



Opal Green

James Ostby

Introduction

My name is Opal Green and I have a story to tell. It is an account of my life, and now, even in its infancy, I am spellbound by it. Perhaps you will also be.

Rather than present my writing as a biography, or any such, I herein offer it in the form of a novel. A novel that is mostly true.

Also, a caution to any reader who thinks women cannot equal and surpass men intellectually, I must point out how many of us create far better and more literary compositions than do our opposites.

And finally, if any reader should come to an abrupt ending of this work it will be either because I have died or have become incapacitated. My apologies.

Part I

Chapter One

I was standing in front of our miserable London flat, crying because my mother was sick. And already at the tender age of eight I expected no sympathy or compassion from within, or from without on the lonely street.

The doctor and the policeman were still inside. The policeman, a young, blond, good-looking, compassionate soul had been ordered by the doctor to put me out, and after he tried for a few minutes to comfort me he went back in. And there I stood, alone and afraid. Could one as young as I wish to simply die and have it all over? I remember asking myself that question, but try as I might I cannot recall the answer.

The doctor, whose name I never knew and did not wish to know as he was so stern, had asked where my father was, and I was compelled to tell him I hadn't seen him for a long time, and I could hardly remember what he looked like. "Huh, that doesn't surprise me in the least," said he.

I was not to move, which was an unnecessary admonition as I had nowhere to go. Between periods of breaking into tears I watched the mongers, drunkards, a pickpocket, and all of the common passers by, as well as the upper crust and the in betweens. Now and again the kind policeman looked out and smiled. As it was the only kindness shown me, I believe in my young mind he had become—then and there—my ideal man, and if I survived to be of age I would have married him. Strange how a child thinks, but I never got over it. For the rest of my life I wondered what had become of him.

Time seemed to slow, but at the point where I felt it should stop, a faraway figure in white caught my eye, and it soon became a lady, then a tall, young, beautiful lady in a silk dress and broad, white hat, carrying a green parasol. As she walked the oncoming pedestrians parted deferentially; an uncommon courtesy. She grew closer, and as she did she seemed to direct her attention to me. Closer, and closer, and I was transfixed. Closer, and to my surprise she, who had appeared so aloof, became uneasy, then faint and confused until when she was near she stopped and groped for a windowsill on which to steady herself while still staring at me in a way that seemed to me to be in alarm and disbelief. Her knees bent and I feared she would collapse, but I dared not touch her.

"Are you well?" I asked.

She studied me for another moment or two, then replied, "Oh, yes, I believe I am. I don't know what came over me. I'm not one to faint or otherwise carry on so. Dear me." She stood straighter and removed her hand from the sill. "I am Olive Green, and may I ask your name?" She smiled rigidly.

"I'm Opal."

"Opal. And may I know your family name?"

"Corbie, Miss."

"Opal Corbie. A nice name for what I see as a nice young lady. Now, if I may, can you tell me why you seem so distressed."

"My mother is unwell and a policeman and a doctor are inside with her."

"Is she very unwell?"

"I fear so, but they won't let me inside and they don't tell me anything." I began to cry again.

"And your father? Where is he?"

I waited until a loud peddler had passed. "He is gone."

"Gone? My goodness! When did he leave?"

"A long time ago."

"How old are you?"

"Eight."

"And how do you and your mother make a living?"

"She works at whatever she can, cleaning houses and such, and I assist her. And she has some money saved from when my father was here. She hid it from him."

"Merciful heaven," murmured Miss Green. "Oh, let me collect myself. This is all so unexpected and queer."

"Queer?"

"I'll explain it later if I have the opportunity, but for now will you allow me to help you?"

"Help me?"

"Yes." And without waiting for my reply she continued. "Have you any other family?"

"No, ma'am, not that I know of."

"Hmmm. And how did you summon the doctor?"

"I went and found the policeman."

"Brave young lady. You seem bright as well as strong. Have you gone to a school?"

"No, but my mother read to me and taught me to read. I am a good reader. Oh, and there was an old man on our street who would set out two chairs in front of his place and help me in my reading, give me lessons on arithmetic, and so on. He gave me books too."

"Indeed? He must have been a learned man."

"I heard he used to teach at a boys' school, and when he quit he was lonely. Mr Vic was his name."

"Well, well. Now let me see. I shall go inside and see what's going on."

"Oh, no, if you please," said I, "the doctor will be angry."

"Ha! Never mind him."

Miss Green moved toward the door but just then it opened and out came the doctor and the bobby.

"Hrumph!" growled the doctor, almost bumping into Miss Green.

"And hrumph to you, whoever you may be," replied she.

"I am doctor—"

"And how is your patient?"

"She is deader than mutton, as they used to say. Any other questions?"

"Yes," said Miss Green, "how did you become so vile? It must have been the result of much practice."

I feared he was going to strike her. "What business is it of yours?"

"And what business is it of yours what my business is?"

He muttered something unintelligible but obviously crude, and turned to the policeman. "Call an undertaker, then take her to the nearest orphanage." He frowned at me.

"But sir——"

"What else is there for those like her? Get it done." With that he stalked off.

"Never!" cried Miss Green. "You wouldn't do that, would you?"

The policeman sagged. "What else can I do?"

Miss Green looked down at me. "Will you come and live with me?"

"I, I suppose so ma'am."

She looked back up at the policeman. "There you have it."

"I don't think it would be legal."

"Legal? You know what orphanages are like. And even worse, what if she were to be put in the care of a child farmer?"

I didn't know until years later what child farmers were, and to my dismay I found they were women who took in orphans for money, and who often mistreated, abandoned, or even murdered their charges.

"Still, I could get in trouble——"

"Who's to know?" asked Miss Green. "This is between you and me, and I would be the last to tell anyone."

"There's her and her family." He pointed down at me.

"Her? She's eight years old and homeless! Family? What family? Have you no heart?"

"I guess you're right. Hold up your hand and swear."

Miss Green held up her right hand and suppressed a chuckle. "I swear. Now off with you young man. You will never again hear from us or see us unless we pass on the street, and then we will not deign to recognize you."

However she followed him and whispered something, at which he nodded.

With that Miss Green took my hand and we, as I realized later, began our new lives.

Miss Green helped me into the carriage, and a fine one it was; black, with red-cloth shade, tassels, gold-colored ornamentation, and black-velvet soft-cushion seats. The driver flicked his whip and off we went.

But I twisted around and looked back. "Oh, my mother. My poor, lone mother. There she lies, abandoned by the only one who ever loved her."

"There, there, dear." Miss Green put her arm around me and hugged me. "I directed the young policeman to a fine funeral establishment and your mother

will have the best. We will attend her funeral, and she will be placed to rest in the graveyard behind a small Unitarian church nearby in the country, if you agree. It's called *The Common Church*. But I will have to know your mother's given name."

"Oh, thank you Miss, ever so much. Her name is Edna, named after her mother."

"There's one thing more, but first I cannot abide you calling me *Miss*. Wouldn't you prefer to address me as Olive?"

"Oh, I don't think I could presume to do that. It wouldn't be proper."

"Oh, not proper? What then? *Your majesty*, or *Your highness*? Maybe *Countess Green*? Ha!"

Notwithstanding my low spirits I had to stifle a laugh. "No indeed."

"What then? You tell me. I'm all ears."

"I'm sure I can't come up with anything."

"Then how about what all of my close friends call me: *Olly*. For Olive. What do you think?"

"If you please, that would be, be presumptuous of me ma'am."

"A fine vocabulary you have."

"I do?"

"Yes. But back to my name. What if you were to call me *mum*? I don't want to in any way make you feel I am trying to replace your mother, but wouldn't *mum* do?"

"Thank you, I believe it would." I managed a calm face.

"Very good. Now the other thing. As you mourn your mother you may do well to remember that, present or past, living or dead, things, events, and people live on in our memories," she tapped her head, "and I pray you will nourish those memories—the good ones—and keep them with you forever."

"I will."

As we rattled and rumbled on I caught sidelong glances of Miss Green, and she was even more lovely than I had first thought; blond almost-white hair, features that would have been any portrait painter's delight, perfect figure, and more. Obviously much more. But what was not as obvious was, why me? It was all like a fairytale. A miserable waif swept away by a beautiful princess. Such things do not happen in real life. Was there to be a hitch? Would she be different than she seemed?

And my poor, dear mother.

"Mum, why me?"

She looked at me curiously. "Oh, here we are. We can talk about it later."

The driver stopped in an affluent part of the west edge of the city and a large three-story house caught my eye.

"My what a lovely mansion," said I. "I wonder who lives there?"

"Why, I do," replied Miss Green. Mum. "*We* do, and I don't see it as a mansion."

"I certainly do after the squalor I have endured all of my life."

"Gracious. Then in we go," said Miss Green.

Chapter Two

We entered the mansion and I was reborn. But in an instant I wished my mother could have been with me. She had deserved better.

We passed through an entryway and into a hall that ran all the way to the back of the house. It was wide and beautiful, with frescoes high up along each side, based on, I assumed, famous paintings; and stands with vases of flowers, busts of ancient figures, and other ornate decorations. For all of my later years I remembered most the figure of Plato, but of course at the time I had no idea of who he was.

Miss Green led me through the first door on the right and we were in the drawing room, and a grand room it was! Not huge, but elegant. Plush chairs, fine tea table, fireplace, Paintings of people whom I assumed were relatives, living or dead. A bouquet of flowers in a small vase on the fireplace mantle; though I, having never seen many flowers, couldn't distinguish one kind from another. Fine oriental-type carpets all about, exotic figurines on wall shelves, and so much more that I couldn't take it all in. I was speechless.

"This is where I receive all of my important guests," said Miss Green. In my mind she was still Miss Green. Seeing my look she added, "Not really my dear. I know many prominent people but I have few friends. It's my lot to be a loner. Part of my nature. Well, let us go back across the hall and I will show you the sitting room.

The sitting room was only a slight degree less exquisite than the drawing room. Much the same in decoration and furnishings however, but more utilitarian.

"Mum, who was the lady in the black dress who left through the far door as we entered?"

"That was Gertrude, the maid. She is a lady of all abilities; cleaning, cooking, repairing, and so on. And she is my friend. You might be under the impression I am aloof and hoity-toity, but I am not. I am from a plain upbringing and I do not put on airs. I also employ her husband, Edgar, who does the repairs, answers the door, and other things like bouncing thugs, ruffians, and others who may wish to harm or take advantage of me. Gertrude and Edgar Corker whom I could not live without."

"Oh, dear, are you set upon much?" I asked.

"Not much, but I don't like to be imposed upon. You have undoubtedly noticed the high stone wall surrounding the house. It has broken glass embedded along the top. And the strong iron gate which we close at night."

"Oh dear! And Mr Corker protects you?"

"Yes, but there's more to it than that. I have known them all of my life and they are more like parents to me than servants."

"Dear me."

"But enough about that. On to the library."

On down the hall, on the left, was the library; and oh how filled it was. Books on shelves almost to the ceiling on all four walls. Hardly room for any adornments, save a few old paintings of men I assumed were writers. The only furniture were four comfortable, scarlet chairs, each with a footstool and a small table. Two of the chairs were backed against the window. The other two stood across the room, and their tables had reading lamps.

"Now for my retreat. My small, private place where no one else is allowed; not even Gertrude and Edgar. I even do my own cleaning. Follow me."

"But if no one else is allowed—?"

"My dear Miss Opal, you are the only exception."

"Gracious. Are you sure?"

"I am always sure. Come along."

We went down the hall to the rear of the house, turned left, and climbed a stairway to the small third floor. We came to a strong oak door whereupon she pulled out a key and turned the lock. It was pitch dark inside but she knew exactly where a candle and matches were. The room was somewhat larger than I had expected, and in the dim light I noticed the many pictures on the walls. She then lit a lamp.

"There we are," said Miss Green. My haven."

There were no windows, but there was another strong door to our left. Inside were even more etchings, paintings, and photographs on the walls; and most noticeable was, they were nearly all portraits. They were, I assumed, family groups.

Seeing my surprise Miss Green asked, "I hope you are not taken aback?"

"No, mum, only it's all a bit unusual."

"Without doubt it is, but I myself confess to being unusual. Like you."

"Me? Unusual?"

"Yes, but in a good way."

"Thank you mum." I felt I should curtsy.

A large desk almost filled the center of the room and two straight-back wooden chairs faced it in front. There were three bookcases holding not books, but stacks and bundles of papers. A fourth bookcase held books.

Miss Green lit another lamp and I was better able to view the wall adornments. To my utter astonishment I found my own self staring back at me from many of the images! I fell back, spun around facing the opposite wall, and it was the same. I had never felt faint in my life, but I did so then, and I grabbed the front edge of the desk with my right hand and held on for dear life, at which Miss Green came and supported me, then helped me to one of the chairs.

"Oh, Opal, I am so sorry, I should have prepared you. Oh, dear me, how careless of me!"

The room stopped whirling and I looked up at her. "Am I taking leave of my senses? How did you come by so many of my images? Is it a trick, and why

would you deceive me?"

"No, no dear heart, it is not a trick. Let me explain it. I should have done so before." She knelt at my feet. "Are you sufficiently recovered to hear me out?"

I nodded.

"Oh, so much you don't know about me, but nothing sinister. Can you believe that?"

I nodded again.

"I will cut it short. I had a husband, Albert, and——"

"But you are Miss——"

"By my choice, after he died. He was a fine man, and I will tell of him some other time. And my child, Abigail, the other love of my life. In fact they were my life, and when I lost them I was destroyed."

"I'm sorry."

"From then on I was empty, soulless, and a shell—a mere husk—of myself. I won't speak more of that—I don't seek sympathy—I only wish to explain. You see, as I was walking the day I first saw you I all but ran into my daughter, there in front of me, returned, and I nearly collapsed right on the spot."

"I saw you grasp the windowsill," said I. "I wondered why an elegant lady such as you was walking through the masses like that."

"I had no life. I guess I was trying to become part of humanity again. I don't know. In any case now you have endured the same feeling. I saw my daughter and now you have seen yourself." She sobbed, then looked up at me. "Will you now abandon me?"

I sobbed in return. "I, abandon you? Never. You held onto the windowsill, I, now, to this desk. We are bound forever."

"You seem wise beyond your years. A delight."

"I will be nine in a month."

"We will have the best birthday celebration ever! Cakes, presents, everything!"

We clung to each other and laughed and cried.

Chapter Three

I settled in. Miss Green let me choose a bedroom on the second floor and we spent the next two weeks purchasing decorations, furnishings, and such. We were both children as we shopped, arranged the room, shopped some more, decorated, When finished we agreed the room was the best any child in England had, and to celebrate we sat in it and toasted each other with apple cider. We then toasted each chair, the bed, the elf figurine on the dresser, and so on until our cider was gone. Then we toasted each other with empty glasses.

It was a wonderful day.

Several days later we went to the cemetery where my mother, Miss Green's daughter Abigail, her father Albert, and her husband Albert, lay.

"Oh, my poor mother. Thank you mum for my her nice headstone."

It lay toward the edge of the cemetery, under a tall oak.

"I'm sure you will do the same for me someday."

"What? No. I mean yes I would, but such thing to say."

"Oh shame on me, I didn't mean to be so blunt. Don't worry, I will be around to pester you for a good long time more."

"I pray you will. Dear me."

The soil atop my mother's grave was clear but we set about pulling the grass and weeds from the other two.

As we worked we chatted, albeit reservedly, about nothing in particular. Then as I glanced up at Albert's stone I asked, "What, if I may ask, was your husband's profession? Something interesting I am guessing."

"I don't know about interesting but he was from a wealthy family who owned a number of foundries where they made things like hinges, door locks, and such. He had taken ownership of the whole caboodle just before we were married, so between his assets and my fortune we kept the wolf far from the door."

An owl hooted.

"Your fortune?" Opal brushed away a bee that had landed in her hair.

"I'm from a family of traders. Importing and exporting. Albert's business and mine were just beginning to merge when he passed."

"Yours? Alone?"

"Mostly. My two brothers passed away, and when my father died I wound up with ninety percent of the company. The rest was given to a loyal foreman who had been working for the firm for many years."

"I fear I am prying," said I.

"No, you are not. One of our commitments to each other must be openness."

"Who runs the companies?"

She looked surprised. "I do of course."

"You—? Oh, my."

"I ran both companies even when Albert was alive. He was my one and only love but I ruled the roost."

"You did? Gracious! What did he think of that?"

She said nothing, and as she sat beside her husband's grave I half expected her to fall upon it in tears and convulsions, but she did no such thing. She simply gazed at the inscription on the marker, and when I started to ask another question she did not hear.

One day when Miss Green and I were sitting in the drawing room doing nothing she broached the subject of my clothing. She appeared to be hesitant.

"My dear, you have been wearing apparel that suits you well; even so I have a confession to make."

"A confession? Oh, dear!"

"Probably not a wicked confession, none the less you shall be the judge of that. The clothing you have been wearing is that of my poor, dear, departed daughter."

"That is your confession?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand."

"Do you feel uncomfortable wearing her clothing?"

"No. I accept it as a compliment."

"Thank goodness. I was worried lest you would somehow view them as hand-me-downs."

"Assuredly not."

"They do become you." She pause, then, "On to another subject that may be touchy."

"Oh?"

"It has to do with your father."

I waited.

"You may not wish to speak of him, but I assure you there is a good reason for my asking. A very good reason for you to trust in me."

"I do trust you mum."

"Then did you know if he mistreated your mother?"

"I don't remember much about him as he was seldom there, but yes, I knew. I have vague memories of him beating her and abusing her in other ways I didn't understand. Until now."

"I thought so. I sent Edgar to the doctor to inquire the cause of your mother's death, and there were several causes: overwork, bad heart, and abuse. The doctor had treated her for years and he was well aware of it all."

"And he did nothing?"

"No, but I assume there wasn't much he could have done. He did tell Edgar

he had seen enough death and misery for three lifetimes, and he couldn't wait to retire."

"He was pretty gruff," said I.

"I have known him for several years and he is not usually that way."

"I am glad of it."

"Now Opal, I must expand upon the subject of your father. And your name."

"Opal?"

"Oh, dear no," she laughed. "Your family name. Corbie. You know how I convinced the policeman to let me take you in? Well that leaves you, us, in an illegal situation. Sooner or later we will be found out, whether regarding census, birth registration, and so on; not to mention if your father is still alive, and if he were to return, there could be trouble. I should say *would be* trouble."

"What can be done?"

"The obvious. You can become Opal Green."

"Green? Oh, how wonderful. But, oh dear, what of my poor mother? I would have to forsake her."

"You would forever have your birth name. No one could take that from you. We would merely leave it off your birth registration, on which you would be Opal Green."

"But I don't have a birth registration."

"You will. I will take care of it."

"You will do that for me?"

"Yes."

"Oh, thank you."

"You are welcome Miss Opal Corbie Green."

"Ha!"

"Now it's time for tea. Some think children should not drink tea as it will stunt their growth, ruin their innards, etcetera, but I don't believe it. Do you drink tea?"

"I have never taken tea mum, but I am willing to try it."

"I will put a goodly amount of sugar in yours. Come along and watch me prepare it."

Chapter Four

As the months passed I appreciated even more how close to heaven I was, although my heaven on earth was not, nor ever could be, perfect.

With that in mind, and not being satisfied without possessing the common human foible of never being satisfied with the status quo, one fine day as I was walking alone a peculiar notion came to me. A concern having to do with Miss Green. Was I to be her main focus for the rest of her life? I could be, and I would willingly be if the matter were up to me, and most of all if I judged it to be good for her; nevertheless I doubted I could live up to her expectations. Still, who was I, a mere child, to plan her life or interfere in it? I know how many beans make five, but that was not enough. It would not suffice. No. I worried about her. Moreover, throughout the time I had been under her wing I had become used to her flattery, and in particular her frequent assertions as to how smart I was. What she did not grasp was that I was far less intelligent than she thought, to the degree that I fully understood only half of her musings and reflections. How could I at my age? The best I could do was to smile, nod, and assent, and resolve to some day understand.

By the time I returned to the front of our house—I could call it *our* house because of Miss Green's explicit and several pronouncements as to how most of her assets would in due time be passed to me—I had decided to set aside my worry as to Miss Green's foibles until I was years older and thus better prepared to deal with the problem, if it was a problem. Or to cope with my own tendencies to dwell on things which may or may not happen.

Come what may, I had my own fears. As I had settled down in my new life a familiar feeling had come over me, a chronic worrier compelled by my nature to fret about something. The main *something* was—despite Miss Green's efforts to change my identity—that my father, Philo, would return and find me. Irrational to be sure, but real to me. I remembered little of him, but what I did remember was horrible, and I supposed the terror he had inflicted upon me would be with me until my dying day. I more than supposed it; I knew it for certain. Oh, well, plenty of others had it bad.

As time passed I began to feel more at ease about asking Miss Green of her past, and she didn't seem to mind. One morning as we sat in the kitchen having our morning toast and tea, I inquired again about her departed husband, Albert.

"There will never be another man for me. I recall telling you I ran the companies, but there was more to it than that. He had never been interested in business; none the less he had a genius for it and he would gladly give me advice when asked. Only when asked."

"Then what did he do most of the time mum?"

"He was a scholar. An uneducated, informal, private scholar. And most of his days were spent reading, writing, visiting libraries, and so on. I am convinced that as he progressed he exceeded most college academics in his chosen fields of literature, philosophy, and writing. Ahh, alas, he left me too soon. He would have produced good work. Oh, dear, too soon." She appeared to drift away in thought.

"I, I hesitate to ask, but I shall. How did he die?"

"I entered his study one day and found him slumped over his desk. The doctor simply called it heart failure."

"I am so very sorry. Have I upset you?"

"Not in the least. You possess the candor of youth."

"I would like to follow in your husband's footsteps. And yours."

"Um? Oh, thank you dear. But in what way?"

"In some sensible way. I should like to be a writer when I grow up. Like the Brontes. I may be aiming too high though; I could never be as good as they."

"Never as good?" She sat up straighter. "You will never know until you try, and that reminds me, I have something to tell you, and I will not take *No* for an answer."

"My goodness, have I done something wrong?"

"On the contrary you seem to have done everything right. But here is my plan for you. You are a bright young lady but you are, like my poor Albert when he started out, uneducated. What shall we do about that?"

"I'm sure I don't know mum."

"Voila! I have hired a tutor for you."

"A tutor?"

"Eh, eh, no arguing; for once I insist and you have no say in the matter."

"I was——"

"Now, now, it's settled, and she will start next Monday. There you have it. Her name is Miss Place. She is an engaging, good-looking, and able young lady and it strikes me you two will get on just fine. We will turn the empty room on the second floor into a classroom, complete with desks and chairs, wall maps, book cases—and books—everything a good schoolroom should have, and more. And a switch standing in the corner in case you become unruly. I——"

"Unruly?" I gasped. Tears welled up in my eyes.

"Oh, oh me, I have gone too far. Do come here my dear so I may hug away your tears. Don't you know by now what a unique and sometime awkward sense of humour I possess? Come my darling."

I went to her and she took me in her arms and nearly squeezed the daylights out of me. "I shall attempt to control my odd personality," said she. "You will learn how grownups, no matter how they try, never fully lose their—our—gracelessness. We can be insensate. Now dry your eyes and say you forgive me, and if you can't do it now, at least tell me you will do so sometime in the future."

She grinned as she said it, and as I could never resist her comical smiles I

melted. "I forgive you now mum, for I am afraid if I don't you will put me back out on the street."

Miss Green's face had turned scarlet and she had a countenance I had never seen before. "Don't you ever, ever say that to me again!" She fell to the floor and hid her face in her hands. "Never! How can you hurt me so? Don't you think I have feelings? Ohhhhh," she moaned.

I didn't know what to do, so I just stood there and my tears fell again. We both sobbed for a time, then she sat up, wiped her face with her dress, and reached for me, but I fell back.

"Don't be afraid," she said. "I only——"

"You are scaring me," said I.

"What? I am? What's happening to me? I have never——"

Then I knew she was fallible. She, who had seemed so strong and invincible.

I went to her and, kneeling, she hugged my knees and whimpered, "You won't leave me will you? You mustn't go away. I would die if you did. Say you won't."

Embarrassed, with an aching heart, and at a loss, I could only murmur, "No." Then I sank beside her and we wept together.

After our weeping we sat together on a sofa.

"You will have a fine education young lady, and it will not be conventional. By that I mean it won't be limited to the usual singing, piano playing, dancing, and all such frivolity. Do you see a piano in this house? No. Nor will you find sewing materials and such. Miss Betsy Place is well qualified to teach you the important life skills, like mathematics, science, biology, natural science, astronomy, and all."

"My, she must be quite learned."

"She is, but she has no fortune to rely on and she must teach for a living. If we women had rights equal to those of men she would fare far better. So as she stands she is a jack of all trades when it comes to her occupation. Knowledgeable in many areas, but not outstanding in any one, as she would be if she were allowed to become a professional. Some day—most likely when I am long gone—women will—— Oh never mind, I won't get going on that."

"And here am I, by chance. Would you have taken me in had I been a homely little waif who did not resemble your lost—— I mean to say—— Oh, dear."

"Pooh, don't be embarrassed. But most likely not, I must confess, but that's life. I'm not religious—I see religion as mere nonsense resulting in more evil than good in the world—however I am feeling some serendipity. That's all."

"What's serendipity?" I asked.

"Simply put, it's good luck, even if some read more into it than that."

Chapter Five

Months passed. I took my lessons from Miss Place, we played table games—myself, mum, and the Corkers—mum took me around London to various activities and attractions, and all in all life was wonderful.

One Monday morning when Miss Green was away Mrs Corker took me aside into the sitting room, and the serious look on her face made me nervous.

"Please sit down Miss Green the younger," she indicated a plush chair, "I wish to propose something to you."

I sat, and found myself twisting my dress while I stared at her.

"You know Miss Green—*mum*—lost her mother early on?"

"Goodness, I didn't know."

"And unlike you she had a good father, but she lost him to consumption. A few years later both of her brothers were lost at sea on a trading expedition, never to be recovered or heard of again. So you see we are a diverse group here in this house. All mixed up, but content together as far as I can tell." She paused and looked at me curiously.

"Well, then, to my point. You may have noticed how I am like a mother to Olive, and you also know— Anyway you are her daughter, and, and, if I may, I have a suggestion for you."

"Yes?"

"Olive would never say anything to you about it as she is too refined, but I will presume to speak for her. Let me be brief. You call her *mum*, and that's fine so far as it goes, but could you find it in your heart to call her *mother* now and then? I am aware it has not been long since you lost your real mother, but oh, my, how much it would mean to your other mother to hear that one word."

I had been expecting a reprimand of some kind, so I was not vexed at what Mrs Corker had said.

"Goodness yes Mrs Corker, I would be happy to do so."

"Would you? You would have no reservations?"

"Gracious no. Two mothers are better than one."

"Then tis settled, but one more matter. Will you please call me grandmother? *Mrs Corker* disagrees with me."

"By all means."

"Then we are done, but there will be no need to tell your mother any of this. It would embarrass her. She has her pride you know."

"I will be mum. Mum about mum. Ha!"

"My but you are witty for your age. Exceedingly perspicacious."

"You make me blush Mrs Cork— I mean grandmother. You are very kind, however I feel that any way I have with words is merely because I pass much of my time reading. But what does *perspicacious* mean?"

"It means clear sighted and wise."

"Hmmm. If I am so wise I should have known what the word meant."

"There you go again. You are a queer young lady, and I intend it as a compliment."

"That's what Miss Place said."

"Perspicacious or queer?"

"Perspicacious."

"Then she herself is perspicacious," said Mrs Corker.

I laughed. "And you are perspicacious."

"Kind of you to say so, but let us not get caught up too much in that. None the less," she paused, "you know who is most perspicacious of all, do you not?"

"Mum, I mean mother, doubtlessly."

"Very perspicacious of you."

We had a good laugh.

On a clear, bright, warm June day mum invited me to go for a walk with her, to which I readily agreed, but first she went upstairs and came down with a small parasol for me. She took hers from the stand near the front door and out we went.

As we walked toward the busy streets I commented, "This reminds me of the day you found me. Do you walk often?"

"Yes. Why? I don't know for sure. If I had to say, I'd guess it has to do with keeping in touch with humanity. Does that surprise you?"

"No, for I am perspicacious."

She stopped and looked at me. "You are what?"

"Perspicacious. Mrs Corker told me so."

She laughed heartily. "If Mrs Corker said so it is true."

Fifteen minutes later were amidst the hustle and bustle of a late Tuesday morning. Miss Green had on her white dress—the same one as when I had first laid eyes on her—and I had on my blue, frilly dress. And as before people parted to let her, us, pass through. Even the dogs showed some deference.

"You do know how to part the crowds mum," said I.

"Oh, no, it is you."

"I beg to differ, but thank you just the same."

There came a person dressed as a clown, and all about were the usual peddlers, inebriates, cripples, . . . , as well as the upper class. Mostly the lower though.

We came to an intersection and I tugged at her sleeve. "Aren't you afraid of being accosted?"

She looked down at me and said, "Hardly. We are on busy streets and someone would come to our rescue. Besides," and she took me aside and turned to face a brick wall, "I have Mr Sticker with me." Looking around to make sure no one was paying us any undue attention, she reached deep into one of the folds in her dress and revealed a knife.

I stepped back. "You carry a, a——!"

"Hush! Not so loud. It's a garter dagger, but I don't carry it in my garter where it would be difficult to get at."

"Oh my!" I said looking up at her.

"Ladies of the evening sometime carry them," said she. "You know what they are don't you?"

"I do. I grew up on the streets. You amaze me mother."

"Mother?" She turned away from me, withdrew her handkerchief from her bosom, and I knew she was wiping away tears.

After a while I tugged at the back of her dress and she turned to me and attempted to laugh. It wasn't much of a laugh, but I pretended it was and laughed back.

"I may be young," said I, "nevertheless I know the streets, and I am aware of dangers. They come mostly to lone girls and ladies obviously. I remember the first time I saw you, and in spite of my own troubles I wondered at you walking along."

"Oh, you are a dear. Even so, you couldn't have known that not more than ten or twenty feet behind me was Edgar. In his younger days he had been a prizefighter, and he modestly told me that he had been pretty good, but he gave it up because it was giving him headaches. You can also tell how hard it was on him by the sunken bridge of his nose and the general roughness of his face. Still, even at his age, he could knock out the average man with one blow. Two blows if his opponent were above average. Three if his adversary were a woman."

Sometimes she perplexed me with her odd observations.

"Oh, I know, you wonder why I take such precautions when we are in a good area of town, and I can be overly cautious. As I said, even if we were put upon there's invariably some good soul to come to the rescue. But you never know."

"But you had Edgar follow you when you went to my street."

"I did, for as you are aware it is not a good street."

"Then why did you go there?"

"It was fate. I found you."

I must have looked confused, for she added, "I like to observe people, and you don't get the complete picture walking down streets like the one we are on now."

"You wore a fancy white dress," said I. "I saw you from a block away. You attracted an abundance of attention."

"I'm afraid I did, and it was foolish of me. I fear I appeared dowdy that day."

"I am glad you are less vivacious today," I continued, "for I would hate to attract more attention than we—you—normally do. You are the most beautiful lady I have ever seen."

"Tosh! I could say the same for you; the most lovely girl I have ever laid eyes upon."

"Bosh!" I giggled, and we went on our merry way, stopping in the shade now and again, going into shops but not purchasing anything, and so on.

We stopped to watch a street magician perform sleight-of-hand tricks, we gave a poor old beggar a few coins, as we passed a cigar shop I asked mum if she would like a cigar, we drank lemonade, . . . , and in all we had a grand time.

After much walking we sat on a bench in front of a pub to rest, and oh, the humanity. We were quiet for a time, then mum surprised me by asking, "Are you worrying about something?"

"Worrying? Why do you ask?"

"Your brow is furrowed and you, well, you simply seem worried."

"I hope we will not run into my father."

"Your father? Oh, my. How long has it been since you have seen him?"

"I really don't know. I was quite young."

"Months or years?"

"Perhaps a year."

She reached over and took my hand. "And was he, was he abusive to you?"

"Oh, no, he was never abusive to me; only my mother. In fact he never paid much attention to me at all. It was as if I didn't exist."

Mum pondered for a moment. "Was he a drinker?"

"Yes he was. I don't know if I ever remember him being sober. The only good thing was he wasn't around much. But oh, when he was—"

I considered for a moment. "May I confide in you?"

"Yes."

"You won't let it out to anyone."

"Absolutely not."

"He became so vicious I had decided to kill him."

Mum gasped, but said nothing for a moment. Then, "He must have been worse than I had imagined."

"I had a knife, and when he was busy with my mother I was going to come up behind him and do him in."

"No!"

"Yes mum. I was going to stab him not once—from which he might have recovered, or killed me—but three times. Exactly three times, and twist the knife each time. So there you have it; you don't know as much about me as you thought."

"Evidently not. Would you really have?"

"Oh yes, and if I had done so my mother would probably still be alive. I shan't forgive myself for not saving her life."

She shrank back and looked up at the clear sky. I gave her some time to recover, then I had to ask, "Are you going to send me away now?"

"Send you away?" She looked back at me and her face flushed. "Away? Send you— Never, you goose! How could you ask such a thing? Not on your life!"

"Even a young, tender girl such as I can be pushed too far."

She grabbed me and gave me such a hug that I could hardly breath, and when she was through she sat sobbing and wiping her face with her pocket handkerchief. "You poor thing," said she. Then she cried some more, and her crying brought me to tears as well.

When we both had had our cry mum looked seriously at me. "What does you father look like?"

"I don't— Well, did you see the rough-looking man who stared hard at us as he walked by a while ago? Tall, lean, black beard? Hooked nose and dark complexion? Aggravating people?"

"I did. I'm accustomed to being stared at, but he was beyond the pale in his —"

"He looked like my father's twin, except my father doesn't have a twin, and as depraved and brazen as that man was, he wasn't as evil-looking as my father. That's why I looked worried, but I didn't want to be a bother and say anything."

"My dear, you are far from being a bother! You are my life!"

"And you are mine," said I. "In any case I am sometimes vexed at the idea of him spotting me and recognizing me."

"Not likely, however you will never be out and about without protection, and the longer you go without him seeing you the more you will change and become unfamiliar to him. Try not to worry. And oh how I regret that my husband, Albert, is not still here. You would have loved him dearly. He was the kindest man I have ever known, and he would have taken to you as much as I have."

"I am sure I would have loved him, and I almost miss him as it is, silly as it sounds. Gracious how we can see things in our mind's eye isn't it?"

Mum looked far away, and up. "I don't know how I survived the first weeks after he died. I almost— To put it in a milder way, I didn't want to live. Had it not been for Gertrude and Edgar— And again when my dear Abigail— Oh, well, we muddle on don't we?"

I was completely drained, and I was sure we both were. We had not the strength to move.

Two inebriates staggered by, each stiffer than the other. Both were short and round, and mostly bald. Perhaps brothers.

There we stood, watching people pass by, but not seeing them. I did not, and I don't believe mum did either.

"Mother, will you never again marry?" I asked.

"Never."

"But is it good for you to be single?"

"Oh, for goodness sake, I could never find another to match Albert. It's as plain and simple as that."

"Nevertheless, would you mind if, when I am older, I do a little searching on your behalf? I know I could not find another Albert, but with persistence and luck maybe I could come close. There are many good people in the world."

I expected an explosion, but she only sagged back more against a wall and

said, "When you are older I expect you will be preoccupied with finding your own husband."

I saw her lower lip quiver. It was not like her. But, being inherently stubborn, I knew I would, when I was older, find someone for her.

Chapter Six

I had never intended to keep a diary—having considered them to be frivolous; for silly girls with pretty curls—but as I planned my novel I came to feel a diary would be a good record of what life held for me, and would be a superb reference when I started writing. So, as mum had decided I was reliable, I would receive a pound every week, I purchased my first diary. It had a lock, but mum told me I needn't lock it unless I wanted to, as she would never be so base as to peek. With that, and with a flourish for her benefit, I threw the key into the dustbin.

My first entry was: *I feel I am the most fortunate of all people in London.*

That was all, and I almost wished mum would read it on the sly.

My next entry, two days later: *I wish to be a writer when I grow up. Why? There's no accounting for it; I just do. Mum is as much at a loss as I am about why, and she can only attribute it to my perspicacity, a word she often uses to describe me and my machinations. Machinations. Ha! I learned that word just yesterday. If I am to be a writer I must build my vocabulary.*

And the next day: *Why a writer? A scribbler? I now know why. Writing requires one to encompass the world and beyond.*

My days passed blissfully, and in fact I would have been hard-pressed to find anything to worry or complain about, though I was sure if I dwelt on it long enough I could croak about. So I didn't. Dwell. Dwelling was not one of my strengths.

So, as I sat in the drawing room not dwelling, to my surprise, in walked mum towing a girl of about my age.

"Aha Miss Opal!" said my second mother. Do I have a surprise for you my dear young lady! Please meet Pansy. Pansy, this is my daughter Opal."

I stood and curtsyed shyly. Curtseying, like dwelling, was not one of my strong points.

"I see from your expression you are wondering who Pansy is and why she is here."

Pansy returned my curtsy with as much enthusiasm as I had put her way. She was about my height, with long, curly auburn hair, wide eyes, fairly dark complexion, and a hang-dog appearance that made a complete reversal when she smiled, which she did as she advanced to meet me. I learned later the pensive look was due to a slight downturn at the ends of her mouth, and it was in no way indicative of her nature, which was quite the opposite of sad. We shook

hands—or more accurately, clasped each other's hand warmly—and patted each other's shoulder. As we did I was aware of her strong grip and I noticed she was somewhat heavier than I.

"Pansy Rose Sherett," said mum.

"Pansy R——" I started.

"Yes, yes, but no teasing," mum interjected. She is blessed with a truly original and picturesque name, if one can use that descriptive."

"Oh, no, I would never——"

"Pansy is the daughter of one of my few true friends, Marigold, but more on Marigold some other time. That will suffice for the *whos* for now. As to the *why*, I think you need a classmate. I might be wrong, or you may prefer a young lad, however——"

"I would not," I interjected. Mum's odd humor again.

"Or you and Pansy might immediately take a dislike of each other that——"

"Mother, you try my patience."

"Well it's worth trying your patience in order to hear you address me as mother. Ha!"

Pansy, who had until this point not said a word, burst out, "We will be fast friends. I know it." She had a low, strong voice. And with that she came closer and wrapped me in her arms so strongly I was almost uncomfortable. She was solid but not fat. I managed to untangle myself.

"I know it too, Pansy," said I. "Don't ask me how, but I do."

"Please, Miss, when will I begin my lessons?" Pansy asked of mum.

"Monday morning at eight o'clock sharp. There will be no penalty for being late—no dunce stool or cap or anything of the like—howsomever——"

"Oh no, I shall be prompt! Why would I not; it will be one of the best times of my life!"

"Don't take mum too seriously Pansy," said I, "She will chafe you now and again, and you mustn't take her too severely. And you will know when she is severe, believe me."

Pansy came close and whispered in my ear, "Will she be harsh?"

"Harsh? Ha, ha, ha! Certainly not you ninny."

"Oh, gracious me!" cried mum. "How can you think that of——"

Pansy blushed. "I am sorry. It just came out."

"Why Pansy," said I, "your face is rose colored. Pansy Rose. Rose-colored. Don't you see——?"

"Now Miss Opal Green," remonstrated mum again, "restrain yourself."

Then we all had a good laugh and the ice was broken.

As the weeks passed Pansy lent much to our school sessions, and our tutor, Miss Place, was well pleased. I was best in mathematics and reading, while my classmate excelled at every other subject. Actually we were not far apart.

With time Pansy and I grew closer and more familiar, still and all there was one subject she would not talk about. Her mother. Or parents, for that matter.

In fact I didn't know anything about a father, and to my mind it was better for me not to ask any more personal questions. I later asked mum, but she was evasive, and my only take was that I might learn more when I was older, so I dropped it.

Chapter Seven

Life flowed on like the Thames, highs and lows, season to season. But, unlike the great river, all life changes and ends. At my tender age I was only beginning to grasp reality. I was only eleven years old, and I had not yet tasted the bitter fruits of existence, except for my very early years, and those memories were fading.

There were constants within me; my love for mum, for Gertrude and Edgar Corker, for Pansy; and good regards for the visitors who graced our drawing room, many whose names I soon forgot.

A foremost constant was my ambition to be a writer. I had no idea of the genesis of that ambition; it had simply sprung up and flourished.

Then, on a bright spring day as I was scratching in my diary, I made a connection! My diary—the outline of my life—would be the essence my writing, no matter if such writing were novels, nonfiction, autobiography—

Diary, you are to be my best friend! Now I must call you by another name, for Diary won't do. Too banal. Banal. I learnt that word from mum the other day. Let me think. Wait, I shall go and ask mother.

Mum always has the solution. Alice! Alice, from Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Mr Vic, our neighbor when I was little, read it to me. Now, Diary, you are Alice if you please, and even if you do not please, thank you very much.

Done. When I told mum, she was impressed to the extent of telling me how precocious I was. What she did not know was that I was far less precocious than she thought. In fact I didn't even know what *precocious* meant. She often made more of me than there really was.

Yet, and yet, I did possess a way with words uncommon in most children my age. And I did like to sit by the bay window in the drawing room and browse through Johnson's dictionary; that is how, I suspect, I came to think I have a retentive mind. I had found the definition of *retentive*. Well maybe not in Johnson's, but in one of several in the house. Furthermore I conceded to myself the possibility I wasn't really a retentive reader; I could have only been bored witless.

On a midsummer dull, drizzly day my idealized life was interrupted.

I had wanted to get out of the house, and since mother was busy sewing up a dress—something she seldom did I must say—she sent Edgar with me. Then, as we set out, I got it into my head that we should walk the street where my real mother and I had lived. Edgar was not keen about it, but off we went.

When we got to my old street the weather quickly changed from bright sunny to overcast, but we had our umbrellas and we were sufficiently comfortable to enjoy the *atmosphere*, if such was not too fine a descriptive. We could not avoid smelling the atmosphere, even by holding our handkerchiefs to our faces, but all-in-all it was a pretty good day. Men, women, dogs, cats, cabs, loafers, inebriates, . . . , the usual, and more. Even a stray parrot in a tree, squawking in some language we didn't understand. Mr Corker, walking as all gentlemen do on the kerb side, was an excellent companion, and mum had more than once confided to me how he wished I were his daughter, and how Mrs Corker felt the same, but even more so.

We walked, and walked— and I knew Edgar was stalling— until we grew close to where my mother and I had lived. I had invariably been apprehensive there, but nothing could have equaled the shock of my looking ahead some distance and seeing my father! It was him, no doubt about it, and I cringed and drew back Mr Corker's hand.

"What is it, my dear?"

I could hardly speak. "My father." I pointed with my head.

"Your father? It has been several years. Are you sure?"

I nodded. "Yes. He's older and thinner, but I will recognize him until his dying day. What shall we do?"

"He's coming closer and the only thing to do is to walk on as nonchalantly as we can. Are you up to it?"

"I will have to be," I replied.

"Then stay between me and the buildings, and keep opposite him. And don't worry because even if he should make you out I can handle him."

"Very well."

"Chin up," whispered Mr Corker. He was large, and I hid behind him as we started out.

We bucked up and walked on, and of a sudden I felt the urge to wet myself, and I gripped Mr Corker's strong, rough hand harder. He beamed down at me and I knew he was enjoying our adventure. He was certainly not mean; yet I got the feeling he would have been happy to beat the tar out of my father, but I could not— would not— bring myself to wish for such vengeance. Well, maybe a slap or two to put him off. Huh. Much better if I were never to be seen by him at all.

Closer, closer, . . . , and we were past! Unnoticed, without so much as a sidelong glance.

We walked on and Mr Corker spoke without looking at me. "You weren't worried were you?"

"I was shaking in my shoes. Furthermore I feared you were going to strike him simply out of spite."

"Oh, well, I was tempted to pummel the daylights out of him, but how did you know?"

"How indeed? I have my ways."

"Hmm. Well if you pretend to be so astute, tell me what I am thinking now?"

We moved aside to let an old, hunch-backed man and a dog pass. Apparently the dog was his guide.

"You were thinking I am advanced for my age, and now you are glad you don't have to avail yourself of a dog in order to walk the streets. Next you will tell yourself how fortunate you will be to have me as a guide when you are older."

Mr Corker stopped and stood stock still. "You mystify me. You couldn't know all that. Ha, a lucky guesser!"

"No, sir, not this time. Somehow I knew."

"Then I am flummoxed. Do you often know such things of people? You seem like a mystic." He was turning pale.

"Often? I had never thought about it. I don't know. Hmmm. Still, please don't think I'm a mystic; I'm simply more observant than most, that's all. Gracious, now I do feel like an eccentric though. Do you really think I am so different, Mr Corker?"

He seemed to relax. "Oh, don't take an old man like me too seriously." said he. "When it comes right down to it I view your, eh, abilities, as gifts. My mind runs away with me sometimes. Put it out of your mind, and now, having dodged your father, let us enjoy our walk."

"Very well," I agreed.

We strolled hand in hand and I was much relieved, even as my mind began to wander.

"Mr Corker, if I were a little older, and you were single, I would be inclined to marry you."

"You what?" He stopped and let go of my hand. "What kind of thing to say! I am old enough to be your father, not to mention how I am happily married. And, I should add, I am hardly handsome enough for a pretty lady—ha, girl—like you. The whole thing is preposterous! Oh, aha, you are baiting me. Well it won't work. Why? Simply because I am relieved that you are not serious. Were you in earnest I would have found myself in a very awkward position you know. Immoral. Almost perverse. But you can't bamboozle me, and I am adamant you see me as your father. No, no, don't argue. That's the end of it my dear. Ho!"

"I should have known you wouldn't take the bait; still you underestimate yourself. When my time comes I should strive to find someone just like you. No, don't interrupt me. I am serious."

We talked ourselves out, and as we walked I again saw my father in the distance, but on second glance it was not him, but a mere apparition. Would I be haunted for as long as he lived? Or as long as I did if I were to have a short life?

We neared home and I couldn't keep myself from saying to Mr Corker, "In the meantime I will concentrate on finding a friend for mum."

"I hope you mean a lady friend."

"Certainly not."

Chapter Eight

My hourglass is running faster. How can one so young feel this way? Months pass and life is good, but—— We are all healthy, wealthy, and—for the most part—wise. And yet I am bored.

We have a new pupil in our home school; Philbert Sherett. I know not what to make of him.

Philbert Sherett. Pansy's older brother. A nice-looking lad of my age. Blond, with good, even features, and with a good figure, if one can describe a boy in such a way way. His only notable feature was how the right side of his mouth was turned up slightly, giving him a permanent and furtive look. Shy most of the time, but given to outbursts of wrath on rare occasions. Fortunately for me he never directs his anger at me; only to Miss Place and Pansy. I wish he would set upon me too so I could assume some of their pain.

As I soon learned, Philbert was unusual in other ways. I let weeks pass before inquiring of mum what ailed him, for clearly something did. Most people didn't go around barking at people suddenly, out of nowhere, and for no good reason. That's what his flare-ups seemed like; barks, and the only good thing was they were short-lived and infrequent. Most of the time, though, he was almost charming, especially to me.

Anyway mum was reluctant to tell me more of poor Philbert, but after a week of my hounding her she relented.

"Philbert is a paradox; much like Pansy," said she, "yet not like her at all. I mean to say he comes from the same home, but that's where the similarity ends. Oh, my, I don't know how to say it."

"How do you know his mother?" I asked.

"Muggs? We were tutored together as children. I was——"

"Muggs?"

"Marigold. We each lost our husband about the same time. Her husband, Figgs, was part owner of a building company, and he fell from the fourth floor of a home he was inspecting."

"You don't say! Did he die?"

"No, but if he had it would have been for the best."

"And Muggs. Does she have other children?"

"No."

"How does she fare without her husband?"

"Better than with."

"Oh? Goodness! She has Phil."

"Oh, well, yes, but at times that's a mixed blessing."

"How so?"

"You have seen how Philbert flares up now and then."

"Yes. But never at me."

"Thank goodness. And the worst is he flares up at his mother."

"Oh."

"He has a soft spot for you."

"Soft—— Nonsense."

"Anyhow he tries me more than you know. One of these times I'm going to—— Nevermind."

"Then why did you take him in? Is his mother poor?"

"No. But I took him in because of her."

And sure thing, several weeks later Philbert had a blowup, but for the first—and I must say the last—time, in mum's presence. As he was railing at Miss Place over a word he suspected she had mispronounced, in walked mum. She blinked once, then calmly motioned for him to follow her. Fortunately for him, he did. Out the door and down the hall they went, leaving Miss Place, Pansy, and me sitting in shocked silence.

After a minute or two I ventured, "I am glad I am not Phil."

"Me too," added Pansy.

"For that matter, I too," whispered Miss Place. Then out loud, "The irony is, I had not mispronounced the word."

We all looked at each other, unsure of whether to laugh or cringe. So we did both, first cringing, then laughing, even if the laughs were rather subdued. Then we were quiet again, unable to resume our lessons; curious as to Philbert's fate. He had always irked me in some way, but I did not wish too much ill on him; only an ample measure sufficient to do him some good. Howsoever those kinds of reprimands seldom work.

We listened for any sounds, but all we heard was the ticking of the wall clock. I focused on the pendulum, and it seemed to say *Phil-bert, Phil-bert, Phil-bert, . . .* And as I listened I found myself, against my better nature, almost hoping mum would box Phil's ears.

After an hour—perhaps a half hour; maybe only a quarter of an hour—in walked Philbert. He seemed none the worse for anything as he calmly sat down in his place. He did or said nothing. But after Miss Place had collected herself and was about to resume our lessons, Phil finally spoke up.

"Miss Place, I have been terribly impertinent and obnoxious to you, and to the others in this house. I humbly beg your forgiveness, and I pledge to do better from now on. Will you, and the others," he looked around at us, "pardon me, on my promise to never again act so boorishly?"

We all agreed we would pardon him.

And we were all utterly bowled over when he kept his promise. I for one never again heard or saw him act as his former self.

After all was said and done I promised myself I would never, ever, ask mum what had transpired down the hall that day. Nevertheless, oh lord how I

longed to know.

Chapter Nine

Marigold. Muggs Sherett. Pansy never said anything about her mother, and mum was *mum* too, and their uncommunicativeness only made me more curious. *Uncommunicative*. A new word. No wonder people think I am quite smart; and part of the reason they do is because I keep a lexicon. After all, if I am to be a writer I need the tools.

I must break myself of the tendency to digress. Marigold. I had laid eyes on her only once, when I had walked Pansy home. And even then I had not really seen her mother who had stood back from the door in the semidarkness, holding a handkerchief to her face and not speaking. And how odd as to how strangely Pansy acted, and didn't invite me in, but I brushed it off and soon forgot about it.

Months later the incident re-occurred when I again accompanied Pansy home, and that time the mother didn't come to the door, and again Pansy politely bid me farewell and went inside.

A few days later, on a quiet day when mum was in an exceptionally good mood I again asked her about Marigold.

"I have never really seen her," said I. "Only once, and then she stood in the dark holding a cloth over her face. And Pansy is very reluctant to invite me in. It's all very odd."

"I agree it is, and you don't know half of it," replied mum.

"Pray tell me the half I don't know," I pleaded.

"I will. It is a sad, gruesome story."

She paused for a time and I grew impatient and ill at ease.

Then, "I have known and been friends with Marigold ever since our childhood days. We were, and are, as close as can be. I became wealthy and married a wonderful man, while she married a villain and struggled in every way."

She paused and wiped tears from her eyes.

"Years passed and I tried to help her in any way I could, but it wasn't easy."

More tears.

"Then one fine spring day it all came to a head. Her husband, whose name isn't even worth mentioning, threw a liquid of some kind in her face. An acid. She was horribly disfigured and has not gone out in public since, unless she wears a heavy veil."

I gasped, and it took me a while to recover.

"And her husband?"

Mum looked up at me. "You must not ask about him. I will tell you he disappeared shortly thereafter and has never been seen or heard of since."

"Was his disappearance suspicious?" I asked.

"Yes, but ask no more questions?"

"Am I not to be trusted?"

"What? Why yes. I only——"

"You only want to protect me? Mother, I do not need such protection."

"Oh."

"Oh? That's all you have to say?"

She stiffened in her chair, apparently resolving something within. "What else do you want to know?"

"Was Edgar involved in the husband's disappearance?"

"I only suspect."

"Thank you mother. That's all I want to know."

The stray, grey tabby cat mum had taken in entered the room and rubbed against my legs. She liked me, but not so much mum.

"I shall make no more inquiries as regards Marigold's past, but I am curious to know how she came to live in such a nice house?"

"Oh, well, that's the only pleasant part of her past, and I am most happy to tell you how it came about. It's simple. She was digging in the back yard of her old, dilapidated house down the way, preparing to plant a small garden, and her shovel struck something unusual. Upon bringing it up she saw it was a smallish leather bag with a drawstring. It was heavy, and as she fiddled with the string the bag fell apart and gold coins spilled on the ground. In the instant she had a fortune delivered to her. Or perhaps I should say, if not a fortune, a handsome amount of money to keep her for the rest of her life, and Pansy for hers. So there you go."

"You cannot be serious! Those things only happen in children's storybooks."

Mum chuckled. "Well my dear, you are a child."

"But I am not a gullible one."

"Obviously not, but I invite you to ask Muggs about it. She will confirm my account."

"How in blazes can I ask her if I never come face-to-face with her?"

"Mind your tongue young lady; no profanity. In answer to your base question I will say you shall meet her, face-to-face, sooner or later. I need more time to prepare her and Pansy. And you."

"Me?"

"You must go over in your mind how she looks, then imagine her even more severe."

"Gracious!"

"Yes, gracious, but you mustn't show the slightest sign of revulsion."

"I would never——"

"Most have, and that's why she is a recluse."

"She is so course in appearance?"

"Course? Oh, yes. The only saving grace is that her eyesight is good."

"And her gold coins."

"My dear, she would give up her money and all else she has if it would restore her face. The irony is she was such a lovely lady."

"As lovely as you?"

"Bosh! If pressed I would say more so. In fact nearly as lovely as you."

"Me? I— Are you mocking me?"

"Never. I often have the urge to jest, but never in a low way I hope; and if I do, I rely on you to shush me. But not now, as I am in earnest. Tut, tut," she wagged her finger at me, "I do not knowingly jest on subjects like this. So there. The end."

"Very well. Then what do you intend to name your cat?"

"Me? She evidently likes you much more than me, so as the queen of the house I hereby appoint you, the princess, the *Grand Namer of Cats*."

"I am honored, and I also wish to be appointed as the *Husband-finder of the Household of Green*."

Mum didn't deign to answer, and her face fell. Then she recovered. "Only if you appoint me as the *Husband-finder of Opal Green* when the time comes. And I already have someone in mind."

"Who?"

"Philbert, obviously."

She shrank at my moan.

Chapter Ten

I have heard time passes slowly in young people, and so it was for me. I was getting bored. Lessons, dinners, tea, walks, reading, writing in my diary, which I had already called Alice.

Then one evening something overcame me, and it transformed my life.

Of an evening I was lying on the parlor chaise lounge, listless beyond measure, and tired. Mum was across the room from me reading a book by the light of a lamp, and humming a tune as she did so. Altogether the most dull time of a dull day. The most interesting thing happened was when mum had called me a genius I replied that I no doubt was, but only because of the general stupidity of the masses of humankind. And that I read a lot and kept a list of my favorite words. She replied as regards to how I am much too modest, and on we bantered until I graciously agreed with her and added how I am probably even more intelligent than she thinks.

I fell into a half-dozing state; the last I remembered until——

The room was hazy, and the haze appeared to wax and wane. I was aware of a feeling of ennui; even foreboding. Through it all—however long it lasted—my eyes were wide open.

When my spell had ended it was such a relief. *Spell?* I could find no better word to describe it. And I was drained. I had never been so empty of emotion, except for the lingering—oh, how to put it into words—unease. No, too mild. Fear? No, too strong. Dread, confusion,

I remained lying on the chaise for some time, and after I had settled down my next concern was, would it happen to me again? If so, how often? Was it epilepsy? I had once seen a lady fall to the ground in an epileptic fit. I would rather be dead.

After a while I regained control of myself. Mum would never know. Oh, lord, unless I got to the point where I started falling to the ground. I couldn't burden anyone with that.

Weeks went by and with no return of my *epilepsy*; the only word close to what I had experienced. Could it be I was out of the woods?

Several more weeks, and nothing. Well, well, very likely it had been an aberration. Silly me. Nothing more than an over-active imagination. The price a good writer must pay. A blessing in disguise, pardon the worn-out expression. So there it is.

More weeks passed, then months, and no more *fits*. So far, so good. I passed on to other concerns, namely *stupidity*. I don't know what had

brought on that word, and I don't believe I harbored any feeling of superiority. I guess mum and Mr and Mrs Corker perpetually telling me how smart I am may have been the cause. They meant well, but I tried to maintain my balance. None the less, the consistent drone must have been having an effect on me because, try as I might, I finally had to confess to myself that I had a pretty high opinion of my inner-cranial workings. How else could most other people appear to be so unthinking? There it was, but not out in the open, for I would never breath a word of such feelings to anyone. Oh, with one exception; my student-companion, Philbert, who could use a touch of comeuppance, which I would most readily administer. He irritated me no end.

Month after month I waited for the fits, but there were none. *Fits*. What else could I call them? It, rather, for there had been only one episode. Possibly a half-wakened state of some sort. In any event I was nearly ready to forget about it.

One rainy, gloomy day the monotony was broken; I was to at last meet Mrs Sherett. I was apprehensive.

We knocked on the door and shortly it opened as if by itself due the the inner darkness and the dark dress of the figure we soon made out standing back farther than normal.

"Marigold," said mum as she embraced the figure. Then she turned and all but dragged me in by my arm. "Opal, this is my best friend, Marigold." They both faded back into the dim hallway.

I curtsied and said, "Pleased to make your acquaintance Mrs Sherett."

"Please call me Muggs. For two reasons. One, Mrs *Sherett* is too formal, and two, I cannot stand *Sherett*, my vile husband's name.

"Oh, my. Muggs? Dear me, it catches in my throat. I'm not used to calling my elders and superiors by such names. It flusters me."

"Ha, ha, hah! In that case will *Marigold* do?"

We all moved down the hall and into a small parlor where it was also quite dark. A cat meowed.

"If you insist, and if mother assents."

"I assent," said mum.

"Here, let me open the curtains. I am so used to the dark I forget when I receive visitors."

I steeled myself.

Mrs Sherett opened the curtains, then turned to face me, and, my only feeling was one of relief, as she did not appear to be as frightful as I had expected. My face must have reflected my relief, as she immediately smiled and seemed to relax. My next instinct was to hug her, so I did.

"I should have thought you would be taken aback," said she.

"Aha, I was prepared," I returned. "I knew how beautiful you were, so I had your son, Philbert, bring me a picture of you from before your misfortune, and I

kept it in my bedroom so I would see it every day. And guess what Mrs—— Marigold, I see right through your scars and wrinkles into the real you. So there you have it. You must think me odd, but you wouldn't be the first to do so. And ——"

"As they say in America, you are a caution."

"Thank you. Now, may I feel your face."

"What? Feel my face? Why in heaven's name would you wish to——"

Mum broke in. "Opal, what has come over you? What a thing to ask! I would never have thought——"

"Wait, Olly, it's not what we think. Your daughter is a true jewel, and I don't mean her name. She is open and honest, your Opal, and what more could you wish for, tell me that!"

I stepped back in confusion. I didn't see myself as a jewel, or as particularly open.

Apparently mum's confusion matched mine, and the only one who seemed collected was Marigold. "Step right up and feel my face Opal, and please tell me what you think."

When I was finished I said, "Not so bad. I was able to see the real you. From now on shall we think no more of it and devote our times on more cheerful things?"

Mother staggered slightly as she went to an armchair and collapsed into it.

"Yes," nodded Marigold, "There is nothing I would like better. Please sit down." She and I took armchairs facing mum. "Oh, lest I forget," said she, "will you return my picture sometime?"

"Must I? I am very fond of it you know."

"Well, so am I, and——"

"You don't want me to forget the real you, do you?" I asked.

Mum looked up from behind her handkerchief and gave a slight gasp.

"Pay no heed to your mother," said Marigold. "We'll have a copy made. So there, it's settled. Are you well Olive? You seem a little peaked. Would you like some water?"

"I would prefer gin, but I know you don't keep any."

Chapter Eleven

Mum disappeared then and again on business. She never talked about her times away, and if I hadn't known better I would have suspected her of having an affair of the heart. She wasn't, but I often wished she were.

On a hot, sultry summer day I was alone, unless I counted the Corkers, who were a fine pair but—

Of a sudden I was overwhelmed—no, *overwhelmed* was too strong a word—moved, to relieve my tedium, and the only possible remedy was to get out of the house. Mum would go into convulsions if she returned and found I had gone out alone, but I would take the chance. Anything to break the maddening boredom.

Having learned some tricks from mum, I slipped into the kitchen and procured a small knife, which I hid under my long dress. Better safe than, well, dead, obviously; and I had learnt about knives at a young age. I had two poles; good and kind on one hand, but on the other I was capable of nearly anything in a just cause, and staying alive and well was unquestionably a just cause.

I took up my parasol, my white gloves, and a scone, and away I went on my adventure.

Figuring it was best to take a familiar route I headed toward my old home. I was attracted to it not due to any fond memories; rather in memory of my real mother. *Real mother*. A rare utterance; so rare that I said it twice out loud, but softly so no one would think I was daft, whether I am or not. Maybe I am, howsoever not in any way most people would think.

As I strolled leisurely along I met all of the characters I had seen on previous walks. Of course not the same ones, but their epitomes. And I enjoyed being on my own. I would have liked to have visited my mother's grave, to talk with her and mourn as I had never been able to do alone. Of a certain I didn't believe in souls, and spirits, and such nonsense; nevertheless it would do me good to commune with her and pretend. That's what people do.

As I walked no one paid any attention to me, and I felt as secure as if Mr Corker had been with me. I had only one concern; what if I met my father again? There would be no hiding. All I could hope for would be that he wouldn't recognize me, and I was unsure of how much I had changed since he had last seen me. One good thing was that he had never paid much attention to me, but I didn't know what that was worth. As far as I was concerned he could go down and cast my lot with the bats of hell. Oh, dear, what would mum say, to hear me now?

Free. I was free, but with the pleasance came guilt. In order to commune with *old mother*, I had to abandon *new mother*. Oh, well, new mother would understand. Therefore on—

"There my dear child, I have found you at last!"

Somebody had come from behind, seized me by putting an arm around my neck, and forced me into an alleyway.

The next thing I remembered was Mr Corker kneeling over me. "Ahh," said he. "You worried me. Are you all there?"

"All there? Where? Where am I?"

"You are in an alleyway my dear, where you have no business being, you naughty child. You are a wonder, and at times I imagine you were set upon this earth with the purpose of sending me to an asylum. And your poor mother. Is it your mission in life to put her in her grave before her time? If so, you have a good start."

"Ohh, my neck."

"Here, sit up." He lifted me very carefully.

"Ow!"

"Try to turn your head."

"Ohhhh." I did "I know I sound like something from a dime novel, but where am I? What happened?"

"What happened? What happened you ask? I will tell you what happened, Miss Behave. I'm sure you get my meaning? Yes, then. Your father seized you from behind, forced you in here, shook you every which way, and threw you against the wall, whereupon you collapsed. Thank your lucky stars I had followed you."

"Stars, no, but thank you dear Mr Corker. My new father."

"Indeed, still and all you should know by now that good fathers deal out punishments when their children are naughty, so prepare yourself for——"

"Anything. But tell me, what happened to my father?"

"I did."

"Excuse me?"

"I happened to him."

"Oh."

"I took it easy on him, even if he deserved worse. A few body blows, and when he got back on his feet I saw how good a runner he is."

"My heavens."

"That won't be the last of him however; I know his type. Now, up you come, and we'll see if I need to carry you home."

I was able to walk, and on the way I asked, "Will mum need to know?"

"I haven't decided. What do you think?"

"I don't know. I am loath to keep things from her, but——"

"You just did."

"Yes, and it resulted in a hard lesson. Still, I have learned the lesson. Anyway——"

"I'll think about it, but I'm inclined to let this sorry affair be forgotten."

"I am already getting amnesia."

"But I trust you recognize this." He held out the kitchen knife I had taken.

"Where did you——?"

"On the ground beside you. The epitome of a paradox. So nice, and kind, and so on, but every now and again you break your mold, or break out of it in an odd form, or something. I don't know. Sometimes I wonder what will become of you."

"Oh, I will be fine. I'm not as odd as you apparently think. 'Tis only my good imagination; nothing more. Don't worry father."

"Father. Hurumph! I'm too old for that. You call my wife grandmother."

"I know you and Mrs Corker have no children."

"Well I'll do what I can for you. Still, I could keel over at any time."

"Come, come. How dramatic. You will do no such thing."

"I will do my best not to."

"Thank you sir. I forbid you to keel over."

Chapter Twelve

Time dragged on, but on a clear, bright autumn day mum must have seen how bored I was, for she came into the sitting room with an announcement.

"We are going on an excursion!"

"Oh, my, where?"

"Down and over to the nearest flower shop."

"Flower shop?" My face fell.

"No, you ninny, I am teasing you. We shall take the train to Margate. We will swim, sun ourselves on the beach, have picnics, walk the walks, ogle the handsome men and boys, and do everything we cannot do here. And more. Perchance we will give in to other sins, and best of all, Philbert will come with us."

"Phil? Oh, please no!" My face fell again.

"Ha! You are too easy. I was teasing you again. Not Philbert. Pansy."

"Mother, you will be the death of me. Pansy?"

"Yes. We'll leave tomorrow. Pack some clothes and your bathing suit."

"I don't have a bathing suit."

"Then you will have to wear your birthday suit."

"Now mum. You are in rare good humour."

"I don't have one either, but we will find some when we get there."

Furthermore, I am always in good humour."

I giggled. "Almost always."

We went, we saw, we played, and we enjoyed. Most fun of all was the ogling, and surreptitiously watching the men and boys return our subtle glances. Most of the glances were at mum, who cut a beauteous and stately figure in her blue, white-laced dress, matching white parasol, and her opal (ha!) necklace and other colorful accouterments. Still, Pansy and I caught our share of attention, divided nearly equally between us, though I liked to think I received slightly more; but if pressed I would have denied it. Anyway, I liked the attention, if not the boys.

"Mother, you are blind and in need of a guide if you really are unaware of the looks you are receiving from the men."

"How you go on, seeing things," she replied as she walked primly on, but I detected faint—very faint—amusement on her face. "We are not trollops."

"I hope not, especially if you are referring to Anthony Trollope," said I. "I shall be able to write better than he. And I take that back. What would be wrong with being trollops for a few days?"

Pansy covered her mouth with her hand and laughed. She didn't know what to make of us; mum and me.

"There you go again dear, talking about writing," observed mum. "We are here to enjoy ourselves, not to dither."

"No dithering allowed," laughed Pansy as she skipped along beside mum. "We should forget everything until we return home. I have begun by forgetting my name. And, I'm sorry young lady," she glanced at me, "you look familiar, but for the life of me I cannot remember your name either. And the gorgeous young lady in blue beside me should be familiar, but alas, my memory has gone completely to pot, and all the better for it. Oh, nothing against her; I merely like to escape the humdrum of our everyday lives."

Goodness. There was more to Pansy than I had thought.

"Then I shall let my memory go too," said I, but with one parting shot, "yet sometimes I wish I were not a girl."

"What?" cried Pansy. "What, then?"

"What other is there? A boy of course, silly you!"

"Why in the world would you wish that?"

"Because of the advantages."

"The—?"

"You know very well."

"Such a radical change simply for *advantages*?"

"Yes."

Pansy studied me suspiciously. "Are you saying you don't like boys?"

"That's too much; I only meant—"

Mum stopped and took us both by our upper arm. "You two are vexing me, and I am not one to be vexed. Here you are! Squabbling like little children."

"We are children," said Pansy.

"Only in mind. Now stop it. Stop the philosophizing. Let's continue to enjoy our outing." She whopped us each on the top of our head with her open hand; but not very hard. "On we go."

We came to a vendor—a small, elderly, wizened, cheerful old man—who was selling small prints of the area, and mother bought one for Pansy and one for me. Mine was of the beach and the women's bathing machines, and Pansy's was of the colorful main thoroughfare.

We swam, and since neither Pansy or I had ever been in deep water before, at first we were timid, but mum held us up, and soon we were like fish. More like flounders; none the less fish. I could tell mum had not been swimming much herself, but she showed no fear or trepidation whatsoever.

We splashed and thrashed merrily, ignoring the men and boys who had surreptitiously surrounded us at a little-too-close distance, and who stood trying to eye us while appearing to chat with each other. I was flattered, but at the same time irked at the liberty they had taken merely by dint of being males. No bathing machines for them, and no cumbersome bathing costumes either.

"Ignore them," I whispered to Pansy.

"I am. Some of them are not so bad though. The golden-haired lad standing alongside the fatty is adorable."

The boy was about our age, and if the homely dark-haired lady beside him was his mother he was either blessed by some god, or just plain lucky.

I splashed water in Pansy's face. "Stop it!" said I. "We're here to have fun and to get out of the big city, not to give young lechers the glad eye."

"Young lech—? I am not— How you talk! Control yourself Opal; people will suspect you of something untoward."

"Let them. But I am not what you think I am; so there!"

"When I see you showing interests in boys I will believe you."

"Humbug." I splashed water in her face again. "You have no inkling of what I'm about have you! Then I shall tell you. It's not that I wouldn't have affection for boys. No, it's that I want equality with them. I demand equality. That's what I'm about, Miss Boy; Boy-chaser.

"Me? Boy-chaser? I have never— And aren't we pretty-much equal?"

"Maybe now, at our age, but wait until we grow up. When we do I will watch you when you go in and try to vote, for instance."

Pansy could only sputter.

I persisted. "And when—if—we marry. The husbands control everything, from money on down. We're totally under their control."

"From what you have told me about your mother—your new mother—she is not controlled."

"One in a thousand."

"In any event, what can be done about it?"

"We can work toward women's suffrage, and—"

"But women suffer too much already."

"Stop it. It's nothing to make light of. And as for a husband, I intend to have my marriage all arranged legally."

Pansy appeared more than perplexed. "How?"

"Put everything in writing; from money matters and property ownership, on down to personal deportment. All legally drawn up and recorded."

"Recorded where?"

"I haven't figured it all out yet."

"And by *personal deportment* do you mean—?"

"In bed? Yes, I mean exactly that."

"But who would know what goes on in—?"

"No matter; it would be irrelevant, for I would marry someone like my mother's husband. My *second mother's* as you would say. Or someone like Mr Corker."

Pansy gasped. "Mr Corker? He's old enough to be your father!"

"I said *like* him, for goodness sake. He was young once. Furthermore he *is* my father. I made him my father. And, again, to put it in Pansy words, *my second father*. So there you have it."

Mum approached us. "Are you two squabbling?"

"No," replied Pansy.

"Yes," said I, "but not seriously. I would call it more like educating. I am

the teacher and Pansy is the student."

"How impudent," retorted Pansy.

I noticed the golden-haired boy was obviously delighted at our goings on.

"Now, now, no more of that," said mum. "We're here to swim, so stop misbehaving and keep swimming."

Chapter Thirteen

As I grow older I often feel I know everything about mum. How naive I am.

We were in mum's private room where I had been only once before, long ago. It wasn't that she hadn't allowed me; I just had no reason to be there.

She began, "I have brought you here to in order to make a confession. Oh, that's not the right word, for I have done nothing wrong. More of an admission. No, that's not it either. Nevermind, you can call it what you will."

She paused and sat with her hands clasped together tightly on her desk. Her knuckles began to turn white.

"I was young," she continued, then stopped for a few moments. "Before I met Albert there was another."

"Another? Who, pray tell?"

"A sailor who had been dismissed from the navy for something or other; he would never say."

"What was his name?"

"I cannot bring myself to say it."

"Excuse me?"

"We ran away together." She began to cry softly.

"Don't cry mum. I have seldom seen you this upset. I suspect it hurts me more than it does you. Oh, I shouldn't be so selfish as to say that. But——"

Mum wiped her eyes with her kerchief. "We went here and there about the country, and at first things were good, and we even considered getting married, though I was too young."

She put her face in her hands with her elbows on the desk, and was silent for a long time.

"And then?" I asked. My own tears welled up.

"Then good fortune intervened." But she was again silent.

"Yes?"

"He began to mistreat me in unspeakable ways." Again, silence.

"That was good fortune?"

"Yes. I finally decided to leave him. We had rented a pigsty of a room in Manchester, and one night when he was out late—as he was nearly every night—I collected what little I had of clothes and money and left. I found my way back here to London, to my father. Oh, how glad he was to see me, even in my wretched state! He was angry and happy at the same time, but mostly happy."

"A happy ending?"

"Yes and no. For a month things were good. At least as good as they could be after my misadventure. My stupidity. Then one day there came a knock on

the front door. When I looked through the peep-hole, there he was, oh, the vile creature I had run away with. I'll call him Fig, despite worse epithets I would prefer to apply to him.

"What did you do?"

"As I had regained my composure, I opened the door and told him to go away and never return."

"Did he?"

"No, he attempted to force his way in."

"Oh, dear me!" I gasped.

"Just then my father, an image of our own Edgar right down to his fighting abilities, struck Fig squarely between the eyes, whereupon our intruder staggered back out the door and fell flat on his back, insensible as a dead mackerel, with blood oozing from his nose. He lay there without so much as a twitch."

"Was he dead?"

"At first we didn't know. Father closed the door, and we went in and ate breakfast. Several hours later we looked out and he was gone, and we never saw him again."

"Dear me! And have you heard anything about him after that?"

"Yes. Several years later we found he had been killed in a fight out behind a Liverpool pub."

"Why I never! I am speechless."

Mum finished wiping her eyes. "Then you will be even more mute when I tell you I have left out most accounts of the suffering I endured. It would have taken me hours to have gone into details of the abuse I suffered. And why had I related this? Because I want you to know I am not the angel you seem to think I am. *Feet of clay*, and all that. We all wend our way through life differently, even so if you can learn anything from my mistakes I will tell you more of them sometime. If, though, you do not, or cannot, gain from my tales of woe, I will remain quiet."

"Mother, I don't wish to live alone in a cave for the rest of my life."

"Ha! I'm sure you don't. Not you of all people."

"I confess I am not fond of the hoi polloi, other than to go about now and again to observe them out of simple curiosity, and for my writing. In general I predict I shall become a fifty-percent recluse."

"You shan't!"

"Well, then, forty."

"Say thirty."

"Thirty. But a weak and wavering thirty."

"Done."

"But I say it under protest."

"Protest or not, I will hold you to it."

At that we embraced.

Not long after mum's revelation—that very night in fact—I found it

difficult to sleep, and when I did I would rather have remained awake. Oh, the nightmares. Of bilious and dangerous men.

In the morning I resolved never to sleep again. I was in a funk. Mum was trying to prepare me for life, but I would rather have learned the hard way, in person, and even at my age I already had a good idea, if not experiences. Well, nothing for it but to carry on. Mum tries to steel me for whatever comes; however I would rather steel myself.

None the less there are tribulations in life which cannot be overcome. The other day I had another *episode*. The same as my first, only longer and more vivid, and it almost defied description. As best I could put it into words it was some combination of dream and vivid imagination, with the feeling of dread I had been aware of before.

I had been in a plush chair in the sitting room, opposite the fireplace from mum, and when I *woke up* and looked around I was dizzy and unnerved, but evidently mum, who was reading a book of poetry, hadn't noticed. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes.

Oh, my, am I to be afflicted by phantasms for the rest of my days? Spells? If so I can only hope they do not become more vivid, and more physical. And come what may I will keep it from mum, unless she begins to notice. If I start rolling around on the floor, foaming at the mouth, and so on. I shall remain strong.

Chapter Fourteen

On a delightful day when mum and I were sitting out back of the house under a mulberry tree, out of the clear blue mum said, "I hope to have grandchildren someday."

"Excuse me?" I almost dropped the book I was about to start reading. Aha! She had drawn me outside for a purpose.

"You heard me." She smiled slyly.

"I am only a child, and you spring that on me mother?" A nearby raven squawked in agreement.

"One should look to the future, and I have seen how you and Philbert get along."

"Philbert? Philbert! How can you say that? He is no more than a nuisance to me, and don't think I don't know you are pulling my strings like a puppet. How can you—?"

"Compose yourself dear, I merely—"

"Merely? Let me tell you I am never going to marry Philbert Sherett! Eh, eh, don't interrupt. I am not going to be like a girl in a Brontë-like story, wherein the young lady either dislikes—or is infatuated with—a boy, and later they become true loves. When I am a successful writer I will never condescend to employing such a trite devices. If I do write along those lines, I will be more of a pragmatist. The young lady will defy the young man, and she will not have any more to do with him. There, how do you like that?"

"Then I apologize. I was only half serious you know. Don't pout."

"I am not pouting."

"I am afraid a rooster is going to come and sit on your lip."

I bit my lower lip, and the raven spoke up again.

"Oh, I have something to say that will cheer you up," laughed mum. "You know I have been off on business much of the time. Too much over the years. And you have heard me speak of my country estate. I shall take you there if you wish."

I looked up. "To Wildwood?"

"Yes, to Wildwood."

"Gracious, mum, when will we go?"

"Tomorrow, if are able to get your lip under control by then."

"It is already under control. I will began packing right now. How long will we be there?"

"A fortnight or so. Pack well."

"Oh, tomorrow can't come soon enough!"

Wildwood was not far north of London, but far enough from the crowds of

the big city. We went by train to a railway station in a small community not even named, where we were met by a not-tall, elderly man named Elway, whose name could have been either his given name or his surname, and I didn't ask. He was the caretaker, and his wife, Minerva, was the housekeeper. He was robust, red-faced and even redder-nosed, and jolly, and I took a liking to him immediately. Obviously mum liked him too. She hugged and kissed him, which was curious, considering he was only a caretaker and handyman.

Our carriage ride to the estate lasted only twenty minutes or slightly more, and when we emerged from the woods through which we had passed, and up the drive, I was astounded. Mum had never spoken much about Wildwood, and I wondered why not. It was a magnificent, two-story, brick-shaped building of some size. Not the old castle or ancient mansion I had anticipated; rather a newer, brick structure not more than several decades old, yet it gave the appearance of being much older. The only unusual feature was a rounded tower at one end. Unusual, I thought, because square would have matched better. I decided then and there to call the mansion a house. I had never been pretentious, and to my surprise I later found *house* was what mum, Elway, and Minerva all called it.

The house was surrounded by a forest comprising trees most of which I had never seen before, and really the only ones I recognized were what I perceived to be large Christmas trees. Why would I recognize trees; I had seldom been out of London? The ground sloped gently away from the house in all directions, and it had been cleared for about one-hundred feet or more. Despite the rise there was no distant view. And oh, how fragrant the air was! The opposite of the big city; a refreshing opposite. I knew I was in for a wonderful—

"Come inside Miss Opal," said mum. "I see Minerva is opening the door and she will be most eager to meet you. She has looked forward to it for too long already."

She took my hand and we went to the door whereupon out came a stout-but-not-fat, or even what I would have called plump, lady. She was taller than her husband, and—of all things—she resembled someone I knew, but I couldn't think who.

Mum and Minerva hugged, and even clung to each other, and as with Elway I wondered at it. Then they turned to me.

"Minerva Fiddler, this is my daughter, Opal. You finally meet, and I am sorry for it. Oh, I meant sorry it has taken so long, not sorry—"

"I know what you mean," laughed Minerva. "I hope you have not become too proper to give me a hug," she said to me.

I was conscious of a blush coming over my face, but I replied, "I am not too proper at all ma'am. In fact I am never very proper at anything, as mum will attest."

We hugged each other and she almost squeezed the breath out of me. Then she took me by the hand and dragged me inside. "Come along you two,"

she ordered with uncommon familiarity.

We entered through a hall and into a drawing room which was beyond all of my expectations. It was walled with dark oak paneling, and the ceiling was of white plaster with ancient Greek figures and ornate whirls troweled in. The furnishings were all new-looking except for a dozen antique statuettes and ceramics, and many of the ceramics were oriental, all much to my surprise because I had not viewed mum as the type who would be interested in such things. To match the ceramics were several oriental rugs. And to match the ceramics and the rugs were oriental paintings on all of the walls, except for a painting of mum; larger and in a more prominent place, on the fireplace mantelpiece. Mum was younger, and there were two people standing beside her; Minerva and Elway. Curiouser and curiouser thought Alice. And I.

"Tis me," said mum, who had come up behind me.

"Yes, and I assume it was done recently."

"Hah! Ha, hah, hah. You are too much. Much too much, you imp!" She turned to Minerva. "What am I to do with her?"

"Do what I did with you," answered Minerva.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. I ignored you, and eventually you gave up."

Mum laughed. "Opal never gives up. Well, then, let's show Miss Funny Bone the rest of the house."

I wondered about that. What was the real connection between them and mum?

We went from room to room, and each was nicer than the last. The motif was based on the drawing room. Based in the mind's eye of the designer; mum, I guessed. And such opulence!

"Mother, why have you never told me of this place?" I asked.

She turned from a painting she was studying and looked at me in surprise. "Excuse me?"

"I knew nothing of this place until now. Were you keeping it mum?"

"Good heavens no! I told you about it once. About a year ago. We were in the sitting room, and when I started to tell you of it you acted bored. You merely sat there stock still, staring straight ahead with a queer look on your face, so naturally I assumed you weren't interested. Hmmm, now that I think of it, maybe there was more to it than that. I hope you weren't discomposed in some way."

"Oh, no mum, I'm sure not. You know me; sometimes I fall into reveries. Daydreams, when I let my too-active imagination run away with me, that's all. Think nothing of it."

Was I protesting too much, as in *Hamlet*? Apparently not, for mum turned back to the painting. None the less, I dreaded the day when I would have to explain. Not for myself, but for mum, who worried about me overly much already. Plenty of time to hope my condition resolved itself, and if not, time enough to figure out how to put it to mum. I knew the old saw about not

worrying about things you can't do anything about, but in my case maybe there was something——

"The tower, mum. Are you going to show me the tower?"

"The tower? Oh, yes, if you like, but not now. We have to unpack and set up our bedrooms before it gets dark, and then it will be suppertime, and by that time I will be too knackered to climb the tower."

"What's up there?"

"The room at the top of the tower is like my study at home. Another retreat. My refuge."

"Oh." Again I wanted to know from what she needed refuge, but I dared not ask. Someday I would.

Chapter Fifteen

As weeks passed even Wildwood, as enchanting as it was, became commonplace. Why? Aside from mum and me and her two servants, there were no other people. After all, aren't people in general the spices that make life bearable? Even if some people—in fact many—are too spicy.

I decided to write in my diary.

Oh my, Alice. Am I in Wonderland? Early on in my life mum called me perspicacious, and it has stuck with me ever since. I won't say being perspicacious—if I really am—is a curse. To me none the less it sometimes seems so. I once mentioned my concern to mum and she was flippant about it, so at first I was too, but as time passed I came back to being troubled.

As I am in a dispirited state despite my fine situation in life, I may as well natter to myself again about my and mum's confidences. Her secret as regards her refuges from life. I know more than she probably suspects I do, and she may not see her unusual behavior as unusual. Well, and well, a time will come when we both own up, even if mum doesn't think she has anything to own.

I miss mum's library at home.

Our monotony was interrupted by a short ride to the community where the railway station was. The community had no name, so I privately named it *Mud*, not because it was muddy, but for no reason at all other than *Mud* seemed to fit.

There sat a small shop in Mud where everyday items were sold; mostly iron goods and groceries. Being a city girl I was more interested in the local people, among them several about my age. Two fair, brown-haired lads who, as soon as I stepped outside, began making eyes at me, but I pretended to ignore them, though, surprisingly, I took their attentions as a compliment. There were also three girls; all redheads, and all pretty. I decided I must have come to the land of good-looking people, and I should change the name of the place from Mud to, to, em, something happy. It was almost a hamlet. Well! There it was; *Happy Hamlet!*

The tallest redhead approached me. "We don't see many outsiders here," said she. "May I ask your name?"

"Opal. Opal Green. And you?"

"Grace."

That was all. Grace. "Are you just passing through," she inquired.

"We will be at Wildwood for a while," I answered.

She was obviously astonished. "Wildwood? You don't say so!" She was comely, but not by no means beautiful, and she tended to slouch.

"You seem surprised," I responded. "Do you know the place?"

"Oh, my, yes. Everyone knows of the Wildwood mansion!" Her freckles appeared to brighten.

"I wouldn't call it a mansion," said I.

"You would if you lived in the house I do." She pointed down the dusty trail at a rickety hovel.

"Oh, well I——"

"Tis a pigsty, Miss. That's where I and my two sisters live."

I was taken aback and at a loss for words. I soon recovered and went on.

"What do your parents do?"

"Our mother is long dead and gone, and my father is a wood cutter."

"What does he do with the wood?"

"Dear me, how high class you are! He sells it as firewood. But then I guess you who live in the mansion wouldn't know how the rest of us live."

I was miffed at that. "Don't presume to judge people like me. I have had more than my share of hardship, Miss Grace."

She stepped back in surprise. "Oh, I am sorry, I shouldn't have——"

"No you shouldn't have," I retorted, but then I softened, knowing I had been disingenuous. Grace, I hope I may have my mother's permission to have you and your sisters—I assume the other two there are your sisters—to our house sometime so you will not think us too high and mighty."

On the way home I told mum of my name for the community.

"Happy Hamlet? From Shakespeare?" she asked.

"Oh, mother, there are times when I cannot tell if you are teasing me or you are serious. Goodness no, not Shakespeare!" Then I saw the mischievous smirk on her face. "Oh, you. If you were me and I were you, I would give you a good pinch. You take such delight in——"

"That's because I find you so easy to fool. You invite it. But take it as a compliment."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, if you were a dullard do you really think me so cruel as to torment you in such a way?"

"If I were a dullard I would have no way of knowing——"

"Let me put it better. I do not torment dullards. Think better of me than that."

"Still, why me?"

"Who else? You are usually the only one around. But above all by virtue of my odd sense of humour. Perhaps you will develop your own sense of humour someday. I only help you develop your wits."

"I hope they will not be like yours."

"Oh, pooh, don't sulk."

"I'm not." But, I confided to my inner speaker, I was.

As we neared the *mansion* I broached the subject of the three freckled sisters. I could tell Mum was less than enthusiastic, but she agreed, and four days later we had a tea party. Afterward I doubted that the three young ladies and I would ever see each other again. They were pleasant, but I had nothing at all in

common with them. I was, as the trite old saying goes, *a fish out of water*. I had mostly been around a higher-class of people, and this had been my first experience with such youth of my age.

'Of course you remember. I am here to guide you through life,' said Madam Fantasy'

Madam Fantasy, one of the characters who had recently popped up as part of my alter ego. I had become a vocabulary enthusiast.

'Why a Lexicon?' asked Madam Fantasy.

"Why indeed? Because if I am to be a good writer I need an excellent vocabulary. Then, you may ask—whoever you really are—why do you want to be a writer? Aha, you won't trip me up on that! I thought it through several years ago, and the answer is, writing novels is a profession whereby one encompasses the everything. If you're a doctor your life is devoted to others' physical miseries; as a solicitor the same, only as regards legal troubles; as a farmer the monotony of hoeing beets all of your life; . . . I can think of no other pursuit as interesting and rewarding."

'According to what standard?'

"Why, money and fame!"

'And should you fail?'

"I believe mum will take care of me in that wise, though I will not count on it because I love her not for her fortune."

'In any event I will do everything I can to help you succeed.'

What is happening to me? I should ask myself, what other misfortunes, or ailments, will descend upon me? My fits have been replaced by even more odious *whatevers*.

The only compensation is being here in Wildwood, stultifying as it is, is better than being in London. My what a crab I am becoming.

Chapter Sixteen

I have gone through a number of diary books as the years have slipped by.

We at our London residence are all pretty well. Edgar has occasional bouts with gout which he says are as painful as some of his former prizefighting bouts, only in his feet and not his head. His bunions bother him as well, on top of his gout. Mum is the same as ever except for having become upset at seeing some grey hairs, and she would neither believe me when I pointed out how the suspect hairs were only lighter shades of her normal, blond locks; nor was she consoled when I advised her to throw away her looking glass.

I, though, have undergone additional alterations; some within, some without.

My first *alteration* was a womanly one involving blood and rags, of which I shall say no more, except it was a shock not only to me, but to mum, although we should have expected it.

Along with the aforesaid was a *development* which, although less surprising, was more outwardly apparent; my buxomness. To mum's surprise I didn't give a fig about it.

There were other changes, but the remaining significant one was my self awareness of my potential as a writer. One simply knows such things, and if he or she does not know, there's no hope of achieving anything above the mundane.

If I have not characterised my writing ambitions in any particular way it is because I have not reached a level of professionalism sufficient for me to claim any right to do so. It's one thing to say you're going to be a great *this or that*, but it's another thing to do so. As to literary excellence, who knows? The only thing an agile person can do is prepare, rather than jump right (write?) in, and despite my youthful exuberance, there is no certainty of success. It had taken some time for me to become aware of that.

Mum wanted me to enter a university but I was not keen on trying the nearly impossible. Even if I were to be on a par with the brightest male applicants, I would not be able to gain entrance to any acceptable institution; I would have to wait for hell to freeze over first. Moreover, after my present home schooling I couldn't see how a university education would improve my writing ambitions. What, then? The obvious; reading, reading, reading, and life experience, if I could eventually move away from home. I hoped that in a few more years I could talk mum into taking me on more outings, possibly even overseas, to France. Oh, I wasn't crabbing; life was good. I was looking to the future.

"Speaking of the future, mother, I would much rather ponder yours for a change if you don't mind."

We were sitting on the small, second-story balcony at the rear of the house, engaged in the art of doing nothing, at which we had, over the last several years, become very good. Part of our mastery was due to the many opportunities we had to do so. There, and finding what pleasures we could in long walks, cab rides, dinners out and at the homes of some of her female friends, few as they were. Sometimes we were accompanied by my classmate and good friend Pansy, to her delight and ours. Then there were the stays at Wildwood. They had become more frequent for some reason not apparent to me.

"My future?" questioned mum. "Is not my future obvious by now? More of the same? And don't you know by now your future is my future?"

She had made that comment before, as regards my future and hers being intertwined. And as I got older I started to wonder what she really meant. If I married would she follow me, or expect us to move in with her? As much as I loved her, I had begun to think further ahead, and due to my extraordinarily vivid imagination nothing was beyond consideration. A mentality necessary for an excellent writer, but not so good for such a writer who desires to lead an otherwise normal life. Oh, well, I may have been counting my chickens—— I could possibly be the worst scribbler to ever write a book, even if I do so.

"You know by now I am persistent," said I.

"What? Why do you bring up that?"

"As I advance toward old age, I——"

"Advance toward old age, ha! Listen you you. I haven't heard that one before."

"Nevertheless. Allow me to continue. When I am of a mature age who knows what my lot in life will be? If I am deathly ill and disabled, or in another country, or, or even dead, what will you——?"

"Dead?" cried mum. "Oh, please! Spare me! You take the prize."

"Thank you. Now, consider that you will not be young forever either, and I would hate to see you alone. I can only imagine how you would——"

Mum's face turned white. "That again. You brought something similar up once a year or two ago, and I told you I don't want to hear it. I have made it plain I had only one love in my life—matrimonially speaking—and you know who that was. My dear love, Albert. And I have no intention of seeking another." She turned cross. "Do you not believe me? Do you think I am feeble minded to the point of not knowing myself. Opal, you try me no end when you bring up subjects like that."

I drew back in my chair. Whenever she called my by my given name I knew I was in trouble. Usually I was *dear*, or the like.

"Opal, will you please not bring up this subject again? I can't bear it."

We sat studying each other.

After a full minute I began again. "What do you suppose Albert would think of——"

"Stop!" Mum hit her book that was lying on the end table, hard, with her open hand. "No more of that!"

More silence, and I looked down and tried to wipe the tears from my cheeks with my bare hands without her noticing, but she did notice. She got up and came to me, kneeling before me and laying her head on my lap. I finished wiping my face, then I began to stroke her hair. I don't know how long we sat thus, but eventually she looked up at me and spoke.

"My dear Opal," she began. The she buried her face in my lap again.

She spoke thus when she was was peevish, which was not often, and when she was in a more-than-usual loving mood. And when she was apologetic. Now she was all three at once.

"How will you ever forgive me? Tell me, and I will do anything."

I began to blubber, and I continued to blubber for a while, unable to speak. Then she joined me, and we both blubbered. After a while she looked up again, and we were, reconciled. We both laughed, then we both blubbered, then we laughed yet again.

"Tut, tut," said I. "Shame on us, and mostly me."

"Oh, no, shame on mostly me," argued mum. "I am older and should have known better."

"No," I went on, "I am younger, and have not yet learned to hold my tongue on delicate matters. I bear most of the blame——"

"Let us both stop!" said mum. We have hurt each other too much already. I will never again be touchy about my past. I was too abrasive. From this time on you may broach any subject you wish."

"Ha! As for me I will be more careful as to my broaching."

"Broach away!"

That evening mum took us—me, Gertrude, and Edgar, along with my dear friend Pansy—to a fancy downtown restaurant, Claridge's. We were all dressed to the nines, except for Edgar, who was not up with the rest of us, but was acceptable. The trousers of his black suit were too short, and his white cravat was not as white as it should have been, none the less his overall appearance could have been worse. As we entered, the head waiter paid no attention, even as he eyed Pansy and me, not because of our appearances; rather due to our sex. In some dining establishments it was still frowned upon for women to dine with men. Then his glance fell on mum and all was well, or perhaps I should say, acceptable. I had found such to be the case in other places and circumstances where mum was the key to entrance or acceptance.

We were led to a good table and seated. I had been with mum to such places before, and I was sure Gertrude and Edgar had too, but I noted how he from time to time felt the inside of his neck piece with his index finger. And Pansy. How she glowed and wondered as she looked around in awe. Obviously she had never experienced such opulence. The multi-coloured walls with their Florentine designs beggared description; still I knew I would remember it

forever. The ornate sideboards and serving tables were decorated with all sorts or expensive-looking French and oriental vases, figurines, and the like. And at the center of our dining table stood, I guessed, Sophocles himself; twelve inches tall. Oh, my!

We talked, we laughed, we joked, we poked fun, and we forgot our troubles. I am sure I was not the only one who had troubles, nevertheless mine were trifling. The waiters came, the waiters went, and people—men—tried not to stare at us. At first I assumed they were staring at mum, then I saw they were also gazing—smiling—at me and at Pansy. I flattered myself with the realization they were looking at me slightly more than at Pansy. Shame on me. Yet— The unusual sensation I had was of being complimented, and who in my situation would not have felt the same? My only answer to my own question was to myself several months previous, when I cared not about my opposites. I was confused.

We dined on all sorts of peppers, macaroni soup, boiled cod, a variety of cheeses, and a wonderful vegetable salad.

"Goodness," said Gertrude, "this salad is spicy."

"Well, Miss Gertrude," said I, "spice is the variety of life." It just popped out.

They all looked at me first in surprise, then in perplexity, and finally in complete astonishment.

Mum was the first to grasp my little wordplay, or whatever it was. "She is talking about the old saying *Variety is the spice*—"

"Oh!" cried Pansy. Spice of life. How clever."

Gradually they all stopped staring at me as if I were daft, excepting Edgar, who would likely require more time.

After Edgar had collected himself, he—to everyone's surprise, for it was not in his character—did a delightful and hilarious imitation of a mad hatter; an imitation of which I would not have judged him capable, and more than that, would not have imagined him inclined to attempt. Yet attempt he did, and he was adorable. Normally such antics would have resulted in his being ushered out, but as he sat back down he received resounding applause from both diners and the staff, who would not allow him to rest until he had taken a bow. Face beet-red, he did. As for me, I could not have described his performance if I had tried. I could only set it aside for later consideration and possible inclusion in my writing.

In the carriage on the way home we sang every song we could think of, except for Edgar, who confessed that the only songs he knew were not fit for present company. We attracted many a curious stare as we went, and when we arrived mum tipped the driver more than amply.

I was sure, like the walls of the restaurant, I would be able to recall the evening for the rest of my life as one of the best events of my life.

Chapter Seventeen

As I gradually regained a modicum of sentience, I opened my eyes. I saw only the shimmering color blue.

After that, I am told, I recognized my mother's voice, then I went back to sleep.

Two days later I was able to speak. Again, so I was told.

"What, what, what—?"

"You went into a trance three days ago," answered mum. "A very deep one. We were afraid you wouldn't come out of it."

"Oh, I'm so thirsty. May I have some water?"

I drank deeply, and asked for more. Mum wiped her eyes.

"Was there a doctor?" I asked.

"Yes, but he said it was beyond him. You would either wake up or, or, oh, I can't say it. Not wake up."

"Die?"

Mum only broke down more, leaning her head on me.

"Now mother," said I, "here I am, fit as a fiddle, and I vow here and now never to fall into such a state again. So there you have it; dry your eyes again and pull yourself together. That's an order."

She only wept louder, but I cut her short.

"Oh, dear me, my chamber pot! How did I—? Did you—?"

"Oh, no, Mrs Corker took care of your toweling; not I."

"Thank goodness. But wait! Did you say my toweling? Am I still wearing —?"

Mum broke out in laughter. "Just because you were asleep didn't affect how you had lost your movements. Eh, eh, don't interrupt. The doctor took your fragrance as a good sign, and as you are returning to us quite well, he was right."

If one can feel—as well as see—color, I did. I sensed my face turning red.

"I must get up and put on my regular clothes. My how embarrassing. I will never live it down."

Just then Mrs Corker entered the bedroom.

"No you don't! Lie back down. I speak for your mother as well as for myself. You are clean enough to wait until tomorrow. And as far as living it down goes, you are merely human like the rest of us. I've changed many a nap-cloth in my day, so don't you fret about it."

"Why, I wasn't fretting. Tis natural to want to—"

"Tush! Now let me prop you up and set this chowder before you. Are you hungry?"

"No."

Mum interrupted. "She is, and she will eat like a horse."

The room was stuffy and I bid mum to open the window.

The clam chowder was too delicious and I feared it would go right through me. Mum and Mrs Corker sat staring at me until I was uncomfortable, and through the window came the hoot of an owl. I wondered whether my two watchers would begin to hoot as well, for they had begun to resemble hooters. Still, I finished the chowder.

"Well done," said Mrs Corker, taking my bowl.

"Whoo!" I exclaimed.

"Who? Who what?" she asked in surprise.

I laughed. "Nevermind, grandmother. Sometimes something lighthearted comes over me. You must learn to ignore such outbursts."

"Why, I never," said Mrs Corker. "You astound me." And with that she huffed out of the room, leaving mum and me giggling.

"Now, mother dearest, a most serious question, and I pray you won't withhold anything from me."

"I will not. You know I am not the withholding type; I'm a realist who believes in meeting life's vicissitudes head on."

"Did the doctor think I would fall into such a state again? I know I promised not to, but——"

"State? Fall into? Oh, dear, I—— Oh, my. Let me collect myself. Well, as I told you, he said it was beyond him, so I assume he didn't know. The only thing he was sure of was that it wasn't a normal, ahem, *departure*. He said it was physical, as if you had eaten some bad food, or caught something when you were out walking amongst the riffraff."

I groaned.

"He thinks it was a normal malady," continued mum, "like we all suffer from time to time. Probably you won't catch it again."

I took control of my emotions. "Oh, I'm sure I won't. After all, I said I am as fit as a fiddle, and I vowed never to succumb to departures again, and I assure you I won't. Realistic as you are, don't you place some faith in precognition? Eh, don't interrupt. I'm certain you realize most of our thoughts and actions are the results of our inner-cranial machinations."

"I don't know about——"

"You do now, mum, and perhaps it would behoove you to base more of your precepts on instinct, and less on sheer analysis. Aha! I can read your mind. You think I am going to turn religious."

"Not you Miss Smarty. I guessed someday there will be an intelligence test better than measuring the size of people's heads. For now, though, we have various ways to separate the quick from the dull, and one way is religion. Anyone who believes there's a puppet-master somewhere above is, ipso facto, dull."

"But——"

"But nothing. You know I am right, and if you persist in arguing I will call

in Gertrude to change you, whether you need it or not. So there, that's and end of it."

"Oh, please, anything but that," I laughed.

"Then behave yourself. At times I find it difficult to keep up with you."

We bantered in that vein for a while, then, "I shall attempt to get up," said I.

"You will not. You must remain in bed for the rest of the day. *Rest* of the day. Get it? You must rest."

"Who said——?"

"I just did, and when the queen speaks everyone obeys."

"Oh, well then Queen Mum, I shall do as you say. I am tired. But——"

"But what?"

"Oh, I know it's silly."

"What's silly?"

"I'm afraid to go to sleep. Afraid I may not wake up."

"Tosh! You're out of the woods now. Anyway I will stay here beside you."

"Would you? Oh, please do."

Mum rose, closed the window, and pulled the curtain.

"There. Shut your eyes and conjure up sweet dreams."

I gradually awoke to find the room dark and mum sitting by my bed.

"Wake up, sleepy-head," said mum. "I confess you had me worried."

"Oh, a dream."

"Good or bad?"

"I know not."

"Tell me."

"I enlisted in the Royal Navy. I was——"

"Do tell!"

"I will, if you don't interrupt me. I was a gunner, and we went into battle with the French. I was——"

"Afraid?"

"Mother, please! No, I wasn't afraid; that's the funny part. Quite the opposite, I was enthusiastic, even when the shells started flying; first round shot, then explosive charges. I was in my element as a loader, and I felt I had found my calling. Oh, I hated to wake up and find, once again, I am a woman."

Mom stood and peered down at me.

"You are a puzzlement. First off, you are not a woman, you are a girl. Furthermore I wonder about you. About your sense of yourself as to your femininity. Surely you don't mean to say you would rather be a boy? Please tell me you don't."

I gathered myself.

Then, "No, mum I don't. I do, though, wish I had all of the rights and privileges of a man. Now don't you feel that way yourself? I'm sure you do. There's no use denying it. I know you at least as well as you know me, and if there were less of an age difference we could have been sisters. What do you say

to that?"

Mum fell back onto her chair.

"I agree. Still, we are of a different generation, and my feelings in that regard are not quite as firm as yours."

"Hah! Then we must work together to strengthen your feelings."

"You boggle my mind," said mum, "and I am going to take a short walk to un-boggle it. That is, if I can walk."

She stood and tottered out the door.

Alone, I was aware of how wet I was, but I would tell no-one.

Chapter Eighteen

It seemed as everyone I had come to know was handsome or beautiful, and that was the case one day when I was walking in a part of London where I had never been before. Usually Mr Corker tagged along thinking he was unseen, but this time I had eluded him.

As I walked along studying a rat that was nibbling away at a rotten piece of something, I bumped—literally bumped—into a young lady of about my age.

"Oh, gracious, how clumsy of me!" I cried, "I do beg your pardon."

"Not at all," answered she. "Indeed, I was watching the same rat."

"You were—?"

We both burst out laughing, as did the lovely lady who accompanied her, and by appearances I concluded the lady was obviously her mother. Or, if I stretched my fancy, her older sister.

The young lady and I curtsied, and I half expected the mother to do the same.

"I'm Lotte," said the girl, "and this is my mother."

I curtsied again and Lotte's mother bowed slightly. "Phoebe Glorious," said she with a faint smile.

"Glorious? Oh, yes, truly," I blurted.

They both laughed.

"My dear," said the mother, "please do not think me conceited. My family name is"

"I am Opal Green, and I live with my mother far in that direction." I pointed to the north.

"And here you are, walking in this area, close to the river, alone?" questioned Lotte's mother. "How brave and foolish, I do say."

"Oh, yes, probably both," I smiled. "I have succeeded in leaving my protector, Mr Corker, behind."

"Your father?" asked Lotte.

"Oh, no, I don't have a father. Well, of course I do, but— I was taken in by a wonderful lady and, not to go on about myself I will only say—"

But I felt something in my throat, and seeing my distress Mrs Glorious interrupted me.

"Nevermind," said she, "if we are to come across you again—and I hope we do—we can return to that if you wish. Now, let us find a nice place sit and rest. Would you like that?"

"I would very much, as I am getting a fearful about being alone. But I will not disclose that to my mother or to Mr Corker."

"I don't think you will," said Mrs Glorious, "as you seem to be a very determined young lady, and I suspect you keep your mother on her toes."

We sat on a bench under a spreading tree of some kind. I knew nothing about trees.

"I do keep her on her toes, and I declare I do so on purpose, for I feel it is good for her, as it keeps her from getting soft."

Lotte giggled and Mrs Glorious laughed heartily, attracting attention from several passers-by. I joined in.

We chatted gaily and it was delightful to be around people other than mum, and— Then, of a sudden we were all startled by a cry from behind. We turned, and I jumped up to see Mr Corker come running, red-faced and with what I considered to be a mixed air of anger and relief.

"Thought you had given me the slip, eh? Opal, you will be my death! In fact I feel I am about to fall to the ground this instant, deader than a doornail. How would you feel then?"

He collapsed on the bench and removed his floppy, grey, felt hat. "Aaargh!"

Mrs Glorious stood, took a step backward, stared at me, and quavered, "Who is that, that man?"

Having collected myself I tittered and answered, "Only dear mister Corker, our helper, savior, protector, and dear friend."

"Some friend! I dare say he has caused my heart to palpitate; and my heart never palpitates. I should sit down, but I daren't sit by him," she nodded at Mr Corker.

"Oh, poo," said I, "you will be safer beside him than anywhere else."

I grasped her hand and placed her on the bench, where she moved to the end farthest from Mr Corker and eyed him warily while holding both hands over her heart.

Mr Corker paid her no attention, and as he recovered himself he looked at me in disgust, but said nothing.

No one spoke for several minutes, then Lotte piped up timidly, "Have I fallen down the rabbit hole? This is all so, so—"

"You have fallen down the Green rabbit hole. Our family verges on madness at times, but it adds spice to our lives. If we form lasting friendships with you and yours, I am sure you will come to appreciate our foibles, and see some of them as strengths. What do you think of that?"

"Think? I'm not thinking straight right now. Give me a few moments."

Then, as if in a cheap novel, my mother came running up, distraught.

"Mother, why are you so—?"

"How dare you ask?" she interrupted. "You imp! You—"

"Calm yourself! How did you find me?"

"I knew something was up, and so did Edgar, so I followed him. Oh, I don't hold with whippings, but if any child deserved one it is you!"

"Now mum, come and sit here between Mr Corker and Mrs Glorious, and collect yourself. All's well that ends—"

She sat, but continued, "Fiddlesticks! Has ended well by chance. You know how dangerous it is in this part of town. I hate to think what could have

happened to you."

— "Mrs Glorious piped up. "It's not as bad here as people think. Not that I

Mum cast a sour glance at her. "And who are you?" she asked rather gruffly. "My name is Phoebe Glorious, and I and my daughter Lotte have just met your delightful daughter. I shall say—"

"And on whose authority do you, with your injurious tongue, proclaim this to be a safe are for a lone girl to be?"

"My, I didn't mean to offend you, Mrs Green. It's only that we—my husband and I and our two daughters, live nearby, and we don't find it to be such a low-class area. That's all."

"Huh," huffed mum, "I guess not, if one is the sort who must inhabit such place."

At that Mrs Glorious stood and faced mum.

"I do not appreciate your tone, Mrs What's-your-name, and I really don't think you should pass judgment on us without knowing more than you do. I will have you know we are not the low-life plebeians you apparently assume we are. We are the respectable and prosperous owners of a successful shipping company, and that accounts for where we live. As for any other dim views you have of us, I will go toe-to-to with you on any personal attributes we possess; such as intelligence, honesty, decency, and so on. There. The rest is up to you, if there is any rest; and I do feel you owe us an apology before you stomp off with your nose up in the air."

Mum's eyes widened to the size of saucers, and she clutched her throat without speaking.

I was forced to intervene. A poor, young waif who had been taken in by a wonderful lady, obliged to intervene in a tiff between that lady and another one who was obviously not callous or unkind. But how to intervene? Boldly? Charmingly? It would be bodily. Quick and delicate.

I forced my way between the two, quickly and not very delicately.

"Mother, are you ill? Is it your heart?"

"No, not in the way you imply." She put both of her hands in her lap and took a deep breath. I expected an outburst, but nothing came.

"And Mrs Glorious, is there anything I can do for you by way of calming your frayed nerves, for I fear we have all taken a toilsome and irritating path, and if all of you will listen to me," I waved the back of my hand to include both of them and Edgar, "I think I can shed some light on our mutual discomfort, of which I am the main instigator. Further, if you will allow me, I will suggest some ministrations that will surely calm our delicate feelings."

My intervention worked like a charm. The faces of all three appeared to melt like wax.

A moment of silence, then mum said, "You astound me, Opal. You, the child, intervening in the quibbles of three, hmm, *adults*."

"I am equally astounded," added Mrs Glorious, "and I echo your mother's

words. Just look at us!"

Edgar looked up. "I'm hardly astounded. I know Miss Opal has it all over us when it comes to common sense. However, having said that, I am still not over *Miss Common Sense's* wandering off down here all alone. I too don't think it's as bad a place as many make it out to be," he glanced at Mrs Glorious, "nevertheless," he looked at me, "it is nowhere for young ladies to be dawdling alone." He furrowed his brows, but underneath I saw how hard he was working to keep from smiling. Only I could see it.

"You are right Mr Corker, and I apologize to you all."

"Now, then," said Mrs Glorious, "you and I have some amends to make." She took both of mum's hands in hers and lifted her to her feet, and they embraced, and I heard a whimper or two.

After a while they separated, regarded each other, giggled, and declared—both at the same time—that they were sure to be friends. Then Lotte and I hugged one another and made the same declaration, also simultaneously.

All was well.

I have a friend. Lotte Glorious. Oh, mum is a friend, but not in the same way. I know Lotte and I will be more than friends.

Chapter Nineteen

I was alone in the house. Mum was off on one of her frequent business journeys, Mr and Mrs Corker had trusted me to be by myself while they went about their weekly shopping, and I was bored. Bored beyond my feeble attempts to describe my condition, if I had been called upon to do so.

Little did I know my boredom was about to be interrupted. There came a louder-than-usual knock on the door; so loud that I didn't think to be cautious. Only concerned. I ran to the door, opened it wide, and it took me part of a minute to recognize my father! Oh, the horror!

"Good morning Opal," said he, calmly; even humbly.

He had aged. Oh how he had aged, and shrunk. He was shorter and emaciated, and his face had a yellowish cast. I started to shut the door on him, but he stayed me.

"Oh, have no fear, I'm not the man I was, and I intend you no harm. I only wanted to see you one last time. I don't even deserve to be invited in, but I hope you will hear me out." An appealing aspect came over him. "We could sit here on the step for a few minutes?"

I wavered, then, "The others are occupied, but we could sit in the hallway if you wish."

He nodded slowly, and I led him in, where we sat opposite each other. His face was deeply creased, and when he removed his hat I saw how bald he had become. And, curiously, he was dressed all in black.

He began, "I won't beg your forgiveness; it's much too late for that——"

"It is."

"And I can't offer you anything. Not money, property, or anything else. Nothing tangible."

I held my tongue.

"The only thing I can offer is salvation."

At that he regarded me expectantly, but I remained silent.

"In whatever time I have left on earth I am doing the Lord's work, and——"

I held up my hand to stop him. "I am glad you have found solace in what you do, but any effort to sway me would be futile."

"I merely wanted to——"

"It is of no use," said I. "Our past is long over. You cannot bring back my mother—your wife—nor can you mitigate the harm you have done to me and to others. I say that not to punish you, as I see you have been your own punisher. I'm enough of a pragmatist to know we cannot dwell on the past with the intent of undoing the wrongs, when those wrongs were so severe. All we both can do is let the past be, wish one another well, separate for the last time, and move on."

He hung his head and said, "How astute and sensible you are." He looked

up again. "Then I will leave you in peace." He paused at the door. "I will say prayers for you. It's the least I can do."

"If you wish. Doing so will benefit you, but in no way me."

He gazed at me for an instant, bowed, turned, and hobbled away, not looking back. I was sorry for him, my father, and closed the door.

I went to my bedroom, flung myself onto the bed, and sobbed. Crying has never been one of my strengths, so I cut it short, and when a bird flew in through the window I took it as a sign I should wipe my eyes and pull myself together; and just in time, as I heard someone's footsteps downstairs. So that was that.

I am not—and have never been—the crying sort; not since I stood alone in front of our flat after my mother died. Nevertheless I went to my bedroom and broke down. Not in sympathy for my father. No, in sympathy for myself. Plain, simple, stomach-wrenching, self-pity, the like of which I seldom experienced, and I was glad I was alone. If suffering in private is a virtue, I am quite virtuous. I sobbed. I had always assumed if one was overcome with the urge to cry, she should cry to her heart's content. Only never around men, who never cry. Ha!

Of a bright, warm summer day in June came the sound of the door knocker, followed by direct knocking. Mum and I were in the sitting room having our afternoon tea, and shortly Mrs Corker tapped on our door and entered. She looked doubtful.

"A man to see Miss Opal."

"Yes?" said mum.

"He is odd-looking."

"How so?"

"Old, dressed in black, more-or-less sinister appearing."

"Is Edgar here?"

"Yes."

"And did the man give his name?" asked mum.

"Pecker. Mr Pecker."

"Please show him in," said mum, "but keep Edgar nearby."

I was unnerved by her tone.

We waited a short while, then went to the drawing room. There, standing before the bow window was the thinnest, most translucent man—or person—I had ever seen. He conjured in my mind Dickens' Uriah Heep; tall, scraping, and as was soon apparent, extremely obsequious. He, like my father, was dressed in black. He held his floppy black hat in both of his hands, and gave a more-than-polite bow. Even his long, straight hair was dark black, and oily.

Mum nodded civilly, and I did nothing but stand stiffly beside her.

"May we help you?" inquired mum.

"Thank you, no. I am only here as the bearer of ill tidings."

He stopped and stared at us in a cockeyed way.

"Yes?" prompted mum.

"As regards Miss Opal's father."

Again he stopped, and he stood twisting his hat.

"Yes?" said mum, agitated.

"I am here to inform you of the death of your father," he looked down at me, "Mr Philo Corbie." He waited for a response, but none came. "He passed in his sleep, and in no pain." Still no response. "His last words before falling asleep were of you."

"Is that intended to mollify me?"

He remained silent.

I pressed on. "If you step on someone's toes inadvertently, and apologize, that is forgivable. Easily forgotten. Do it with purpose, but after apologies, that is also forgivable. Bludgeon someone to the point on insensibility, that's up to the recipient, and whether any permanent damage has been done. Kill someone, no matter the motive, is usually unforgivable. And it's a legal issue."

I lost my breath, and both mum and Mr Pecker stared at me.

"Now," I continued, "kill someone slowly, by beatings, neglect, and even through mental anguish, is tantamount to outright murder. I'm sure you get my drift."

By then they were both gaping at me, and I had nothing more to say. Mr Pecker twisted his hat even tighter, and mum forced her mouth shut. I heard Edgar try to suppress a cough behind the closed door.

Mr Pecker said, "The Lord has made it very clear——"

"The Lord," I barked. "The Lord! An affront! You insult and degrade me, sir, you and your ilk, living in the realm of ancient myth and mysticism." I turned to mum. "Please ask this feckless remnant of my past to leave."

At that Edgar entered, approached our visitor, and nodded his head toward the door. Mr Pecker needed no more urging, and left.

That left me, mum, and Edgar staring at each other in mute, what? Relief? No. I didn't know, but I was still fired up. Mum closed her mouth, sat down, and continued to gape at me in confusion, and Edgar turned his back to mum, winked at me and left the room.

Chapter Twenty

If I am to become a writer I must learn to concoct plausible stories. Not just possible, but plausible. Not only that, I am already aware of other constructs that should be adhered to, and one has to do with amateurish repetition. One can stretch the imagination too far, and— Such as the constructs of foul, miserable men abusing women and girls. Oh, in fact there are many such men doing despicable things, but I would avoid overdoing

Mum and I hurried along toward Marigold's place, and I could hardly keep up.

"But why?" I asked again. "Let me catch my breath."

She grabbed my hand and all but dragged me along.

"Come along. You should be able to keep up with an old lady."

"Tell me again what the message said," I huffed.

A scrawny, emaciated lad had delivered a message that had sent mum into a near frenzy.

"Never mind. Come along."

But I could tell mum was running out of breath too, and she released me and slowed down. Then she stopped and leaned back against a brick wall.

"Her husband came back. I told you."

"Yes, but I thought Edgar had taken care of him years ago, and—"

"I don't know, and Edgar and I had an unwritten agreement not to bring it up."

She caught her breath, but didn't move.

"Then isn't it time you revised that agreement?" said I severely. "This is no time to stand on principle, or whatever you—"

"You have a way about you," said mum with some vexation, "but you do get to the essence of things. Anyway, on we go."

Pansy answered the door, and she was in a state.

Mum pushed past her. "Where is she?"

"In the, in the parlor. She is not good."

We went to the back. There, as usual in the semi-darkness, sat Marigold. We couldn't make out her condition, even as we were aware it ranged from bad to terrible. Mum rushed to her, fell to her knees, took her hands, and demanded to know what had happened. For a moment Muggs was unable to speak, then she answered, between heartbreaking sobs.

"He appeared at my door. After all these years, an apparition that I didn't at first recognize. Ohhh!"

"There, there, Marigold, what then?"

"I awoke on the floor, bewildered, with Pansy kneeling over me, and he was

gone. Ask her," she indicated her daughter, "for she will tell me nothing. Nothing. I am at a loss."

Pansy stood beside her mother, stone-still, as if in a trance.

Mom looked up at me. "Take Miss Pansy in the other room and tend to her. See if you can find out what happened."

I led Pansy out of the room and upstairs into a bedroom where there were two cozy chairs, and placed her in one of them. I parted the window curtains, and sat down facing her.

"You find yourself in good hands," said I, "and Edgar will be here soon. We will take care of everything. All you have to do is have faith in us. Do you?"

She nodded, but I could see she had not yet gained control of herself.

I slipped down to the kitchen and rummaged through the shelves. There I found a red, half-empty, stoppered bottle of something, and smelling it I knew it was sherry, so I filled a small glass and started back up to the bedroom. Then I stopped, returned to the kitchen, and filled another glass. I needed a drop or two as well. I was not as angelic as mum had assumed.

My patient sat as before; perfectly still and expressionless. I poured, and I had to lift Pansy's right hand, place the glass into it, close her hand, and lift it to her lips. Only then did she drink.

Before I sat, I went to the dining room and found the family bulldog—Chomper—sitting on a pad in his corner, sleeping. Feeling he would be both a comfort and a stimulant to Pansy, I gently woke him—gently, because though he knew me, he had never shown me much affection—and led him up to the bedroom. Alas, when Pansy saw him she started, spilled her drink, and shrank back in her chair in fear! What in—? I pulled Chomper back and showed him the door, then set my chair beside Pansy's and put my arm around her shoulders until she calmed somewhat. We sat, for a long while, quietly.

Mum came to our door and motioned to me, and we went to the kitchen.

"I gleaned only a scant bit of information from Marigold, and that is, when she came to Chomper was licking her face, and there had been a horrible row wherein he had attacked her husband and mauled him severely. That's all she remembers."

"Oh, my! Good old Chomper. And no wonder Pansy is in such a condition."

A thunderous knock on the door, and in strode Edgar, our savior, whom we met halfway.

"Where is the assassin?" bellowed he. "This time I will do the job right, as I should had done years ago. I'll settle his hash for good, and then—"

Mum led him to the kitchen and sat him at the table, where he ranted for another minute or two.

After he had worn himself out, mum said, or asked, "So you let him off the first time?"

He hung his head. "To my discredit. I only broke a few of his bones."

"That should have been sufficient." She moved behind him and massaged

his shoulders affectionately. "Now," said she, "we will move on, and start with me telling you what we think has just happened here; even if we don't know the full story yet." She moved around and sat facing him across the table, and I too sat down.

"Here's the long and short of it," began mum. "Marigold's husband—I still can't, after all this time, bring myself to say his name—came here to her door; she answered, he forced his way in and began abusing her, Chomper came to her rescue and mauled him severely, the villain managed to get away, Marigold fainted, Pansy got her up and into bed, then she sent us a message, we left the note for you before hurrying here, we found Pansy all but paralyzed with fear, and that sums it up. I think we have a pretty good picture of the whole sordid affair."

Back at the shelf I withdrew the bottle of sherry and a glass and poured—a larger one than before—and placed it before Edgar. He eyed it, but pushed it away.

"I don't drink spirits," said he. "Only once or twice before, in dire emergencies."

I winced. "This is a dire emergency." I pushed back the glass. "If the no-name husband survives his dog bites, he may be back. Drink!"

Edgar seized the glass with both hands and downed the contents in two gulps.

My mother had sat in amazement. "Opal Green, you don't mean to tell me you know that much of Demon Drink?"

"Oh, mum, I'm not the little angel you think. And, no, I was not going to tell you—"

"Have you sampled my own liquors?"

"Only once when you were away. Pansy and I—"

"Stop! Tell me no more! Oh, this has been a day I don't wish to remember. No one could have made it up. Ohhh!"

She put her arms on the table and leaned her head on them.

"When I am a successful writer," said I, "I will write along these lines, and make you proud."

"Mmmph meh praud," mumbled Edgar.

"Excuse me?" I smiled.

"Make me proud." He poured himself another drink.

I had sometimes walked past Lotte's home on the off chance I would meet her, but I never did. I had not the courage to go to her door. Not courage; something else. I have never been shy, so what then? Something about her? Her mother? No, something about me. I'll have to chew it over.

So there I was, walking past the Glorious home, and I had to give myself credit for revealing to myself again my peculiarities. Not an individualist; that

means being an egoist, which I know I am. Huh. The other side of the coin is that I am just plain unique. Mum tries to shine a good light on it, but unique is unique. "Live with it," she had said. "Accept it, and build upon it. Use it to your advantage by turning it into an ability. Retain and enhance the valuable and cast off the rest."

Fine advice as far as it went. The trouble is, it didn't go very far. Life isn't that simple. It can't be defined and ruled by simple mots, aphorisms, and similar generalizations. I avoid them in daily life, and more than ever in my writing.

'And? How does that pertain to your friend Lotte?'

"I thought you would never ask, Sir Reality. Simply, life moves on. We gain and lose friends."

'You never really had this one.'

"That's why I'm moving on."

Chapter Twenty-one

We had been spending more time at Wildwood, and I had come to appreciate the place. London was stuffy even when one lived in a luxurious home.

Elway and Minerva welcomed us to their little world. Mum, as usual, showed them extra affection, and again I sensed there existed some bond of which I was unaware. Hmmm. Oh, well, time would tell.

I still had no friends at Wildwood, and I had it in mind to bring Pansy along sometime. At the same time I was conscious of a certain reluctance on my part, and I didn't know why. Usually when people say they don't know why *this and that*, they do know, and I am no different, but this time I truly didn't. I guessed time would tell on that also.

Of a typical slow day I pondered on how I, with firm aspirations, who saw myself as a blooming writer, had not written so much as one word, except in my diary.

Fear of failure Alice? Plain procrastination? Sloth? No, not sloth; that is not in my nature. Awareness of my youth and inexperience? Yes, that is probably it; inexperience and incomplete education. Oh, one's education is never complete; still there is a point of adequate completeness for all practical purposes, and if I do say, I am not of a dull and obtuse composition. I have long thought my penchant for, or addiction to, writing, was because the occupation entails—if one is a good writer—all human activities, feelings, activities; every facet. At the very least it would entail a great many of those activities, . . . Here I go again about the encompassing requirements of— None the less, how will I ever write anything of substance if I live as I do now; in seclusion, with no first-hand knowledge of the real world?

And, another worry. I am still bustless. Flat as a frying pan.

Sitting alone under a spreading tree, with a grey cat rubbing up against my leg, I decided to write a sentence. One good sentence. Merely because I have not had much of a taste of real-life, I am well-educated for my age, I am aging faster and faster, I am an avid reader, and I should be capable of scratching out a single excellent sentence. Perhaps not profound, or scholarly, but indicative of some astuteness. Some potential. So, on what subject? A sentence about writing. Oh, heavens no. Utterly banal. I pondered, but came up with nothing. The cat looked at me and purred, and I reached down and petted it. A sentence in praise of mum? Hardly literature. I came up with several other trite subjects, and trite they were. A voice in my head, nearly audible, said, *You aspire to be a writer, and you can't even scribble one sentence?* I chewed on my fountain pen. I shifted in the old wooden chair. I petted the cat. Nothing worked. I crumpled my paper and tossed it on the ground, at which the cat stopped purring and looked up at me. Cats are not like dogs; they are expressionless. None the less he, or she, showed

his or her disgust by stalking off by way of indicating I was a booby.

After sitting for a time I picked up my paper and went to the house. Walking down the hall past the drawing room I heard mum and Mrs Fiddler.

"Now you know if there's anything at all you need, you have only to ask, and" said mum.

What? I thought she had addressed Minerva as *mother*. I must have heard wrong; nevertheless I stopped and listened. More precisely, *eavesdropped*.

". . . seems well to me," said mum.

"Oh, I suppose he does," replied Minerva, "but I who am with him all the time detect a slight slowness, and"

They lowered their voices, and between that and my guilt, I went on my way, perplexed. Not only could I not write a decent literary sentence, I couldn't comprehend what was going on between mum and the Fiddlers. By the time I entered the sitting room a spell of vertigo had come over me, and I fell into a large, plush, blue armchair. I had never suffered from vertigo before.

Ten minutes later mum entered and sat beside me.

"You appear a bit peaked my dear," she observed.

"I, oh, it's nothing. I tried to write something, and it made me dizzy." It was mostly a lie, because the dizzy spell had come on only after I heard her conversation with Minerva. "I feel better now."

"Hm. I have some elixir that doctor—"

"Thank you mum, but I'm back to normal now. It has passed. Hmm. Good thing too. When I get like that there's no telling. I thought I heard you call Mrs Fiddler *mother*."

"Oh, that. When I was a lost child she was like a mother. Another parent, like Edgar and Gertrude. That's all. Insecurity I guess. Two mothers are better than one. Oh, but not for you dear Opal." She smiled weakly.

"Oh."

Mum left the room, leaving me to ponder my future. Do most my age dither so much about their future? Oh, dear.

The grey cat, again my friend, appeared and rubbed against my leg apologetically. He—for I had seen he was a he—looked up at me, but still no smile. No Cheshire cat this one. On the other hand—on the other paw—he was my only male friend. The only one my age. Well, in cat years he was old; I could see that. Oh, my, was I destined to live around the elderly forever?

I hope mother will send me away to a university where I will be around those of my age. It will be a long wait, even if she does. Whinge, whinge, whinge. Never completely happy. And another thing; how about mum? What would she do without me? There are seldom perfect choices regarding life's crossroads. I have always been practical. Therefore I should know a way to cease worrying about things that are so far in the future as to be unknowable, and events that may never come about, or for which no satisfactory response is possible. Maybe some of mum's doctor's elixir after all

A not-large figure came into view far down the drive, and as it—she—came closer I made out a girl of about my age dressed in brown. All-brown, top to bottom, but with no headwear. Then as she grew near I noticed the only other color of her apparel was a red scarf across the front of her neck, with the ends trailing back over her shoulders. She approached, then, while thirty yards away she stopped and stood staring at me, and then to my great surprise she began walking—almost running—in circles. She was not tall, but she was well-built, fair, yet plain as a pipestem. Different than other young people I had previously met thereabout. Curious, I beckoned her on, but to my dismay my cat—my protector—charged toward the visitor in such fury as to send the girl running in fright. "Kitty!" I shouted, but it was too late, and Kitty returned with a proud look on his face. He couldn't smile, but he could assume other countenances. I had never seen a cat who could do that. Was it my imagination? Anyway, in spite of my displeasure I felt a bond between us; maybe a bond of individuality. There was something wrong though. I couldn't have a male protector named Kitty. Aha! Edgar. He would be called Edgar. By no means would I tell the real Edgar, for fear of him taking exception at being the genesis of a cat name, therefore it would be another of my little confidences. Little confidences? Not all of my confidences were so little.

'Neither are they so big, came a voice in my head. You tend to make them big.'

I started and looked around. "What do you mean by that?"

'You create much of your own anxiety.'

"For instance?" I whispered, hoping no one would hear.

'Leaving your mother alone, for instance. You should have figured out by now that, as she is bound to live on in London, you could go to school there. Perhaps live apart, but not far apart. And she does not seem to be the type who would impose upon you.'

"Oh."

'Oh? That's all you can say? Then let me give you something real to worry about. How will you, a girl, get into a proper school?'

"I won't be a girl by then, I'll be——"

'Tut, tut, you will still be seen as a girl. So there, mull that over for the next few years, if you must dither about something.'

I glanced around again, then leaned my elbows on my knees, closed my eyes, and held my head. Was I daft? Worse than daft? My alter ego had been coming more lately. There were now three; *Madam Fantasy*, *Sir Reality*, and the new *Mr Harsh*, who was by far the most vocal. A long, soft, involuntary moan escaped me, and when I opened my eyes there appeared Edgar staring up at me in disgust.

But wait, he didn't resemble the real Edgar in any regard; looks or disposition. Then what would I name him? Victor. He was invariably right and

ready for combat, so what better name than Victor? There I sat, scratching him behind his ears.

"Now behave yourself Victor."

"So you have named your gallant knight Victor?"

Mum had tiptoed up behind me.

"Don't you think it an appropriate appellation? You just now saw how he ran off that girl. I'm sorry he did, but he thinks he's defending me."

Mum stepped in front of me and looked down in apparent confusion.

"Girl?"

"Yes, the one dressed in brown. You must have seen her, and how Victor chased her away. Poor thing, I would have liked to have spoken with her."

"I saw your cat run around in circles before you, but there was no girl."

"Now, just now," I quavered, "the girl—"

"I sat on the portico for some time before coming to see how you were getting along, and I repeat, there was no girl."

I melted into my chair like warm butter, and covered my eyes with one hand. My right hand. My writing hand. Oh, my mind was wandering. Aflutter. I had had *incidents*, yet nothing like this. Was I going mad? Had there been lunatics in my real family? I had only known my mother and my father. My mother had been sane, but perhaps my father had been mad. And even then as I remembered them I experienced a mental twinge at conjuring—rather, recognizing—calling such a craven person *father*. A groan of pain, and in an instant I knew it had emanated from me. Then there was a faint moan from mum, who had fallen to my feet and was leaning on my lap. She had a tendency to do that.

Chapter Twenty-two

Am I a bluestocking? I shall ask mother. Short diary entry today. I had abandoned my *Alice* stuff.

I was growing fond of Wildwood, and after my encounter with the girl in brown, I had made the portico my favorite spot in good weather, and the drawing room my next-favorite place. After all, at Wildwood who was there to receive? Mum had no friends there, and neither did Elway and Minerva, except for one old lady who called on the Fiddlers once a month. She was a wealthy landowner, and that was nearly all I knew of her, since she made it a point to ignore me, and mum had told me very little. I only knew her surname was Hogg, because once mum had warned me to never address her thus, as she was very sensitive about it.

"Hog?" I had exclaimed, more than asked.

"Hogg. Two 'g's," explained mum.

"Then what am I to call her?"

"I suggest *Miss Millicent*, as I do."

"Miss?"

"As you can plainly see, she is not what anyone would call lovely, I assume she has had no matrimonial offers."

For some time—years—I had been mulling my resolution to start writing, but my resolve had never got past the mulling stage. I had two questions for mum; silly questions that I had to put to her none the less. I am obsessive in nature, and perhaps there's a medical name for it, or there will be in the future.

The time had arrived. I went to the tower where mum secluded herself in times of anxiety, and knowing I was now the cause of her anxiety I climbed the stairway. I would never have done so under normal circumstances. I knocked and heard her muted voice. The door was never locked.

Inside mum sat by the only window with a book on her lap, and she did not seem happy. A bewildering face I had never seen before.

I pulled the only other chair close to her and sat down.

"Mother, I know how I distress you at times, and obviously this is one of those times. What is it? Rather, I know what it is. It's the girl in brown is it not?"

She tried to laugh. "You know me young lady."

"Yes, thus I am here to tell you you need not worry. My little lapses are infrequent, and in fact I welcome them. Yes, don't look so surprised; I welcome them, as they stimulate my vivid imagination, and I need all of the stimulation I can get. So don't—"

"Not that kind of stimulation!"

"Why yes, even that, as long as it doesn't come over me too often. Rest easy mum, and look at the bright side. It could be a blessing."

She merely moaned and eyed me in what she apparently assumed was a knowingly way. No bright side for her.

"I think I inherited my insights from my father," said I. "I vaguely recall him acting strangely once in a while, like he was dreaming with his bloodshot eyes open."

"Insights. Some insights. You will be the death of——"

"Tosh! I only brighten your otherwise dull life." I put my thumbs in my ears and wiggled my fingers at her, at which she gasped, gagged, and then succumbed to a reluctant, quavering, laugh. "Besides," I added, "I'm too old for you to put me in an orphan's home."

"Now you stop that, Opal Green, it's not a laughing matter!" She laughed again.

I broke in, "Again, as long as my enlightenments don't come too often, what of it?"

Mum tried to speak, and for a moment or two she could not. She only babbled and gurgled. Then, "You're right, but only to a degree."

"A great degree. Now you must humour me and my foibles, as to something that I know is preposterous, but which I require nevertheless."

"Yes?"

"You have long known I am obsessed with becoming a writer, but, oh, it's crazy."

"Oh, that again. You have asked every three months for years. What's crazy about wanting to be a writer? Out with it!"

"If I am to have further education, will I be regarded as a bluestocking?"

"If you—— Bluestocking?" With that mum covered her face with her handkerchief and bent forward until her face was nearly on her knees, laughing.

"What?" I asked, perplexed.

"You are the limit. First, you will have higher education. Didn't I tell you?"

"Yes. But would I be allowed into a university?"

"If I have to I will pull some strings. You know by now how adept I am at string-pulling."

"Yes."

"And second, the bluestocking days are long, long over. Over well before even my time. And luckily for you, because there were doctors who held that too much education such as men received adversely affected young women's capability to reproduce. So you see how fortunate you——"

"Mother, stop! Sometimes you become the child and I the mother. Here I put to you a serious subject and you act like that. Shame. Put on your dunce cap and stand in the corner."

"I apologize. It's only that your concern is so trifling nowadays."

"Not to me. I have heard how women are treated as second-class students." She waved the back of her hand at me.

"Now daughter, it's not as bad now, and remember, strings. I have many strings available to me, even in the educational institutions, and I will be more than ready to pull them. There, does that ease your mind? I hope so, because I am as adept at pulling noses as I am at pulling——"

"Yes, mum, very much. You are paradoxical. One minute childish and cheeky, the next the wisest and most remarkable person I ever hope to know."

"Then I will add one other thing. A device. From now on whenever you start one of your foolish worries I will do this," she pulled her left earlobe twice, "and in so-doing I will put your mind at ease. There we are. I'm as good at earlobe-pulling as I am at"

She carried on like the cat who had swallowed the canary. Quite a large canary I almost ventured to imagine.

I left the tower, and as I descended the stairway I decided to leap right in with a full book. A novel. Quit fiddling around. But first, two steps. Inexperienced as I was, what could I write about? Well, as mum had once observed, one doesn't have to be able to swim in order to teach someone to swim. In other words, merely because I am young doesn't mean I am not knowledgeable. I am not arrogant, only rational, self-confident, and steadfast. There, that knocks down all obstacles in one fell swoop.

I sat down in an armchair in the drawing room and stared at a portrait of a middle-aged man in work clothes. I had meant to ask mum who he was.

'Then, Miss Smarty, what will you write about?'

"I scarcely know."

'If you think yourself so damnably smart, you should know.'

"Nothing specific yet. Give me time."

'I will not. Instead I will tell you what to scribble about. You have, even at your young age, lead an interesting life; therefore I urge you to write about yourself.'

"Myself? There's not——"

'There is, and there will be more to come.'

"That sounds like a diary, and I already——"

'No, you ninny, keep on with your diary, but sit yourself down, put pen to paper, and begin at the beginning of your life. Force yourself to write the first sentence, and go from there. You must begin now, whether you sink or swim. Sink or swim, ha!'

"Oh, dear."

Chapter Twenty-three

The following day I sat at the small, plain, varnished-oak writing table in my bedroom. My alter ago, whom I had trusted, had been wrong. I had written one sentence, and could write no more.

Chapter One

"My earliest memory is of myself lying on my bed, crying."

'Ugh! Dreadful. I told you to write one good sentence.'

"You did not say good."

'I assumed it would be. Lord, do I have to write it for you?'

"Well——"

'Well nothing. We have nought to discuss until you write that sentence. Evidently it will be some time before you do. Until then.'

I threw down my pen and got up to leave. Just then I heard a commotion in the sitting room, and I darted out into the hall and to the sitting room from which the noise was emanating. Upon entering I found mum sitting on the floor beside Elway, who was unconscious. Before I could move, his wife, Minerva, entered, forced me aside, and fell to the floor across from mum.

"What is it?" cried she.

"I don't know," mum responded. "We were standing here talking about the flowers in front and he suddenly dropped like a stone. He's still breathing but I can't rouse him."

Without looking at me mum said, "Go and fetch Dr Flynn. Hurry!"

"The greasy-looking old man down the lane by the——?"

"Yes, yes, don't dawdle. Away with you!"

Out I ran; I, who was the only one available. Away I went. The doctor's house was a fair distance from Wildwood but I was up to it, and on I flew, ignoring greetings from those few I met.

The doctor was in, and he appeared to be not as old and unkempt as I had remembered. Not only that he had a nice carriage and a capable old mare to pull it. In minutes we were away, and on the way I told him of Mr Fiddler's condition, which was easy to tell, as she had simply fallen to the floor as if he had been dead, but he was still breathing. As I said so, I hoped he still was.

We pulled up in front of the portico and I unhitched the mare and led her

to the horse shed while Dr Flynn took up his bag and went in.

Inside, I hurried to the sitting room where Dr Flynn was leaning over Mr Fiddler, who had somehow been moved to the couch.

The doctor, who he been listening to his patient's heart and lungs, straightened up and put his stethoscope back in his bag.

"His vitals sound good, his temperature and pulse are normal, his complexion is the same as ever. All said, and knowing this codger as I do, I almost suspect him of playing for sympathy."

Elway, now wide awake, groaned and muttered a profanity just as Miss Hogg entered the room. She glowered at him and at the doctor, went to a straight-back wooden chair in a far corner, and sat down.

"I will return tomorrow," said Dr Flynn, "and I hope my old whist-playing partner will desist in his theatrics from now on." He bowed, and departed.

Mum went to the couch and sat beside Elway, folding back his dark hair, patting him on a shoulder, then taking both of his hands in hers and looking lovingly at him.

"Are you settled now?" asked mum. "You had us all scared."

"Humph. You were scared? I was the one on death's door."

"How could you have been scared," chuckled Minerva, "you were unconscious?"

Elway, normally of a goodhearted and jolly disposition, rolled his head sideways and growled at his wife, "Quibble, quibble, quibble. What makes you think I was unconscious simply because my eyes were closed. I could have heard every thing you said."

"Then what did I say?"

"Say? Oh, the usual prattle."

"Such as? Come now, exactly what did I say?" persisted Minerva.

He put a hand to his forehead. "Oh, my head. I still don't feel well. I could use a dose of that brandy you keep in the——"

At that even mum tittered. She kissed him on one cheek, then the other.

When we were sure the patient was well, mum and I went outside and sat in the old wooden chairs beneath the big oak tree nearest the portico. Now that we were away from Elway she appeared to me to be unusually disconcerted. I took her hand.

"Don't worry so, mum. I have misjudged the doctor, and he seems very competent."

With one finger she wiped away a single tear.

"He is. Still, you know how I worry."

She attempted to appear amused.

"I do not," said I. "In fact quite the opposite, and that's why, in turn, I now worry about you. Mother, is there something you're not telling me. Remember when I—accidentally, mind you—thought I heard you call Mrs Fiddler *mother*, or some such. I must have misheard, I'm sure, however——"

"Probably not. I often do so."

She looked at me askance.

"You do?"

"I have long known the Fiddlers, and they have become more than hired servants. Far more." She looked away into the distance. "I shall say I almost regard them as my parents. We all need parents you know."

"I do know," said I.

"Leastways in our younger years," mum added, chuckling.

I was silent for a minute or two, summoning up my nerve.

Then, "Mum, assuming we all need parents—parents, plural—when we are young, please remember I am fatherless."

She regarded me suspiciously, and I took a deep breath.

"What are you getting at?" she all-but growled. "I smell a rat."

"Calm yourself, mother, I am only about to suggest—"

"You will suggest nothing. I will have no other husband. Never! Not even if it means you will have no other father than Edgar. There, that's the end of it, so desist."

I wilted.

"As you wish, mum, I—"

"Not as I wish. As I demand. You have been at it for years."

"Very well, I will, er, desist. I am sorry to have upset you so. I meant well."

"Take care that you don't turn into a do-gooder."

My wilting was complete. I was speechless. I had never seen myself as a do-gooder.

Mum subsided.

"You will most likely learn there is, in most rational women's lives, only one man. Oh, the flirtations of youth, and perhaps a misstep or two, but nothing more, and when the time comes you will know, and I hope to be around when you do, howsomever if I am not, please remember this conversation or I will haunt you."

I giggled. The heat was off. I relaxed, only to find myself very suddenly twisting in my chair and looking for the girl in brown.

"Is something amiss?" asked mum.

"No, I have been sitting in one position for so long part of my back has gone asleep."

"Back? Not your lower cheeks?"

"Mother! How crude!"

Part II

Chapter Twenty-four

Mum has aged. Mr and Mrs Corker have aged. One of my best friends, Pansy Sherett, has matured. I have aged. And my writing has stalled. Oh dear! What am I to do? And the worst is, now, several years after I was told my father had died, I am sure I saw him again! What am I to do? Woe is me. And am I myself on the road to the tomb?

'Stifle yourself! You're seeing things. Your father is deader than a doornail. And I find you on the verge of losing your senses.'

"I am not."

'The very fact that you are conversing with me tells me otherwise.'

"It should be telling you I have an exceedingly vivid imagination."

'I'll grant you that. Still——'

Ohhh! It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, . . . Mum had aged, yet she was young. Mr and Mrs Corker showed their age, but not much. Pansy had matured; still and all she was young. And I have aged, mentally more than physically. Isn't that good?

As to immediate vexations that compound London life, I was certain I had seen my father stroll by our house the other day. Curiously, he appeared to have cleaned himself up, and he was wearing better clothes. He appeared younger, although I had been afforded only a glimpse of him.

'You had seen him?'

"Blast you for your continual hectoring!"

"Excuse me?" asked mum, entering my bedroom as usual without knocking.

"I didn't say anything."

Mum was still a desirous woman. Lady. I had often wished we were blood-related, but more than once when I had mentioned my wish she, well, had not exactly lied to me by trying to convince me I was as beautiful, and then as usual we fell to quibbling about it.

"Then we won't get into that again."

"Huh."

"Dear me. Huh? Whether or not you talk to yourself."

"I look to the time you will knock on my door before entering. Or at the least clear your throat."

"Oh gracious. Why yes, if you like. Indeed, I remember when I was your

age I would have felt the same."

With that she went back out, knocked lightly, coughed, and re-entered. I attempted to hold a stern face, only to double over in my chair in laughter. She without exception had the most appropriate reaction to any occasion. She followed by sitting in the chair facing me, wiping tears of laughter from her face with the fingers of both hands.

"It will be a good, long time till you manage to stay grouchy with me," said she. "I do confess you have a point though. Heretofore I have been remiss in respecting your privacy, but no more. You are growing up."

"Oh, but I only——"

"Tut, tut, you deserve more consideration, and that's that. Now may I ask what goes on in that overactive noodle of yours?"

"Only that I'm, oh, aging, and my writing is not working out, and I tend to worry about the future—not only mine, but yours and everyone else's who are close to me—and, and——"

Mum sobered. "Oh, my, you are in a state." She leaned forward and took my hands in hers. "Why I don't know what—— Give me a moment to think."

For the first time I could ever remember she was at a loss, though probably my memory had failed me.

"It's really not that——" I began, but she waved me quiet.

So there we sat, both looking down.

Then, "Opal, I have reached an age where I am beginning to lose my facilities. Oh, to be specific, not my senses or mental acuity, mind you; rather my ability to understand your inner workings. My own child—my other child, I should say—did not live long enough to prepare me for one of your age. So you see, we are in this together; two sojourners in the same small boat, wending our way through the unknown with faith that we shall arrive safely at a serene harbor. And if I am to be the captain it will take some time for me to get my sea legs."

I saluted her.

"I have faith in your navigation," said I, "and I will do my utmost to be a good swab."

"See that you do."

"You have many good things going for you, one of which is, you are an ardent reader, and the fact that you read philosophy is a good sign."

A raven appeared on the windowsill and gave me a curious look. I knew nothing about ravens, yet I was certain he was a *he*, therefore I grew apprehensive, but I reached cautiously out to him, and received a stiff peck on the palm of my hand.

"Ow!"

Mum laughed.

"Tisn't funny!" I cried. "That hurt."

"I apologize. Why do we laugh when someone is hurt? Anyway, I will leave you to nurse your wound."

When she was gone I sat pouting; not because of being pecked, but simply because I was down in the mouth and needed no other reason. I had known some who at such times needed to sit down and have a good cry, but that was not my way. I very much preferred pouting, at which I was accomplished. An accomplished pouter.

'What good does that do, you silly goose?'

"It makes me feel better."

'Bosh!'

I pouted for a full ten minutes.

Chapter Twenty-five

Philbert Sherett. Philbert Sherett. Philbert Sherett. Am I to be nagged about him for the rest of my life? Boys in general. Muffs. I had never been aware of any fondness for them. Am I a tribade? For that matter, does the fact that I even know the word *tribade* mean I am one? I have been compiling a lexicon of words and phrases for when I break out and actually start writing, however I could not recall how or where I had come up with *tribade*, and merely having it in my vocabulary struck me as odd and unsettling. The only consolation was, I had no passionate feelings for other young ladies either. Ohhhh.

Mum and I were walking in Covent Garden, my favorite place in London. Flower girls—both waifs and not-so-innocents—costermongers, pickpockets; for I was sure there were pickpockets, and all. My goodness, only Dickens could do justice to the descriptions. The only sense even he could not convey was the smell. The odor that could not be put into words, and which I, at my humble stage of writing, would not, or could not, attempt. The stench.

Mum led the way, parting the seas of humankind not by dint of force, but through grace and beauty. I followed, gathering in all of the spectacle and storing it away for future use. People, mostly. Ordinary, extraordinary for better or worse in appearance or behavior, or other characteristic. A dwarf having a difficult time making his way through the crowd; a thin, wasted man of middle age, so tall he could have been on stilts; a lady of some age who was normal-sized above her waist, but enormous below; a dark-haired dandy with a thin mustache who could have been a leading man in any of the local playhouses; fast ladies showing too much ankle; push-cart pushers; and every other kind of London representative.

Mum turned. "Come along Miss Muffet. Keep up, lest you be put upon by some bounder."

"I have my garter dagger," said I, looking about.

"Shush, not so loud! And better not to resort to that. There would be much explaining to do."

My, for the variety of people. Handsome and not-so-well favored, young and doddering, small and large, I could go on, yet I could not hold a candle to the descriptions of the great English writers of the present and recent past. And—shame on me, for I could be wrong—I was not sure I wanted to flog personal descriptions as much as some of them did. I, who hadn't written much of anything.

Mum stopped suddenly and looked far to her left.

"What is it?" I asked.

She remained silent for a moment, then turned about and looked at me in

a peculiar way.

"Nothing my dear. I thought I recognized a lady I had known years ago, but it wasn't her."

It was obviously a fib, and I strained my eyes in the direction she had been looking. What she had seen had disturbed her, none the less I kept quiet. If it had to do with me she must have had a good reason to act the way she had.

Not all in the crowd were shabby. Along came a lady who could have been mum at a slightly younger age. Then an elderly man of distinguished appearance who may have been dapper in his younger years; tall, light, well-dressed, well-shaven, with a thin mustache and a Roman nose. He carried an expensive-looking walking stick. He was followed by a less-dapper, younger, shorter man who was still a gentleman, and who called to mind a banker or other business person. He smiled at me in a kind, fatherly way.

We saw a juggler with his back to a brick wall, and not far from him was a conjurer working his trade. More street-walkers plying their trade while simultaneously trying to avoid attention, whom one had to admire if only for their proficiency. Stray dogs, cats, even a monkey who strode on his hind legs, unafraid, parting the masses as if he were the king of some country inhabited only by intelligent apes. Ha! He had a small, red cap resembling a teacup without a handle that he kept tipping at people as he walked. If monkeys can smile, he was smiling. Moreover, he had a tin cup into which well-wishers were putting coins.

We passed some food vendors, but mum had long ago made it clear to me that we would never partake. *Bags of mystery* she called the sausage, and she would no more recommend any of the food there than she would, as she once told me, *partake of cow dung*. Thinking herself clever, she had gone on to say she would have much preferred the cow dung.

So, run-down, bored, hungry, somewhat down in the dumps, I fell to thinking about nothing.

"No matter what?" asked mum.

"No matter—? Nevermind me, I was just thinking."

"Oh?"

"I'll tell you later. On we go."

Time for me to do my business. Crap or get off the pot. And while I have never heard it put that way, I shall add my *get off the pot* phrase to my lexicon. Possibly when I am famous someone will read my work and make it a standard expression in one form or another. Nevermind that now. Tomorrow I will ensconce myself in my bedroom. Sit at my writing table and force myself to take up my pen and write the title of my book. What that title will be I can't conceive, but it will come to me. How do I know? Because whenever I have such a firm belief, that belief bears fruit. Such beliefs never fail me. Am I mad? If I am it is a good madness.

Chapter Twenty-six

The Singular Life of Maggie Block. The title. I will base my book on my own life, and whenever I take up my pen I will be she; Maggie Block. Not unusual, knowing my claim to uniqueness will be in my approach. I will begin my story with my own life, short as it is, then I will continue as I imagine my future will unfold.

No need to confide the genesis of my book to mum right away. Better to simply begin and see how my writing goes, for fear of her having me committed to some Bedlam-like institution for my efforts. Now, to forge ahead.

Chapter Two

At a very young age I was found standing alone in front of our London apartment, crying for my dying mother. Now and then a kindly, young policeman came out to check on me, and other than for that time was interminable. On, and on, and on.

Passersby passed, purposely taking little notice of me, until, hours later it seemed, an elegant lady stopped.

"I am April Blue," said she, "and may I ask your name?"

"Maggie."

"Maggie. And may I know your family name?"

"Block, Miss."

"Maggie Block. Such a nice name for what I see as a nice young lady. Now, if I may, can you tell me why you are so distressed?"

"My mother is unwell and a policeman and a doctor are inside with her."

"Is she very unwell?"

"I fear so, but they won't let me inside and they don't tell me anything." I began to cry again.

I had set out on my new life as a writer! Praise be and hallelujah, and all that!

'Hold on! Are you not, as you said a few years ago, too young to have much, or anything, new or enlightening to say?'

"I now very firmly believe I do."

'And why have you changed your mind?'

"I have creative powers."

'Of a sudden?'

"Sudden realization."

'You may have—I know you well—but you lack world knowledge.'

"Aha, that's where I have it over you! I will not be the kind of writer who grinds books out one after another as fast as I can. It may take me at least a year for each book, and likely much longer, especially for this first work. Thus I intend to gain world experience as I go. That and higher education. Furthermore, by the time I get to the later part of my book—the hard part—I will no doubt have that *world knowledge*, as you put it."

'Then I grant your cleverness, but whether you will be a great author remains to be seen. Many more writers fail than succeed. Most I may say.'

Of a dull, boring afternoon inside and outdoors, I went to mum's study to ask her a writing-related question. I seldom ventured there as, though I was allowed and welcomed, I knew if she were to be somehow forced, she would prefer no-one, not even I, visit her there.

And, being a rule-breaker, by sheer chance I most-likely saved her life. I knocked and entered simultaneously, as usual, and there she was, unconscious on the floor. I screamed as I had never done before, and in my state of fear and confusion it seemed like both Mr and Mrs Corker appeared in an instant, to discover me half-sensible, prostrate beside mum. Edgar had knelt by me, and Gertrude by mum, and contrary to what one would have expected, they were both silent as they ministered to us; he by slapping me vigorously on my cheeks, her by holding mum's head and shoulders on her lap as one would a child, and murmuring to her.

"Ow!" I cried, pushing away Edgar's hands. "What have I done to deserve this kind of treatment?"

"You have frightened me little miss," responded he. "But thank goodness you still have the fire in you. Are you able to sit up?"

"Of course I am." I did. "What' going on?"

"Your mum had collapsed, and I assume you did as well when you saw her flat on the floor."

"Good heavens!" I crawled to mum. "Is she——? Is she——?"

"She is," replied Gertrude. "Breathing well and showing signs of waking, but Edgar, fetch the doctor."

Just then mum opened her eyes and looked up at Gertrude.

"No, no Edgar. Don't go. I was only, only resting for a moment or two."

"A moment or two?" said Gertrude. "My dear, you were out and lying on the floor for much longer than a moment. Away, Edgar. The doctor!"

"No!" cried mum, clutching Edgar's sleeve. "Stay and I will tell you what

came over me, and it's nothing any doctor can remedy. Sit."

We sat on the floor beside her.

"I confess," said mum, "that I was not resting. You see, all of my life I have had nightmares. Usually they aren't as upsetting as this. Very rarely——"

"I have never seen you in such a state as this," I interrupted. "Indeed I had no clue as to your affliction."

"Affliction, quirk, illness, call it what you will, I have never been one to put my weaknesses on others. Only Edgar and Gertrude have been aware of this."

Gertrude smoothed back mum's hair and felt her forehead.

"Secrets. We had an agreement," I said under my breath, "and you have broken that agreement."

Mum looked stricken, and she sat straight up.

"No, no, I, oh I have, haven't I? I had not seen it in that light; still I ought to have. I was trying to protect you."

"I don't need your protection," said I coldly. "Not on matters such as that. Your health. For shame!"

Mum uttered a long, low, otherworldly sob the likes of which I had never before heard. We fell on each other and hugged, and she clung so tightly I nearly cried out. At that Gertrude stood, and she and Edgar looked down at us in wonderment.

"We are alike," whispered mum, "we both have inner demons. You have inherited them from me."

"How could I? We aren't——"

"Not by blood. Through your association with me. I have tainted you!"

Edgar and Gertrude had slipped out of the room.

"Nonsense! Utter, complete, ridiculous bollocks. Do you think me so malleable as to be——? Oh mother, you can be so obtuse. At times—and the older I get—I feel I am the mother and you are the child."

At that mum stuck out her tongue, and the tiff was over. But not the revelations.

We sat mugging back and forth, then——

"There's more," said mum, and at that I went rigid.

"What more? Is it bad?"

"Yes and no. Bad and worse. I——"

"First the worse, and do not spare me."

"No, first the bad, and it is that I have been reading as much of Plato's works as I can find."

"What? What's so bad about that?" I felt my face turn warm.

"You know, the cave and all that. I have been at it for a long time and it only perplexes me. What meaning is there? You know, the meaning of life? If there is any, and the answer no doubt is obvious. Any *meaning* is in the mind of the questioner."

"And? If that's the bad I shan't worry about the worse."

Mum blushed. "The bad and the worse overlap. Oh, it's beyond me,

however here is an addition to my confession; it's not simply nightmares. No, there's more to it. Plato is driving me bonkers with all of his forms and stuff. Oh, how to put it? Give me a moment to think."

"Please do, mum, for you are making no sense at all."

I crabbed away from mum and remained on the floor regarding her with as peaceful a countenance as I could force. I waited. She said nothing and only looked down.

At last, "Mother, now you really worry me. Say something even if it is not what I want to hear. You know the old saying, how anticipation is worse than the punishment."

She lifted her head and smiled dejectedly.

"That's not an old saying. And my condition has nothing at all to do with punishment."

"Nevertheless, even if I have made up the saying it is true, and your silence is punishment."

"My goodness daughter! Settle down."

"How can I when you leave me hanging thus?"

"Oh, then allow me to collect myself for a minute, then I'll do my best to at least console you."

"Please do."

Mum was silent for well over a minute, then she burst out.

"Many years ago something happened that scarred me for life. Eh, eh, let me continue. It was something I have never told anyone, and that I may never tell; not even to you. Stop interrupting!"

She glared at me more sternly than she ever had.

"To continue. Nevertheless, as regards you, I will try someday to, to," she sobbed quietly, "reveal the cause of my agony. Oh, agony may be too strong. I should probably say *torment*. No, *lasting distress*, and let me add that with time I am healing, although I may never fully recover. Oh, dear, here I go, blabbing on about the distant past. Anyway, as I do—blab I mean—I now feel sure I will reveal it all to you someday. Show patience."

"I will, mum." I crabbed back to her and we hugged again, even more firmly than before, and longer.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Edgar entered the drawing room where I was sitting staring at the opposite wall, doing absolutely nothing, and trying to think of absolutely nothing.

"Miss Opal, there is a young man at the door who wishes to see you."

"Who?"

"He won't say."

"Is he presentable?"

"Yes, but——"

"I suggest you ask him in."

"Before I do I should tell you he said something about your father."

"Fa——?"

"And from how you have described your father over the years I am inclined to say he resembles——"

"What? Impossible that this——"

Edgar stood quietly while I struggled.

Then, "Please send him in, but I hope you will stay close by."

"Of course," said Edgar, "I have always been your protector."

Presently I heard footsteps, and in the doorway stood my father! I was stupefied, and the room whirled about me to where I fell back in my armchair fully aware that I was swooning. The next thing I knew Edgar and a young man stood before me, and Edgar was patting my cheek with one hand and wiping my forehead with a handkerchief with the other. The young man appeared embarrassed and at a loss.

"There, there," consoled Edgar, "you have nothing to fear. This lad means you no harm, and in fact I am sure once you regain your senses you will be happy to welcome him."

"Ohhhhh! I shall buh surr will ven——"

"Come, come," said Edgar. "Close your eyes for a moment and try to relax."

That advice, however, only served to revive me.

"Who are you?" I asked of our visitor.

"I am your brother——"

"Brother!" I all but shouted.

When I came to Edgar was holding a small glass to my lips.

"Drink this."

"What is it?"

"Nevermind, it will revive you."

I drank, and after a few moments it did. Revive me. Some sort of strong spirit.

Meanwhile Edgar pulled up another chair for our visitor and bade him sit, then, turning back to me he said, "This is Michael, your brother. He has

convinced me he is truly your brother, and now I will leave you two alone to sort things."

I grasped Edgar's sleeve, but he removed my hand and left the room. I was too weak to follow, so there I was, face-to-face with someone who claimed kinship. Even worse, in my agitated state, claimed to be my brother. I wished for another drink, but as I studied my *brother* I began to unbend. He had a kind face. He was, I guessed, three or four years older than I, and despite being an image of my father as a young man, he was, shall I say, as different in appearance as different can be. I had never had much use for young men; still I took to my brother as a safe exception. Surely he was my brother.

We stared at each other uncomfortably, Michael and I, and—

'Speak to him, you ninny!'

"I am at a loss. Taken aback. Shy!"

'Obviously he is the same, only to a higher degree. It's up to you to break the ice.'

"What shall I say?"

'For—— You call yourself a writer? Where's your imagination? Speak up!'

"How do you do, Michael? It appears we have some catching-up to do."
He stiffened, but in relief.

"Very well," said he, "and you? How do you do?"

"All the better for meeting you," I replied. "I, I——"

"Yes, I know, it's difficult isn't it?"

"Extremely. Dear me, I had not the faintest idea. My goodness. How in the world?"

"In view of your shock and surprise, if I may call it that, let me put you at ease by being brief. Our father and my mother lived here in London, in poverty and deprivation. He was unkind to her, and she was fortunate that he was gone much of the time. She was as good a mother as she could be under the circumstances, and she scraped and toiled at menial jobs for a meager living. She died shortly after finding out our father had given his last blow. Then I was taken in by a complete stranger. A wonderful lady whom I know as my mother. That's the sum of it."

A familiar dizziness overcame me.

"Pardon me," said I, putting a hand to my brow, "your story is my story, almost beyond coincidence. I intend to be a writer, but no matter how good at it I become, I don't think I will ever be capable of making up such a narrative. Not even Charles Dickens' coincidences match this. Please give me a moment."

My recovery took a good, long while.

Then I asked, "How did you find me? No, first, how did you even know of my existence?"

"Aha! My new mother has resources, and she is exceedingly wise. When I

told her of my father's philandering—yes, I knew of it even at a young age—she suspected, and hired a private detective. That's all."

"But you waited for years before contacting me?"

"Not many years. She had been reluctant to tell me, and when she finally did I was hesitant to come forth, not wanting to alarm you or intrude in your life."

I stood, stepped up to him, and swatted him on the top of his head with my fan.

"You nincompoop!"

"Ow! How was I to know you—?"

I whacked him again, lightly.

"You should have known. We are bonded by blood, and the implication is that you should have sensed it. My what a simple—"

He laughed, "Now I do sense something, and it is not any simple-mindedness on my part. I feel a pain on my pate, and a young lady of demonic temperament is administering that pain."

"I'm hitting you with an open fan!"

"Lucky for me you don't have a cudgel at hand."

I sat back down and said, "You and I will get along famously."

"Yes, as long as I mind my Ps and Qs."

"You will. I'll see to that."

I have a brother! I have a brother! An actual, true brother. Well, half. I'm not alone! Oh, mum, who can never be replaced, but a brother. Two blessings in my life.

I put away my diary and fell onto my bed in a blissful state such as I had never before experienced. A feeling of bonding. I couldn't wait to find out more about Michael.

Life is often bizarre.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Trite but true. Apt. *Time marches on.* I'm aging. How do I know? One sure sign is how I am blossoming. I'm no-longer flat. As flat. And I'm not as silly as I used to be. Moreover, I have less contact with old friends, mostly because my home-schooling has ended, and just as well, for I had begun to feel there's not much more I could learn. Not to be conceited or anything like that; only being truthful and honest with myself, dear Diary. *Dear Diary?* On, no, I swore I would never resort to such rot. Yet time doth fly. I feel old. Am I losing my reason? Will I come to the point where I walk about waving my arms and talking to myself? Anyway, the past is the past. Strange how the mind's machinations are so divergent. Stop, or I may go mad.

I clapped my diary shut. Clapped-shut my diary, to be proper. Then I went out back of the house and sat on the rough, wooden bench that mum had refused to get rid of, as, I assumed, it had some special meaning for her. It had an easeful backrest, and I made it a habit of bringing a seat cushion.

There I sat, alone and lonesome. I had more-or-less lost track of Pansy, Philbert (thank goodness), and my other friends and acquaintances, and that loss had been my own doing, right or wrong, good or bad. Could such abandonment be a serious, weighty character flaw on my part? I had always known I was different, and I had viewed such differences as propitious. Yet why had I made that assumption? Was I less advanced than I had thought? I had asked mum once or twice and she had assured me I was exceedingly smart in all aspects, and had I received her reassurances unquestioningly; possibly too unquestioningly, for any dimwit would have taken such reassurances with the good-old grain of salt. I am insecure.

A blue-and-yellow bird landed in the grass not far in front of me and cocked his head. *His*, I thought, despite knowing little about birds. He looked lonely, still, if I were to develop my writing style I would need to abandon the common animism affectation by so many older authors. *The sun shone happily down. The trees whispered ominously ...* Oh, please! So obviously the bird was not comforting me; only being and acting like a bird. Oh I was lonely. Am lonely. Keep your tenses straight young lady.

'Please do young lady.'

"Rub it in, will you?"

'I will.'

"Aye, that's the rub."

'Ho, ho!'

"Someday I will be rid of you and your sarcasm. You keep me in such a

state of perturbation."

"Thank you, even if that will be the day you rid yourself of me!"

"Yes it will. The day I leave off denigrating myself. The day I achieve full self-confidence. That will be the glorious day I show you the door."

A bizarre and puzzling turn of events. The only time I had been aware of a firm bond with anyone—other than with mum, and that was different—was with my brother Michael, and that bond alarmed me since it was the first time I had ever felt that way with any boy. Boy? He should be called a man! Then isn't the implication that I am a woman. For heavenly day's sake, no! Anyway, it's unnatural. Furthermore, he's a spitting image of my father. Of our father, and young as he is, and likable—extremely likable and kind—it is unsettling. Am I never satisfied? On the one hand I have never cared for those of my age and sex; on the other hand I have never had any particular affection for those of the opposite gender either. I've forever been odd in that way. In many ways. Mum assures me it is a *good odd*, and I should appreciate it, as it sets me apart from the common run of humanity. My only question to my alter ego is whether or not that separation is good or bad. I shall therefore assume it is neither; only a fact of life, unless said alter ego convinces me otherwise.

So there it is; a young man who I like finally comes along, and he's my brother! Dash it all. What a specimen am I, but there, I have said it, and someday I will say it to someone. An actual person.

'Won't I do?'

"You? Absolutely not; you're not a person."

'What? You cut me to the quick!'

"Nonsense, you have no quick."

Oh, I must get out of here and lead my own life. I won't forsake mum, or my brother, or Gertrude and Edgar, or any others dear to me. No. I will only live by myself and lead my own life; that's not too much to expect. Everyone, unless they are physically or mentally, or otherwise, infirm, leaves the nest sooner or later. So there we have it. I shall plan my own life.

'So there we have it? Apparently you can't avoid consulting me.'

"Taking into consideration who you are, tell me, *yes or no*."

'Riddles now, eh?'

"Yes *and* no."

Mostly no. And I will aim for university first.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Mum's secret. Her only secret, despite our agreement to never have secrets from one another. It must be something appalling, and no doubt my vivid imagination makes it even more so. Oh, me!

After my morning preparations I was sitting alone in the drawing room, wondering what the day would bring, and I didn't have long to wait, for I heard an unearthly scream from down the hall. I levitated from my chair and hung, suspended by nothing, for a second or two, after which I landed on my feet, running toward the door. I followed another scream into the sitting room, there to find my mother and Gertrude on their knees leaning over Edgar who was lying flat on his back on the floor. They both looked up at me in supplication, and caught by such surprise I scarcely knew what to do.

"Whaa? What has happened?" I stammered.

Neither of them was able to speak, and they only gaped at me. Me, not yet a full adult.

I knelt, moved them apart, and touched Edgar's cold face. I then put my cheek to his nose and mouth, and could detect no breath. In desperation I felt his neck and his wrist. All to no avail. I lost control and began beating on his strong chest with both fists until I collapsed across him in agony. My hero. My protector. Gone. Gertrude collapsed beside me, and a moment later mum tried to pry me up, but I clung tightly to my Edgar; mine more than any other's it seemed, until I at last let go and collapsed into mum's arms, and there we were, pathetic, woebegone creatures with no succor other than that offered by the others; and those offerings were inadequate. Woe unto us.

As it turned out, I was the strong one. I got up.

"I will call on Michael. Please try to collect yourselves the best you can, and I will return shortly."

My brother resided in an apartment only two-stones throw from us, and upon our return he took charge.

"Let us afford him the dignity of being covered," said Michael softly.

Gertrude was still clinging to her husband, and we gently lifted her off and to a chair. That done, Michael covered Edgar with a sheet he had procured.

"Now," said Michael, "we shall retire to another room."

He led us into the drawing room.

"I will leave you two to care for Mrs Corker while I summon help. In the meantime Mrs Green, if you and Opal will be so kind as to—you know—do what you can, I will be back as soon as I possible."

Away he went, leaving mum and me looking at each other. Mother was the first to move, helping Gertrude from her chair.

"Let's make you more comfortable," said mum. "We will put you in your bedroom, and will do everything we can to assist you through your trial. Our trial, but mostly yours. Come, up we go, and when we get you settled in bed I have a medicine that will help."

Michael returned, followed by another young man who bore him a close resemblance. *A handsome young man* was my first impression.

"This is my chamber-fellow and best friend, Edward Silverspoon," said Michael. "Edward, my sister, Opal. The other introductions must wait; now let us get on with it. We will move poor Edgar back to the lumber room where we will no doubt find what is needed," he lowered his voice, "to begin the preparations."

Edward was very handsome. Average height and size, well-proportioned, slightly dark complected, adequate features, and all—nothing singularly above average—yet when everything about him was added up he was as fine and dashing as they come. I perceived both a shyness and a roguishness in him as well.

I followed them to the lumber room where was kept all odds and ends large and small. Lumber, unused furniture, cloth, clothing, knick-knacks, and much more. To my surprise Michael and Edward proceeded to position two sturdy crates close together, and to lay three wooden planks across them.

"What—?" I started.

"The body must be prepared," said Edward softly.

"Prepared?"

"One of us will fetch an undertaker while the other will go for ice," he continued.

The room began to undulate, and after I had staggered in a small circle several times Edward gently took my arm and led me back to the drawing room and placed me in a comfortable chair. He then stuffed several small cushions around me. My mind began to clear, and when I looked up at him he seemed nervous and in a not much better state than I.

"Thank you, Edward. Don't let me keep you."

"Oh, good then miss, I'll—"

"Miss? Oh dear no, please call me Opal."

He backed toward the door in some frustration.

"Yes, for sure Miss Opal. I will."

He all but ran from the room, leaving me alone. An unusual feeling came over me; loneliness. The loneliness was followed some minutes later by mild consternation. Undertaker? Ice? What did I know of life? Real life, not my sheltered life. I sat thus for a while longer, then Edward re-emerged and I was mildly surprised at myself for not taking a dislike to him, as was my usual feeling for those my age of the opposite desire. For the first time in my life I felt no disdain for a young man, if I could call him a young man. Moreover, I quite liked him, and I determined to learn more about him.

'How can you like him; someone you have had only glimpses of?'

Mum entered the room, unsteadily and pale, and she sat down opposite me.

"How is she?" I asked.

"As you can imagine, but I gave her an ample dose of my special elixir, and she is settled in."

"For how long?"

"I don't know, but I will go back in an hour, and I expect you and I will take watch over her in turns."

"By all means, and furthermore I insist on taking the first watch. I——"

"I am quite able to——"

"Tut. You seem to be as distraught as she. Now mother, I order you up to bed, and——"

"But I——"

"Behave yourself and do as I say. Away with you, and do not come down for at least two hours."

She sat staring at me for a moment, and a queer thought came to mind; her special secret. A manifestation of the mysterious workings of the mind. Oh, well.

I motioned her to the door, and she obeyed, and as she left I could not help noticing her stagger ever so slightly.

So there I was, alone with my thoughts, and they were not pleasant ones, therefore I brushed them from my mind; a talent I had developed several years before. Not simple vacuousness—certainly not—rather a device. Then I conjured another of my devices; that of eliminating all thought, and at that I was exceedingly proficient. Not a trance; only a mild psychogenic retreat wherein I lost track of time.

Crash! I all but leaped from my chair, and landed facing the door, past which Edward went wheeling a small cart. I ran after him and caught him by his arm.

"What have you there, Edward?"

"Ice."

"Ice. Good heavens, what for?"

"For the, why, the body, miss."

"The body?"

"Yes, miss. You know."

"Oh, I see. And please stop calling me—— Let me help you."

"Please, it's no sight for a lady."

He had set down the back of the cart and he seemed to have gained some resolve.

"As you say then, but I must ask, how do you apply the ice?"

"The body lies on planks and we pack the ice underneath and cover

everything with blankets or anything we can find."

"Thank you Edward. And thank you for prohibiting me from following you. I don't envy you you."

He smiled weakly, took up the cart handles, and went off down the hall. I returned to my chair where I picked up a book I had been trying unsuccessfully to read. Not because I didn't like the book; rather because I couldn't concentrate. Indeed, reading dictionaries was one of my joys. As I opened the book—good old Grose's *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*—someone else entered through the front door. Now what? I went out.

Down the hall walked a stout, sallow, elderly, grey-haired, severe-looking man followed by Michael who was lugging a large, square, leather case with a handle on top. The man, carrying two big jugs, passed me with no more than a glance, but Michael stopped to rest.

"What have you there?" I asked.

"The embalming equipment," he mumbled.

"Embalming—? I didn't know that was to be done."

"It is normal procedure, and I took the liberty—and I hope the burden—off your mother by taking care of this unpleasant task."

"Bless you. Mother will be relieved. Edward arrived with the ice only minutes ago, and he forbade me from following him back, and now, knowing what you have there wild horses couldn't drag me into that room."

"It's not my idea of a good time I must say, but it's life."

With that he picked up the case and trundled on.

I decided it was time to check on mum, so up I went. I knocked softly on the door, but hearing no answer I stole in. Gertrude was still fast asleep, and on the floor beside the bed—on a plush rug—lay mum, also fast asleep. I couldn't bear to disturb her, so I took up residence in a corner chair and leaned back, exhausted.

The next thing I knew someone was shaking me and calling my name.

"Opal, Opal, wake up."

I was lying on the floor on the plush rug, and mum was leaning over me.

"Aha!" said she. "What are you doing here on the floor?"

I sat up.

"A curious question, from one who herself was lying here," said I.

"I, um, well nevermind that. I am in flummoxed beyond belief. For the first time in my life I don't know what to do."

I sat up and we embraced, and were silent.

Then I said, "Do nothing."

"Wha—?"

"You find yourself facing a terrible trial, but the rest of us will manage everything, so I say, do nothing. It's as simple as that."

She relaxed, and went on, "There are so many arrangements to make, and I —"

"Tut. Much has already been done, and the only thing for you to do is to

come to the cemetery with us and show us the plot. Leave the rest to us."

"Yes, but there are details, such as the door wreath, and the——"

"Bosh. Trivial. We will take care of everything, black clothes and all."

At that a frown of concern came over her.

"No, no black clothes. The queen may feel she has to carry on that way, but not us. Not I, rather, as I cannot speak for the rest of you. No I will not. Edgar would be appalled at my silliness."

"Very well." I shivered. "My I'm cold."

"Cold?"

"I have no recollection of lying down next to you, but I had an unpleasant dream that I was lying on planks, and I was cold."

Mum put her arms around me again.

"There, there, Opal, my one-of-a-kind. Put it out of your mind. It will all be over soon. Except," she looked up at Gertrude, who was stirring, "for——"

"We will manage. All together we will muddle through."

Chapter Thirty

I don't know what's happening to me.

I put down my diary. I was unable to continue.

'Ha, ha, ha! And I might add, ho, ho ho! Edward has you under his thumb, has he?'

"Not at all! No one has me under their thumb, least of all Edward Silverspoon."

'I know you better than that. I know you better than anyone does.'

"Impossible. Better than anyone? How can you; you are not a *one*. You are a only a manifestation of me."

'There you have it! You are not a dolt, and I knew you would come to your senses.'

The funeral was over, and mum had shown more vulnerability than I had anticipated; none the less she had survived, and was on her way to as full a recovery as was possible, for how can one ever regain such a loss?

Michael had been a tremendous help, along with Edward. And even as the thought of Edward buzzed through my head I reproached myself for dwelling on him. He was obviously a fine young man, and I knew most of his few faults were of my own invention. I was unused to young men, that's all, and it frightened me. Curiouser and curiouser. So, as I frequently did when fearful or agitated, I turned to my writing. The trouble was, I never wrote much. I, who believed I had such potential.

I retreated to my bedroom in despair and desolation such as I had never experienced before, and threw myself face-down on my bed in tears and anguish. What was happening to me? The only thing I knew for sure was that I was stagnating.

Part III

Chapter Thirty-one

Here I am of an evening, in our living room, sitting across from my dear husband, scratching in my diary, with little to scratch about. Our lives are good, if uneventful, mum is healthy of mind and body, my college classes are rewarding, and so on. Michael is a wonderful brother and he visits us when he can.

Life's hardships take their toll none the less. Mum has new companions whom she likes, but she misses Gertrude and Edgar so. And I know she misses me even more. She seldom goes to Wildwood, saying it simply isn't the same, and she may sell it, although she never does. My *voice* persists but I have learned to ignore it most of the time. I won't give in to it's—his, actually—sarcasms. Other than that I can't think of anything else to grouse about.

"Obviously I like the English language classes most of all, yet to my surprise I am also intrigued by the history lectures."

Mum had got me into Bedford College for ladies, and even if it is not up to Oxford or Cambridge standards I was beyond delighted.

"I am surprised you hadn't tried to force your way into Oxford."

"I may be a piece of work, as you put it; still I am not that radical. I know my limits."

"Oh, you have limits? I wasn't aware of any of your limits."

"I should have said, the limits put on me because I am not a man. And enough out of you, Edward. I don't personally have many limits; still, no point in you egging me on."

He laughed and held up his hands in surrender.

"Then I shall hold my tongue."

"Thank you. When you get on me like that you become as happy as a hog in a wallow."

"I confess I do."

"So bless mum for getting me into Bedford. Hmmm. I only have one dislike, and that is professor Quibble. He is——"

"Professor Quibble?"

"Yes. That's what we call him. His continual arguing with us students is quite irritating, and I wish someone would set him straight."

Edward laughed.

"You? Why don't you set him straight?"

We prattled on like that, and we were quite agreeable. I was in college, and Edward was doing well working for mum. Helping Edward. Once mum had whispered to me that he was extremely bright. The downside was how much he

and I were separated. It was the price we paid. The upside was how we carried on when we were together. The way we carried on would have made a procurer blush, and in fact I had never gotten over the blushes.

My first opinions of my fine husband—before he was my fine husband—had been mixed. Mostly suspicious. Obviously he had an eye for me, and while that was not unusual, there had always been a twinkle in his eye that was difficult to interpret, so, being naturally cautious, I strongly suspected him of being a wolf. How wrong I had been. For one who had had such a difficult childhood, he had turned out to be a wonderful, kind, sensible person; a good example of how a basic human constitution is sometimes able to persevere. Mental constitution I should say. In Edward's case an extra blessing was his physical constitution.

My physical constitution was good as well. Yet, oh, my cerebral one was suspect. No, *suspect* was not the word; that was too rosy, for my damnable voices continued to aggravate me. I had assumed it would fade with time, and it had for a while, only to resume full-force, and my only remediation was to not merely live with it, but to embrace it. No, no, not *embrace*; I could never do that. Try and accommodate it. Yes, accommodate it and come to an accord with it. Edward and I had—straight off—agreed we would never keep our inner thoughts from one another, and to my burning shame I have kept one; my alter ego. I justified it by telling myself it would unduly worry him, and anyway I would eventually confide in him; still I had said it to myself with little conviction.

Edward was with mum, and I was home alone. So, as needs must, I came up with something to worry about; my writing. Or lack thereof. Years had passed and I had nothing much to show for my good intentions, other than more good intentions. And the bizarre aspect of the futility was that I regarded most popular writing with a jaundiced eye. I was better. Or would be if I ever wrote anything. Most current writing was abominable in substance, form, and every other aspect. So here I was, criticizing others. The Queen of Hypocrites. That was me. Shameful. So as it was, home alone, in an altogether miserable frame of mind, I just felt like getting sozzled on the spirits my dear but not-so-innocent husband had *spirited* away in a shoe in our bedroom closet. The trouble was I would likely drink it all, and drinking was never to my advantage. My diary, however, is to my advantage.

At long, long last, I shall recommence writing. Commence would be more like it, since I had written very little. Now is the time. Why? I am more mature, I am settled in life, I am receiving an education—even if, as I am sure, writers are born, not made—and we are financially secure; Edward and I. Further, we are healthy of body and mind. I will disregard my voice, it will go away eventually. Life is good.

After years of waffling I resumed writing *The Singular life of Maggie Block*. My concept had been good, especially of me being Maggie. I had to look back at what I had written.

Chapter Three

At a very young age I was found standing alone in front of our London apartment, crying, for my dead mother. Now and then someone passed by, paying me no notice, for which I was glad. I

So looking back I was pleased with my work, and eager to continue. Therefore I did continue.

It is such a joy to be writing again. One thing to be careful of though; to not let it become another diary. I shall be inventive from now on, while remaining true to the core of my mental outline, and when I catch up to the present I will invent what I imagine my life will be. After all I am Maggie Block, and it will be interesting to see what becomes of me. Ha!

"Ha what?" asked Edward, who had burst in through the front door.

"Oh, you startled me. I am ecstatic because I have resumed my writing, and I am still good at it."

I threw my arms around his neck and gave him a nice, wet kiss.

Chapter Thirty-two

I regularly walked alone around Regent's Park near the college. The gardens, the zoo, the people in their finery, those not in finery. I was safe in the daytimes, and confident. Edward worried about me, and wanted to accompany me, but that was not practical, mostly due to his time with mum.

As it happened, I was walking in the park between lectures, waiting for mum to join me. Trees, flowers, water— And Edward was with me in spirit most of the time. He had received no formal education past the age of thirteen, but he was sharp, and he had read everything he had been able to lay his hands on. Mum would have entered him in a university if he had wanted, but he lacked interest, and she soon found he was quite curious as to her business interests, thus she encouraged him and he took to her pursuits with uncommon enthusiasm and adeptness. In time it was obvious they were more like close friends than mother and son-in-law employee. As for me, I knew little of mum's affairs, and I didn't wish to know more; therefore I was pleased to see how well things were working out with Edward.

I stopped at the drinking fountain. I had grown up mostly indoors, and now that I was older I appreciated all the more being around people; even the dregs of humanity who are often more interesting and colorful than the higher-ups. As well there are many more of them, thus more variety. And I guess they have more immediate concerns, so are more active. And, as if I had conjured him, down a path hobbled an elderly, short, stout man who could have been Tweedledee. And lo, close behind him came Tweedledum! No, I was seeing things. I passed my hand over my eyes and looked again. They persisted, saw me staring, and scowled. Again, as happened too often, I felt my face turn red, and I looked down and away as if studying a distant tree. Yet they did resemble the Tweedles. Next appeared a pretty young girl who couldn't have been over three years old, alone and crying, and just as I was about to befriend her a young, well-dressed lady found her, and they both broke into tears. Then came another young lady who was shabbily dressed and not as attractive as the mother. And on, and on they came, and no author could have done them justice. I take that back; I could, if I were to ever get off my duff and write. Oh, I am writing, but I have not gotten to the essential, creative part, which will be the test of my abilities. I am confident even as I sense a nagging in the back of my mind—

One peculiar aspect of my confidence is the lack of high regard for most writers, leastwise as to the basics of the craft: spelling, syntax, consistency, and more.

Enough for now, I'm out for the enjoyment of my surroundings. And good heavens, when will mum ever show up. It isn't the same without her.

A poor drunk, crawling along, collapsing completely now and then. An

organ-grinder and his barrel-organ. No monkey, but a very old lady with a cup. Couples with parasols, unchaste women, dandies, toe-rags Most, anyway and regardless of status, were everyday, normal people, and I—

"Boo!"

I nearly jumped out of my skin.

"Mother, don't do that to me!" She had come from behind me and goosed me in my rear. "My heart is pounding. You could have killed me!" I put a hand to my chest.

"Stuff and nonsense dear girl. Ha, ha! You make me laugh."

I biffed her with the oriental fan that I carried on such occasions.

"I wish I had a heavier weapon," I barked.

"Tut, tut, collect yourself. You are not that fragile within. Come along, we have some strolling to do."

She grabbed my upper arm and led me along the gravel path. I followed reluctantly, but with one dramatic protest. I held out my free hand, fingers spread.

"See, my hand is still shaking."

"Fiddlesticks. Come."

It took me some time to collect myself, but when I had I enjoyed myself. It was a pleasure to walk beside my still-beautiful mother and notice the admiring looks she got. And it was even more of a pleasure to observe the ones I got. Not as many as she, though I was a close second; and second out of two was pretty good. She walked slower, that was all. I had given up on finding her a husband; the idea alone had been preposterous. I was her only intimate, and if I couldn't no one could.

A bobby roused a gang of young revelers from the park, clubbing the worst loudmouth over the head with his stick, just adequate to inflict pain and still allow the recipient to keep his feet under himself. A duck crossed in front of us, a stray dog marked a tree, . . . , everything was pretty-much the same as the many times we had been there before. In other words the aspects ranged from delightful, through comical, to cheerless, on down to pathetic. Humankind. The stuff of writing.

Dear Diary,

I have always longed to begin with that. Dear Diary. I can't help myself, only this once. Why? As a reminder, or reaffirmation, of what dunderheads people can be. Not to denigrate them—heavens no. I will never sink that low. Only, I am a supreme positivist, and I cannot help it. By the same token I know I am bright. It's something that intelligent people know, and unintelligent people only think they know. Imbeciles never know they are imbeciles, Therefore—

'Now Opal, aren't you a little egotistical?'

"What? You of all—my alter ego—calling me egotistical? That's

laughable."

'Oh, yes, yet how do you know you are so smart? Tell me that young lady.'

"I—we—know simply because the vast majority of other people are so dumb. How can anyone argue with that?"

'Oh my goodness, how can you be certain you are not among the dumb?'

"I know because so many others—— Curses! You will not hoodwink me—us—into some kind of absurd, circular discussion. Away with you!"

As always after, my head throbbed. Was I falling into insanity?

Chapter Thirty-three

Michael has grown on me to the point where I regard him as a full brother. There is only one impediment; he so resembles my father. In looks; unquestionably the opposite in personality. How enigmatic and unpredictable genetics can be. Here I, with no genetic link to mum, could be her twin if not for our age difference; and Michael and I— Oh, I don't know even now, after all this time. The only things I am certain of are his niceness and his excellent intellect. No, no, there's more to him than those, and I do think I would have married him if not for our blood connection. Not to say I would have preferred him over Edward. Pardon me for even thinking such a thing. Besides, Mrs Silverspoon had a nice ring to it, even as I still saw of myself as Opal Green, and for all time would.

"And how have you been faring?" inquired Michael, who sat across from me in our small parlor.

"Quite well thank you. And you?"

"Quite well thank you," he laughed.

His mother, Dora, a widow like mum—therein was another Dickensian coincidence—had tried to send him to The University of Oxford, but he had begged off, not knowing what he wanted to do.

"You need a cat," said Michael out of the blue.

"Huh? Cat? What makes you say that? You, the grounded one."

"You spend much time home alone."

"Well a cat is not the answer. Sometimes I wonder about you."

"Nevertheless."

"Nevertheless nothing. First off, I am not alone that much, and second, if you assume I sit here twiddling my thumbs all day you misjudge me as usual."

"What, then?"

"I cogitate."

I wasn't sure he even knew what the word meant.

"All day long? No one can cogitate that much."

"I can."

"On what, for example?"

"Mum, my writing—"

"And your mother?"

"Never you mind Mr Green."

Michael's face darkened.

"Corbie, please."

"My, yes, excuse me. I forgot."

He cleared his throat and struggled with some inner thought, then he

forced a weak wink.

"No, excuse me."

We were quiet for a few minutes, both looking down at the carpet between us. I broke the ice.

"I actually do find time write you know."

"Yes, and I have been trying to talk you into giving me a sample of your writing."

We worked too hard at recovering from what had almost been a tiff.

"And I have been putting you off by telling you how much I use my blue pencil to make corrections, and how I am not yet confident to where I can show you, or anyone, my work. Not even Edward. So here we are, full-circle, in our usual stalemate."

We chatted on. I had seen some of my father in Michael, and I realized how much he must struggle with that part. A daemon it must be. No, dear reader, *daemon*, not *demon*. *Dear Reader* indeed. How could I be so light about such a dark psychological state? I must be cautious from now on.

When we had smoothed things over Michael departed, but not after I had hugged him and kissed him on his cheek; and as I did so I saw a tear in each of his eyes. Bless my dear brother. I hoped he would find himself. He had the means to take up most any profession or occupation he wanted, yet he had not. Not lazy I knew. No, not that; something else. Something visceral.

Chapter Six

I have adapted to my new life better than I had expected. Oh, once in a while I break into tears for no reason that I can determine; still such breakdowns are infrequent. My new mother is wonderful, and her home here in London is palatial, and, ha, ha, when I first entered it and mentioned how 'palatial' it was, my mother stopped and looked at me in amazement for my knowing the word. She knew right then that she had taken in a prodigy. For that matter, she would have been surprised that I knew 'prodigy.'

I was scribbling, scratching, struggling, composing, writing my book; the essence of which was now a projection of my imagined life. When, if I am an old lady, I will look back on my projection to see how accurately I had portrayed myself, and if I do not reach old age I hope any who remember me will do so fondly and appreciate my effort, and I pray—in a secular way—Edward will be able to keep me alive by reading my work whenever he is low.

Edward, my guiding light. No, no, not that. I am *his* guiding light, and he is my breath of life; the one essential I cannot live without. Were he to die, I would die. I don't go on in my diary like that because it sounds so silly when I read it.

Nor do I ever go to that silly extreme in my book writing, for the same reason. Writers who do so are living in the past as far as their efforts go, and I have no urge to regress. I only need tell myself every so often I love him. No, no, I'm babbling to myself. I do not *need* to tell myself, I want to tell myself simply because it makes me feel good. So there it is.

'Let me stop you right there. Despite all of your literary gibberish, all you find yourself doing is writing another diary. You——'

"No. Well, in the very first part it may seem so, howsomever that is a very short part. Away with you!"

Oh, when will Edward come home. He's not usually this late. I go back to classes tomorrow.

Chapter Thirty-four

I always sit in the front row at my English Literature class, and not to gain the favor of the lecturers. I view them all—rightly or wrongly—as lechers, and I know how to lay on my charms to my advantage, but no, I sit in front because I am enthusiastic about the content of the lessons and the discussions, lechers be damned. And oh, if I had any influence on their individual portions they would be damned. Severe? I am no doormat when it comes to gal-sneakers. Be they old or be they young, I'll cut off their parts to bake my bread.

Well, well, well, on other side of the *content of the lessons* coin I am really not as enthused as I aspire to be, and I am not sure if it is because I have done with past and current writing, or if it is that I am a step or two ahead of everyone, including the lechers, who, despite their lechery are well educated and quick-witted; I am aware of that. Oh, yes, I'll grant them that. Even my dead hero—whose work I have read over and over—now seems turgid and, . . . , what? Outdated. Shall I presume to improve on their style, or on that of any others of their ilk? Other than for my inner voice I expect I am rational, and everyone says I am very intelligent, but what do I think? That's what counts until I learn otherwise or am dealt a strong dose of some other reality. We all have our personal realities. Notwithstanding my growing notion that I will eventually be a firm realist, yet for now, oh, nevermind, I am losing track of the lecturer. Smith, the youngest droner of the bunch and surprisingly the least lusty, I will say in his favor, for I judged he was average for his age. If Edward were standing up there and I didn't know him I would probably think the same, or worse.

"Therefore if one contrives to break literary tradition," droned the droner as I pinched my inner-left thigh in order to stay awake, "one must"

I went to see my mother. She had been somewhat lost of spirit ever since my marriage. She never let on, still it was obvious and painful to see, and all the worse now that Gertrude had passed on. Mum's two new companions, Milo and Lucilla Fog, were nice, but they could never fully replace Edgar and Gertrude in our hearts. I visited mum as often as possible, but things were different now. Not our love for and devotion to each other; those feelings would never diminish. Mum's physical changes were another story. They were not severe changes; only I noticed them.

Lucilla received me at the door.

"Why bless me, it's Opal!" greeted Mrs Fog. "Do come in. How nice to see you."

That was her usual greeting. She resembled Gertrude in appearance, if not

in personality. She was not quite as demonstrative, despite her attempts.

Milo appeared as I entered; short, stout, ruddy-faced, and convivial. He sported a black mustache to cover his hare-lip.

"How delightful to see you Miss Opal," said he. That was his every-time greeting.

"And you both," I replied. "You are hale, hearty, and all. Young, in fact."

"Poo!" giggled Lucilla. "Enough of that, let me take you to your mother. She has been down in the mouth as of late no matter how hard we try to cheer her up."

She ushered me down the hall and into the the receiving room, where sat mum gazing out a window at nothing, for there was nothing in particular to see, and from her appearance she was comfortable with the view. Um. Not displeased. She glanced at me with some effort.

"Mother dearest, you appear to be as bright as a daisy!"

"Stop it." Ha! She couldn't help smiling. "And how are you daughter dearest?"

"I am very dear. Really."

"How do you do?"

"I do very well, obviously, as a daisy. I am not as bright as a daisy, I am a daisy."

We continued our prattle for a while, until we were prattled out and mum turned quiet. She had wanted me and Edward to live with her after our marriage, but we had reconsidered. Later I had consoled her with the notion that since Edward spent more time with her than with me we were well connected; she countered that she didn't see much of me; I responded But now she said she hoped I wasn't going to spout on about getting her married off to some suave devil who would *look after* her for her remaining days, and all that nonsense.

"Gosh no, mum, I have given up on that. For that to happen the effort will have to come of your free will, spontaneously, and—"

"Pigs will fly before—"

We sat smiling out the window, then of a sudden mum said, "I am concerned about your brother Michael."

That took me by surprise. She and Michael had become good friends, notwithstanding their differences in almost everything, and that she never had much to say about him other than a few kind words. She had even gone so far as to venture that if she had had a son she would have wanted him to be like Michael or Edward.

"What of him?" I asked.

"Lately he has not been himself. Not as light. Oh, we both know he has always had his *father* periods; you know, the effects of having such a father as his—yours—but this is different. He is distracted much of the time, and not as light. He is so changed I daren't inquire. Have you noticed?"

"Goodness no. Partly because I don't often see him. But come to think, the

last time we met he didn't seem as lighthearted. Hmm. And several times he mentioned possibly going away for a while, and when I questioned him he fell silent. Clammed up. Odd, but I dismissed it. Do you think it has to do with his businesses?"

Mum shrugged.

"Whatever it is, it warrants us keeping an eye on him," I murmured. "I'll try to visit him more often, and I am sure Edward will too. My goodness."

Chapter Thirty-five

My love for Edward grows, and that is an unfamiliar entry here, for at the time we were married I didn't think I could possibly love him more. And I know he feels the same about me. He has told me so many times.

Another phenomenon. While he knows all about me, I continue to learn more about him. For one thing, his innate intelligence, and I admit to myself the possibility that he is quicker than I in some areas. Everyday life, for one. And why not; he has lived in the real world whilst I have not. And other areas, such as wit. I have no wit. I am, sorry to say, prosy. And what else has Mr Silverspoon? Inner strength, except for the rare times when, as a consequence of his father's latent effect, he suffers a breakdown of varying degree. Now, as my diary is very private, I am obligated to admit to a side of my love that is troubling. I cannot call it a really dark side, it simply isn't at all light. Hmmmm. It's a troubling hint of, what? Mercy. Wait, that's it! The unknown. It's the unknown aspect of my Edward that troubles me. Oh, nothing sinister—I know him better than that—rather something that seems to haunt him. Something I dare not bring up. He will tell me, I hope, and if not *it* will remain private. So—

'You two pledged you would keep no secrets from one another.'

"Why, yes, but—"

'And now you have.'

"This is different. I won't pry into something that he is obviously so sensitive about."

'A secret is a secret Mrs Green. And while I'm at it, I must say how unusual it is for you to keep your maiden name.'

"I'm ahead of my time, that's all. Now stop your twitting am twatting and go away."

One day I was sitting in the small scraggly-grass space in front of our apartment, not enjoying fresh air—for there was none in London—but getting some sun, and watching the people. I was a people watcher. Are all writers people watchers? I don't know. All I do know is it's a fascinating pastime that sometimes provides literary inspirations. How could any writer worth his salt not benefit from studying people. Worth *her* salt I should, and do, say, as such should be as common as *his*.

'Now, now. Continually rocking the boat.'

"Nevertheless. And be quiet."

Occasionally someone would stop to speak with me. Too often they were rakes, and many would be best described simply as wretches, whereupon I would resort to calling back through the open window to my husband, who was seldom there, but the trick always worked.

A heavysset lady in her middle age stopped, and I tried not to stare at her large, red nose. If not for her unsightly protrusion she would have been attractive. She was well-dressed and well-arranged, very presentable, and as it turned out, well-spoken.

"I have seen you pass by quite often," said I.

"I live just down the street. My name is May. My husband, Tom, is a doctor, and he is busy much of the time, leaving me on my own. And you?"

"Opal Green," I replied, and I am a university student at Bedford. My husband, Edward, works for my mother who owns several businesses, and he is very busy too, so you see we have husbands with something in common."

"Lor, we do, therefore we have something in common! Well, not ages and noses I must say," and she laughed heartily. "Nor education. And not size or beauty, as I have one set and you have the other. Then it seems I have talked myself in to a consternation where we have very few shared peculiarities."

She conjured in my mind a theater actress.

I attempted to mollify her.

"I can tell from the single minute we have spoken that you are quick-witted. And back to husbands; in some respects it's possible we have both married up. Then we——"

"Ha, you can be too kind. And I should have said, *far too kind*, none the less I appreciate it. Shall we leave it at that?"

I burst out laughing.

"Will you sit with me for a while? I have another chair inside, and we have a nice space here to——"

"I would be pleased to sit with you. I hope my chair will be substantial."

I fetched another chair and there we sat, watching the people pass by, and talking about nothing in particular.

"Does your husband like his profession?" I asked.

"Excuse me? Like? Goodness no. How could anyone in their right mind like tending to people's miseries day after day? And," she lowered her voice, "most of his patients are from the lower classes on down to the dregs of society. Oh, poor Tom comes home every evening looking and feeling like he has gone thirty rounds with Woolf Bendoff. He——"

"Who?"

"A vicious prizefighter. Anyway, regardless of status, the ailments are without exception the same—consumption, pleurisy, tumors, drink, and so on—and there's seldom much compensation, monetarily or by way of gratitude. It's wearing him down. Furthermore I worry that he will come down with a contagion himself. Oh, dear, but I am rambling on."

"You make yourself quite clear."

"Still, I don't know you well, and——"

"I feel I know *you* well, and, dear me, I don't know your——"

"Grinder. Our surname is Grinder, and it is an apt name, let me assure you. Oh, heavens, there I go again!"

"I am a good listener."

"And I have not been. What of you? Tell me about yourself please."

I told her my life story in the span of, I estimated, five minutes, minimizing the bad and emphasizing the good.

"That's about it," said I. "My passion is writing. Oh, and my dear husband, and my mother."

May seemed impressed.

"I see there is more to you than——," said she. "Goodness me, I never would have imagined just by looking at you."

"What?" I feigned indignance, "you took me for a blockhead? Why I never!"

She sputtered and her nose turned even redder.

"No, no! It was just that—— You are so pretty, and——"

"You assumed because I am decent-looking I am empty-headed?" I was enjoying my little jest. "Oh, I am crushed!"

May began to cry, and only then did I appreciate how cruel I had been. I reached out and put my arm around her shoulders.

"I am so sorry," said I, "I am never that way. I was teasing and it all came out wrong. There, there, will you forgive me? At times I forget myself. I know we are destined to be friends, and I don't want to do anything to upset that."

She eyed me for a few seconds, then leaned and put her head on my shoulder.

"We shall be friends," said she. "I knew it the minute you invited me to sit with you."

Chapter Thirty-six

"I have not seen Michael for some time now," said I to Edward of an evening when we were seated in front of the fire. "He has never missed a week here, much less several weeks, and mum has not seen him either. It's so unlike him, especially as regards mum and the businesses."

"Hmm. Have either of you called on him lately?"

"I have not, but mum has been to his apartment twice, and either he is not there or he is not answering the door. All the more troubling."

"Yes it is, and it's time to find out what's up. We both have tomorrow off, and we shall accompany your mother to Michael's place, where I will break down the door if I have to."

"Indeed, if need be. Oh I do hope the landlady has a key. And if Michael isn't inside at least we may find a clue as to his whereabouts. Oh, my, if he has done something untoward it could be my father's—our father's—lingering influence. That predisposition—mental or physical—might affect Michael more than it would me."

In the morning we met mum at her place, conferred with her briefly, then started off to Michael's apartment. We were all silent as we walked. What more was there to say?

The landlady was in, but she was reluctant to give us the key.

"I assure you," said mum, "we are who we say we are, and I also assure you that we are desperate. Again, we have not seen or heard anything from our dear Michael in weeks. How can we convince you that we are——?"

"What is his favorite book?" she interrupted.

"Favorite book?" quavered mum, looking at me.

"Why I don't quite know," said I, "he isn't much of a reader at all. I may say I have never seen him read a book. What——?"

The stern, elderly, pudgy landlady disappeared for a moment, and returned with a key.

"Many's the talk Michael and I had, sitting here outside, or in front of the fire, and I know he was not overly bookish. Besides, you all look like nice, decent folks."

Edward opened the door, and in we crept. Crept reluctantly behind our key-bearer. My stomach churned, and, oh, my, an incongruous thought; that I would never in my writing pen such a trite pair of words as *stomach churned*. Never.

"Nobody here," murmured Edward as we stood in the main room. "A bit untidy," he added, then he went to the kitchen area and found nothing unusual. "Now the bedroom," and I detected a very faint quiver in his voice.

"Do you want me to go?" I asked.

"I will," he replied, grasping the door handle.

We had not smelled anything out of the ordinary, and that gave me hope.

Edward entered. Slowly. Mum and I held back.

"Nobody here."

The relief in his voice palpable. I would never use that word, *palpable*, in my writing. Oh, what is the matter with me?

I entered the bedroom and peered around in the semidarkness. Despite seeing nothing unusual, for some reason I began to shiver, and Edward embraced me.

"You are not cold, are you?" said he.

"No. How can you remain so strong?"

"Not as strong as you think. It's only that you are closer to him than I."

"Just so. Now, don't you think we should search the place to see if we can find any clue as to his disappearance?"

"I'm right behind you."

We exited the bedroom, and I asked mum to help us search, an effort she readily agreed to, and in fact she proceeded with a degree of animation that startled me. She had been slow of mind and body for so long that in spite of the circumstances I took some solace in her new animation.

Scraps of paper here, cups and saucers there, shoes on the floor, many other odds and ends, no books whatsoever; nothing to lead us to Michael. We sat down in defeat, looking to one another in blank despair. I opened my mouth to speak. To no avail. Three defeated mutes were we.

I didn't know how long we sat. Then Edward, the most unshakable of us, went to a cabinet above the sink, rustled around, and came back with three glasses and a green bottle. He filled the glasses and set them out. I didn't know what was in them, and I didn't care, and I doubt that mum did either, for she emptied her glass with three or four gulps. Following her lead, I did the same. Edward was not far behind, and when I looked I could see him smile at us over the top of his glass as he drank.

Edward poured us all another drink. Then another, after which mum put a stop to our imbibing.

"We will never find Michael at this rate. Come along, back to my place where we can devise a plan."

"A plan?" I asked.

"We're getting nowhere this way. I know some people," said she, "one of whom is a detective, another is a higher-up in the police hierarchy, and another is an old friend whom I once, well, nevermind, but he knows the ropes when it comes to this sort of thing. Away."

I noticed that mum stood unsteadily, however when we got moving she gained her legs better than I did.

"So what will we——"

"Not now my dear," cut in mum, "it's no use trying to plan something like

this on the go."

"I was only——"

"Hush!"

When we got home—it was still my home in spirit—mum bid Lucilla make us strong coffee. We drank as much as we could. It didn't help, and we all ended up taking naps right there in the sitting room, notwithstanding the effects of our coffee.

Chapter Thirty-seven

I woke first, after our quest. Then Edward, then mum.

"Whatever was in that bottle, Edward, was quite potent," said I. "So potent I am not in any condition to plan a rescue mission, so I suggest you two go about it. Then, when you are through, and despite what you may decide, I will pack a bag and go on a mission to find him."

"You will do no such thing!" barked mum. I had succeeded in rousing her. "You will stay here and work with us to that end, you will resume your studies, and Edward will go."

Edward was caught by surprise.

"I? But I know nothing of——"

"Tosh! You are the most worldly of us, so tis obvious. Well, worldly except for me, but obviously I can't go running around——"

"How can I prepare——?"

"I'll give you a few days to make mental adjustments, that's how. It's settled."

Dead silence.

Then mum spoke. "Now, a plan to find Michael."

But we came up with nothing.

We planned some more, but nobody went looking, and three months passed with no information whatsoever regarding Michael. Not one tittle. Even Edward, usually the stoic one of our trio, was nonplussed.

"I fear the worst," said he.

We were all in her drawing room; a glum little gathering. At mum's utterance I was again made aware of her age. Not physical age, but her emotional disposition which had deteriorated since her stoic stance of months ago as to Michael. She had ups and downs, whereas in her younger years she had been almost always up. And as so often happens to people in times of stress, a mostly unrelated thought flashed through my mind; the possibility that Edward and I would end up living with her eventually. Something we had wanted to avoid. Nothing against her, it was just that—— That it might be coming sooner than we had expected. Life was passing faster than I had imagined. I had heard elderly people say that, yet, curiously, I had never thought of it so personally before. Oh, fudge!

My palliatives were my studies and my writing. Edward's was working for mum, which had become more of a working *with* mum, was his palliative, and he seemed to have found his niche in life.

Unbeknownst to mum, and at first to Edward, I did slip away from home from time to time in the hope of spotting Michael, even if it was mostly to calm myself by was doing something. How we delude ourselves in our efforts to cope.

'We? Did you say *we*? Don't you mean *you*?'
"Why would I say—?"
'Because *you* are very good at deluding yourself.'
"Most people are."
'Not as good as you. You win the prize.'

Chapter Ten

I sat up and, and nothing. I didn't know where I was, and the reason I didn't was because everything was pitch dark. I was floating on a cloud, but the cloud seemed hard, or a least not cloudlike. Substantial enough to support me.

Then to my relief I became aware I was in my bedroom, in my bed. What foolishness. I got up, groped my way to the window, and spread open the curtains, affording ample light for me to move about without mishap. I sat by my dresser and peered into the looking glass, noticing how much I resembled my mother—my new mother—April Blue. Beautiful mum, who had taken me—poor, lost waif—in, and not only taken me in, had been the best mother anyone could have hoped for. Mum—single, kind, well-informed, childless, mum—who despite her travails is, well, to me a goddess. Oh, I something to give in return. No, I won't say return; it isn't a compact between us. It's love, that's what it is, and

Sooner or later needs must I will be a seer. Reach the point in my writing where I will be predicting my own future, and that, then, will differentiate my book from my diary. That's the best way I can put it to myself.

Month after month with no sign of Michael.

I studied on at Bedford despite a growing lack of enthusiasm due to a feeling of superiority on my part as to my main interest, writing. English composition. I—

'What? You, a mere student—?'

"Yes. I very firmly believe I am a level above the professors—I mean to say the English professors, not those professing science and so on—and I can't help it. It's something I just know. I intuit."

'Intuit, Inschmooit. Nonsense!'

"Nevertheless."

Between my waning interest in university and mum's—oh, not mental decline—rather her overwhelming business and personal concerns, some of which I suspected I was unaware—I abandoned my studies. And, since Edward had been spending most of his time at mum's anyway, we relinquished our apartment and moved in with her. I had wanted us to be on our own, however now I appreciated my mother more than ever, and it was just like old times. Life was good, except for our—mostly my—haunting concern for Michael. I guess human nature moves us to assume there is almost always a recourse for life's vicissitudes, other than, obviously, death, incurable illness, things like that. What, then, is my *course*, I should say, as regards my only blood relation. My heart is breaking, and I feel I will eventually be moved to take action.

'What action?'

"I will go looking for him."

'No! You don't say so.'

"I do, and this is no time for me to be writing in my diary."

Oh, at times like this I wish there were some almighty intelligence up in the sky or wherever poor, mediocre, religious supplicants think he dwells. Then again I am glad—considering all of the misery caused by religion—there is no one above pulling the strings. They don't even have the imagination to think *he* may be a *she*. And are they responsible for the results of their beliefs? Should they . . . ?

Chapter Thirty-eight

On a Monday morning before mum was up I prepared to take my leave. Edward did his best to control himself, thinking no doubt that I was on a fool's errand.

He and I faced each other over the table, lingering over our morning coffee.

"You are the limit," said he. "Do you have your garter dagger?"

"Out of the blue you ask, but yes I have it. No garter though. Moreover, I'm only going to do some investigation here in London."

I attempted to present a lighthearted air.

"London, the most dangerous place in the country. And if your mother's people can't find out anything, how can you?"

We went outside and Edward sat down on the bench beside the front door.

"I feel dizzy," said he, and he said something about me being *willful*.

I tittered. "You'll feel better once I'm gone."

"Huh. Worse I am sure."

I looked away, pretending to study the sky. I hated being at odds with him.

Mum, who had gotten up, had become faint and we had put her on the sofa in the sitting room.

'You are aware your quest will be difficult?' said *Madam Fantasy*. 'Not that you are a cuckoo; just that we all do nonsensical things now and again.'

"I would have expected that of *Mr Harsh*. Anyway it's out of my control. I can't stop myself."

'If your mother's hirelings can't find him how can you, by simply walking around. Your chances are next to nil.'

"I intend to do more than go blindly about; I will query people."

'What people my dear?'

"Police, at gaols, hospitals, asylums; and any other people and likely institutions I come across. It's not the blind man's buff you think. And if I don't find him I will be at some peace knowing I tried."

'How long will you try?'

"It depends on what I find out about him, on my constitution, and on my willpower. And I guess when I run out of places and people. After all, I can't keep on forever, and I can't

travel the world. If I can't find anything here in town I'll be stumped, and——"

Mr Harsh broke in.

'In heaven's name why? Have you lost your mind?'

"Michael is the only other of my lineage that I know of."

Day after day I searched, going home each night to sleep and report to Edward and mum, and starting out again early in the mornings.

I began by tactfully sounding out every likely bobby I came across, as distasteful as I found it. It was necessary for me to charm them, and while I was very proficient at it, I was more than chagrined. I felt like a painted lady, and some of those I approached apparently imagined I was. Nevertheless I carried on, smiling, chatting, and showing my photograph of Michael. No one recognized him. One bobby looked hard at the photo, but that was all. No matter, my search was just beginning, and I was emboldened, not discouraged.

Three or four days on I was running out of bobbies, so I turned to police stations. I found the front desk men were more polite and less, um, lusty.

"Can't say I do," said the young man. "He resembles a guy we had in the clink about a fortnight ago, but this one," he waved the photo, "is younger and better looking. No, this isn't him. Sorry miss."

Miss, because I had removed my rings.

"Wish I could help. Perhaps after my shift we could—"

"Thank you kindly, but I must keep moving. My search could go on for a time."

I cast him a pleasant smile and left. He didn't seem like a bad sort.

On I trudged, looking around now and then for Michael or one of mum's men who might have been sent to keep keep track of me. And attempting to be inconspicuous. I wore plain clothes, no jewelry, no cosmetics, kept my hair a bit disheveled, and so on. Why? Well, who would trust a young lady dressed to the nines? I look like a man.

One station after another, to no avail.

From police to gaols. Even finding Michael in a jail would be better than not knowing. Most of the gaolers were pleasant and helpful. Sympathetic, apparently feeling some pity for their charges. The gaols themselves were another matter; cold, damp, squalid, As were the inmates; cold, damp, and squalid. Poor souls, and I was torn between wanting to find Michael in such places, and hoping to not find him. Oh, the stench.

Home in the evenings, putting on a brave face, and off again each morning with forced good humour.

I moved on to hospitals. Even the infectious hospitals, where I covered my face with my handkerchief and did not linger. Worse—some of them—than the gaols. Invalids, all manner of diseased, infected with lord-only-knows what, The crippled, the cancerous, the wasted, those suffering in other ways. And the usual a consumption section. Whenever I entered I felt myself weakening, and when I left, I regained my strength.

On, and on, surprised at how calm I was. Even relieved. How could that

be? On, light as a feather, nodding at and greeting those I met. On, thinking of nothing in particular. On—— Then I stopped short. That was it, improbable as it was! I had been stifled! Had never been anywhere, done anything, tasted life. I all but collapsed onto a smooth rock and sat with my head reeling. How strong a realization; one that had put my entire past into a totally different perspective. One that seemed to threaten everything I had known, including my relationships with mum, Edward, Philosophers go on about everything under the sun—mostly hot air—and here I am, a totally rational, and is it going to be the ruination of me? Despite quirks like my inner voice, alter ego, or what; and my silly diary, and even my unique writing, I am certain I am as sane as can be. Still, on my off days I have doubts, and those doubts fall on Edward as well. If I succumb to brain fever, will my brother? Or vice versa? And how about my father? Doubtlessly he had been similarly afflicted. What differentiates genius from lunacy? Surely there are degrees. What degree am I, and which way? And what if I am neither genius nor lunatic? Oh, my, that would be almost worse. But even thinking of it being worse could be an indication of some worse condition. Ohhhh.

"You alright miss?"

At first I thought it was one of my inner voices. Not the usual one—the grating, raspy, annoying *Mr Harsh*—but either *Madam Fantasy* or *Sir Reality*. It sounded mannish, so apparently it was *Sir Reality*. I looked up and no, it was a thin, emaciated old man. His face had a yellow tinge, he had a thin, white mustache, and a black patch over his left eye. Long, scraggly white hair with a bald spot on top. I couldn't read his personality because he was expressionless.

"I am well, thank you. Why do you ask?"

"Your eyes were closed and you were swaying in circles as if you were about to fall off that rock. And if you will pardon my saying so, you are pale my dear. For all that I feel fairly weak myself. May I sit beside you and rest my old bones?"

I made room for him.

"Ahh, even a rock feels good sometimes," said he. "May I know your name?"

"Opal Green sir. And yours?"

"Job. Like in the Bible."

"And your surname?"

"Never had one. I was an orphan and the home never got around to giving me one."

"Oh, my, how awful."

"Never even had a given name either, as far as that goes, so because I was such a miserable wretch they called me Job. How do you like that?"

"I don't like it at all."

"Oh, don't feel sorry for me, I've had a good life and all."

"What did you do, if I may be so bold?"

"I did like many in my situation; I joined the army. Had a good life. Traveled all over the world, fought in battles, chased some—well, you know,

women—managed to stay healthy and avoid too many wounds, and all. Retired on half pay."

"Do you have a wife?"

Job was silent for a moment. Then, "No, I never did. I would have liked to, but one of my wounds killed any chances of my having a wife. You are old enough to get my meaning?"

"I do, and I will ask no more questions."

"Bless you, and if you ask no more questions I shall not be forced to tell any lies my dear," he laughed.

I put a hand over my mouth to cover a giggle.

He laughed and said, "Now I'm just an old gin-soaked soldier."

We sat looking at the passersby.

Then out of the blue, "Miss, why are you so overwrought? If you don't mind my asking."

"I don't. My brother—my only natural relative—has disappeared. Just like that, without even a note left behind, and he has been gone for quite a while now. My mother, the lady who took me in, not my real mother, hired people to find him, but they have been unsuccessful, so now I'm searching."

"Dear me."

I showed him Michael's photograph.

"Nice-looking lad," said Job, "but I haven't seen him. One chance in millions that I had. Sorry."

"Nevermind, I know my chances of finding him are next to nil, but I have to try, and when I fail at the least— You know."

"I do know."

On to the asylums, and for the first time I hoped I did not find him. Indeed I would have wished him dead rather than find him in one.

Each asylum, or *hause*, or even madhouse, whatever they were called, was unique to a degree, but the residents were, as a rule, the same in their differences. The tranquil, the the normal-appearing, the repetitive, the boisterous, and so on; and the wild who had to be restrained this way or that. Never was walking through these places of antipathy anywhere close to easy.

"Are you here to gawk?"

I looked to my right where, sitting in a plush, high-back chair, sat a handsome lady perhaps in her thirties. She was well dressed and well groomed, with pitch-black hair and deep, dark eyes. She didn't appear to fit in with the others.

"Most certainly not," said I with some agitation, "I am looking for my lost brother. I am not so crass as to gawk."

"Pardon me miss, but almost all who pass through are gawkers. How is one to tell?"

I went to her.

"I am not. I have never been in such a place as this. And I dare say you don't look like you should be in here either."

She laughed and wiped her eyes with a white rag.

"Oh yes, I should be. And it's better than dancing upon nothing you know."

"Dancing upon—?"

"Hanging. My, you present yourself as a touch rough around the edges, yet there's something about you. Good gracious my dear, you don't know about hanging?"

"Not the way you put it."

"Forget it then. Next you will want to know what I did to end up in this fine institution?"

"No. I would never ask."

"Ha, ha! But you want to know."

"Not as if my life depended on it, but I am curious."

She put a finger to the side of her nose.

"Killed my man."

"Your husband?"

She snorted. "No, as I said, my man."

"Why?"

"Well that's the thing about it you see. I don't know. I didn't know then, and I don't know now. Isn't that something? So when they debated about what to do with me, I had nothing to say. What could I say? I was a crackbrain? That was obvious."

"Do you regret it?"

She blew her nose and then was quiet for a moment.

"You know, it had never crossed my mind. That's just not the way I see things."

She shrugged and looked blankly at me. "Nevermind all that my dear," said she, "what of you? Brother you said?"

I handed Michael's photo to her.

"No, I haven't seen him, and I've been here a good while."

"You seem sure."

"Oh, I'd have remembered him. He's quite manly."

We chatted, and when I stood to leave I wished her well.

"I'm told I don't deserve any well wishes, but thank you," said Venus. Her name was Venus.

Nothing of my Michael, and I couldn't wait to leave. On the way to the door I passed a grizzled man who was struggling to get out of his straitjacket.

Chapter Thirty-nine

Back to my diary, but without much to write. Michael is long gone, nothing of mum's *secret*, and nothing about her *old friend*, even if I may be imagining more than there was.

I'm relieved to have quit my university studies. I learn more by reading and living life than I do by listening to blowhards, and as I had written here some time ago, writers are, as in other endeavors—physical or mental—like boxers, artists, and so on—endowed with proficiency. They certainly don't acquire it.

And yet how tedious my life has become. Sometimes I feel like simply disappearing as Michael has done, no matter my fate.

Chapter Twelve

I stole out of the house not caring about anything except having a life of my own. All I possessed was a light travel bag, a handbag, and what money mum had given me over the years. And my good looks, brilliance, and ingenuity. Plus my abnormal wit. And my guilt.

Oh, the guilt. It wasn't my mother's fault that she loved me too much, to where I was overwhelmed. When does one reach a point where there's no other recourse than to decide whose life is more important, one's own, or that of a dearly beloved. Perhaps if our situations had been reversed—I the mother and she the daughter—I would have given my life. As it is, I can't, and my only solace is in resolving that I will someday return. Until then I cannot even pledge myself to keep track of my dear mother, for that is the depth of my desperation.

My writing reflects a longing for more variety in my life. *Some* variety to be sure—even a smidgeon—yet I am level-headed, and I know how stable I must remain. Any excitement in my life must be of my own invention.

'Oh quit complaining. What a croaker you are.'

It was the gruff voice of Mr Harsh.

"I wasn't——"

'You were. Appreciate your life of ease. You should be ashamed of yourself.'

"I am, but can't I aspire to more——?"

'Yes, if you stop whining and start doing.'

"Easier said than——"

Madam Fantasy broke in.

'You may be able to do both my dear. Maintain your present life while going off on your own sometimes.'

Then Sir Reality. 'When you are older and you have no obligations other than to Edward, you can really live.'

Then *bang!* it hit me. My writing will be my life, and my life will be my writing. Not completely, but in large part. Drivel? No, not to my mind. From now on I will enjoy both, and while I'm at it I'll be more of a companion to Edward, whom I know I have failed. Just because he is not my intellectual equal doesn't denote he is not more than my equal in other areas, so we will even out.

Furthermore I will attempt to dampen my alter egos. Eliminate them if possible. Even Madam Fantasy is often vexatious, if only because I know she is a product of my turbulent mind, as are they all. I refuse to admit I am moonstruck or in any other wise unbalanced.

What it all means is, I will be able to enjoy life more, and worry less. So that's that.

One warm summer evening as mum, Edward, and I were reposing in the sitting room, I sprang from my armchair and blurted, "Here we sit like stuffed owls, languishing and wasting away. I propose we spruce up a bit and visit the Golden Goose. Live a little!"

Mum dropped her book into her lap and Edward's pipe nearly fell from his mouth.

"Golden Goose?" queried mum.

"Don't act so innocent; you know very well what and where the Golden Goose pub is. Right down the way. Here we are twiddling our thumbs like geezers, and I can't stand it anymore. What do you say?"

Edward brightened, but mum was, well I might say, *mum*. When she recovered herself all she said was, "You, you forget, I am a geezer, or geezeress, or——"

"Poo!" interrupted Edward. "As the man of the group who hasn't lost his eye for an ankle—and I do intend that only as a compliment—I assure you you are not a geezeress. So let us freshen up and be off. We only live once. Come, no poking around."

He stood, gave me a curious and pleased look, strode to mum and pulled her up and away. She sputtered in polite, obligatory protest, and I could detect her smile falling warmly on the back of my head.

My new outlook on life was already paying off.

We stayed at the Golden Goose and imbibed until we were all drinky, then

we stayed longer. And who was the drinkiest of all? Mum, surely. It had been a long time since I had seen her all aglow. Oh, we had a time.

In a story I would have had us all pay the price for our overindulgence, but in actuality no, and least of all my mother. None of us regretted our outing in the least, and the next day, even if we were worse for wear, we started our daily routines late, and what of it? What indeed? The devil for it! I will go so far as to say we were refreshed not only in the present, but as a new outlook on life. I—

'Pardon me ever so much,' said Sir Reality, speaking almost inaudibly, 'I humbly suggest it is impossible to change one's life with the snap of fingers. Your personality is already formed, and I, with all humility, beg to suggest to you the even greater futility of assuming to alter the lives of your mother and your husband. It pains me to tell you it simply can't be done my dear girl, and you are drifting into a world of unreality.'

"Twaddle! With firm effort it can be done, and I am the one to do it."

Mum looked at me. "Did you say something?"

"Um? No."

"I heard you say *twaddle*."

Chapter Forty

Chapter Fourteen

Oh how I love being off on my own, traveling around the country, meeting new people, being in charge of my life. Not that my mother and others oppress me; not in the way one normally understands oppression. It's just that there are many kinds of unintentional deadweight, and I need room to breath, and to fly. I had left home several times before, but had either returned after a short while, or had been found and brought home by my mother's hirelings.

The train rolled northward. I didn't care what class I was in. As it was, I was on a side bench in third class, conversing with the other passengers. Not all were what I would call third-class people. Certainly some were. On my right was a young, blond, pretty, but slightly chubby mother holding her blond, pretty, chubby little girl of perhaps two. At my left elbow sat an old man whose age I would not even attempt to guess. He had a thin, short, white mustache and a trimmed beard; red, mottled complexion; and he carried an old-man smell. I was comfortable beside him.

Directly across from me sat a young man, not bad looking, but churlish; leering at me in an odious manner. As used to strange and disturbing looks as I was, I ignored him, although doing so took a good deal of concentration. Ha. That sounds like the writer in me. Next to him was a decent appearing young man who had also been eyeing me, while trying not to. He was handsome and well dressed, light complexioned, with a strong, oh, I should say, determined face. On the other side of the leerer was a stout, poorly dressed lady of some age who should have been, oh, I don't know, home in bed. I imagined at any moment someone would tell her she doesn't look well. And my goodness for the other passengers. My wont was to study people, and here there were many to study. The other class carriages provided character inspiration too, but not to this extent. Rock-solid humanity.

Am I a wastrel? Definitely not! I have attended university, worked hard at taking care of my mother, been careful of young men, and so on. All of which I take to indicate I am in many ways unique and above average. Modest as well. Ha! Above all I cherish the notion that I am free from convention.

An excellent writer? I am confident, but who knows? The first sentence of

David Copperfield comes to mind: 'Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.'

My thoughts were interrupted by loud voices down the opposite bench; a man and a woman arguing about something or other. After a while a burly conductor appeared to settle them, and when that didn't work he tapped the man's pate with his baton, and chucked the woman lightly under her chin as well. That was that. Trains can be dangerous places at times.

To my diary. It has been a while.

Not by way of complaint; only to say to myself, "I am bored." I would never say such a thing to anyone, least of all to mum, but damn I am bored. That's all.

When one is bored, and I am that one, a common recourse of mine is to recall life events. Like mum's *old friend*, of whom I know nothing at all other than he is a he. So there I languished in my favorite armchair in the sitting room, plotting. With time I had developed an almost-obsession about her old friend. Yes I have sunk that low, but am I low enough to ply my dear mother with liquor to find out? To what depth will I sink?

'You will sink very low. Why? Tedium, and your wild imagination.'

Mr Harsh, my antagonist. Madam Fantasy and Sir Reality are usually not bad, but more often than not Mr Harsh is unbearable. A pox on him.

"A pox on you for perpetually being so, eh, *harsh*, even though you are often right," said I.

'Truth often hurts. Consider this, you are your mother's keeper, and as such you need know all about her in the event something is, or goes, wrong. And it will.'

"You usually leave me in doubt."

'Only because I have no faith in your decisions.'

"That explains why, when you appear, I feel I have made no decisions at all."

'Here we are gabbling about nothing of substance.'

"What, then?"

'Time for you to ply your mother with the elixir of truth, and learn who her old friend is.'

"I don't think I should do——"

'Then come right out and ask her. I have never looked on you as a shrinking violet.'

"Good heavens, I couldn't do that!"

'Then bolster your courage with a half-dozen swigs of your strongest painkiller.'

"False courage? I——" But he was gone.

The following day, despite my misgivings, and finding mum in a buoyant mood, I approached her, hesitantly, without liquid courage.

"Several times you have let drop something about an old friend," I began. "A man I believe."

Mum's hand began to tremble and I feared she would spill her tea.

"Man? I don't recall——"

"Oh, you did, and it definitely wasn't dear Edgar, or Elway Fiddler at Wildwood, or anyone else I know. Who, then?"

Mum set her teacup on her side stand and looked at me in a queer way; one I had never seen before. Her lower lip quivered like that of a child about to cry, or of an adult who knows the jig is up.

"My dear child, please go into other room and fetch a glass of red wine for me. One for yourself if need be."

I returned with only one glass.

"Do you assume age bestows wisdom?" asked mum. "Not as often as one would hope. Don't look so stricken, it's nothing that distressing really; only something I should have gotten off my chest years ago. I have been nagged by twinges of guilt ever since."

She finished the rest of her wine.

"After I lost my daughter then my husband you can well imagine my anguish. My devastation. Such misery as I hope you will never bear, for it is nearly unbearable. It was until you appeared, but that's another story. I won't go further into it because I don't want to trouble you, and because I myself cannot re-live it without breaking down completely, as I have done sometimes without you knowing."

"I——"

"The anguish, the desperation, the never-ending mourning, the drink, and yes, the tonics. Oh, I am only adding to your concern. I will only say the days of dissolution ended long ago, when you entered my life."

"The man?" I persisted.

"I was so lonely, and then I met someone. Alfred Storm. And as in a story, he had lost his wife as well, and we found some comfort in each other. Moral comfort I must say, you know, not physical. Neither of us was looking for that. We slept together sometimes, but only to hold onto one another as if we were facing inner death. We were adrift and broken nearly beyond repair." She paused for a moment, then held out her glass. "Another please, unless you think poorly of me for it."

"I do not, and I shall fill your glass to overflowing."

I did so, returned, and mum went on.

"T'was the guilt springing from our previous marriages. It consumed us, and when we began to fall in love the irony was that our love was destroying us. Oh we hung on for a time, yet in the end we had to face the fact that everything

between us was futile. We tried to remain as friends. All we could do was live apart, meeting regularly only once a year, and in emergencies. Eventually we stopped meeting."

"Gracious." I collected my thoughts. "What was Alfred's profession?"

"He was an architect."

I studied mum for a moment. "No secrets," said I. "You have for years said no secrets."

One of mum's hands twitched. "I did say that. Hm. I guess I didn't think of it as a secret. Nothing you would have had much interest in."

"Nevertheless."

"Then be assured I have no other impenetrables"

"Good."

Then to my surprise, and in an unusual voice, she said, "Regarding secrets, I may have been misleading. We all have them you know, whether we own up to it or not. One of mine was in regard to Alfred. I didn't think of my relationship with him as a secret. Oh, it was. Eh, eh, don't interrupt, I'm sure you have some secrets yourself, even if you may not see them as such. In your diary perhaps, or in your daydreams, or daymares."

"I, why no, I, oh, me, I guess you are right."

"There, there. I have a suggestion. Let's revise our *no secrets* agreement to *no secret of any great importance*. As, for example, secrets that would be hurtful to one another. And I can't imagine either of us would ever have such secrets. Agreed?"

"I, why, yes. Oh, I feel faint. Am I about to succumb to apoplexy?"

Chapter Forty-one

My dear, sweet Edward. How could I ever get along without him. His morning good grace, his kindness to everyone who deserves kindness, his special affection for mum, his innate quickness and good sense, his ambition, No one could, should, ask for more in a husband.

And my mother as well. No one could wish for more. We are healthy and content. What more can there be in life? Mum still looks after her business affairs, aided greatly by Edward. I write, even though I am still unpublished and must content myself with the possibility that I may only do so for the art and craft of it.

Life goes on with only minor setbacks and irritations, mostly affecting me I fear, but nothing severe.

'No one gets through life without suffering,' blurted Mr Harsh.

"Ohh!" I started. Blasted voices. They bring out the worst in me. Like what? Let me see. Small irritations, like two or three weeks ago when mum confided to me that she suspected Milo of pilfering. She could hardly believe it of her household manager. When I advised her to confront him she retreated, saying she wasn't sure, and so on. I suggested she set a trap for him. Leave some small but attractive item that he could not resist, but mum's terse reply was that she would not stoop so low, and that was an end of it. And here I go again on another of my psychic journeys.

Chapter Fifteen

My writing is going wonderfully, and I have met some publishers! Two things however: I am still not sure of the book title, and said book is far from finished. How strange; a book within a book. Or a diary within a book, within a book. Oh, my.

I have not met any young men who interest me in the least, and I am not concerned about such paucity, as I

Gently setting aside pen and paper, I rubbed my eyes and got up from my desk. I needed to take short walks outdoors in order to clear my head. Sometimes I passed by Michael's former apartment, trying not to gaze at it, bearing in mind how vivid my memories of him are without my stoking them. This time I avoided walking there. I should never take that route; why do I invite such distress? I'm not stupid, therefore it must be some kind of self-loathing, or

at best the reinforcement of my determination to find him. I hope the latter, except I can't rule out the first. Why not? My egos are hindrances. They torment me more, not less, with time.

'We do not! You bring it upon yourself.'

Curiously it was Madam Fantasy, the least noxious of the three.

"And why would I do that?" I blurted. "I need more peace and tranquility in my life, not less."

'You were born that way. Too bad. The Lord made you——'

"Stop it! You know very well I cannot conceive of any prime mover, least of all some ——"

'I know, I know. I was only teasing you.'

"Blather! Someday I will banish you."

'I hope not. If you did, what would I——?'

Chapter Seventeen

Joy! Mother has agreed to let me travel to France! It has always been my wish to do so, and now, just like that, she brought it up.

Mother explained, "I will miss you, but for all my experiences in life I am not well traveled, and I don't want you to be inexperienced in that way. Or any other way I must add. Not stifled by world view, marriage, profession, lack of education; anything, and as I have the means to tend to your needs, I shall."

"You say I am to be spoiled? Over-indulged? Wouldn't that be to my disadvantage?"

I had to put up a good—though feigned—fight, nevertheless it was all I could do to keep from grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"That would not be at all like you, Miss Prim and Proper."

We bantered lightly.

"Oh, you can never tell about me, Mum of all Mums. I could go off my rails and ——"

"Stop it! I know you better than you know yourself, and that is quite an accomplishment. I sometimes think you don't know yourself at all. How's that?"

"Goodness. I scarcely know. Hmmm."

"You are a prize, Maggie Block."

Through the years I have considered abandoning this diary-writing as frivolous, schoolgirl, folderol. Which it is. At the same time, as with so many of my nuances, I am unable to leave off. Someone who shall remain anonymous here once opined on how silly and shallow writers of diaries are. At the time I had no retort. Now I would merely remind him, or her, of how even sillier and shallower non-diarists are.

Sir Reality was unusually loud.

'That *someone* had a point.'

"No. Not at all. And though you mean well, I have been girding myself against you voices. Now please go away."

'I will. Not because of any of your girding however; only because I choose to.'

"Off with you!"

Chapter Twenty

Excellent writers are born, not developed, and I am one of the few who were born to such excellence. Someone—a detractor—had been compelled to ask me how I know. My reply, that when you are excellent you simply know, was greeted by a round of applause by all seated at the table, who obviously had low regards for the questioner, and high regards for me. Almost as high regards as I have for myself, as a writer, and for everything else personal. It's not a sin or egotism to hold such feelings for oneself, while avoiding the foolishness of letting slip those feelings to any of my family, friends, or whomever. No one—especially simpletons—for fear I will be forever marked. Therefor

I will not say Edward and I are growing apart; that would be an exaggeration. No, I will only say we have different interests, and he exasperates me sometimes. Oh, exasperation it too strong a word. I love Edward dearly. Annoyance is more like it, as a result if diverging interests, and whenever it becomes too much for me I turn to my diary for relief, despite having been tempted to quit it. How can one find relief in a glorified method of conversing with oneself? About as rational as a nonbeliever going to a graveyard to commune with the deceased, someone once told me. It's just what people do. No, that makes no sense at all to me. Why, then? I assume it simply helps me sort my thoughts and arrange my mental being. A tranquil meditation.

So here I am, Diary. Help me. Help me to stop sniveling. I much prefer you to the voices. Oh, devil take it, help me.

I threw down my diary in disgust.

Chapter Forty-two

Confidences. How naive I have been. Mum had made a clean breast of it; her relationship with her *friend*, Alfred. Not a full disclosure, mind, but enough to where I was taken aback. Shocked. And more. Alfred, after years of companionship with mum, had admitted to having syphilis. He at first claimed to have been unaware of his condition, then he confessed to having known, then with some—albeit too late—contrition, he withdrew and mum never saw him again.

"What became of him?" I asked of mum.

She stood and walked to the window of the sitting room.

"He started showing signs of his affliction. Skin blotches, then chancres, and then lumps and gross disfigurement. I kept in touch through his maid whom I met regularly in a nearby park."

"I can only imagine you were furious at his behavior."

"Furious? Greatly disappointed, yet I wouldn't say furious. Let down, naturally."

We were both lost in thought for a while.

"Mum, I am so glad you were never physically intimate with him."

I expected affirmation, and I was horrified when she only returned to her chair and hung her head.

"Mum?"

After a long silence she murmured, "Only once."

I felt dizzy, and we both cried.

I collected myself. "Mum, what was his fate? Alfred's?"

"Probably the best possible. He had been saving laudanum-based medicines, and when he had gathered a sufficient amount he drank it all."

I tried to speak, but I only choked up.

Mum went on. "I said I never saw him again, but I did, in a manner of speaking. I attended his funeral; one of the few who were there. The coffin was open but they had covered his poor face with a black cloth."

She sobbed, and I sat silently, wondering about her *only once* comment. Come to think of it, years ago she had had a severe rash that lasted quite a while. Months later there had been some skin blotches that a doctor had called *macula*. Then nothing more over the years. Still, a worry.

In the London Library I searched for information on syphilis, and I found very little. That is to say there existed much on the history of it—chancres, great pox, and so on—but little scientific information, and nothing definite as to treatment.

On the way home I wondered—as I had occasionally—whether I would be happier and less prone to worry if I had been born stupid. Hardly a lofty

philosophical question; I assume most people think they are intelligent, and many of them ask themselves the same thing. The hitch is, most people are not very intelligent, and—

'Eh, eh, how do you know that?'

Mr Harsh.

"Why, because, because, well, it seems so obvious they are not."

'Explain.'

"Conversing with most people is like talking to a mad hatter."

'Oh come now, you can't really mean——'

"Be on your way! I have no patience with you."

If I am intelligent it is a curse. I may well be an idiot savant; good at writing, and at nothing else, except perhaps self-delusion. I'll have to content myself with that. My writing. It is my freedom.

Months pass and the boredom is palpable. The only thing of interest is Milo's continual pilfering, and when I broached it to mum she clammed up as before.

Too much time to think.

I'm afraid I am overly attracted to women. And I hope no one opens this diary.

Chapter Twenty-one

My trip to Paris was wonderful. Before I departed I tried to convince my mother to accompany me, but to no avail, and just as well, for I had a riotous time that she would not have appreciated; would not have allowed. Ha, ha, ha, and ho, ho, ho. Wine and more wine; smiling, laughing faces, jokes and stories, lecherous advances, . . . , and much more. I had all I could do to retain my, my, I shall say, dignity, and I'm afraid I had not retained it.

Each time it took me a full day to recuperate. A small price to pay. I must accept, though, I almost wished mum had joined me, to keep me in check.

I moderated my behavior for the rest of the the trip, concentrating on the usual sights; museums, monuments, and all; thus redeeming myself and gaining both intellectual knowledge—is that redundant?—and stories to relate to mum, and to ameliorate my feelings of debauchery. Above all I was sure I was not going to be with child. That was

*the only thing I remembered for certain. Wouldn't that have been a fine kettle of fish?
After three weeks I was ready to go home.*

Boredom, but I won't be whingy; not even to myself.

I was in our bedroom at my writing table, procrastinating. Fidgeting, kicking my feet, gazing out the window at the large oak tree, I could not have written a word even if someone had stolen up behind me and put a pistol to my head. So what, then? I moved to my comfortable armchair where I had on occasion gained inspiration, but more often than not I either fell asleep or my mind wandered without any particular guidance, too frequently due to Mr Harsh or another of my nemeses. Barring all of that and those, the best I could hope for was an enchanting daydream that would carry me away to a better place. A place where my worst irritation was not Milo getting away with this and that of no real value.

'Oh please!' cut in Sir Reality, not so quietly.

"I assume you want me to——"

'To see how ungrateful you are for what you have.'

"I'm not ungrateful. It's just that I have an unencumbered mentality and——"

'I have always tried to help, but——'

'Bah, *unencumbered mentality!*' cut in Mr Harsh. "There you go again, bragging about how smart you are. Such a bore. The only good thing about you as far as your conceit goes is, in real life you are more reserved.'

My gasp came from deep within. "How disrespectful! In return I shall say your days are numbered; your legion of three. I will rid myself of you if it takes the rest of my life."

'If you do, it probably will.'

Oh, my head! I got up, went outside, walked around the house three times, returned, sat in my chair again, and I was refreshed; and I must have drifted off, for I later recalled a vague half-dream, daydream, or some such. I was high above London, looking down on the crowds of people. Not so high I couldn't make out faces and appearances, and activities, and I was able to float about in order to see different groups. And here was the odd part; I supposed I was *above them all*. No, I don't mean floating; I mean intellectually. Modesty had never been one of my best attributes. Moreover I had never viewed it as an attribute; more of a hindrance. Oh, me, what am I to do? Am I ahead of my time?

If I had any doubts, how does one objectively measure intelligence?

Mum's pussycat, a black and white stray she had taken in and named Tom, rubbed against my leg and purred. She would not have been pleased at her

name, or with mum's muddled sense of humour. No use telling her anything about gender names.

I had heard of attempts to ascertain people's intelligence, such as measuring head size and shape, sensorimotor tests, and so forth, even back as far as phrenology, but no such approaches appeared to be valid. In plain English, i.e. they simply didn't work. And don't. So what? I predict sometime someone will open a new inquiry into intelligence that will lead to well-founded ways to test intelligences. For now I'll keep quiet. All I have to go on is the feeling I've had since I was a young child, that most people are pretty stupid.

What else can I grump about now that I'm in the moment? Plenty to choose from. Aha! Reality. I abhor reality, yet reality *is* intelligence. One cannot be intelligent if they are not a empirical. Not if they are too transcendental. "*Why what a strange creature you are,*" *expostulated Alice* rang in my head. Inspiration, in so far as can be attained. How about a new *Alice in Wonderland*, a land quite the opposite; one of extreme reality? Exaggerated reality.

Mr Harsh. 'You just said you abhor reality.'

"I do, but we must face it or perish."

'No! Are you mad? And you're going to write a new *Alice*?'

"Probably not. What I will do is, I will view the world through a new lens; one of singular experience and reason, and nothing else. One doesn't have to peer down from the ether to see it."

'To view the misery? Are you a fatalist?'

"Without question. Not in the meaning of all human affairs—in actuality everything—being preordained, rather that there isn't much we can do to manage our affairs. There's no prime mover or any other form of sentience *up there* pulling strings."

'Are you deranged?'

"Possibly, but don't you see, it will enhance my other life? My creative life. Therefore my real-life sacrifices will be worth it."

'You are—— Goodbye. You are too much for me.'

Oh, my head! Could I really be mad? If I am, it's better than being sane. In any case I maintain my conviction that human knowledge is based on the tangible. Rather, it should be. And Mr Harsh, please do not return to ask the common and inane question, *What is reality?*

Chapter Forty-three

A significant aspect of my interpretation of reality—and my obsession with it—is my poor brother. Michael stands out as an excellent example of reality's inflictions. That's a poor choice of words; *reality's inflictions*. While I imagine some people see reality as a sort of *being*, I don't. Hardly. Again, one of my personality traits is that I am matter-of-fact. Oh, not in a philosophical sense; in a tangible, down-to-earth, practical way. If I can't see, feel, prove, or mentally grasp something or some concept that I hold to be extant at least in form, it doesn't exist. I'm a philosophical pragmatist without being in any way a philosopher. Philosophies are drivel. Offshoots of ancient mysticism, mythology, and religion, when people didn't know better. We should abandon all of that now that we are seeing more scientific advances.

What has that—my personal, dim outlook on life—to do with Michael? Merely that he is my greatest example of the misfortunes of human existence. If there were some secular form of prayer, I would pray for him. As it is, I will find him, or discover what happened to him if it's the last thing I do. Trite to say.

Life is not all bad. One has to forge on or roll up into a ball and die.

Mum had talked me into going to a fair that had been set up on the west edge of the city. After a brief, feeble resistance I agreed to go, and away we went in a hansom cab. Lucilla had packed a lunch for us, the day was sunny and mild, our cheerfulness was mutual, and we were set for adventure.

We had invited Edward to come along. He had hemmed, hawed, waffled, and claimed work duties, so we let him off the hook. Over time we had, oh I shall say, diverged in our interests, Edward and I. Such an understatement, but true. I loved him still in spite of our distances. Love binds people; so do common feelings, pursuits, and circumstances. One common circumstance never to bind us was having children. I assume usually the wife is the more disappointed, and I am ashamed to say I am not. Edward is the one who is hurt.

On to the fair we jiggled and jogged, merrily, and mum remarked as to how thankful she was at having no dentures to fall out. I could have said the same.

We came over a rise, and before us was a panorama more immense than I had anticipated. Tents, carousels and other rides, tables, livestock, and oh, the throngs of people. The driver let us off, we paid, and he warned us of pickpockets, gropers, and other ruffians.

"Let the villains and culprits beware," said mum. "I'll give them some of their own medicine."

She carried in a pocket hidden a fold of her dress, not her dagger; rather a small, specially-made knife with five star-shaped blades. Extremely short blades. She called it her *dissuader*.

Mum added, "I shall protect you, unless you prefer to be groped."

"Mother! You do talk. Anyway, you know I have had the tip of my parasol sharpened."

"You don't say! I didn't know. Come along then."

Despite a few new wrinkles she was fit as a fiddle.

Medicines, paintings, clothing, knick-knacks, and on, and on. If one could name it, *it* was there. Rides, then the livestock and garden vegetables. And all about, tents; most of them obvious, some mysterious.

We strolled, we laughed—we even cried once or twice—and we had such a good time. Best of all we spoke not of bygone days, or our current concerns; rather of what was right before us. We were children, and our make-believe was more of a curative than any physic. I had never believed such merriment would have been possible; not even in my writing. Now that we have achieved the impossible I hope we can remember how we did, so we may do it again.

In my writing I would have described all of the colorful characters, but in real life there is no need to. Two did stand out howsoever; a tall man and a short woman. Extremely tall, and extremely short. The young man was, I would say nearly seven feet tall. Dark-haired, sallow, thin to the point of emaciation, and so on. Dour too, as most anyone of his physique would be. The lady was probably in her thirties. She couldn't have been over four-and-a-half feet tall, yet I ventured she weighed at least fifteen stone! Not born with any obvious defect other than her shortness. I assumed her weight was acquired, and if she were thinner she would be on the verge of beautiful. She had a attractive countenance, and I wanted to grab hold of her and tell to lose some weight and find a nice man, yet I held my tongue.

Suddenly mum grabbed my arm. "Look, a fortune teller!" She pointed to a red-and-blue striped tent with a lady sitting in front.

I laughed. "I already know our fortunes."

She surprised me by moving closer to the tent.

"What? No. You wouldn't?"

"Why not? What's the harm?"

"Mum!"

"Oh don't be such a stick-in-the-mud."

She led me closer to the lady—oh, to be sure—a lady with long, black hair, dressed in gypsy-like cloths. The epitome of—

"Two beautiful girls," observed the fortune lady, who was herself beautiful in a different-culture way. I expected her to run on about how in need of her service we appeared, and the like. Instead she merely chit-chatted amiably with us.

"Are you enjoying this fine day and this wonderful fair?" she asked. Her distant accent was intriguing, and perhaps that was part of her approach; her draw. All the same I knew she retained more than a measure of sincerity.

"I am," replied mum. "And you?"

We went on for a time; mostly mum and the mysterious lady. Then mum asked, "Do you think we could go inside and see what life holds in store for us?"

"Yes. Please, I am Kezia." She led us into the tent.

It was darker than I had anticipated. In the center stood a round table surrounded by straight wooden chairs. The tent walls were decorated with graphic images of mystical design; some of grotesque creatures. Many of them, and more vivid than I had expected. And oh, yes, on the middle of the table the fabled crystal ball, and it began to glow. Kezia motioned for us to sit, and she went behind the table and took her place. Mum slid the required fee across to her.

I expected what I imagined to be the usual—muttering, moaning, and good omens—and I prepared myself to sit through it with equanimity. After all, Kezia had to provide for herself too. Mum took my hand under the table. Silence, and nothing happened. Kezia only sat looking inquisitively at the ball. No hocus-pocus at all. Mum's grip tightened, but other than that, nothing.

What were the possibilities? Babbling and incantations probably. Ominous portents. Good omens more likely. A request for more money. Or

—

I was tired of sitting there with nothing going on. Was it a ruse to get us to do something? If so, what? Was she going to feign horror at our fate and pretend to return our money in order to tempt us to pay more to find out—?

Kezia looked up at us. "You are both good," said she.

"Good?" I whispered.

"Yes. The most good and balanced people I have ever seen, to the extent that I wish to return your money, light my lamp, and offer you tea."

Mum gasped. "Tea. Return? No, what will our—?"

"Oh, dear, I am so sorry," said Kezia, "don't you know my calling is only a bit of fun, and a way of life?" She pushed mum's coins across the table, but mum pushed them back.

"I—" started mum, but I quieted her.

"We would be delighted to have tea with you," said I, "but only if you stop pushing the coins in our direction."

We all enjoyed a good laugh, and good tea.

Afterward we walked some more, then went home to the real world.

Chapter Forty-four

Time passed in monotony.

Mum surprised me by revealing that her *gentleman friend*, Alfred, had, near the end, come down with consumption.

"You told me he drank——!"

"He did, when he could no longer stand both his old disease and his new one."

"You lied by omission!"

"I have come to think lies can be merciful."

"You appear to be singing a different song."

She simply shrugged. "Can we not try to protect those we love, and to salve our own wounds with some twisting of stark reality, if we mean well? And I did mean well. You can't doubt that."

"I guess not. It rubs me wrong though. How will I ever know if you are telling the truth?"

"Let me see. Oh I've got it. If we are discussing something of real importance, and I am lying—no I mean not telling the exact truth—I will hold up my finger, thus." She held up her index finger. "That will indicate I don't wish to go further into the subject."

I put on my best frown. "To indicate you are lying."

"Or I either can't stand to talk about it, or I am protecting you."

"Lor! Mum you——"

"Lor?"

"There you go again."

"My dear Opal, I merely want to——"

I dramatically held up my index finger. "There, mum, how do you like it. Eh, eh, no more. I have endured more than I can bear."

I strode out of the sitting room even more dramatically, wishing there were a lord of some kind to whom, or which, I could appeal for pity. I do so fear that given enough time I will fall into insanity.

Chapter Twenty-seven

It was time to face the obvious; I preferred girls. Women. Calling my preference a fondness would not do. My feeling was an infatuation, or something eclipsing infatuation. No, I must be honest, I am a downright sapphist. There, once and for all, done, and I

feel all the better for it. Devil take it.

My one, true, and only love, Edward. How we appreciated our times together in the evenings, after we had enjoyed sitting with mum downstairs. Our bedroom was spacious and cosy, the large, soft chairs, the fireplace cheerful, the bed, um, adequate, and the conversation calming. We were healthy, happy, and secure. What more could one want? And I was sure Edward appreciated everything as well. He hadn't been born with the gift of self-expression, but I had been born with the ability to read people. I was able to read him better than I could read myself. A cynic would say that was because I am far more complicated, but I am only a cynic when it comes to people in general, and even then I attempt to moderate my cynicism. What good does it do?

Edward, despite lack of formal education, is keen of mind. More intelligent than I in some areas. And often more practical as to the ways of the world, though I am nothing to sneeze at. Where am I going with this? The older I get the dumber people seem. A queer notion. More than a notion; a firm belief. Not just here, but worldwide, and throughout history. Violence, perfidy, stupidity, and all. Where are we heading?

'Don't ask me.'

"I didn't, and I won't, Madam."

'I was only——'

"Trying to help. I know. That's what you always say. Anyway, on second thought, where?"

'I haven't—— Sorry, I only want to caution you about going too far.'

"Darwin didn't go far enough."

'Whaaaat?'

"Seeing how scientists and others will make the advances, while the stupid and the vicious will use those advances for evil purposes."

'Lord preserve me.'

"There is no Lord, or any such."

Chapter Twenty-eight

Bliss. I have met my true love. Tulip. We are together now, and forever. Forever in this world I must reaffirm, since I would be greatly surprised if there were another, despite what Tulip believes. I humour her.

We are cozily established in our quaint apartment not far from Drury Lane and

the theater. Our lodging is not spacious, but as we are like Siamese twins, space is not important to us. Anyway we are both creative, and we have decorated our place exquisitely. As a writer I tend not to go on much with descriptions. Over-describing is not a sound quality of talented writers.

Tulip's only—and very unusual—quirk is her refusal to tell me her surname. She has made it clear she will never divulge it no matter what, and when I commented on how unexpected her reluctance was, she replied as to how my eccentricities were no easier to fathom. Fathom? Eccentricities? I have no eccentricities. Good gracious! In the event, I made allowances and accommodations for her, difficult as it was, and not being used to yielding and bending.

Tulip works at her art—mostly women's dress, fashions, and all—and I my writing, which is going splendidly. I know editors at several publishing companies who like my work and urge me to speed up my efforts, which is a delightful thing to hear even though my writing cannot be hurried.

Our entertainment—Tulip's and mine—comprises opera, art shows, literary readings, theater, and of—most of all—reading. We are unabashed highbrows, yet we never show or tell anyone of our predilections. And why would anyone care? Neither of us hold much esteem for the masses of humanity. The hoi polloi. Not even for the upper crust. Oh, we are not heartless, we are realists. True, well-grounded, extreme realists, and as an interjection I add one more virtue: modesty, me especially as to my writing. Ha.

Mum and I were on one of our regular walks, and on such walks we tried to converse with people who seemed to be worth conversing with. The smart-looking, well-dressed ones who were in no hurry. Most often they were as bored as we were, thus eager to talk. For mum—sometimes gregarious, and always bright—the conversations were the thing. For me it was writing-related research. Shame on me for seeing it that way; but it was. I was not hard of heart; only I found the talk to be somewhat shallow and full of platitudes. Oh, I could imagine one of my *voices* chiding me on how, there I was, a dissembler, smiling and chatting away, only to write short descriptions, words, and phrases in my notebook later.

Back home I went to my bedroom and sat at my desk with my notebook. The old, thin lady with skin reminiscent of watered-down milk; the lady of indeterminable age who walked with a crutch and spoke with a lisp; the young lady who was even more beautiful than mum had been in her youth; the lonely old man who obviously wished to speak to us, but was too reserved to do so until

we greeted him; a scholarly-appearing man who turned out to be a college professor. I noted them all, and afterward I was twinged by the familiar notion that if I were as gifted a writer as I thought I was, why did I need to go to all the trouble of studying people in public places? My reply to myself was, Dickens did the same thing. Then, if I could surpass Mr Dickens, why did I have to resort to his, his method of inspiration?

Chapter Forty-five

Ups and downs, ins and outs, here and there. What's happening to me? For one thing, I dwell too much about things I suspect others do not. Really, what is the one thing that dominates our lives? I may be mad, but I think at a higher level than most, and I know a truism that is at the summit of all truisms; *All human endeavor is acquisition, and retaining what we have acquired.* Further, that trait is true for all creatures.

'I agree with you.'

"Thank you Mr Harsh. I am surprised. You seldom agree with me."

'You misunderstand. I agree you are mad.'

"Mad? I said it in jest!"

'There is some foundation to every jest.'

Not only do we spend most of our lives acquiring material things, we work toward gaining immaterials such as knowledge, influence, authority, and such. And lust. Finding a mate, or ones with whom we can satisfy our sexual desires. Procreation. Political power. War, for land, resources, and domination of people.

Mum tapped at my bedroom door, and entered.

"I hope I am not interrupting your writing Miss Opal."

"Not at all." She was interrupting my musings, to my relief. She sat down on *her* chair.

"My dear you know I try not to ask about your writing. I will pose my usual question however; is it going well?"

"Yes, but slow. Mother, I have a question for you. Are the stupid responsible? Are they to be held to account for their harmful actions?"

"Good gracious, why do you ask?"

"My writing reflects human conditions, mostly, but what do I know? I haven't lived as long as you, and I haven't experienced life as much as you have. I value your opinions. You have read the work of many philosophers, and——"

"You flatter me too much. Ummm. As to your question, you must know it's not to be simply answered."

"I do. I should have asked not *should*, but *how much* should dullards be responsible?"

"Yes, and now that I have had a chance to mull it over, it seems to me that the degree of their responsibility should be determined mostly by the degree to which the more intelligent allow them to behave badly."

"The intelligent don't govern. Most countries, dominions, and all, are ruled

by the dastardly and the demoniacal."

Mum sat twisting the lace on her left sleeve.

"Mum?"

"It's the age-old story; rule by the strongest and the most ruthless.

Caveman Ogg with his club, the kingdom of Ozania ruled by the vicious king Ozmund, and so on. Then the dictators who rule by force, but with added cunning. Then modern leaders who weasel their way to the top, then add the brutality. And the so-called democracies wherein the cunning is honed to perfection. I am reminded of a saying by Alexander Hamilton in the United States; *Clever men are never intelligent*. Why Opal, look around. The world is a giant debacle run by the clever. The clever and the cold. And oh, yes, still the brutal. And the debauched. I will go as far as to say democracies are ruled by the stupid; government by the corrupt."

"You astonish me, mum."

"You may be—are—sharp, and a talented writer, but don't underestimate me. I could never write as you do, and such, yet the old saying that with age comes wisdom seems to apply to me in practical ways. To sum up any wisdom I may have, I firmly believe philosophy is humbuggery. Thin gruel."

"I didn't know how disillusioned you are."

"Call me that if you wish, but I prefer *realistic*. I know, there are different philosophies based on what philosophers call realism, but I'm a real *realist*. Heh. You can try to invent a better name for it, but it's the obviousness that counts. The rock-bottom, observable element."

"What do you—?"

"Intellectuals will get lost in semantics, cloudy mental constructs, and all, but don't fall into those pipe-dreams. For example; you pick up a rock. It's heavy, solid, rough, and all, you know it's a rock. Now some philosophers might try to convince you that all others perceive it differently. Nonsense! They see it the same as you do. They know it's heavy, solid, . . . , and you all know if you throw it at someone and hit him, he will be in pain. Human commonality. Now there's a word, *commonality*. Don't give in to pipe dreams; put *commonality* in your pipe and smoke it."

I got up, picked up my pen and a writing paper, and handed them to mum. "Here, you should be the writer, not I."

She would not be put upon, and she good-naturedly refused my offer.

"No my dear daughter who assumes she can make fun of me thus. I know my limitations, and I will leave the writing to you. Sit down and behave. I am still able to give you a good spanking."

I returned to my chair. "Mum, you never fail to amaze me with your antics. No, no, not antics; with your life knowledge and common sense."

"Bite your tongue; there is no such thing as common sense. Sense, if you mean intelligence, is far, far from common."

"I have seen more in you than I had supposed existed. How did you become so perspicacious?"

"You don't run businesses as I have all these years without learning

something about people, the real world, and all."

That evening as mum and I sat out back, I ventured to ask, "Did not you feel some guilt about your liaison with Alfred?"

"I have been waiting for you to bring that up," she snapped.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Yes, the guilt was devastating." Tears filled her eyes. "And do you know the most deplorable part? My guilt at being untrue to Albert after he was dead led me to near madness. To where I was relieved when Alfred and I parted. That he became—or was all along—ill." She held up two fingers, indicating truth.

Chapter Twenty-nine

I want to go to America, and Tulip and I will someday. Not to the cities; we have those. I want to go west to see cowboys and Indians! To live wild with them, like a man. I will be the gun-carrying man, and Tulip will be the hard, strong, woman. We'll go to Montana territory and learn to ride and shoot. We'll live off the land, hunt buffaloes, hobnob with the Indians, smoke strong cigars, drink rotgut whiskey, carouse, and oh, yes, start a cattle ranch. Wide-open spaces, freedom from the stench, disease, and noise of the city. Oh the life we will have. Oh, the adventures. And after we finish building a grand house, oh the writing I will do!

Back down to earth here in my diary. Am I to end up in some modern Bedlam? I have heard that genius evokes brain maladies. Naturally, then, I pose to myself the question; if I had any say in the matter, would I relinquish some sanity for a good allotment of genius, even if, as I suspect, writers are more prone to insanity than others? I probably would. Or already have.

I sometimes think I should relinquish my diaries, wherein I am not as down to earth as I wish to be.

I slammed shut my diary and threw it on the floor.

Chapter Forty-six

I loved dining out with mum. We were at the *Ship and Turtle*, enjoying—what else?—turtle. We never dined at lesser places, and absolutely not on anything from street vendors. When she was young lady she had eaten a bag of mystery from a hawker and had become violently ill and had gagged at the sight of sausage ever since. Moreover she was nearly a vegetarian, with the exception of fish and such.

A waiter, dressed to the nines, gave us water and menus. He reminded me of my brother Michael. Just then came a commotion from the front of the area. A drunken man had crawled in and had gotten well toward the tables, at which two waiters and a cook had confronted him. The intruder was loud and belligerent, calling for a table in the rear, the finest oysters, and the best ale in the house.

"I think I know what *ails* him," laughed mum. "*Ails? Ale?*"

"Yes, mother. If you had any kindness of heart you would treat him to a meal."

She laughed again. "You know I would, except for two things. He is too soused to sit up, and the staff would not allow him to incense the place."

The waiters had managed to get the intruder halfway to his feet and were ushering him toward the door when some invisible force lifted me to my feet. The next I knew I was depositing a small handful of shillings in one of the miscreant's pockets. His ushers stared at me as if I were mad, then proceeded with their charge. I regained my composure and returned to our table while some of the diners cheered and clapped, and others simply shook their heads.

Mum was at first aghast, then at a loss, then sympathetic; all within a minute.

"How kind of you my dear. Not many would have done that. What prompted you?"

"I'm sure I don't know! It was like a giant hand had moved me. Am I losing my senses? Tell me! How do I look?"

She reached across the table and took my hand.

"You look like a kind, compassionate young lady with a heart, and I am so proud of you."

"But the hand? The hand that lifted me?"

"Forget about it. We all have our moments. Here, drink some water and compose yourself. If I were you I would stand and take a bow."

"I will not!" I barked.

To my surprise and embarrassment mum stood, pointed down at me, and bowed gracefully. This time the applause was universal, but I still put my hands over my face and hung my head. Dinner with mum was never dull, no matter

how hard I tried to avoid arousing her.

We ordered, and as we dined nearly every diner who passed on the way out patted me on the shoulder. We even received a complimentary bottle of red wine.

"I was just thinking, life is never dull with you, mum," I managed.

"Me? I'm not the one who leapt up and"

"Peas in a pod. Now that I'm older I sometimes regard you as more of a sister than a mother."

"Sister? Poo! Look at me; grey hairs, wrinkles, senility setting in. Need I go on?"

"And poo to you too sister dearest. Any stranger would swear you cannot be over—"

She swatted me with her napkin.

"Now sister," said I, "keep that up and we will be ushered out to join the poor inebriate."

Mum laughed. "Who is no doubt in the nearest pub spending the money you gave him."

"If so, and you manage to get us kicked out, we can join him."

Of a dull, dreary day inside and out, I led mum to—where else?—the sitting room, and—what else?—we sat in our favorite chairs, facing one another.

"What is it my dear?" asked mum.

A robin tried to fly in through the closed window, but only crashed to the ground.

"Something you once said, mum. It has bothered me ever since."

"Bothered you. Gracious, I never mean to do that."

"Not you. Do you remember telling me of your extensive reading, and how you have become a positivist, and all?"

"Yes."

"Then does not the world seem mundane and tragic to you."

Mum's eyes widened slightly. "Is that how you took my little soliloquy?"

"Hardly a soliloquy, inasmuch as you were speaking to me."

"Yes, I, oh I am sorry to have upset you. I only intended to prepare you for the real world. So much of everyday life is nonsense. Literally *no sense*. Simple gabble."

"What else?"

"You press me hard. What else? The grimness of reality. Illness, death, crime, and—"

I interrupted her. "Mental affliction?"

"Yes, that too. Oh, dear, do you mean—?"

"No, not me. Leastwise I don't think so. Oh, I am frequently looking for signs of such—"

Mum held up her hand. "It's no use. What happens happens, and there is,

or will be, nothing you can do about it. The ability to separate the possible from the impossible is an essence of living as a rational being. Listen to me, Opal; I can save you from much pain. There is no sense in you treading the same path I have already taken. Spare yourself some pain by makin' my experience yours, then move on and build upon what I have learned. And above all, live in the real word."

"Yes, but what is a real?"

"Not what philosophers define. Not their sky castles."

"Mum, you told me of all of the philosophical works you have read, and ——"

"Yes, and I might have added that I threw out all of those books, and I should have told you how I discarded all of their fancies as well. Cleared my mind. Emptied my head of——"

I giggled. "You are an empty-head?"

She saw no humour. "Anyone who doesn't know what realism—and being a realist means—never will, now, and in centuries to come." She got up and stood, sternly, before me. "Listen to me. If you only remember and take to heart one thing I tell you, remember this. Base your life only on what your senses of smell, touch, taste, sight, and hearing tell you. Then if you want to build on that, do so, but only on those elemental bases."

"Mum, how could I do otherwise?"

"Very easily. You could become infatuated with philosophical nonsense. You could invent gods and religions, or succumb to their pull. You could be taken in by false medical cures; you could, in your writing, fall into a world of your own creation; you could——"

"Mum! My writing requires me to live in the worlds I create!"

Mum fell back in to her chair in resignation, and after several minutes of silence we resumed our conversation. In the end I agreed with most of what she had said, with the exception of my creative writing, and there she was forced to accede. To very reluctantly accede.

Chapter Forty-seven

We had not been to Wildwood for years, then one day mum announced we would go there. My surprise was not at the going, but at mum's manner. Not delight, or even interest; rather as a duty, or as last the time, or some such that I couldn't make out. Whatever her reason I was more than ready. She had said nothing about Edward coming, but by now we understood he had no interest in such excursions. Furthermore he was invaluable at her office. It would have been good for him to get away, none the less I was never one to push him on things like that. I would miss him, as usual.

Elway and Minerva Fiddler had departed the world years ago without much fuss. That's what I had believed at the time. I had been in for the shock of a lifetime. Anyway up until that time, and I tremble even now at the thought of it. We all must confront——

'For the life of me, how you run on about nothing. Get to the mark!'

"You grow harsher with time Mr Harsh."

'You do that to me. Prattle on to no——'

Back at Wildwood. It had not changed; only the people.

I now knew the reason mum had kept Wildwood. Not as much as a respite from the city, but a comfortable home for her *mother*. Her second, assumed mother. Now I am sure she only keeps it out of nostalgia. What she and I were doing there now I didn't know. It was all so mysterious.

The next day mum and I visited the graveyard beside the small church near the unnamed community nearby where her father rested. She led me to two modest, plain headstones, where we stood for a few minutes, and that was all.

That was the extent of our visit. My mother could be very eccentric.

The following day we were back home. Aside from being with Edward I was returned to the boredom of daily life; breakfast, tea, Milo's pilfering, cab rides, and the usual. And to my writing; distraction from the tedium.

One Sunday morning I came downstairs to the sitting room to find Mum in her chair staring vaguely out the window, and when I sat in my chair she hardly noticed me.

"Mum? And good morning to you too."

She turned and looked at me with one of her unnatural faces. "Milo has died."

"What?"

She turned back to the window.

"Mum, when?"

"Sometime before I arose this morning. I found him lying face-down on the hallway floor, and I called Edward."

"What happened?"

"Edward took him back to the lumber room, and I went to find Lucilla in their bedroom."

"Oh, poor mum, to have to——"

"Lucilla was asleep, and when I woke her to tell her, she shed a few tears but was remarkably collected. At first I had thought she was only half awake, but no, after several minutes she was the same. She got up and started dressing, so I came here. When Edward joined me he said she was still impassive. He has gone to make the arrangements."

I waited, but mum said nothing. "What else?"

"Edward found two small, lead figurines in one of Milo's pockets."

"You don't mean——"

"Pilfering right up till the end."

Mum, however, wiped a tear from her eye. "Life gets hard to bear the older you get. Too many people I know are passing." She sniffed.

"There, there mother. We are healthy, and we'll get through this."

"You know how I have harped on you about being realistic. Sensible, and all. I assume you have figured out there's a price to pay."

"I——"

"One must be strong-willed to cling to reality, but letting go, to my mind, is worse."

"Mum, could we talk about this later. We must get moving, for we have much to do."

She rose and turned to me. "I don't think you need lessons on reality."

She was wrong. I struggled daily to maintain my sense of the material.

We bustled around, mum comforting Lucilla, and I helping Edward, then cooking dinner, despite hardly knowing a pot from a pan or a potato from a turnip. I turned dizzy and disoriented, and how the wild thoughts went through my head. The most incongruous and disconcerting was of my poor brother, Michael. Would I ever see him again, or even find out anything about him? I longed for a large glass of wine. Mum calls herself a realist, but isn't that in itself delusional? Only wishfulness?

Ouch! I cut my finger while slicing an onion. I was preparing the only meal I could, a mixture of chopped vegetables and a little meat. I didn't even know what to call it. Maybe *hash*.

Edward came up behind me and gave me a hug. "Looks good."

I turned, and he kissed me full on my lips. He kissed me again, then hurried out.

I knew a good bit about philosophy, and I appreciate that there were many different kinds of *realist*, and even as I fought a natural tendency to argue and

quibble with mum, at the same time I had enough sense not to, as doing so would only fall into a clouded, pseudo-academic argument, and I knew damn well what she meant anyway.

That evening, when the *shouting* was over, I withdrew to my bedroom and wrote in my diary.

A day like no other. Milo is no more.

Chapter Forty-eight

"Mum is astute. It's only that I tend to disagree with her views on reality."

'Just be sure you don't swing too far the other way,' warned Sir Reality.

"What other way?"

'You know very well. The most important thing you can do is stay away from Madam Fantasy.'

I had assumed he, Sir Reality, and the others would have faded away by now, but no, so I have learned to ignore them. On with my writing. I had been letting it slip, and it gives me great comfort in times of trouble. Trouble? I should say, anxiety.

Chapter Thirty

So here I am, free from the horrors of real life. Free to believe whatever I want to believe as regards life in general. Free to do whatever I feel like doing as long as it doesn't lead me to illness, destruction, madness, and so on; or hurt anyone else. Free to dally with anyone I choose. Free to enter my private world whenever I wish, for after all, why not if it helps? Escape from the constraints of real life. Free from everything and everybody I wish to be free from. After all, didn't some god endow us with the ability to use our imagination, and what if we do invent some comforts? Some god who is himself imaginary, since they are all are human creations, and they are all he. Who can tell, I may even dream up one myself; a god of comfort who doesn't threaten people. One who admits to being created. They all are anyway. Created, so I might as well get in on the act and create one.

I am floating on a cloud, looking down at the earth, and, curiously, I can see both the whole of the world, and, if I squint, I can see the masses of humanity. Further, if I really concentrate I am able to study individuals. Why? I can see them in real life, so why stretch my imagination thus? It's obvious; when I interact with them I have the power to change them for the better. Am I nuts? Could be, but why do I care; I'm content.

My writing is getting too bizarre, and I'll have to tone it down. I may even have to do some revisions, as much as I will hate to. No publisher will accept what they feel is gibberish.

And, despite writing because it makes me feel better, I— Oh, I can do better. Writing as a diversion, or escape, from the real world, I have been fiddling around with my book for years, and it's time to put pen to paper with alacrity. I'm at the point of being all smoke and no fire. Nothing's stopping me; only sloth.

"Fiddlesticks!" said mum. She had been trying to talk me into joining Edward helping him oversee her businesses. She was fooling me and we both knew it.

We were walking through one of her factories. All around us, in the din, workers were making glassware, and that was why it was so hot and fetid throughout the building. Machines, sweating men, furnaces, and so on. I was at the same time intrigued and repelled.

Despite two fine ladies strolling around, few of the workers paid any attention to us. Just as well since I was guilty in my leisure while they were so busy. And another thing; I was a bit surprised that mum's workmen were not provided with better conditions under which to labour.

I timidly asked mum, "Are all workplaces like this?"

"Excuse me? Why I guess so. I don't visit them very often. But yes I believe they are. Why?"

"I don't know. Hmmm. I'm glad I don't work here; it doesn't seem very nice."

"I think they get used to it. Look there, at the glass-blower. Isn't that a nice, fancy bottle he's making? Green glass."

We walked back to the main door and went outside to cool off.

"Gracious," said I again, "I would not want to work there. I take for granted they are well-paid for their hard labour though."

We sat on a rough, backless bench in the shade, and just then a gentle, cool breeze came up.

"I suppose they are," mum replied.

"You don't know?"

"No. I have so many interests, and you know how well Edward and his superintendents take care of things."

An unusual feeling came over me. "He never says much about work."

Could mum really be unaware of the working conditions and the workers' pay? Was it simply easier for her to avoid thinking about it? I will ask Edward.

Mum had just come in from who-knows-where, and she startled me as I sat in the drawing room reading. I dropped my book.

"I have made arrangements with the British Balloon Corps. We will fly like birds!"

"What on earth are you talking about? Have you—?" I picked up my book from the floor.

"Lost my senses? Perhaps, but we only live once and—"

"Oh, mother, what have you done?"

She had always been staid, and over the years she had become more so. Often even glum. Then had she been imbibing some—?

"I have used my influence, charm, and good looks to inveigle invitations for us to go for a balloon ride."

I nearly dropped my book again. "Balloon ride? You cannot be serious."

"I am perfectly serious. The arrangements are made for the day after tomorrow. I know a Major Blond who is a top officer in the gas-balloon development. I charmed him."

"So you said. And you took the liberty of getting me involved."

A wave of distress washed over me, and a several thoughts competed for my attention.

"Involved? I wouldn't put it that way. You don't have to do anything, only —"

"Pray?"

"Now Opal, don't be such a chicken. We'll be tethered, and we will only go up several-hundred feet. We'll see all of London!"

"I don't want to see all of London from above. Such adventures are best written about, and in fact I have recently done so. I would prefer to leave it at that."

"Poo. You'll change your mind."

"I've never heard of the British Balloon Corps. It must be a clandestine group. Would you really have me believe they're going to take two skirts like us up in some contraption like that?"

"Yes. Why? I'm not entirely sure, but when I met Major Blond by chance he was so pleased I could have made him do anything. He is the head of the whole project. And their location is five miles away from here. He can do anything he wants."

"If we are that high surely someone will see us."

"It's a common occurrence, and by now the locals are used to it. At first they believed they were seeing Martians, but when they were told they were only seeing military experiments they were so relieved they forgot all about them. The Martians, not the balloons."

I could only lean back in my chair, close my eyes, and groan.

On the day of our death mum and I set out in a carriage for the killing field. She talked on and I sat looking gloomily at the scenery. I had observed that the older mum got the more changeable she had become. She was not old, however, and my obvious concern was, how would she act when she really was old? Now this abnormal behavior. Mental disturbance? None the less I had resolved to appreciate her cheer in the moments, and worry about the future when the future was upon us. The downside was, my appreciation shouldn't

include risking my life, and hers, on a lark. I had asked Edward for advice on the matter, and he was no more helpful than he had been regarding mum's businesses. Bless him, he is a purely and singularly practical, but nothing more.

We rattled on in the carriage, and mum rambled on. Till my dying day I will never know how she had persuaded the major to——

We arrived and an old sergeant let us into the large field. The driver stopped at a bunch of rickety, unpainted buildings and huts, and other contraptions and whatnot; and a half-inflated balloon. Two men in uniforms were fiddling with one of the machines while another—obviously a higher-up—watched and gave orders. When he saw us he ran to our carriage.

"Ah, the delightful Miss Green," cried the major, ignoring me. "Let me help you down."

I climbed down on the other side, and as I came around mum introduced me.

"Major Blond, my daughter, Opal."

I thought the major's eyes lit up when he finally acknowledged me. He took my hand. "Dear Miss Opal. Delighted!"

We strolled to the balloon, and when we got there I got a whiff of something noxious. Seeing my reaction, the major explained, "Coal gas my dear. Nothing to worry about I assure you."

He chatted on, then returned to work. Mum and I moved upwind, and as we stood waiting I hoped whatever was the cause of her jolly malady would not wear off until we returned home.

A lone—and I could have said lonely—buzzard flew over and I half expected it to fall to the ground, dead of the fumes. It was not my best day either, for my next haloed image was of mum and me falling to the ground, not from fumes, but as a result of balloon-haloed catastrophe. Oh, well, it would be a quick and painless death. I wished mum were her normal, steady, self so she could share my dysphoria.

Would they never get the balloon full? Will we never get it over with? Will I never be able to enjoy the peace and tranquility of home? I had not always appreciated our peaceful house before, but I will welcome it now.

The cursed, blasted buzzard returned. He—it—had to be a *he*, evidently took after mum, thriving on poison. He had it better than I did though; I was subject to both real and mental miasmas from below and above. Poor me, blub, blub, blub. I wallowed in self pity.

The balloon was full. I had overheard someone say something about coal.

Major Blond helped mum and me into the basket, then he got in. The rope meant to prevent us from flying off into the great beyond was none-too-new. Oh, well, we would come down somewhere when the major let out some of the gas. Rope be damned.

After a great deal of huffing and puffing the workers disconnected the gas tube and so on, untied the tethers, and we began our ascent. The bottom of the wicker basket seemed none too firm. I closed my eyes, and when I opened them we were well off the ground and mum was laughing and waving her fan to those

below. I preferred her when she was serious and sedate.

Up, up, up, with the major tending to the *line of life*. On up. For a moment I assumed my lightheadedness was due to the altitude. No, it was due to my cowardice. I was lily-livered. An embarrassment to myself, Major Blond, and even to those below who could see my trembling and carrying on. I stood straight, stiffened, mugged, waved my handkerchief, halloed, and forced a hearty laugh; all the while sick inside and waiting for us to come to the *end of our rope*. I had retained some of my sense of humor.

In time I began to relax and look about, and I even acknowledged to mum and the major that it was in fact a wonderful sight in every direction, especially toward the city.

Mum pinched me in my ribs. "I see you have come around. Now, aren't you glad you came?"

"No." But I was.

"Tut-tut, I know your are. How narrow the Thames appears. Oh, my, I can almost make out our place! And see at the——"

The basket shuddered slightly, and we stopped. The major began pointing out landmarks, mostly to mum, and I was left with my own thoughts. I recognized a number of the larger structures, and the views were delightful. There was *this*, and over there *that*, and there was *the other*. Then——

Chapter Thirty-one

I am floating on a cloud, looking down at the earth, and, curiously, I can see both the whole of the world, and, if I squint, I can distinguish the masses of humanity. Further, if I really concentrate I am able to study individuals. I can see them in real life, so why stretch my imagination thus? It's obvious; when I interact with them I have the power to change them for the better. Am I off? Could be, but why do I care; I'm content.

I wiped my eyes and blinked-away my apparition. A striking image of some lines I had written only days ago. What's happening to me? I manage to reach mental equilibrium, and now this. I fret about my mother's ups and downs, and here I succumb to demons of my own. Different demons to be sure, born of different minds; mum's pragmatism versus my creativity. Which of us will be the happier in our old age?

Then I noticed a change in mum. She had turned glum; an uncommon shift that I dreaded, that usually preceded an ill wind.

I looked down again, and, as if my glance were a knife, the tether parted. My fear was confirmed, none the less in an instant I, the one with the vivid imagination, the conjurer of words and images, was delighted; while mum—steady, earthbound mum—faced our predicament with fear, to the extent that she sank to the bottom of the basket, blubbering and shaking. I tried to lift her to her feet but she resisted almost to the point of becoming hysterical, so I

reluctantly let her be. In my writing I was creative; in real life I was pragmatic. In her real life she was strong most of the time, but in the very, very rare times she broke down she did so completely. A singular pair are we.

Away we floated, up slightly and directly over the city, as if in a phantasm. And a beautiful phantasm it was. So dream-like as to be beyond comprehension, and yet I remembered that I had put the exact same images and thoughts on paper not long ago:

I am floating on a cloud, looking down at the earth, and, curiously, I can see both the whole of the world, and, if I squint, I can distinguish the masses of humanity. Further, if I really concentrate I am able to study individuals. I can see them in real life, so why stretch my imagination thus? It's obvious; when I interact with them I have the power to change them for the better. Am I off? Could be, but why do I care; I'm content.

Mum bumped my legs. She had fallen into a restless sleep. Just as well. So I was free to appreciate a wonderful feeling I had never before experienced.

Major Blond was beginning to recover from his embarrassment. He had not uttered a word other than an initial round of cursing, and now he stood with his back to me pondering, I presumed, how and where to get us down safely. Neither of us spoke for a good-many minutes, then he turned to me, red-faced.

"I assume in your estimation I am the most doltish dolt you have had the misfortune to come across."

I was inclined to agree, but, "No, sir, I do not. You could not have known —"

"I could have, and should have." Nevertheless he appeared to unbend somewhat. "I hope you will forgive me, and now it is up to me to get us down safely."

"There is nothing to forgive, and I believe you will. Please ignore us—me —and carry on."

He looked down at mum. "Leastwise she will not have to fear our landing." We both laughed softly.

Fortunately the wind was light, and all we had to do was wait until we were over open ground. The Major remained silent for a time, then he opened up. Nervously.

"I thought I heard someone say you are a writer, miss."

"Mrs, if you please, and yes, I am, and a very good one."

I disliked *Mrs*, but I feared any advances.

"Oh, my apologies, I didn't see a ring, so——"

"I often dispense with such accouterments, especially when I am on unwonted adventures."

I grinned, and he laughed.

"Unwonted is the word, miss, for I will still address you as that if you don't mind. No ill intentions I am sure; it just slips off the tongue easier."

"As you wish. Now, please tell me of our landing. Will it be hard, soft, or

catastrophic?"

"Oh, definitely catastrophic."

My heart nearly stopped, then he laughed.

"I am sorry! I couldn't resist. No, it will be soft. Or not very hard. Oh, by the way, I confess I have never landed this balloon before."

"Never landed? And you are in charge of——"

"Never without a tether my dear. No worries though; all I have to do is let out the gas slowly. What can possibly go wrong?"

"I can come up with several possibilities."

When we were over open country Major Blond looked at me rather doubtfully, then opened the gas valve a half-turn. Gas hissed out but the balloon continued merrily along at the same height.

"Don't be so timid, Major Courageous. Or do you wish me to open it?"

With a dour glance he opened the valve more, and in a minute we began to descend.

"Caution is the word," said he. "It's easy to let out the gas, but not so easy to put it back in if we go into a fast fall. Then our only available gas would be of the human kind, and while there would be plenty of it, I'm not sure if it would be the rising kind, if you get me meaning."

"Sorry. I'll leave you to it. My lips are sealed."

"You are too kind," he said sourly.

I roused mum and made her stand. "Are you back with us mum?"

"Why would I not be? Um, are they pulling us back down?"

"No, but we will be landing soon."

"Landing?" She looked down. "Oh, my goodness!"

Land we did, in a turnip patch, whereupon as we were climbing out of the basket an elderly farmer came running toward us brandishing a pitchfork. As he closed on us the Major confronted him.

"Calm yourself sir," said the major, "we are only representatives of the British Balloon Corps, and——"

"British Balloon or not, see what yir doin' tuh me turnips! An' if yir a balloon whatever, what are them wimmens doin' with yuh, eh?" He made as if to puncture the balloon.

"Now hold on sir, that's government property. And I assure you the army will more than reimburse you for your lost turnips. Here," Major Blond pulled out a paper and pencil, "I will write it up. You trust the government don't you?"

"Huh. Not much." But the codger lowered his pitchfork. He looked back at us. "What er things comin' to, with wimmens in the army?"

After some more grumblings and pacifications we departed the balloon and went in search of transportation.

—————

Nothingness. Not floating on a cloud, not underwater—— Nowhere and nothing. Void.

I tried to move but I could not. I? Who am I? I must be a logical being or I would not be asking such questions.

Am I dead? Have I gone to some netherworld? Or to a heaven of some sort? In either event I would prefer to go back down to earth, as miserable as it is.

I'm breathing. I can feel it. I'll try my legs again. No. Arms? No. Ahh, a voice. It's familiar but I can't name the speaker. A sad voice.

The sad voice again. I must have slept. Oh, how can one in limbo know that? I am able to move my arms, but not my legs. The nothingness is oppressive, and I would rather become totally sensate, or permanently insensate; none of this hovering in between, which is intolerable.

"Praise be!" said the voice.

I opened my eyes, and before me was an exquisite lady.

"My dear, dear Opal, you have returned."

I glanced around, and since there was no one else, I knew I was Opal.

The lady looked familiar. "You scared us," said she.

Trite as it sounded, I had to ask, "Where am I?"

"My goodness. At home. Where do you think?"

"That's just it, I am having trouble thinking. I was floating in nowhere, and there was nothing. Absolutely nothing, and——"

"Don't distress yourself; all that is over now. You——"

"Excuse me ma'am, but who are you?"

The lady all but fell from my bed where she was sitting beside me, and she turned white. "What? You don't——? My dear, I am your mother, for heaven's sake."

It then dawned on me. She was my mother, even as I couldn't recall her name.

I asked, "What happened?"

"What happened? Much happened. You did not get up one morning. It was like you were talking in your sleep, eyes closed and rolling about. I first thought it was only the vapors, but then——"

"The vapors?! That's an old-fashioned thing to say. Goodness me!"

"Well I am old. Anyway you grew worse, so I sent for doctor Klug, and he ——"

"What of Edward?"

"He was at the point of collapse, and all but useless. That's the good and the bad of it; his concern for you, and his incapacity. He didn't get in my way. Well, the doctor came and he went through the motions, only to say he had no notion of what was wrong with you. He very, very slowly poured some medicine down your throat, which you managed to swallow, and that was that. Then away he went."

"How long was I——?"

"Four days. Four days throughout which you barely twitched. Four days

during which Edward and I did much twitching on your behalf. More than twitching I can assure you. Crying, and everything else. It was the first time I had ever seen Edward cry. Oh, you gave us a scare."

"I have to get up and," said I, "avail myself of the——"

"Oh, no you don't. Not until Edward is here to help, and he is off checking the——"

"Mum, my need isn't one that can be put off—— How embarrassing."

"You mean you didn't even remember that?"

"No, but everything is coming back to me faster now. I'm starting to think I will regain my senses."

Mum moaned.

Chapter Forty-nine

This infernal diary. Am I a schoolgirl? And the boredom! Edward has his life, and mum has undergone a change that I cannot put my finger on. She is content to do not much of anything. Not senility; rather a resignation. She is as alert as ever, I will grant her that, but her rare departures are not as rare. Departures? How else am I to view them, other than times when she simply isn't her old self. Usually in the form of depression. Melancholy, but sometimes agitation, and I am never able to determine what she is agitated about because she is so incoherent during her outbursts. Not out of her mind; only—how can I put it—incomprehensible? The only thread linking her diversions is surrender, and it seems to me she has surrendered to something. Is she succumbing to the vicissitudes of life? Will she be more of a burden on me as she ages? No, such a thing to say—think—after all she has done for me, and how much I love her.

And I hope I can continue to keep her from taking too much of her medicine.

Diary-writing is detrimental to the soul. Soul?

I was at my writing table, not writing. I hadn't written a word. I could smell the River Fleet, while knowing I couldn't possibly do so. All I had accomplished was much kicking of the table legs. It was almost a relief to be interrupted.

'Self pity ill-becomes you.'

"I am sorry, Madam Fantasy, but you never bring me peace, good tidings, or any other consolation."

'Haven't I given you good advice? Have I not taught you how Sir Reality is twisting your mind?'

"You have certainly tried"

'Living in a dream-word is an escape we all must resort to. What harm can come of creating castles in the sky. Dream-worlds. What can be the harm if it makes one feel better?'

"It will only lead to disillusion and madness if you one carries it too far."

'Nonsense. It's a way of coping.

"And why should I believe you, a symptom of madness yourself?"

'The affliction you know is better than the one you don't——'

"I don't know——"

'Your future will be bleak without a release from Sir Reality's grip.'

Part IV

Chapter Fifty

My looking glass deceives me. Is it the glass or me? My light hair is turning darker, not grey as hair usually does, and there are the beginnings of creases in my face. Not only that, my complexion is slightly darker. In itself not to the degree that anyone would notice, but along with the hair and the creases it is unflattering.

And mum, who has for all of her years appeared so young. Oh, my, I can't continue to deny her protestations that she is aging. She is still sometimes worldly, but only sometimes, and in the everyday meaning of the word. Rare flashes.

Edward? Oh, he is still Edward, only slower. Inside and out.

Milo and Lucilla Fog? Gone. Died ten years ago; she two months after he. Both of heart trouble. Hated to see them go, but there was no need to replace them. Any heavy work could be hired.

Chapter One

I am free again. Unencumbered by anyone, and recently unencumbered by Tulip, whom I love, but whom I cannot get along with. A sad and bitter parting wherein she threatened suicide. I tried my best to convince her that remaining together would only make things worse. We quareled bitterly, and in the end nothing was resolved except that I was leaving; and only I was resolved on that. Selfish? It's just a word. A choice between ongoing bitterness resulting in the inevitable, and moving on. Now part of my past.

After a month of licking my wounds I got back to my writing. I began by discarding everything I had written, and starting over. The publishers I had met years ago were right; my work had not been good. Now, though, it is, and I am ebullient. *Chapter One*, and on to fame, if not fortune. Fame and contentment, doing what I was born to do. Writing is my life.

One mid-morning in early December came a firm knock. I opened the door and there he was standing in the lightly-falling snow, smiling but not saying a word, and when he doffed his hat my knees buckled and down I went. When I came to, mum, Edward, and Michael were all kneeling over me, and mum was fanning me with her handkerchief. And, oh, when my eyes focused on Michael my second revival was the same, only with my brother laughing.

"I knew I would surprise you," said Michael, "but stop acting so womanishly! Come, control yourself. I did not travel all this way to be the death of you. Get up and behave yourself."

"No, no, I can't. I don't want to. I prefer to lie here. If I croak right here on this spot it would serve you right for all of the——"

"Serve me right? You would be——"

"Take him away. He is making me ill. If I were able I would beat him to within an inch of——"

Mum, with a surge of strength, intervened. "Stop it, you two! Children! Edward, escort Mr Corbie to another room. Any other room; just get him out of here, and when he is settled offer him a cup of poison."

When they were gone mum rolled from her knees to sit beside me. "I declare! Just when you think you've seen everything."

She rambled on, and her rambling—while vehement—was a welcome indication that she retained most of her grasps of the corporeal and of common sense in spite of her decline. In a crisis she had come through as of old.

"Take all the time you want, my dear," said mum, "and after you—we—have licked our wounds, so to speak, we will hold your brother to account. And oh, my, how I am looking forward to that. How he has made you suffer. I wish our old protector Edgar were here to open the proceedings by administering a good thrashing to, to, I can't even bring myself to say his name. Your vagrant brother; and hrummp, he is only half. Half of a brother."

I squeezed mum's hand. "Half is better than nothing."

"Even if that half is from your father, the scoundrel?"

"Indeed, and please remember, Michael is nothing like my father."

"Well, yes, there's that. Still, he has much explaining to do, and if you don't press him hard, I will."

"We both will, but I'm sure he will give a good account of himself."

We sat silently for a time.

"I did notice he was well dressed," broke in mum, "and he looks healthy."

"A word," growled mum as we entered the drawing room. "More than a word."

We sat down facing Michael and Edward, and Edward tried to speak but mum waved him silent.

"Now then Mr Corbie, if you will be so kind, please tell us everything that you have done since you so cruelly, and without so much as a word or a note, left us to agonize about your whereabouts, fate, or however one would describe such inconsiderate behavior. Leave nothing out; we have all the time in the world. And be truthful, as we will know if you prevaricate."

Michael smiled shamefacedly and cleared his throat.

"I will be truthful, but please keep one thing in mind; my leaving was not as plain and simple as one would normally assume."

Mum wagged her finger at him. "No prevaricating."

"No, I agree, but wait until I have finished before you judge me."

Mum nodded, and Michael continued.

"I was walking near Fleet Street one day, and the next I knew I was lying in the gutter with passers-by glancing down on me as if I were a drunkard. I was light-headed but I managed to get up and lean on a wall. There I remained for a while until it hit me; I didn't know who I was! I——"

"You had been assaulted?" I cried.

"No, that's the thing, I had not been. I felt my head and so on, and I was unharmed. You must believe me! I swear, I did not know who I was, or where I was. I was well-dressed, I had some money with me—so I knew I hadn't been robbed—but the rest was a complete blank."

Stunned silence, trite as it is, fell over us.

"So there I was. You can't imagine the feeling."

"Lord, what did you do?" asked Edward.

"I walked about the city looking for familiar dwellings, but recognized none, and as my money was running out I came across two elderly men—brothers from the looks of them—who were arguing, and when I approached, one of them buttonholed me and asked me to arbitrate their dispute. Something to do with goods. Saleable items, and I learned they were importers. I soon had them on good terms again, and as a way of thanking me they invited me to join them in the nearest pub. I learned they were not brothers, but had been partners for many years. Flinch and Jones, two light-complected, sturdy, and amiable sorts to who I took a liking, and they must have sensed it for they began tactfully questioning me about my life. When I told them the bare minimum, and that I was unemployed, they went outside, conferred, returned, and offered me employment as an office manager, bookkeeper, and so on, I readily shook hands on it, and they ordered more ale. So there it is. They became good friends, and by and by I assumed responsibility for their operation."

"Yet," mum observed, "you have clearly come to your senses. How do you account for that?"

"If you believe my story thus far, no doubt you will believe the rest. Ha, ha!"

"Don't be so sure."

But I could see she was taking a renewed liking to Michael, as she had years ago.

"I was strolling alone near our office, and again, as years before, I came to in the gutter. I had not been as alone as I had assumed. Someone had knocked me on the head and fleeced me of my money, my pocket watch, and my gold ring; and this time I knew I had been hit because of the lump on the back of my head. Well mum, mister, and missus, it turned out to be the best lump I had ever received, for as I stood, as I had years before, leaning against a wall, it came to me!"

"No?!" I cried, "You don't say——?"

"Oh, but I do say. Everything came back to me! And here I am. I would beg your forgiveness, but I won't, because none of it has been my fault. You should rather be glad I am back, and in one piece."

"If you can be believed," tittered mum."

"Oh, I am to be believed. Not even your gifted daughter, my extraordinary sister, could write—cook up—such a tale."

Chapter Fifty-one

Healthy of body, still handsome in the way of some older women. Still we are all aware of mum's state of mind. The changes have become more apparent. Most apparent is her disposition. Though never a full-fledged, flighty optimist, she has throughout the years been hopeful and of good cheer, and we are saddened to see her less so now. We have tried this and that, to no avail.

We have removed all of her tonics and spirits, but she is even more gloomy and irritable. Edward, half seriously, suggested we should have given her more. Michael opined we should bring in a psychiatrist. I had no opinion, thus I was probably the most astute of all. Resignation. That is most likely mum's feeling, true to her lifelong form. My only practical opinion is that we should dole out to her a glass of wine every evening.

"Keep in mind she is not incompetent," said Michael, "and we cannot do anything against her will if she strongly resists. Our hands are tied."

"We have removed her stimulants and she *is* resisting."

Edward grimaced. "That doesn't count. We did so out of necessity."

That was about as profound as he ever got.

Michael ventured, "What if she becomes more determined about things in general? We can't manage every aspect of her life."

"For now leave it to me," said I. "I best know her, and the difficult decisions are yet to come."

"Difficult decisions?" muttered Michael. "I don't like the sound of that."

Chapter Two

I have found my true love, the love of my life, my soul mate, or whatever denomination that conveys my love for her, Ophelia Cram. Attractive, clever, well educated, and more. My equal. Oh, how self-important I am, but she forgives me, and I cherish her.

And I cherish our magical, mystical country cottage on five wooded acres near Hawes. A quite large cottage offering us perfect isolation if we desire it; and we usually do. Lovely flora, now-and-then wildlife, butterflies and other delightful insect life, Peace and quiet, enforced by Bowser, our young bulldog who was ferocious in appearance and bark, but only in bite when absolutely necessary.

A perfect Jane Austen setting, and I shall attempt to better it through my writing.

'Be careful you don't lose touch with the real world,' offered Sir Reality.

"What if I did?"

'It depends on your degree of decline.'

"Degree of decline? You infer I could go mad?"

'Well——'

"You don't say! You, Sir Reality. I would rather hear from Madam Fantasy, or even Mr Harsh!"

'Say what you will, I only offer you grounds for reason. Those such as you do tend to ——'

"Those like me?"

'All I am saying is'

"Bloody——"

'Mind your language young lady. Show some respect for'

—————

I stumbled from my bedroom scarcely knowing where I was. Everyone has bad dreams, but this one was beyond anything previous. Moreover, it was a dream in which I knew I was dreaming. Who has such dreams? Am I unique in it? Am I in the early stages of dementia? Have I inherited some form of psychopathy? What is——?

I gathered myself, groped my way downstairs and into the sitting room, and collapsed onto the couch. Were I a lesser writer I would have described myself as lying there *with my head spinning*, and so on. As it was, I only moaned.

Morning light shone past the edges of the window curtains, and a hack writer would have scribbled, . . . *light casting its cheerful rays into the room with* Another moan welled up as I pondered the implications of my otherworldly terror. Was it the beginning of some new——"

"Goodness me my dear, what brings you down here this early in the morning?"

I leapt from the couch and landed facing mum.

"Mum! You scared me half to——" I fell face-down on the floor.

"Good heavens, what is the matter with you?"

Mum fell beside me and rolled me over.

"Wake up, Opal! Do you hear me? Say something!"

"Something."

"Whaa? Stop that! What happened?" She patted my cheeks with both hands.

"Awful dream, mum. Different than any dream I have ever had." At that I was aware of my speech fading into mumbles and gibberish."

"Wake up, wake up!" cried mum, slapping me harder.

"Ow!" I sat up. "Lay off, mum, that hurts."

"Talk to me!"

"What do you think I'm doing?"

"Oh. You gave me such a fright. Can you move all of your limbs?"

At that I burst into a loud laugh. "Yes. What makes you think I can't?"

Then we both sat laughing.

"Now," interrupted mum, "tell me what this is all about."

I did so, relating how I was in hell—the hell invented by the religious—complete with fire, brimstone, the devil and his pitchfork, his trident, or whatever it's called—and all of the other nonsense; except in the dream it wasn't nonsense, and to make my agony worse, I knew it was all a dream. I told mum how instead of that realization making my dream more bearable, it made it worse, as though I had been gripped by madness incarnate, or if not incarnate, at least visual.

"Mother, am I going under?" I blubbered.

She hugged me. "No. You have only to get used to the fact that you are unique."

"That's all?"

"Yes. Don't fear your singularity; embrace it and let it guide your dear heart. Never forget, hand-in-hand with advanced intellect and individuality comes the ability to be great, and in your case through your writing."

"Really?"

"I am sure of it. From what of your work you have shown me I do not exaggerate when I say you will be successful."

"To what degree?"

"Who can tell, but even if worse comes to worst you will retain your passion, and that may be the most important success of all. A dreamer—and no, I'm not talking about your night-time dreams—I'm speaking more of daydreams, pipe-dreams, and the like. And at a higher level, simply, a satisfying way of life."

"Oh, how you talk mum." But I was mollified. More, I was comforted. In a pinch she had shown her old self.

Mum has her ups and downs. She still more ups than downs, and I know it will be a long time until they put the final nail in her coffin. Oh, what a thing to say. Shame on me. I will cross it out. She would never read my diary; still, if she did there would never be any going back.

Chapter Fifty-two

Lord preserve us. Mum's turn to spiritualism and mysticism continues. Even more alarming, her demons are intensifying and consuming her. She was so well-grounded; now this. What has happened to her? I ask, but she will not, or cannot, explain, leaving me to assume the obvious; she is suffering from some sort of unrecognizable mental illness. I am unable to imagine any other explanation as to why someone who has—for all of her life been so stable and earthy—is failing. If that is the *what*, then what is the *why*? Can it be that life has worn her down? If so, how could someone so strong as she crumble? And if she fails, what of me, a lesser pilgrim?

Now she wants me to attend a seance with her! What to do? Join her, apparently.

There we were in the obligatory almost-dark room, sitting with several other dupes around a table with the medium—Mildred *Something-or-other*—I didn't catch her last name. It rhymed with *Farce*, or *Arse*. Dear me.

For the next half-hour I suffered through the proceedings, blocking them out the best I could, while worrying about how I would save mum from her silly obsession. The irony! Mum. Stable mum. How she had fallen.

At last the sham ended and we started on our way home; she ebullient, and me devastated. Oh, well, tomorrow would be another day, and I had Edward and Michael to help me fight the good fight.

Mum is gone, and I had been conscious of her life spirit departing my body as well. Yet, and all, despite my fanciful view of life I know full-well she is gone for good. No lingering spirit; nothing. Only my memories. Woe! How will I manage without her? Who will care for me? Edward and Michael? And Michael is not well.

I returned alone to the cemetery. We had been unable to put mum next to her husband Albert and her daughter Abigail, so we placed her next to my mother. I knelt between them.

Oh, thank you mum for my mother's nice headstone.

I'm sure you will do the same for me someday.

I have never been much given to shedding tears, yet how could I not?

Don't worry, I will be around to pester you for a good long time more.

And she had. Would that she had not been so put upon in her last years. I brushed the leaves from the grass over the graves. Edna Corbie, my real mother,

and Olive Green, my new mother. I am sure my real mother would have been as good and wonderful as mum if fate had allowed.

Both headstones were simple; name, dates, and inscribed only with *Truly Missed*. No tasteless *Now With the Angels*, or the like.

A tall, old, dignified man approached and offered me his handkerchief, but I politely waved him off. He bowed and turned away.

I went to where mum's Albert and her daughter Abigail lay. Mum would have been pleased. *Would have been*. That's all that is left of her now, *would have beens*. Someday I will be a mere *would have been*.

Michael Corbie, my only flesh and blood. By half; but how I had clung to that half. Now he too is gone forever. Buried beside my real mother. My despair would only be complete were Edward to perish. By force of will I shall not allow him to leave me alone. I laughingly told him that once, and he, usually light-hearted, gruffly informed me he saw no humor in it. That was him, unimaginative as ever.

Chapter Fifty-three

Years have passed, and now my dear Edward is no more. I am alone, and that's how I will remain. None of my loved ones can be replaced. As a second-rate writer might say, *Alone with my fond memories*; but I am not a second-rate writer, and my memories are of cold comfort. The only temper they elicit is sorrow. I—

'I offer no further words of comfort,' said Madam Fantasy.

"Just as well. I will remember your advice, but I must banish you."

'Banish me? No! Why?'

"For my sanity."

Silence.

One more termination. My diary.

This is my final entry. I have not become a famous writer. In that I have failed, albeit my success lies in the doing. The attempt, and I still hold that I am an exceptionally talented author. How do I know? As bitter as I might seem to others, I know because almost all other writing—popular with the hoi polloi—is awful. My critics—now departed—would have persisted in badgering me as to how I can be so conceited, and I would have replied something to the effect that, as they and other readers have at best only vague understandings of my work, how on earth would they be qualified to pass judgments on it? Then we would have babbled about it, and as usual I would have dismissed them as literary loggerheads.

The end. I got up from my old, soft chair in the sitting room, went to the fireplace, and tossed my diary onto the flames.

The house is nearly empty of people; only myself and Bugs. Bertha. Bertha Crow, who is not bothersome as she is mute. We communicate by way of her hand gestures and the notes she writes. I hesitate to call her a friend, likable as she is. More of a companion. I have made provisions for her for when I am gone.

I have nearly reached my end, and now my main solace is my past writings. They free me by affording relief from life. Abrogation of existence. Simple as that.

I have one more book left in me, and I will write it more to my own liking than any before. Why not? Likely no one will read it even if it is my magnum opus.

Chapter One

I had descended from my white mansion on the hill. Was I in Alice's Wonderland? If not I was in a similar place, inhabited by unusual people and creatures to be sure; unusual in their refinement, demeanor, and in many other aspects. The entirety was bright, shining, and phantasmagorical, and it appeared to shimmer.

How had I gotten there? It was like I had been on a vast carousel, although vast was not an adequate descriptor. And it—the carousel—turned exceedingly slowly, allowing me to step off and appreciate each of a series of localities.

How had I gotten there? It was like I had been on a vast carousel, although vast was not an adequate descriptor. And it—the carousel—turned exceedingly slowly, allowing me to step off and appreciate each of a series of localities.

I strolled along, delighted. I was well-dressed, healthy, young, intelligent, . . . , and the world was mine, as only a genius knows. A genius writer, bound to be successful and well-recognized.

I was in a meadow, but where was the meadow? My thoughts were interrupted by a rabbit. A white rabbit who—ignoring me—was talking to himself. But oh, he was not in the least behaving like the rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*. Not in the least worried or distraught. Very peaceful in fact.

"Hello Mr Rabbit," said I, "What a nice day."

He ignored me and walked—hopped—on. I stepped in front of him.

"Good morning," said I firmly, but he passed directly through me!

I turned and watched him go on his way.

"Very well then," said I with some irritation, "have it your way, but I must say you are very rude, and your rudeness does not improve my temper."

Away he hopped.

"Well," grumped I to myself, "every place has its churls; still I am surprised to meet one in such an otherwise delightful place. Pooh."

I proceeded through the meadow until I came upon a cottage that could have come directly out of the pages of a fairy-tale. It was smaller than any I had ever seen, constructed of rocks and mortar, but with a rough-hewn wooden front painted dark-green, and a thatched roof. Smoke rose from the chimney, though the day was warm. I had never been faint-hearted, and with no trepidation I approached the red door and knocked. I waited. I knocked again, and waited. I knocked with more alacrity and the door opened. To my astonishment there stood a huge dormouse. Moreover he was the

Dormouse. He rubbed his bleary eyes and peered at me.

"Yes?" he said.

"Glory be, the Dormouse!" I cried. "The famous Dormouse."

"Nonsense my dear, I am only a dormouse, and I am tired."

"It's not winter," I replied, "so why are you tired?"

"Impudent lady, I am unique. Tired all of the time. So there."

He started to shut the door, but I stopped him with my foot.

"I find myself in a fine place, wherever I am, but everyone seems so rude."

At that the dormouse opened his eyes and peered at me.

"It seems you are the rude one, interrupting my sleep. Now please, leave me be."

He slammed the door shut.

Some sort of miasmal fog descended over me as I continued on my way, and time skipped a beat or two.

The next thing I knew, to my dismay, I was in London. Then upon further appreciation I found there were no foul smells, no beggars, no dead rats; nothing of the sort. Only fine, well-dressed, polite people, clean shops, sunny skies, and all. Had I died? Oh, clearly not. I had never paid any attention to religious claptrap.

I walked on, half expecting a hatter to scurry out of the haberdasher's shop I was nearing. To try to sell me a hat? A man's hat. And I probably would have bought it. And worn it! My life is that wonderful. Wonder-ful. Why not? I dictate it.

As I passed, men bowed, I curtsied, and dogs made way. I was as opposite to the Queen of Hearts as one could be. I allowed that I could have an essential character similar to that of the March Hare, and good for me if I did. A touch of rabidity never hurt anyone, and I venture to say it adds to one's delight.

All but skipping, I moved on, and before long I came to two most unique personages. Egg-shaped twins apparently, and they were arguing heatedly and about to come to blows. As they blocked my way I was forced to stop, and then it hit me; Tweedledum and Tweedledee! No, I was on a fantastic journey, but not this fantastic!

"I beg your pardon gentlemen, will you allow me to pass?" I felt lightheaded.

They looked at me and said in unison, "We will not until you settle our difference of opinion."

"On what, pray?"

"On the substance of the moon," one of them said.

"Oh, good heavens, you don't mean the old green cheese——?"

"Almost," said the other, "rock or sand. I say rock; this idiot says sand. Say rock,

thus putting him out of his misery."

"Say sand, and put him in his place."

"I say both, now be so good as to let me pass."

I pushed my way through and walked on until . . .

Chapter Two

The carousel was a wonderful vehicle. It transported me. Transported me to wondrous settings. This time it had deposited me amongst a group of Pichwickian-type gentlemen and an odd assortment of other such notables, and I used the term notable loosely, for it can evoke many interpretations.

I and three others began our tour of England in fine fettle. Sam Wells, August Grass, Nate Bung, and myself were, I was to find, a mostly merry company; and resilient, resourceful, and all other attributes and characters necessary for our journey. So there on a bright, warm early-spring day we began our trek. We walked our way north for most of the morning—catching rides whenever we could—stopping for lunch in . . .

The essence of my final book is freedom. I have, not by choice, achieved the freedom to write what I should have always written. In the event, I have never followed other authors in style or substance, despite what some of the very few critics who have bothered to read my work and have accused me of. I may be touched, but I go where the carousel leads me.

Chapter Three

I was on a fine, sandy beach in some tropical clime. How had I arrived there? I neither knew nor cared, I only . . .