his secretary and write a demand for payment to him. This did not have the effect I hoped for; on the contrary, for he flew into another rage. How did I know, he stormed, the name of his difficult customer? Had I been using spies? To this, I could hardly admit that Hannah, my servant, was the source of the intelligence and quickly invented a lie - that he had been speaking in his sleep. What a commotion this caused! He never spoke in his sleep, he shouted, to which I unwisely retorted that he would hardly know if he was asleep. He took this as pure sarcasm and went to strike me, but I leapt out of the way. How could I, he yelled even louder, a mere girl, expect to be of assistance to him in a business matter? I should rather, he continued, supervise my maid a lot better - (at this he ran his finger along a ledge to show me dust) - and spend less time playing my "damned" piano! I crossed my arms in a show of defiance - for I resolved at that point not to be afraid of his bullying - and he actually picked up a salt cellar and threw it at me, missing me by a foot and breaking a small window pane before storming out and shouting for Hannah to clean up the "damned" mess. In she came, smiling that damned smile, having surely heard every word - picked up the shattered pieces of the cellar, curtsied in mock servility and left the room to me and a terrible emptiness and silence.

I amaze myself still, Victoria, that I did not collapse into a simpering heap in front of Hannah, but instead composed myself, determined neither to give her the satisfaction of seeing me in distress, nor to give her more material for gossip. When Mason came back in a few moments later, I trembled but could not move away. I had prepared a little speech, resolved to tell him I could not be terrified into compliance, resolved to tell him that he was a different man entirely to him who had come calling on us in Cheltenham. He looked at me darkly, eyes narrowed in his fat cheeks - - - and said he was sorry! The tone of the apology was more official than genuine - as if he held me partly to blame for his shocking conduct. Then, to my further astonishment he began to weep. He might be facing financial ruin, he sobbed, and said that it was out of the

question now that he could resume his commitment to my Father. To see his red face consumed in grief did little for his attractiveness, but I overcame my revulsion and laid a hand on his shoulder. My determination to speak plainly vanished and I even apologized to him for my interference, inwardly doubting that I would ever be a proper wife to him - a wife which I could define as proper - a counsellor, a strong support., let alone a wife which he might define as proper - quiescent....and unreservedly enjoyable in bed.

He recovered himself and told me to get ready to go out. He wanted to speak with his brother-in-law Reginald, a solicitor in Cheltenham to see what legal options he might have. We had a standing invitation to take Sunday tea with his sister, he said, of which he now intended to take advantage. In view of his distress, I had no option but to agree, but the thought of visiting his sister filled me with dismay, for we had had a brief - though long enough - conversation at my wedding.

Amelia Groves is a loud, proud sort of woman. The Groves live in a grand Cheltenham house, not far from the Great School, in the Montpelier district. Amelia could scarce conceal her disdain when I admitted that our family house was situated on the other side of town near the race course. It caused me a kind of inner glee to see my first impression of her confirmed - that she was exactly the model of woman - a pretty, stupid ornament of little use - which George affected to despise - yet how he fawned over her! She is, I admit, not unattractive, though her mouth is a little too wide - through over-exertion? - and she is rather bony. Her fancy attire was obviously worth more than my entire wardrobe and her conversation diverged little from ribbons and lace - unless it was to mention the Smallpieces of Bournemouth - cousins of her husband, with whom they were to visit in May. I had to hear of their delightful situation on the Chine, of their grounds, of their mansion, their carriage - and of course, of their gifted children, one of whom, a girl of thirteen, "one would swear to be an operatic Diva, were

one to hear her singing unseen in a distant room." This however was simply a pretext for her to boast of her own daughter Caroline's accomplishments, and we had to endure fully an hour of her playing the piano - I admit quite securely for a girl of eleven - but her voice! Hardly one note could she sing in tune - and none of her relatives seemed to notice, save her mischievous little brother Samuel who sat next to me, digging me in the ribs to try to make me start or giggle whenever she came very badly off the note. Once he whispered to me that I was "a poor thing" and I gathered that he must have heard his mother utter this at some point prior to our visit.

Amelia is nine-and-twenty whereas her husband is a stern, gray man even older than George. She must therefore have been in my situation at her wedding. I studied her for secret signs of unhappiness but saw none as she chattered on like a bird. Whenever I was invited to comment - not often - on the trivial matters dominating her mind, I found little to say, which made me appear dull. George explained, while Samuel smirked, that my silence was due to shyness, me being "away from amongst my own kind." This was so humiliating - making me out almost to be a Savage or of a lower Order - that I crimsoned up - to the private delight of Amelia who glanced sideways at her haughty Mr Groves, as if to say "what a goose."

In our gig homeward-bound, George would not answer my queries as to the advice he had had from his brother (while I endured his niece's exhibition), saying only, with some impatience, that things were progressing. As we neared the cottage he interrupted his brooding to accuse me of deliberately making my contempt for his sister clear by refusing to join in her conversation. This amazed and provoked me. What, I asked him, could I possibly contribute regarding hats, silks and satins - topics which she had so completely exhausted? And then, maliciously, as George adjusted his seating to give me his cold shoulder, the word "Smallpiece" flew into my head causing me to giggle as I had not done since prior to his proposal of marriage. And I could not stop! The giggles turned to helpless laughter and then to sobs and tears. George was disgusted,

declaring me to be mad, possessed, to be in need of a doctor ...

As I sit now, around midnight, the house is dark and silent; but if I hold my breath, I can just hear my husband snoring in his bed - where he has been since two minutes after our homecoming, when we quarrelled further. He again brought his attack around to castigating me for not taking pleasure in his lovemaking. When I asked him boldly in what manner I should behave to satisfy his expectations, he became even more contemptuous. Women he had known, he said, had expressed their pleasure "openly" and "vociferously". This ought to have made me crimson but I kept my nerve and asked him as coolly as I could, what noises or words I should use. This embarrassed him! He blustered that it should come so naturally that he had no need to be explicit. He could not understand my "reserve" - neither in the bedchamber, nor in company with his family - in view of my "girlish and spontaneous manners" which had first so attracted him.

But how can I be that lively, fresh creature he first admired? I am like the greenfinch which loved to whistle and sing from the treetop in the garden until Father had it chopped down, after which he came no more. I feel as lost and homeless as he.

Now, I cannot settle or compose myself enough to go to bed. My mind is in turmoil. What can be wrong with me that the act of physical union causes me no pleasure? These "women he had known" were they the norm and me some freak? How differently were their nether parts to mine that, within a moment, they could be brought by George into some state of rapture?? I would pretend that he pleases me, but how? Should I laugh? Cry out? If he knows what to expect, then any pretence would be absurd and disgusting to him. Long ago, as a young girl, I discovered, I confess, that special area in me which is very sensitive to the touch. Yet the way which George directs himself does not engage it, but how dare I tell him so, him, a man of experience? Did his other women friends have a more extensive area within themselves, an area more sensitive and more easily excitable? The thought that I should raise these subjects with Hannah

flashes across my mind but I suppress it. Questions torment me which any common strumpet could answer with a laugh and toss of the head. No-one can advise me and to write of such private matters makes my face burn. What cruel doubts and dilemmas I must endure at an age when I should be carefree. To speak rationally of these things to my husband is impossible; to remain silent is to suffer in silence; to remain silent in bed is to invite his contempt; to express what I cannot feel is to invite his anger and ridicule. I pray, Victoria, that you will visit me in a dream, but you never do.

Does George now regret our marriage as much as I? His angry voice rings still, at midnight, like a bell in my head, and I can only answer that clamour by asking why he married me? Does he view me as a peculiar trophy he carried off in triumph as reward for his kindly gesture to our family? If I embarrass him in company and disappoint him in private, what can there remain for him to admire in my person, apart from my youth and countenance? Instead of these thoughts provoking sorrow in me, and a resolve to meet his expectations, it has kindled in me something entirely unexpected - a spark, no a flame of resentment.

On the next page, undated, I found a letter which had been much crossed out and altered. I wrote it out to make it more easily accessible, and I rephrased it a little. It was a letter which caused me to feel great pity, for it seemed poor Susan had rehearsed in it a speech which she had never felt able to give to her dogmatic husband, for at no point later in the diary did she refer to it:

Dear George.

I know I am young, yes, but I am sensible, and may be able to give advice which has never occurred to you regarding your business affairs. Should a wife, no matter how inexperienced, not be permitted to state her opinion, even if it should prove worthless? Your difficulty with Mr Hazel has come home with you to affect me directly, and, if you love and cherish me, you will allow that I have a right to be concerned. I have to admit, George, that the person I have seen in you recently is not the jovial person I married. How I wish he would return! I tell myself that you are sorely troubled and that this affects your outlook, mood - and another matter which you yourself alluded to. Moreover, I do understand that you are unable to expose your innermost disquiet to business acquaintances and employees, and am even gratified that you are honest and unashamed enough show me, within the home, the depth of your anguish, distressing for me as

that has been. I beg you now to find less comfort in your bottle and more in me! Let us be candid with each other in all that troubles us, for only then can we build a marriage which is truly a shelter from the storms of life! Let us not quarrel more, but support each other as we swore to do at the altar.

The emotional intensity of her writing illuminated the page. Like a pressed flower it had survived a century and more, and my reading eyes seemed to restore it to full vigour, causing me to tremble so much that I was forced to close the book.

I could not sleep. Against the screen of my inner darkness I tried to see - as I had been taught to do by a sleep therapist at the time of our marital crisis - ribbons and shapes of light as distractions from my thoughts, the precursors of first images and then faces, characters at the threshold of a dream world, beckoning me in. It was beginning to work and I was looking along a street when, out of the dark sky, there emerged the face of a young woman distorted with misery, filling that inner void. I open my eyes in terror, continued to see that face for a second - and immediately heard a terrific din.

Voices, below, now loud, now soft seemed to be arguing. I shivered. The volume grew to a crescendo and stayed there. It seemed to be coming out of the walls. I turned on the bedroom light and was shocked to see a ghastly face - my face - in the mirror. Down the stairs I crept, legs turning weaker. As I edged along the passageway, the voices, I realised, were not coming from the lounge as I had assumed, but from the kitchen. The noise by now was deafening.....but it was not an argument.....of all things, paintings were being discussed.....a woman mentioned Michaelangelo. I pushed open the door and switched on the light....the radio was blaring, turned up as far as it would go. The windows, curtains drawn back, were mirrors against the pitch black outside. I turned off the programme and the light, and stared out into the moonlit greyness of the front garden. The gate was swinging in the wind. I knew I had closed it. I put on a coat and went out. The conifer was bending and whispering, but there was something else - a distant car accelerating through the gears, then silence. I went in and found my phone and sent a text - *nice try Hobbis*.

My first job of the morning would be to get a locksmith to call. I checked the lounge - empty - put a log on the kitchen fire, and settled down to sleep in the rocking chair. My friend, the owl, hooted for a while...the fridge hummed contentedly and the log crackled.....Then the kitchen door flew open and slammed shut! I jumped up out of my semi-doze but Hobbis - it had to be him! - had already gone by the time I got to the front door. He must have been hiding under the stairs.

“You won’t scare me, Hobbis, you bastard!” I yelled into the night. Of course, there came no reply. My heart was pounding, my ears ringing, my skin crawling.

“There is no ghost!” I said aloud to myself. “Calm down. Be rational. Think...”

Having put on all the downstairs lights, I rummaged under the stairs until I found the length of spare skirting board and the saw. Within fifteen minutes I had screwed two panels across the door jambs, back and front, leaving me secure for the night. For good measure, I taped over the letter box.

Back in the kitchen, I read for a while - but not the diary, feeling too spooked. Eventually, after four, I must have fallen asleep because a terrible dream which had seemed so vivid, woke me. So vivid that I had no choice but to check the lounge to see if blood really had come through from the face below the rug.

The light which I had definitely turned off was on. There was a sweet smell of tobacco. Clive

Hobbs was sitting in his scruffy armchair with his back to me smoking. The blood had come through.... It was shaped as a profile in which the mouth was wide open as if screaming.....Then.I opened my eyes. I was still in the kitchen. By the fire. Drenched in sweat.

This time, truly awake, I did check the lounge. It was dark. It was clean and empty. There was no ghost. Finally, I checked the front door. The panel screwed at a hasty angle across the door and jamb told me that Hobbs had not been part of the nightmare, but real enough.

When I woke - properly after some attempts - it was late morning. There was a face staring at me through the window and I realised the noise I had heard in a drowse was of a knuckle rapping on glass. The face shouted the name Karen Edwardes. It was a name I knew from somewhere. My body ached. I had slept fitfully in that rocking chair, too alarmed to drop off until the day began to break, bringing, with the light, a feeling of comfort and safety. It took me a while to register where I was and I couldn't place the woman. She was blonde like Yvonne but younger, in her thirties and her hair was tied back in a businesslike way. Those staring eyes were large and concerned, as if I looked like death warmed up. I got to my feet and asked her what she wanted. "Richard Hind? Don't you remember me? You phoned me at the paper. I sent you the press cuttings."

"Hold on...I've got to look for the screwdriver..."

She frowned at this and left the window.

"It's alright" I said, holding the piece of skirting board as I opened the door. "I haven't gone mad. Come in."

She looked me over, particularly my stubbly chin, hesitated and then made up her mind that I was probably safe and sane after all.

She looked around the kitchen and said the place has altered a bit since she had talked to Clive.

"I couldn't believe it when the landlady said a Mr Richard Hind had bought it."

She had called at The Fox for a coffee and had hardly been able to get away.

"Marion was a reporter's dream! She seems to know everybody's business."

"Including mine."

"Well...."

I pulled her up a chair and put the kettle on, leaving the skirting board and screws on the table. I beat her to the question.

"I had a visitor in the middle of the night. Not a welcome one."

"The ghost?"

"That's what he wants me to think. But this ghost had a key. Milk and sugar?"

"And who might the ghost be?"

"Previous owner. Not Clive. And not Susan.... ..So, are you here on business - or pleasure?"

"Bit of both. We had an anonymous phone call on Wednesday to say that Clive Hobbs's murderer was the brother."

"Well, you can't print that!"

"Of course not. But the editor was curious. Sent me down to do a bit of snooping. The landlady didn't take long to mention the rumour when I mentioned Clive. Opinion seems divided. Are you here alone?"

"If you've been talking to Marion, you know I am."

She stood up and looked out of the window at the front garden. I could not help but admire her shapely back and legs - a stance for me to admire? She winced at the coffee and promised not to

print anything I told her, so I welcomed the chance to discuss our experiences since moving in - about Yvonne's illness and my fears for her.

I showed her the stain in the lounge and allowed her to take a snap with her phone. In the strong light of the afternoon the outline was quite pronounced. In her opinion, it didn't look much like a profile. Then, to my surprise and unease, she turned and walked straight into Susan's corner. For a split second, I had the strangest of experiences; the room seemed to blink and alter, the furniture was different and older. I felt dizzy and went to sit down in the kitchen, putting the diary into the drawer of the table.

"You went straight to the corner which Susan Mason is supposed to haunt," I told her as she followed me in. She laughed and replied that she just wanted to look at the view out of the window. Then a mischievous gleam entered her eye.

"When I was a little girl - a very little girl - I used to see a nurse with a candle in the upstairs of our old house. When I told my mother she dropped a plate. I never knew it at the time, but the place had been a convalescent home for First World War veterans. After I told her about it, the nurse stopped coming."

"So you're psychic?"

"Maybe. Something here makes me tingle."

"Not me by any chance?"

She laughed again, seemingly out of embarrassment, and then changed the subject.

"You met Kenneth Hobbis. Did you think him capable of murdering his own brother?"

"No. He's too sly and too much of a coward. He hired someone else to do it and went to Prague. There's no proof - so he's probably got away with it."

I told her of his outrageous offer to buy me out.

"I don't know for sure, but I reckon he was making plans all along. Just seems everything has fallen into place very sweetly for him."

Time was getting on so I offered to make her a late lunch. She accepted.

After a second glass of wine she said she would not be able to drive. I didn't look up or respond. Then, with a look that made my heart skip, she said she had never spent a night in a haunted house. I thought immediately of poor Susan's desperate attempts to rise above the temptations of the flesh, and told her she could have the spare room. By five she had sobered up and was on her way, leaving me feeling very noble, though bothered by the thought that, had she been a little less tall and a little prettier, my desire for company and solace might have overruled virtue.

April 22nd

For seven days I have made no entries in my diary, Victoria, for I have been ill. It began on the morrow of our visit to the Groves when a terrible lethargy kept me abed. George sent that afternoon for the doctor who diagnosed a nervous disorder, for I felt able - he being a man below thirty and of a sympathetic disposition - to confide in him some of my anxieties, (though not those most personal). I confessed, after some encouragement from him, that I felt lonely and helpless, confronted by what I called -

with a facial expression I tried to make meaningful - my husband's difficulties in businessand "other matters." Having witnessed how impatient and cross George had been at the door of my bedroom, complaining that I had a head full of strange ideas and girlish fancies, Doctor Runnells seemed to guess a certain amount of what ailed me, for as he examined me, once George had left us alone, he asked me in a whisper if I was happy. The word was so poignant to me - once a girl entirely happy - and the doctor so kind and gentle that I broke out in silent weeping, whereupon, as soon as I had quite calmed myself under his comforting hand, he said that there was little he could find wrong with me - medically. He wanted me to stay in bed for a week and rest, prescribed that I be given herbal tea to soothe my nerves and ordered that I eat lots of eggs and red meat as my pallor suggested anaemia.

What else he said downstairs must have been persuasive because after his visit George became quite his old self - and Hannah was an excellent nurse, attending to my every need. The doctor reminded me a little of Jonathan with his intense blue eyes, and as his next visit approached I looked forward more and more to seeing him again. I must confess to this page that I had tingled when he examined me and stroked my forehead, and that the feeling was delightful. I felt, at first, ashamed of what happened when he came yesterday, but I was unable to prevent it. He sent Hannah away to make me an infusion, sat on the edge of the bed and asked me directly if I was happily married - in every sense. I could not speak and at first only nodded - - then shook my head. His eyes were so intensely kind and his manner so gentle again that I felt my colour rise and my heart quicken. With wavering voice, he asked me if I felt better - but I could not reply. He told me that I did look better - my pallor had gone - but, of course, he knew, as a doctor, why I was crimson. He undid two buttons on my nightgown to feel my heart and listen with his instrument. I became faint with desire and involuntarily moved my legs. The bumping of my heart must have deafened him, for quite suddenly he stood up. What treatment I needed, he could not give, he murmured. Instantly, I

felt shame and watched in silence as he packed his medical bag. He too had gone quite red and his hand trembled.

Hannah, clumping up the stairs, broke the tension between us and he said he would inform Mr Mason that he thought a holiday would do me good, that I was otherwise quite recovered, and with a last look, a smile and a nod he was gone!

But what happened next astonished me.

Here below, an attempt had been made to scribble out the next few lines, and for a while I debated whether it was ethical to try and read what Susan had later regretted writing. But curiosity of course got the better of me and with a torch below the page and a few deductive skills I eventually managed to piece together the following (..... denotes where the scrubbing out made it quite impossible to read a word.)

*Hannah, a woman of experience, saw too that I was aroused. Coming close, she bent over me and slowly did up the buttons on my dress, brushing my right breast, then kissed my hot cheek. I felt my whole inner open up even more with a terrible desire, and as soon as she had winked and flounced out, unable to resist temptation, I committed a selfish act, disgraceful but *exhilarating* (?) and afterwards I slept.*

This morning, I left my sickbed. It was a beautiful day and I walked quite a way - slowly - along the lane, returning with an armful of daffodils. My face in the mirror was aglow with the fresh air and I looked very pretty. Although I try, I cannot stop thinking of the effect I had on Doctor Runnells.

As I turned to remove my bonnet, Hannah came out of the kitchen to smile at me, eyes intense, seeming to penetrate my own eyes to read all I was thinking. I should have blushed but instead returned her steady gaze, for though I should have done, I felt no shame - or not enough to trouble me. I begin to think differently. Young women should not be married off to old men. Although afterwards there may be some guilt, I

know now what remedy I have to hand to still my youthful *urges* which George Mason cannot provoke or requite. Only I must not think things.

I was sullenly angry with George this evening. He said he was pleased to see me quite recovered from my "girlish" troubles and hoped I would think and behave more seriously when I came of age. He also commanded me to eat properly, for what I consumed was "scarce enough to keep a sparrow alive" and I had lost weight. It never seems to occur to him that I am unhappy and that he is the cause! But that was not all, Victoria. Before he retired he told me that he had sold his Cheltenham villa to ease his financial embarrassment. I said nothing, for I have learned that it is futile to wish to be consulted in any matter and have no wish to provoke his ill temper by protesting. But I wish it had been the cottage he had sold.

April 25th

Blessed Monday! Four days have passed since last I wrote here. The sun is shining and the air is still. I am alone. Hannah has asked to be allowed to return home to care for her sick mother and only too willingly have I agreed. As before the New Year, I have made a list of resolutions which I will keep. The chamomile tea which the good Doctor prescribed, does indeed, I am certain, calm my anxieties and makes me, if not content with my situation, resigned to accept it.

Having toured the garden where the seeds and plants George's man put in are showing well.. I begin to count my blessings. On Hannah's strawberry plants there are not red, as I had always assumed, but white flowers, and I take these as a symbol of purity in thought and deed to which I must aspire! God has surely sent me a message, for, upon walking out in the sunshine and fresh air, sweet with the fragrance of hedgerow blossom, I asked myself, might I not be living, instead of in this idyll, in a London slum as Mr Dickens described? The thought that most English women are in a far,

far worse ~~predicament~~ situation than I - in slums, in factories, in workhouses - fills me with both shame and gratitude. I must never forget that George is responsible for the welfare of the seven-and-thirty men he employs, and has been so for more years than I have been alive. Is it any wonder that he feels so keenly the threat to his business and finds so laughable the thought that I, still a girl, could be of practical help? If he behaves sometimes irrationally, is it so surprising? What do I know of such pressures that I may pass judgement? I surely have no right to feel wretched.

And I should not doubt George's character. His true, good nature is temporarily eclipsed, as the sun by a cloud, but not destroyed. I shall look beyond the present time to the future - from worse to better - when, with God's blessing all our problems will be resolved. George has built me a beautiful home, surrounded by the best countryside in England. I shall not be daunted by Hannah's peculiar ways - but laugh at them. I shall pray for fortitude and tolerance.

I have just read over my entries for April, Victoria, and have to feel remorse. My conscience says I am selfish not to look on the positive side of my situation. I am tempted to rip out those feverish entries. George is right - I must abandon childish ways. It is as if there are two people living in this frail frame - a girl with unworthy notions and a young woman with obligations to fulfill. How I would love to go to Church, to seek God's help in my struggle to conquer the unworthy part of me. But George is stubborn and will not take me in the gig for he likes to lie in on Sunday mornings. He would never consent to me walking nearly six miles round. The Ibbotsons from the farm pass by in their cart and I see there is room - but he would not allow me to ride with them. Part of me rebels, but have I not vowed to obey him? I know my resolve to be obedient and resistant to temptation would be strengthened by being in God's house but to explain this to George would be impossible.

I must pray to quell any bitterness which his stubbornness inspires, threatening to undo my determination to love and respect him. But I will yet be strong and stronger! I

shall write no longer in this diary, but, instead, devote all my energies to my tasks at home.

I too, Susan, live in relative luxury, in a peaceful corner of rural England which most people on earth would adore. I should not be depressed by problems which those people would willingly swap for their own. But you have no idea what awaits you barely two months after this entry. Nothing so brutal can be my fate. I would hold hands with you across the chasm of time which divides us, were such a thing possible. I will not be able to see a person cry now without feeling compassion. You have taught me that. You were a brave girl.

May 2nd

Dis gusting dreams have been disturbing my sleep, Victoria, and I have need, after all, to write here again, to cast them out of me. Long and fervently have I prayed the whole day, for I took vows before the Almighty to remain faithful, to forsake all others in honour and love for my husband, whatever his shortcomings. In my dreams a man comes to me who looks like the Doctor and like Jonathan, and with him I do unspeakable things. I have sinned in mind, I have broken the Sixth Commandment in thought and I am wretched for it. I had made resolutions, but what can Willpower alone do against such nightmares and visions which invade my waking and awaken head without warning? There must be a Demon within me bent on filling my body with lewd and gross impulses, bent on dragging me to Damnation. Only my Saviour can cast this Demon out - if only I could go to Church! Over and over, I have read Saint Mark's account of the casting out of the Demon in the young man brought by his father to Jesus after his Transfiguration on Mount Sinai, have kissed the very text, have lain prostrate on my bed, pleading for my Soul, captive of this sinful body, to be delivered from its prison. I have desired separation in a mortal sense - full knowing that it is also sinful to have suicidal thoughts - though unable ever to contemplate raising my own hand against myself, I must confess to holding my breath and telling my poor heart to stop, stop, stop - but how can it? Such an act of separation lies only within His Power. I seek therefore a different separation - to quell and subdue, by the supreme

effort of the Will, the lusts of the flesh and to release my Soul to soar heavenward free and untainted, free as the enviable white dove I see from my window.

I have taken tea, am calmer and can think rationally at last.

Dear Victoria, just as I have learned to read, to perfect my speech, to play my piano and to practise good manners, I am convinced that I can teach myself, with God's Grace, to nullify my physical urges.

For, if I perspire, can I not dry and cool myself at that open window? If I am hungry, can I not fast and suppress all thoughts of food for a time? If a memory troubles me, have I not the imagination to think of something more pleasant in stead? In such matters, I am not a slave! Why should the strongest physical impulse of all be any less susceptible to suppression by the Will, if the Will is sufficiently trained to match the strength of the impulse? As example, I have the Religious Orders of the Brides of Christ to inspire me. I do not have the ability to command my breath and heart to stop, but I can command elsewhere.

This afternoon, numbering the impure thoughts and dreams of that lustful Chimera in my dreams at ten, I took a pin ten times to my most sensitive part, source of all my woes, until I could bear the pain no more. By Saturday night I shall be healed. I am resolved now, that each time such a thought penetrates my armour, or even sense that one is close, as the eastern glow precedes the rise of the sun, I shall picture the pin to dispel that thought, always keeping count. At five I shall enter the closet to punish myself. I will conquer this sinfulness, for as God is the Lord and Master of the World, so shall I be of my body, and not vice-versa.

May 5th

My desperate designs bear fruit and I have greater peace of mind. George's financial worries have eased since the sale of his main house and Hazel has even paid some of his

bill after Mr Groves wrote him an official letter. I am pleased to be told of such matters. Things improve.

Tonight we ate heartily of a pigeon pie I had made under Hannah's expert eye and I glowed with pride to be complimented on the advances I have made in the culinary arts. George will reach forty in October and he talks of this a great deal, particularly when he has drunk wine. He was at first cheery at dinner and spoke of how amazed he was at the prospect of becoming "an old man", he "not long out of breeches charging about with hoop and stick". I assured him gaily that his talk of ageing was premature but as he reached more often for his decanter his tone altered slightly. Less pleasantly, he asked how I should enjoy being married to a Great-Uncle - for his eldest brother Peter's married son Timothy is about to become a father. I was unable to make a sensible reply to this and he fell silent and gazed into the fire. At eight, Hannah came in as usual to clear the table and he asked her how she would enjoy being married to an old man. I almost died with embarrassment for him, and when her ready wit produced a vulgar comment - "At least she would get a good night's sleep," she said - making him roar with laughter, I had to leave the table.

He woke me coming to bed at I knew not what hour. He was staggering with his candle and muttering and cursing. I pretended to be asleep. He even held the candle close to my face, but still I refused to open my eyes. He belched and emitted a noisome wind. He got into bed and snored so loud that I came downstairs, where now I sit until fatigue shall overtake me again, when I shall creep up into the guest room.

May 6th

When I woke the house was silent. In our bedroom - empty - I found another letter. The hand was shaky and there were many crossings-out and changes of mind - clearly the letter had been written under the influence of much wine, for there were scarlet droplets

on it too. I copy it out here, without misspellings and errors of grammar, to be better able to appreciate its full hostility to my interests - and to me as a person.

Well, Susan, it is time I reckon to be plain about certain matters which I've been silent on thus far. I have to admit that my joining with you did not suit certain members of the family. They have sunk capital into this business of mine and have shares - but I will not trouble your pretty head with how it's all drawn up. All you need to know is that I've decided in this important year of becoming forty to get my affairs adjusted to take account of you while not compromising the interests of my kinsfolk - brothers and nephews - in short, to make a new will. My brothers Charles and Peter fear that any child born to us would harm the interests of their eldest lads. Our boy, should we have one, would grow up as the major shareholder - inheriting my portion - and might be of a mind to cause the business to be sold against their wishes. So, wife, I must take that into account, for my brothers have stood by me in bad times enough - as they have recently - when new commissions were as rare as blue moons. So I propose that, were we to have a son, he would inherit, through my decease, his right and proper share at the age of twenty-one, but should he wish to sell it, it could only be sold to his surviving uncles or cousins. For the business to be sold outright, all parties would have to agree. Should we have further offspring - already a remote chance in view of your inability so far to be with child, I would adjust my will further to provide modest annuities for them - for, God damn it - I started in life with nothing and featherbedding did many a richer lad than me only harm, causing them to drink and gamble their money away in sloth. Now I come to you. I sense, as you know, that you are already tired with the match you have made, and think yourself a good deal higher-minded and more respectable than poor old George Mason with his rough hands and manners, but you come from a family now as poor as church mice because of your father's ill-judged investments. I'm not just a good judge of bricks and mortar, and I sense a slyness and defiance in you - a

calculating girl beneath that innocent facade - who is hoping to come into a fortune when poor old George has cocked his toes up. You would be young enough when that time comes to remarry - and nice enough looking to attract suitors. To make you rich would attract the wrong sort, so I mean to invest enough money this year - in case I die - to provide you with £200 p.a. - an adequate income to live. The cottage would be sold under the terms of the will and the money bequeathed evenly between all parties including you so that you would have to find somewhere to rent. You would be twenty and marriageable. At twenty-five, should I die at forty-five you would receive £300, at thirty £400, and so on incrementally by £50 each year I survive. These annuities would continue for three years after my death, in which time, I reckon, you should be able to find a new mate to dote on as devotedly and as lovingly as you do on me. It would therefore benefit you to look after old George into to his declining years, and you would be a little fool to entertain any thoughts to the contrary, by, for example adding any of them red mushrooms in the spinney to his rabbit pie.

This then, set against the value of his relations, was the sum of my value to Mr. Mason. It froze my blood and dissolved every and any resolution to keep up the efforts I had so far painfully made to restrain my wayward impulses and my suppressed inclination to dislike him. I almost threw the letter onto the fire but a sudden thought stayed my hand. He had written it when very drunk. Might recollection of it and then wiser counsel have prevailed during a sobering day? Perhaps, upon his return home, he will humbly apologize for those insults.

He had accused me of cunning, and with that in mind, I went up to the bedroom, put the letter in a fresh envelope and dropped it behind the chest of drawers upon which he had stood it leaning against the wall.

My surmise proved correct. George, on his return, looked completely abashed, and I, having composed myself, was able to play the part of the perfect innocent. I smiled and

greeted him with a kiss on the cheek, found his slippers and poured him a glass of wine which he refused with a gesture of disgust. He tramped upstairs and immediately redescended, looked at me narrowly and asked if I had found a letter which he had placed "absent-mindedly" on the tallboy in the bedroom. The envelope had not been addressed to anyone and I could tell he was praying I had not opened it. I managed to feign surprise and assured him I had not seen it, deciding then to put him in a predicament by suggesting that it might have fallen behind the drawers onto the floor, and offered to go up to search for it, whereupon he sprang to his feet and said he would go, directing me to the kitchen to ask Hannah to bake an apple for his pudding.

When he came back down he said with a weak smile that he had not found it, and must have mislaid it elsewhere. In his clenched hand I could see a patch of white, and as I turned to arrange a bowl of flowers, asking him if the letter was anything of importance, I glimpsed him putting it on the fire as he replied in the negative, saying it was only a reminder to a customer to settle an account.

I conclude now that his shame lay less in the formulation and content of such unworthy sentiments regarding his spouse, than in the fact that he had been so unwise - due to intoxication - in risking them being prematurely discovered by her. But his spouse has the advantage of him, knowing now his true mind, while he harbours no suspicion that she knows.

So, I have seen yet another aspect of Mr Mason which is even more repellent than his insobriety, ill-temper and violence - those I have even excused on grounds previously stated. But this was an act of disloyalty compounded by mendacity, and whilst I know that a second sin is not justified or nullified by a first, what was my little deception with the letter - or indeed any private thoughts and private acts of which I had been ashamed - compared with his utter contempt for me? If this is his idea of loving and cherishing, why should I honour and obey him? If he will dissemble, then so will I.

May 10th

Hannah has drawn to my attention the state of the garden. Weeds are threatening to choke the strawberry plants on which fruits are already formed and some ripening. She had pulled some out, she said, but it needed doing more thoroughly and regularly, and knowing that "Master" did not want me to get my hands dirty - (she said this with that sly wink) - she had another suggestion which I might consider. Her cousin Jacob was a journeyman, and what with lambing finished, and with other jobs in the fields less urgent after sowing, he found himself less in demand. For a shilling a day to pay for his ale, he could come odd times to tidy the garden, if Master would allow.

The thought of the strawberries ripening and of a tidy garden lifts my spirits on this dull May afternoon. I know that George will refuse my request for Jacob to be engaged, so I shall assert my independence and engage him myself without telling him. He never bothers to lock out the back and if Jacob is away by four in the afternoon he will never know he has been. I will pay the shilling from my household allowance. This shall be our secret and Hannah shall know it is.

This morning, she showed me how to draw and prepare a fowl and I am proud I could do a good job. It should make a beautiful stew with the onions and carrots Hannah bought. I shall say and do nothing to annoy George. I shall appear to be the attentive wife and conform to his expectations - for as long as this marriage lasts.

What my inward thoughts and intentions are shall remain my own private business - as his do.

It has become clear to me that his declarations of love were the result of some unfathomable delusion. He even seems to take less pleasure in my body and even less in my company - why should he, when he has his bottle? In the former case, it may be because I have taken to washing less assiduously, the more to match his state of hygiene. Last Saturday, I decided to copy exactly the sighs he makes when he....ch, it is too

disgusting to describe, but it seemed to gratify him.

Never was a couple more ill-matched! If I propose a walk, he winces and points to his sore knees; if a game of backgammon, he declares that it bores him; if I offer to play or read to him, he strikes his head, and says that music and books rattle his brains. His conversation is meagre. If he tells me the tale of how Amos Warner fell from a roof and got up quite unscathed again, I swear I shall run screaming from the room! How I loathe that room! We sit for long periods saying nothing, me reading or sewing, him sipping or gulping wine. On many occasions, I look up to find him staring at me with a scowl which I return with a false smile. At nine, he yawns and stretches and utters the same rhyme - "I must be up at five, to stay alive, away by six, to build my bricks."

And then, thankfully, I have my solitude.

May 1st

Jacob is a tall, handsome fellow of about three-and-twenty with curly blond hair. His eyes are blue and mischievous like his cousin's but there is a greater openness and generosity of spirit in his countenance and manners than in that Minx of a maid. He is already bronzed through working in the open and his eyebrows and eyelashes are comically sun-bleached. May and June, he said with a pleasant lilt and brogue, were a slack time on the farms and he was glad to be able to earn a little and do me a little good. At this latter phrase he smiled so beguilingly, that I could only return his grin, destroying my resolve to maintain a proper distance. Hannah struck him good-naturedly across the shoulder for his "impudence" though I failed to spot in what way he had offended.

I watched him from the bedroom as he crouched down, open-legged to put weeds into his bucket. The sun had come round to shine into my window so that I was sure that its reflection would conceal me - but it did not. He kept looking up and then raised his bare

arm to wave at me. In the same instant, Hannah came out of the bakehouse and was looking up at me too, smiling. I tugged at the curtains - as if their closure had been my intention all along - and drew the scene to a close, though I was sure I could hear them laughing.

I know now, Victoria, that your silence betokens one of two things. Either God will not allow you to bring me solace in a dream - in which case he is a cruel being; or there is no such thing, no heaven, no angels - and you, Victoria, are truly dead, as dead as the mallard which put these gloomy thoughts into my head, for after Jacob had gone, George returned unexpectedly early and tossed the mallard he had shot on the river to Hannah for her to draw and pluck, having first taken the axe to its head., saying it was too thin to have enough meat on for a meal but would be nice in the stock pot. My face must have shown disgust, for George laughed at me and said that there were plenty more quacking out there.

It was a beautiful creature, iridescent green and blue. I could not help but compare its sleekness with the fatness of George and his pock-marked complexion. What had given him the right to deprive it, like me, of life?

May 13th

My mother has written to me to ask how we fare and whether there is any sign of a "happy event." I know not whether to laugh or cry at the notion. Should I reply and tell of her of the awful scene at Saturday breakfast in late April after my recovery when, in positive and optimistic mood I raised that very question? If I could conceive and give birth, I told him, then my nervous depressions and anxieties would lift. I even suggested that we lie more often together and that on those nights George should restrict his glasses of wine. I shudder to recall his reaction. How could we afford a child, he shouted, until his business affairs were settled? Why was I so impractical and silly a

wife? He needed, he said, his wine to relax himself after a fraught day at work, straining every fibre to earn money to clothe and feed me. How could he treat as sincere my wish for a more frequent intercourse - how I crimsoned to hear that word - when he knew full well what a chore it was to me?

Hannah had been in the kitchen and her face told me she had heard everything his raised voice had uttered. She smirked later as I asked her to change our bed linen. For what reason? - she seemed to be wondering.

Later still that day, George renewed his attack on me, having heard Hannah singing a song I had composed which she had overheard me practising. Was I the poor and lonely maid in question? I denied it of course, but my crimson face said otherwise. He shouted that he would have the piano removed and sold - my instrument, not his - if I wasted my time on such miserable nonsense.

That sly, underhand woman! When George had gone to The Fox, she came to me to apologize for being so thoughtless and promised never to sing the song again. Yet I am certain that she sang it on purpose to ferment trouble between us.

Shall I write and tell my mother of all these matters and more? Shall I tell her how feverishly I look forward to George's return from the inn and to our nuptial bliss in the dark as he tries, cursing me, with beery fumes, to become capable? No, rather this. If only one person shall discover my journal one distant day and read of my ~~situation~~ predicament, when I have taken my life, as I surely must, then I shall rest easy. Shall I even post it to Mother ere I go?

May 14th

Jacob has brought the garden into fine condition and now I can appreciate just how many strawberries there will be if the warm weather holds. As with the Doctor and Jonathan, I cannot prevent images of Jacob entering my head and I have foresworn

the desperate remedies I adopted. Were I happy and contented with my husband, were I an older woman, then I would have grounds to feel guilty - for the thought which precedes the deed is, as the Reverend Tomlinson never tired of saying, as wicked as the sin itself. I would tell him that my armour is pierced - not by my lack of determination - but by the negligence and insufficiency of the very man in whose Cause it was donned. I have to admit to myself that my young body is dissatisfied, hence my dreams and daydreams - they confirm it only too powerfully. It does not help or signify that I recall the doctrine that the union of the sexes is the instrument of God for the procreation of new life, for I know now that George Mason does not desire a child - or does not regard it as a priority over the interests of his brothers and their offspring - or, indeed, of his claret. Wherefore then, am I married? To what end should my vow of faithfulness be kept, even though I shall never betray it in an actual deed?

May 18th

For three days I have been unable to summon up the inclination to write in here. This morning George was again unsympathetic when I explained that my original lethargy had returned. He was in an evil temper due to an excess of wine last night and accused me of being more feeble than an old woman, of trying to make him sorry for me when it ought to be the opposite, for he had to bear great responsibility on his weary shoulders, twenty years older than mine. If his horse was dull and lazy, he said, with a clear threat in his voice, he took a whip to it. And then he left with a great slam of the door.

For an hour I could do nothing, put my mind to nothing. Hannah brought me a chamomile tea and some breakfast but I could eat nothing. She told me that the day was warm and clear, that the strawberries were ripening and many almost ready to pick, that it would do me good to walk in the garden.

I found myself quite alone there and the warm air did revive me a little. In the field beyond, the tiny lambs were frolicking and from the woods the rocks noisily calling.

Spring was at its most joyous and sporting its freshest of green liveries. I should have been at the heart of all this, not at its edge! Then I thought with dread of Mason's return in the evening, of the terrible long silences, of his drinking, of his scowls, of his odour - and as I looked - in vain - to the heavens for a sign of Merciful Love, two swans came flying over, so close, to each other, so much in harmony, in such mockery of my marriage that I burst out again in weeping.

I felt at that instant a strong consoling hand on my shoulder, and thinking that, after all, my prayer had been answered, and that George had returned to make amends, I turned....and found myself staring, not into his narrow eyes, but into the kind eyes of Jacob. I could not prevent myself sobbing and ran from him and past an astonished Hannah up to my room, where I presently languish in half-light, my curtains drawn to. My distress has exhausted me further, and I will sleep now.

It was mid-afternoon when I woke. It was warm and I opened a window. From the garden I heard terrific squeals, as if from a rabbit caught in a trap, and thinking Hannah had set one too close to the cottage against my express wishes, I hurried down to see what could be done. On exiting the back door, I realised that the cries were not from an animal but from Hannah - audible through the top window of the bakehouse. Was she ill - or worse, was Jacob attacking her? - for he was nowhere to be seen. I was about to open the door when the squeals turned to cries of elation. I could not help but peer in through the window and was rewarded with the sight of her on her bed quite naked, with her legs crossed over the thrusting back of her equally naked cousin! Her face was contorted in apparent agony but she was making the sounds of relief and delight. She momentarily opened her eyes, surely saw me, but did not break off. What must my hot face, unable to look away, have told her? I continued to watch until all was quiet and was utterly astonished to see Jacob roll away onto his back, revealing a male **member** exceeding George's three-or-fourfold in length, almost as long as my forearm

with such a plump ending, akin to a great strawberry. I hurried away, went upstairs and closed my door. I could hardly breathe, my chest was so tight. I realised with disgust that I was wet below but could not resist the urge to still the panting desire within myself, until I too was moaning with pleasure, as in previous daydreams of Jonathan and Doctor Runnells, only this time much more so, as I imagined Jacob lying with me. No! - on me, within me, moving that huge appendage back and forth.

When Hannah came into the parlour much later I had composed myself again and was staring into the fire. She said that she had seen me in the garden earlier on while she was entertaining Jacob, and assumed I had been picking strawberries. From behind her back, with such a roguish look in those pretty eyes, she slowly produced a pot of cream and placed it on the table. She went to the window and looked out to where Jacob was digging. I stood and joined her there. Her lips were parted and I could see her teeth clenched as she gripped the sill. Jacob turned and thrust the spit of the spade deep into the soil to the hilt, waved at Hannah and bowed extravagantly towards me with a flourish of the hand. Then he thrust his hands into his pockets and looked at the sky.

Hannah giggled. He was an impudent fellow, she declared - he thought he was a good catch for any girl - but she could resist him. How was I to interpret this other than as a teasing mockery of me, for she had surely seen me at the window of the bakehouse? It even occurred to me that, by the volume of her cries, she had deliberately summoned me there to watch. I turned to her and told her she was a hypocrite - at which she laughed even louder. I slapped her face. She slowly shook her head and asked what was wrong with me, though her eyes said she knew. This made me blush and I left the window.

There came a tap at the front door. There stood Jacob, cap in hand, asking if he might have a drink of water. He came in and I watched as Hannah filled him a glass and very slowly handed it to him. Both smiled at me as if by prearrangement. Hannah declared that now the sun was come out she would pick strawberries for me unless I had more urgent matters for her to attend to. She had tried a plump, ripe strawberry earlier

and it had been very pleasant, she said, nudging Jacob who spilled his water and looked puzzled and hurt. When he was gone out, she asked with false concern if I was ill or embarrassed. I told her "neither" - the air had only become very close.

"I saw you at the window, Mrs Mason," she whispered. "We were playing a game."
"A game?"

It was a favourite game of theirs, she declared, for the first time with genuine defiance. She said she knew I could not play that game with "Old Mason" and knew that I would not tell him of what I had witnessed because, if I did, and it landed her in trouble, she would tell the whole of Pitherstock that I had enjoyed watching and wanted to join in. This astonished me very much, but before I could answer she had flounced into the garden to join Jacob. I watched - and he saw me watch - as Hannah bent and stooped in a provocative manner to pick the fruit. She looked at me too and, with a smile, popped a strawberry, a very large one, into her mouth, rolling up her eyes to the whites. I drew the curtain. I was trapped in a terrible marriage and at the mercy of an insolent maid and a lustful gardener.

May 19th

This afternoon, Hannah was all smiles as if yesterday had not happened. She had, she said, a surprise for me, a present I would really appreciate. From a bag she drew out a bottle which contained a liquid of a very pale pink colour. She said she had taken all the overripe and rotting strawberries into the bakehouse, mashed them, added warm water, sugar and yeast. This was the fermented result, a sparkling strawberry wine. I had always found wine unpalatable and harsh, and told her I had no desire to drink what she offered. She smiled and replied that hers was sweet and not strong enough to cause me upset. I watched as she took out the stopper and poured a glass. It was fragrant and effervescent, creaming with foam, and she took the glass slowly to the window, capturing therein the sun's brilliance. I could not resist following her, and put the glass to my lips as

she passed it to me with a curtsy. It was not harsh, not sour, but lusciously sweet. Thirstily I drank and she filled my glass again. And again. My head became light and I saw two of her smiling face and had to sit down. "Drink, Mistress," she whispered. She had, she said, another surprise even better than the wine. I remember her raising the glass to my lips and singing a soft lullaby. Then, in a daze, unable to protest, I was lifted and carried in sinewy, freckled arms, wispy with blond hairs, and felt as if I was flying.

When I came more clearly to my senses, I was lying on my own bed, quite naked. I tried to move but could not. Equally naked, Hannah was pressing her lips - oh horror, oh bliss - to my breasts and nipples. Her head moved down and I watched her put the tip of her tongue into my navel, turning her great eyes to look up at me with that roguish smile. She whispered she had read in my eyes, staring through the bakehouse window, what my secret wishes were. I tried to reply but could only groan. My whole being was on fire as she moved even lower to flick me with her tongue. She was kneeling on the bed with her rump raised high. With one hand she slowly rubbed herself and I whimpered - partly with horror, yes, but also with a terrible desire. Now Jacob appeared into my view, also naked, massaging his huge rod, and proceeded to sink it slowly and deep into her making her laugh and cry out - and me shudder. At first he moved slowly, then gained momentum until she seemed at the point of ecstasy - when he stopped and withdrew the thing, now glistening with Hannah's *juice* (?), an inch at a time, for a seeming eternity. He stepped away from her and came to the end of the bed, took my unresisting ankles in his hands and spread my legs apart until they would go no further. In an instant he was entering me very slowly, filling me so full that I thought I would die with the agony and the thrill of it. It did not take long before I was shouting and screaming as a tide of delight swept through me from head to toe. This must have been what my sister Victoria experienced, for her to look so blissful. Could there be a more intense emotion than this?

I must have passed out and when I woke I was under the covers. Had it been another of my wicked dreams? No. I was naked and between my thighs was a huge dark patch. Immediately I thought of George's return, the sun being to the right in the window, and hurriedly I ripped the sheet from the bed and put it into the laundry. I filled a bath and sat for a while in the cool but comforting water, for I ached and was sore. In the mirror my eyes were wide and my cheeks were flushed. I was a proper woman at last, but had I sinned? All had been achieved against my will because of the wine. Was I to blame if I had enjoyed the act I had hated? Enjoyed? What a weak and watery word to describe such an experience!

George is upstairs snoring as I complete this entry. He said how pleased he was to see me quite recovered and aglow with health - and I could not reply. All evening we sat in silence, him drinking and whistling, me reading without taking in what I read. My face hidden behind those book covers, I could constantly relive the events of the afternoon. My face is, as George remarked, quite changed. I experience the good and natural state of being alive - good for me and for all of my sex. I can and shall feel guilt no more. Anything less than this contentment is due. I now conclude, to the tyranny of inadequate men asserting their power over us.

I could not resist flicking through the next pages and was horrified that after five or six the rest were blank. How her infidelity had come, or had been brought, to George's attention was now my most prominent thought. My chief suspect was Hannah, but perhaps he had walked in on another steamy scene. Or had Susan blurted out the truth in a quarrel? I was terrified that the diary would end without an explanation. I began to see an alteration in her language and handwriting - and the dates disappeared, as if time had ceased to be of importance, causing me to wonder if she had had a presentiment of her death - or had even desired it. I had no way of telling how many days had elapsed between the previous and next entry.

I have not written here for a while, dearest Diary, for I have been much occupied. There is now no need to be modest in my mode of address to you. If Mason can drink away his cares, ignoring me, then so can I, ignoring him. I am always quite sober by the hour of his return.

As soon as Hannah brings in a bottle, my heart flutters and I tremble. I hear the spade which Jacob wields being slammed into the earth and know that within minutes he will be here. He addresses my urges until I cry NO MORE while Hannah watches, standing legs apart, attending to her own pleasure. Then it is my turn to watch his great thick Dick push in and out of her, taking her skins inside. Can she scream louder than me? We wager. Jacob protests that we pretend - but not I! It is as if my whole body is transfixed, for sometimes he can barely move inside me, I am so narrow. Hannah is like a cave, well visited over the years since she was little more than a child by her elder brother, she declares. If she bore a child, it would fall out on its head! How we laugh at poor, exhausted Jacob as we drink more wine which rekindles our lusts, causing him to pretend to faint. I laugh to think of my reserve and my conscience. Who cared about me? Who cared that I was ransomed into marital slavery to a man of utter mediocrity? His dick is pathetic. He is fat and smells of his own wastes. His breath is foul. His warty skin puts me in mind of a toad. I almost vomit to reflect that he entered me with that sluggish thing barely three inches long. I hope he is satisfied, that, by his neglect, cruelty and inadequacy I am completely corrupted. And he, the fool, cannot explain to himself the great change in me, he is so blind and insensitive in that warty, thick skin! Should he discover all and throw me out of the house, we plan to be hostesses in Pitherstock and Jacob can be our butler and our servant! No doubt, many a lonely widow or spinster would pay handsomely to have him pay them a visit. I have a headache and shall go to bed before Mason returns home. Hannah will explain.

Mason has had to go on business to Worcester - he will not divulge what the nature of it is, but I know his lawyer is based there, and that it is likely to concern his Will. He will be two nights away, having decided to go on to see his brother Charles in Malvern. I was beyond consolation to be left so alone - and Jacob not around, for he has been hired

to cut hedges and clear ditches on a farm the other side of Cheltenham.

Hannah came to say goodnight and kissed and embraced me, which was more than pleasant. She confessed suddenly that she had fallen in love with me which shocked me at first a great deal - but more, it filled me with secret joy, because I had found myself daydreaming not so much of Jacob - - but of her! My reaction was to push her gently away, saying that such a love could not be, that it was unnatural. But I know my face said otherwise. I retired to bed and lay restless, knowing that she was only yards away in the bakehouse. I looked eventually out of the window and could see a candle burning in her window - and as I continued to gaze, she came to the window and looked up. I hurried down to her, threw off my nightgown and we lay together for hours in a turmoil of caresses and kisses on lips, and on every inch of each other, until we could bare the wait no longer and gave each other delight first of all with our hands, fingers, thumbs, noses and tongues, but finally and tumultuously, at her wicked suggestion, end-on-end, with, of all things, a great carrot! Am I ashamed? I am not! What need did we have, she jested afterwards, of Jacob!

And then, Hannah, my Nemesis, whom I had hated and was convinced hated me, was weeping for my sake. She held me tight and told me she had a secret to tell. So it transpired, that night, until the dawn began to break, that she told me all of what had happened to her because of my husband, how she loathed him and how she planned to be revenged.

It was mid-afternoon. I felt more lonely and vulnerable than I had for a long, long time. I lived in an area where no-one could be trusted. I stood at the window watching the clouds come hunting in from the west. With no great enthusiasm, I sowed rocket, lettuce and spring onions in the propagator I had bought and went onto the front garden, trying to decide whether the shoots were grasses or snowdrops. My mobile phone rang. It was a message from Yvonne. *I'm not coming back - I can't* - it said. A surge of horror and a surge of joy ran through my body, leaving me exhausted and bewildered. For an hour I walked between the car and the front door, unable to decide whether to drive down to reason with her, or stay where - and as - I was. Finally, I sat down heavily - and drunk - on the rustic bench. In the rockery, heads of crocuses and snowdrops were rising sleepily from green shoots. I took a picture of them on my phone and sent it to her. It began to rain, and I sat unable to move, reliving my first encounters with Yvonne.

Thoughts I had long suppressed, blended into white light, came crawling out of their hidey-holes intact....Morwenna's bushy hair.....almost black.....Yvonne's sister's dark hair...but not quite so dark...not bushy, but fine.....Morwenna's dark eyes and strange broad forehead.....her musical gifts.....*she takes after my Granny Morris for that, Richard.....she taught herself to play piano.....*the man in the street....that swarthy drunken man arguing with Yvonne.....*he was a beggar, Richard.....*who had turned in tears and staggered away...a beggar?.....the dates.....October the fifth – how could I ever forget that wonderful night ?.... the night I had asked Yvonne round to try my paella.....June the nineteenth – Morwenna's birthday....early, but her weight....over eight pounds.....her quiet, introverted, self-obsessed, morose personality.....determined to cause upset even when so tiny.... throwing her blackcurrant juice everywhere...on the carpet, over the cat, over her rocking chair....maliciously, so maliciously.....A parade of images – some with sound captions, some without – a parade still in the same order in spite of all my efforts to subvert and bring it to a conclusion..... was Morwenna mine?

Hannah's husband had died. I already knew, in a tavern brawl. Once the full circumstances were explained by Hannah, my loathing for Mason went far beyond what I thought was possible. Hannah's husband Peter was not a drunkard - far from it. He was a Radical who had worked for Mason and was tired of seeing men injured or killed through their employer's negligence and their families left destitute. He had campaigned quietly amongst the workforce for them to organize a Combination to press for better conditions and wages. He had called a meeting in Pitherstock which had been discovered by Mason's spy and broken up by hired thugs. In the brawl ensuing, Peter had been singled out and stabbed. A grieving Hannah had been informed of this by one who had repented to God of his cowardly attack. No amount of pleading with the Police, however, had led to this claim being investigated and she had been told by an unsympathetic Officer that her husband was a trouble-maker who had justly reaped what he had sown.

Mason had had no idea, when he hired her to assist me, whose wife she had been, and she saw a great opportunity to exact revenge. At first, she had hated me almost as much as Mason, and had planned to poison him, causing me to be blamed through my inexperience and carelessness as a cook. Seeing, however, how badly I was treated - and seeing - having secretly read my diary! - how dissatisfied I was, she had come up

*with a more cunning plan - to corrupt me and spread the news of his cuckolding far and wide. She had even planned to get up a *Skimmington Ride in Pitherstock which had not seen one in living memory.*

Only she had, despite herself, taken such pity on me that her heart had softened until, in the week when I had lain ill in bed and had been my nurse, she realised what her tender feelings for me had actually become.

She asked me to forgive her sly attacks and I did so without hesitation and again we held each other in a passion. Afterwards, we swore eternal love and fell fast asleep.

I awoke in the bakehouse to find her gone. A note informed me that she had gone into Pitherstock and that I ought to make ready to leave, for the storm would break around Mason's head as soon as he returned - the morrow. She would borrow her father's mare and cart that evening and we could take a train from Pitherstock to Bristol where a relative ran a tavern and would be willing to give us shelter until we could "find our feet and live off our wits - and perhaps our other assets".

God help me. George Mason returned home unexpectedly this afternoon and found me drinking what was left of the strawberry wine. Fortunately, I had not packed my clothes and he has no inkling of my plan. He bullied me into telling him how I had come by the wine, and shouted that he would dismiss Hannah on the spot. What an irony! He went to look for her but of course she was not there. Immediately, he left to go to The Fox and I was terrified that the news which Hannah was spreading would be talked about there, but when he did not return I could only suppose that, as yet, it was not. I packed my clothes in his absence but could not decide whether just to leave or wait for Hannah, hoping that Mason would stay long enough at the inn to be quite incapable of violence.

* I googled this and found the following note: *Skimmington Ride* – a processional lampooning of cuckolds or adulterers with effigies of the victims – viz *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Thomas Hardy.

*Then, at seven, she came! But with bad news. Her mother had taken ill again and until her aunt could be fetched from Sheltenham the morrow, she felt unable to leave her bedside. I embraced her and assured her that having endured nigh on four months of George Mason, one more evening would not signify. The morrow he would be at his work and we could flee then! As we parted, the door was flung open - and there he stood, red-faced and unsteady, and for a moment I was sure that he had discovered all. But he had not! He came in and began an attack on Hannah, accusing her of corrupting me with drink, at which she laughed. Who was he, she said scornfully, to speak of corruption by drink - one who corrupted himself every night with wine and could never leave *The Fox* sober? Then Fury truly got the better of her and she said she had told the whole of *Pilherstock* what he had done to her husband and what a "poor" man he was! When he demanded she explain herself, she looked at me laughing and I blushed. He then turned on me. What was her meaning? - he demanded to know. When I merely shook my head and eyed him defiantly, he went to strike me, calling me a sly hussy, but Hannah intervened and pushed him to the floor, and went to stand over him with her foot on his heaving chest. In his anger and shame to have been bested by a woman, he got to his feet and stormed out, shouting that she was dismissed and he expected her to be gone by the time he returned from *The Fox*.*

*Hannah took me in her arms and apologized for her outburst. I was to come with her that evening to the farm for it would not be long before the truth spread from the town. But I assured her that he would go straight to bed and that I would be safe for one night. As a good luck charm she took off her *St Christopher* medallion and gave it to me. She would be here in the morning as early as she could - just as soon as her aunt had come.*

It is ten 'o'clock and all is quiet. Only the firewood crackles and the owls call. I am

not afraid of Mason. Having witnessed his ignominious fall to the floor, I feel emboldened. His power over me, like Goliath's power over the tribe of David is mostly illusion, reliant on the fear he inspires by his fierce manners. He can be defeated. Have I not seen him, a grown, nay, an old man, dissolve into tears of self-pity, like any weakling? I am therefore resolved that when he returns from the inn in an even greater state of drunkenness and raging, I shall tell him some of the truth so that he shall be glad to see me gone. And I am nimble. Any attempt he makes to strike me I shall easily confound.

This precious diary shall be the essence of my novel. He shall not lay his coarse hands on it. What the next chapter shall be will play in my dreams tonight, ere I wake to a new life, to mock the stern face of Hypocrisy and to breach the invisible walls behind which I, as so many of my sisters, have been held in abject captivity.

And so her life ended. I closed the book and went into the lounge. I scraped out all the pebbles from inside the skirting board until I found what I was looking for. It was a little dull but otherwise no worse for wear, having lain in the dark for a hundred and thirty years.

It was gone nine o' clock and I needed company and a drink. I found the bar in uproar. Kenneth Hobbs had been arrested on suspicion of conspiracy to murder. George Stubbs was triumphant while Marion stood biting her lip. A Pitherstock woman - so the rumour went - a woman much abused by her partner, had gone into a refuge after a fight in their front garden with him and informed the police that he was Kenneth's murderous accomplice.

I bought George a drink and sat with him.

"Cain and Abel all over again" he muttered. "I knowed it all along. Never did trust that Kenneth. Eyes too close together for one thing."

"Innocent till proven guilty, George."

"I hear Yvonne cleared off, Richard. Ghost again?"

"You heard wrong. Gone to help a girlfriend out for a few days."

"Oh, I see. Tongues will wag, though. Saying she's not quite right upstairs. Nothing better to do than talk about other folk.....some folk."

"I know, George. She's got just a touch of the February blues, that's all." I tugged old Toby dog's ear and looked his master in the eye. Pleasantly I said I hoped the gossip-mongers would shut up.

He thought this over and slyly asked if Susan Mason had had anything to do with her going. I was about to say no, but a different thought came to me. I told him that I'd had a strange dream where a young woman in old-fashioned garb had told me what a terrible ordeal her marriage was.

“And you believed her?”

“Well, the place is definitely haunted. Yes, I believe her. She was hardly more than a girl and Mason was an alcoholic and impotent bully. She was a victim of ignorance, cruelty and hypocrisy.”

“According to form, she was a wanton young woman who spent his money and made his life misery.”

“Just rubbish and gossip again, George. Fact is, he was crap in bed, a bad businessman and he took it out on her.” I reached into my pocket and showed him Hannah’s St Christopher I’d found under the wall. “Susan gave me this as a token she was telling the truth.”

He looked at me, alarmed.

“H-how many you had, Richard?”

Female laughter from the other end of the bar made him look up. A pretty young woman in Gothic style, sporting studs and a neck tattoo had tossed back her head at something one of her two male companions had said.

“Young women don’t know what modesty is these days,” growled George, to which I made no reply. I went to get a refill at the bar.

“Looks like George was right all along, Marion.”

“Don’t rush to conclusions. They haven’t charged him yet. If the informant’s who they say she is, well - if she told me it were raining, I’d go outside to check!”

I asked her how long Kenneth had been at the police station.

“Since Tuesday afternoon.”

“Tuesday? Are you sure?”

“Haven’t you had the news on? It’s been....”

But I didn’t catch the rest. My ears were ringing. The night my mystery visitor had turned on the radio, Kenneth Hobbs had been sitting in a police cell.

That night I did dream of a young woman. She stood at the end of the bed. I felt no fear. She told me to burn the diary. When I awoke there was, of course, no-one there. I went downstairs and found the book still on the table. The discoloration under the lounge rug looked nothing like a face, more like a nebula. The rooms were quiet and relaxed. The cottage felt like home.

I rose late on a beautiful February morning. Wisps of cloud flicked like brush strokes across the blue canvas sky, and frost lay like a white cloth in the shadows. I carried the barbecue to the front into the sun, and after a few attempts, managed to get it going. As I fried my breakfast and boiled water for coffee I watched the mist retreat further into the distant meadows. Two young women on horseback came past, paused and waved before trotting on. I waved back. When the coals had turned quite white I fetched the diary and laid it open, covers-side down, on the top. Dark smoke rose again, and the heat turned the pages until one by one they caught fire. I fetched down Morwenna’s tiny chair, pulled it to pieces and, along with its permanent stain, burnt it, crying with anguish and joy as it spat and crackled.

A taxi pulled up and a figure emerged from the back and waved. She opened the gate and walked slowly up the path, admiring the crocuses and snowdrops, towards the cottage.

