

Pavlova's Bitches

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Pavlova's Bitches ~

Dramatis Personæ

Several readers have written to ask if I would provide a list of the characters, as they find it easy to become confused. So do I. So I compiled a list of my own. Here it is. Please [e-mail me](#) if you have any suggestions as to how this could be made more useful.

Schoolgirls

Miss Lucy Carter

Good at maths, dyslexic and morbidly aware of her unusual appearance (For her family, see below.)

Miss Felicity Shipman

Clever, cheerful and scheming (For her family, see below.)

Miss Carry Walmsley

More properly, Lady Caroline Artemis Gloriana Walmsley

Head Girl and head of the school battledore team; in love with Miss Paulson

(For her family, see below.)

Miss Sarah Clark

Friend of Penrose and Shipman

Miss Victoria Penrose

Friend of Clark, easily manipulated by Shipman

Miss Prudence Miller

Bookish and poetic; scribe of the Scientific Society

Miss Kershaw

Prefect; member of battledore team

Miss Charlotte Benson

Senior Prefect

Miss Emma Denning

Member of battledore team

Miss Abigail French

Miss Margaret Smythe

Member of battledore team

Miss Isadora Parkinson

Fifth-former; suffers from menorrhagia

School Staff

Miss Georgina Anne Paulson

Teaches French, Politics, Philosophy and Science. Loves Carry.

Mrs Cunningham

Head Mistress

Miss Hanson

Secretary to Head Mistress

Mrs Probert

Maths Teacher

Mrs Bateson

English Teacher

Miss Gurney

Sports

Dr Straker

School Doctor

Matron

Caretaker

Has a wizened assistant named Ben.

Ostler

Duchy of Grantshire

Alfred Augustus George Walmsley, Fourth Duke of Grantshire

Father of Carry; always short of money; school governor

Aurelia Margaret Lysistrata Walmsley

Wife of the above and mother of Carry; school governor

Mrs Amelia Crichton

Governess to Carry, and now secretary to the duchess

Annie & Liza

Servants, known as "the twins".

Jemmy

An inexperienced maidservant

Neville

Carry's stallion

The Carter household

Mrs Joanna Carter

Lucy's mother

Mr Henry Carter

Lucy's father

Miss Elsie Carter (deceased)

Lucy's elder sister

Simpson

Servant to the Carter household

The Shipman household

George & Frederick Shipman

Felicity's younger brothers

Others

Mr Jepson

Clockmaker

Philip Jepson

Son of the above

Mrs Katherine Fearnley

Friend of the Duchess

Mr Josiah Fearnley

Lawyer; husband of the above, and friend of the Duke

Mr Charles Matson

Scientist; friend of Mr Fearnley

Harry and Sam

Delivery men

Rory

One of Harry's horses

*This story is dedicated to Hecate, who inspired its
conception, aided its execution and, out of her
beautiful generosity of spirit, encouraged me in
moments of despair.*

*(If you ever find anything by me on a pay site, please
let me know. I don't give permission to pay sites to
reproduce my writings. I'd rather people gave their
money to a good cause — such as ASSTR!)*

Part I

“Hey, Carter!”

“Oh, Shipman! Not now, dear!”

It is break-time at the Hepplewhite Academy, that pioneering institution for the education of the daughters of the most modern, free-thinking parents. Despite rising rolls throughout the early 1860s, and an increasingly illustrious roster of old girls, occasional establishment figures voice their disapproval: “What can a young woman learn,” they ask, “that cannot be best learned at mother’s knee? What benefit can there be to mankind if women study history, philosophy, mathematics, politics, science?” But the argument has rebounded upon them: for a new generation is in turn learning these vital arts, at mother’s knee – where better?

And so we see two lower sixth-formers, hurrying in opposite directions: Lucy Carter, to attend to the necessities of nature, and Felicity Shipman, to her locker to plunder a necessary biscuit or two. (Rations are not over-generous here at Hepplewhite: too much food gives the girls an abundance of excess energy, and energy spells trouble. Also, food is expensive.) As they pass, Felicity turns and hails her friend.

“Oh Shipman, can’t it wait?”

“No, Carter, this is important, honestly! You’ll want to hear this!”

“Very well, tell me, then!”

“Come, sit with me a moment.”

“Why, what is it?” Carter is jigging up and down agitatedly.

Shipman, who has younger siblings, recognizes the symptom at once. “Oh, come and sit! Just cross your legs, girl, and listen!”

Reluctantly, Carter sits beside her friend on the hard oak bench.

“I thought we weren't supposed to cross our legs.”

“Whoever told you that?”

“Well...” Carter blushes. It is one of her endearing characteristics – that, and her amazingly deep blue, almost violet eyes, one of which seems always to point in the wrong direction. “It was Nanny, of course. She said it wasn't lady-like.”

“Oh, pooh! If gentlemen can sit like that, why can't we?”

“But surely...”

“You know what Miss Paulson says: the morality of our society is just the wishes of those in power!”

“But Nanny wasn't in power!”

“No, silly! How do you think she learned what was supposed to be lady-like? Why do ladies have to do it this way and that way, while the men can do as they please? Why do you think the men have it all their own way?”

“Because they have all the power?”

“Yes! They make the rules. They've even got us so that we enforce their rules for them. That's what Miss Paulson says.”

“Goodness! I never thought of it like that before. How I wish I could go to those lectures!”

“Well that's what I wanted to tell you about, so listen! You know how Milady Walmthley always looks tho fondly at Mith Paulthon, and how she's always sucking up to her after lectures?” Shipman rolls her eyes as she does her celebrated impression of Carry Walmsley's lisp.

“Well, yes, of course.” They laugh good-naturedly: much as the girls mock her for her little-girl mannerisms, Carry is renowned for her sunny temperament as well as being by common consent a formidable battledore player.

“She told Benson, and Benson told me, that she – that’s Miss Paulson – is thinking of setting up a science laboratory!”

“What? Here?”

“Yes! Isn’t that exciting?”

Lucy Carter shakes her head delicately and blinks. “But why?”

“Don’t you see? It’s like I was telling you! If boys can do science, why not girls, don’t you know?” Miss Shipman loves to adopt the mannerisms of the landed classes, and this modern “don’t you know” impresses her contemporaries no end.

“Oh, it must be wonderful to attend her sixth form lectures!”

“They are so inspiring, Carter! The things she says!”

For a moment, both young women stare blankly ahead, the one with longing, the other with visionary zeal. Only the most intelligent girls from the lower sixth are invited to attend Miss Paulson’s lectures, and at first sight it is surprising that Carter feels no jealousy of her friend’s privilege, but only the sincerest admiration.

“What has she been saying, then?”

“She says that one day, women will be at the forefront of every discipline! We have minds every bit as good as men’s – she says. It is only because, from ancient times, the weaker sex has had to serve the stronger, that we have not been allowed to take part in manly activity. But in schools like this, don’t you know...”

“Oh, Shipman, I am so sorry! I should love to hear more, but I must go, really I must.”

“Don’t be silly! Clamp your legs together!”

“What?”

“Squeeze them together, silly!” And, in answer to Carter’s puzzled expression, “Your upper legs!” In these enlightened times, young ladies are not expected to use words like “thigh” – and “belly” is positively obscene.

“Oh!” Carter blushes prettily as she does so.

“See?”

“Yes. Oh!” Carter tucks one dainty ankle behind the other and squeezes again. That is much better. “Go on...”

“Well: Benson says that if they allow it – Miss Paulson’s going to ask the Head, don’t you know – I’m practically certain to be invited.”

“You!”

“Yes. I got pretty good marks, you know, for my essay on the franchise.”

“Oh, Shipman!” For a moment, Carter’s expression is adoring.

“Yes. And I think that if I were to mention your results in mathematics...”

“Oh! You mean...”

“Yes. I think she might let you in. Science has lots of mathematics mixed up in it, I believe...”

“Oh, Shipman! That would be wonderful!” Carter rocks to and fro, blushing, her arms crossed at her breast, her fingers anxiously tapping at her shoulders. For poor Miss Carter cannot spell to save her life: she still lives under a cloud of shame for having misspelled her name “Lucy Crater” at the head of her first Politics essay, and was thenceforth excluded from Miss Paulson’s lectures. It is a bitter disappointment, for all the girls hang on Miss Paulson’s words, and to accept them only at second-hand is to experience daily the misery of the outcast. In a rapture of gratitude, she turns her most radiant smile upon her friend. Neither the chaotic angles of her jumbled

teeth nor the drunken motion of her left eye can rob that smile of its endearing pathos. "I'm so lucky to have you as a friend, Shipman!"

Shipman smiles back. Carter is so clever at mathematics, and so hopeless at every other subject. And although she looks so odd, there really is something very sweet about her. It is a pity that all the other girls are so cruel about her. Impulsively, she gives her a peck on the cheek. "I must go. Till later, then!"

"Oh... yes..." Carter's eyes relax as Shipman vanishes into the misty blur of hurrying bodies. She gives her legs another squeeze. It is wonderful to have a friend. She sits for several moments, savouring a warm glow of contentment; but then the hand-bell rings, signalling the end of break. "Oh goodness!" and she runs precipitately to the lavatory.

It is now one of Miss Paulson's free periods. Normally, she would be marking her girls' work with her customary care and assiduity; but today there is to be a much-anticipated interview with the Head. Her teaching has been going well, she knows: her pupils' respectful gazes, and even the occasional back-handed compliment in the staff room, assure her of that. But today brings a fresh challenge: for if her ambitions for her girls are to be fulfilled, she is going to have to ask for money. And that is why, at eleven thirty, she is sitting in one of the three chairs reserved for staff in Mrs Cunningham's waiting room, a pamphlet upon her knee.

Although Mrs Cunningham is by no means a despot, she is forceful and firm of purpose; her uncompromising demands for the very highest standards from pupils and staff alike command respect and obedience. And by ensuring that the pupils participate by shifts in the cooking, cleaning and even kitchen-gardening, watched

over by a complex prefectorial hierarchy, she is able to run the school on a tight budget. For, despite modestly improving rolls, money is still tight.

Liberal the parents may be in their social views, but financial liberality is for the most part the privilege of the landed gentry – a class more zealous to marry its daughters advantageously than to educate their intellects. No, the majority of her parents are from the professional classes: doctors, academicians, lawyers and the wealthier clergy. It is ironic that the most illustrious patricians she can boast, the Duke and Duchess of Grantshire, are among the most financially embarrassed of all. Nevertheless, by judiciously appointing their popular and vivacious daughter Head Girl, and abetting the appointment of the Duke to the Board of Governors, it is to be hoped that in due course a more wealthy and beneficent clientele can be attracted.

Miss Paulson is well aware of the constraints, and that she will have to argue most persuasively if she is to be allocated any funds. To fortify herself, she reads once more from Miss Harriet Taylor's inspiring monograph:

“When the reasons alleged for excluding women from active life in all its higher departments, are stripped of their garb of declamatory phrases, and reduced to the simple expression of meaning, they seem to be mainly three: the incompatibility of active life with maternity, and the cares of a household; secondly, its alleged hardening effect on the character; and thirdly, the inexpediency of making an addition to the already excessive pressure of competition in every kind of professional or lucrative employment.”

In her anxiety, the words seem to flow into one another; she finds she has to read the sentence again and again; for by the time she has read half way, her mind has reverted to the image of a frosty Mrs Cunningham, stiff in her high-backed leather chair, combating all her arguments – or worse, flatly denying her request.

Miss Hanson, the secretary, looks up from her ink-well and appraises the preoccupied teacher. Although she cannot be said to be a conventional beauty, Miss Georgina Paulson is nonetheless attractive. Her curly copper-red hair, cut short just above the collar to reveal a slender neck, gives her the aura of a mediaeval angel; and her plain sleeves, cuffed an inch or two above the wrist, betray an elegant fineness of limb, as does the ankle which extends demurely below the dark blue dress. And her face, though a little pinched, has a feral beauty which somehow reminds Miss Hanson of a fox: the pale, pale freckles upon Miss Paulson's cheeks almost suggest the ruddy whiskers of the beast. And yet she knows, as do many of Miss Paulson's admirers, the unsettling effect of those pale, serious eyes: the rimless pince-nez and the short, fair lashes seem to give them a hypnotic intensity.

The tinkle of a hand-bell from the inner sanctum recalls Miss Hanson to her duty. She stands and opens the door. "Mrs Cunningham will see you now, Miss Paulson," she says with a curtsy; and with a sigh, Miss Paulson rises and sweeps into the august presence, courteously inclining her head to Miss Hanson.

Miss Paulson's fears, however, are confounded: for Mrs Cunningham has risen to greet her, takes her hand, leads her to the sofa.

"Miss Paulson, how very good to see you. Do come and sit down over here. Miss Hanson: bring us some tea, dear." Mrs Cunningham does not release the teacher's hand, but smiles brightly and shakes it for emphasis as she speaks. "Miss Paulson, everyone is so pleased with the impact you are having on our girls. Really, we are so fortunate to have you. I have been meaning to have a little talk with you upon a couple of matters, as it happens. It is simply the pressure of work that prevented me from doing so before you made your appointment." Mrs Cunningham

drops her voice confidentially. "You see, my dear, at the last Governors' Meeting, your name was mentioned."

"My name?"

"Yes. Don't look so dismayed. Complimentary things were said. And in view of those very complimentary things, it was agreed that although you've only been with us – what is it now? – two years?"

"Two years..." Miss Paulson breathes the words, beside herself with quiet excitement.

"...it was agreed that your salary should be adjusted to that of a senior mistress, with immediate effect."

"Oh Mrs Cunningham! How wonderful!"

The Head beams kindly at the overwhelmed young teacher, and gives the trembling hand a reassuring little squeeze.

"That means another twenty pounds a year!"

"Oh, but Mrs Cunningham, I can't tell you how grateful I am!"

"You are pleased?" the Head chuckles indulgently.

"Oh... Twenty pounds! It seems so much!"

There is a knock at the door.

"Oh, thank you Hanson: that was quick. — Sugar, Miss Paulson?"

"Oh yes, thank you, just a very little." Miss Paulson's hand is still trapped, so she watches anxiously as Miss Hanson gingerly places a smallish lump into the brown, cloudy liquid, and then a much larger piece into Mrs Cunningham's cup. She retreats and closes the door, leaving them alone.

"And now there is another matter, rather more confidential."

With her free hand, the Head takes her spoon and stirs and stirs. Miss Paulson looks wistfully at her own cup, doubting her ability to stir with her left hand without causing a spill.

“You see, dear Carry Walmsley is such a nice girl, but really she seems very distracted these days, and some of our teachers are getting, well, just a little worried about her.”

“Oh? I have had nothing but very good work from her, I’m pleased to say.”

“Aha. Well, Miss Paulson, no doubt that is very much to your credit.” Another little squeeze. “But as you are well aware, we do so wish to make a good impression upon the Duke and Duchess. And so I thought that perhaps, given your very exceptional gifts, you might possibly be persuaded to take Carry under your wing, and give her some extra tuition. I wouldn’t normally ask, but it seems that she is having particular difficulty with her French, and I do know that you spent some time in Paris...”

“Oh yes, with Professor Marcel Roger at the Sorbonne...”

“...Exactly. That is why I ventured to ask.”

“But of course I would help Carry. It would be my pleasure, Mrs Cunningham. You know I would do anything to help the school...”

“And naturally, it is only right that we compensate you for this extra labour. We were proposing the sum of ten pounds.”

“Oh Mrs Cunningham, that’s quite magnificent, but surely excessive...”

“Nonsense!” Another squeeze. “I am sure that the Duke and Duchess will be very happy to know that their beloved daughter will be in such good hands.”

“Oh, but Mrs Cunningham, what am I to do with so much money? My mind is all in a whirl!”

Mrs Cunningham laughs delightedly, and pats the captive hand. "Now tell me, Miss Paulson, what was the reason for your visit?"

"Well, Mrs Cunningham, I... I hardly know what to say. You see, I was thinking of a new activity for the girls."

"A new activity?"

"Yes, one which would have great educational merit. Of course you fully subscribe to the view that there is no subject of study which should remain closed to the intellect of woman, by reason of some supposed infirmity of our sex?"

"Yes, yes, of course, why do you think we're running this school?" Mrs Cunningham sounds impatient, but amused.

"I am grateful, Mrs Cunningham... You see, while I was in Paris I was continuing my studies, studies which I began many years ago with my father..."

Mrs Cunningham sighs, but does not relinquish the hand. "I suspect you are about to ask for something expensive, Miss Paulson. You know we have very little money. Go on. Tell me."

"Oh, Mrs Cunningham: you see – I was studying the Electrical Force."

"The Electrical Force?"

"Yes. With the help of some of the girls, we could continue the work. And there is so much to be done – work which our girls could do, if only we had some equipment... A science laboratory... Think of the honour it could bring to the school..."

"How much?" Finally, the hand is relinquished. Mrs Cunningham's stare is imperious.

"Oh... if we could use my classroom – we could have some cupboards – well, if I were to forego the ten pounds for the extra lessons, and the twenty as a senior

mistress — I think that the sum of thirty pounds would suffice. If I were permitted to, I should be able to bear the costs myself.”

“What? You would pay for this out of your own salary?”

“It is for the girls, Mrs Cunningham; — and for science. It is to open the doors of science to our sex.”

The Head rises to her feet thoughtfully. Miss Paulson watches her anxiously as she goes to stand before the window, looking out, thinking. There is a long silence. Then she turns. Her face is grave.

“You are a remarkable young woman, Miss Paulson.”

“Oh, I —”

“We are fortunate to have someone with such dedication on our staff. Very well. You shall have your laboratory. For the time being, these scientific activities will have to take place in the girls’ free time.”

“Of course.”

“At least it should keep them out of mischief. Your contribution of the ten pounds for Miss Carry’s extra lessons: that I will accept. But your salary increase you shall keep. The extra money...” Mrs Cunningham sighs deeply — “I shall have to find, somehow.”

She goes to her desk, takes her pen and begins to write.

Cautiously, Miss Paulson reaches for her teacup.

“Miss Paulson, if I could ask you to wait for just a moment... I’m just writing a note for the Bursar, and I’d be very grateful if you could just pass it to Hanson on your way out.”

By now the tea is lukewarm, but it is the cup of victory, and it is sweet.

Felicity Shipman scampers alongside the wagon as it trundles into the school courtyard.

“Is this the scientific equipment from London?” she calls to the driver.

“Yus miss,” he says, touching his forelock; and, as she wheels away and darts in through a door to find Miss Paulson, “That’s a pretty ‘un, Sam,” he says to his mate.

Sam is staring open-mouthed at the doorway, through which has just disappeared what he thinks must be the most elegant posterior he has ever seen: “Did ya see the way she swayed it, ‘Enry? Didja?”

Henry laughs, sets the brake and gets down.

Shortly, Shipman returns with another girl, more sedately now. Sam cannot now decide which of the two maidens is the more shapely, for the new arrival certainly has the more imposing bosom; but on closer inspection, he finds she has crooked teeth and a wayward eye, and so remains faithful to his original sweetheart. It is thus with a great sense of gallantry that he, too, clambers down and assists Henry in opening the wagon. One of the horses neighs, and there is a chinking of buckles.

“Ah, shaddup, Rory!” spits Henry over his shoulder. At once, the girls put their fingers to their mouths, hunch their shoulders and giggle. Sam looks at them as if they are creatures from another planet.

“Miss Paulson says we are to take some of the lighter items,” says Shipman, “and then if you please to follow us...”

“Yus miss,” replies Henry deferentially. “If you would be good enough to take this, then, miss... and you this...”

“Oooh! Hehe!” Carter cannot help giggling and curtsying a little as she takes a bale of wire wrapped in waxy brown paper. Now Sam cannot decide whether those crooked teeth are quite such a bad thing, after all.

“An’ here y’are, Sam,” says Henry, handing the lad a surprisingly heavy mahogany box with gold lettering upon the side.

Sam staggers, and begins to expostulate, “Oh, that’s ffff...” but Henry’s wagging finger stops him just in time. Walking awkwardly with their weighty Voltaic batteries, the men follow the girls’ more graceful motion into the cool, dark interior of the school.

Miss Paulson has just signed the docket, and with a final touch of his forelock, Henry has tugged a bemused Sam back out into the yard.

Now Miss Paulson is kneeling by Number Two Cupboard, carefully arranging bales of wire, packets of wax and bottles of various salts. Still upon the table are the three large mahogany boxes – the Voltaic Batteries. Casually, Shipman tries to move one. She does not try very hard, but it seems quite impossible.

Content with her arrangements, Miss Paulson takes a large waxen bottle from a light wood case.

“Now this, girls, is oil of vitriol, or more properly, acid of sulphur. Put your hand in this fluid, and within quarter of an hour, only the bone would remain, and that, too, would soon be gone. The least splash will burn.” She raises a brown paper packet. “In here, caustic crystals which will neutralize the acid. We have these in case of accidents. But like the acid, contact with these crystals will burn.”

The girls stare wide-eyed at these dangerous, fantastic substances.

And now Miss Paulson removes the stoppers from the batteries, and cautiously pours the electrolyte into each cell. An acrid smell fills the air. To Shipman, it is the smell of an impossibly exciting future.

The stoppers replaced, Miss Paulson manoeuvres a battery to the corner of the table. She hunches her shoulders and takes a deep breath. Then, smoothly, she lifts the battery and walks with it to the window.

"I shall set it down here. Would one of you kindly lift my skirt, so that I may kneel?"

Shipman rushes forward to oblige, while Carter looks on, hand to mouth as Shipman reveals the sweet naked curves of Miss Paulson's trim posterior.

"That's quite high enough, Shipman, thank you," says Miss Paulson smoothly as she kneels and places the battery carefully on the floor; and "Why are you blushing, Carter? Here, what do you think of these?"

Carter looks at the strange little waxen bundles in the baize-lined beechwood box.

"Do you know what these are?"

"No, miss."

"These are the very latest thing: coils! They have most interesting properties."

"Oh!" cries Carter, delighted. "Aren't they darlings?"

"Yes. Put them in Cupboard Number Three, on Shelf Two, at the far right."

Eventually, everything is tidied away, and Miss Paulson dismisses her young helpers.

In the corridor, Carter whispers to her friend: "See? I told you she didn't!"

“Perhaps she wears them in winter!” Shipman is obstinate. Scurrilous speculations are rife about certain foreign habits Miss Paulson may have acquired whilst in Paris.

“She wouldn't, I tell you! It's just gossip!”

The two walk along in silence. Shipman is a little anxious about being seen talking to Carter, but nobody seems to be about at the moment.

“Oh, Shipman, there was something I meant to ask you.”

“Yes?”

“You know about sitting with your legs crossed?”

“What about it?”

“Do you ever do that?”

“Well... sometimes, if I wish. Why?”

“Have you ever noticed... feelings?”

“Feelings? What feelings?”

“You know: if you sort of squeeze your legs together, doesn't it give you strange feelings?”

“How do you mean?”

“Oh! It's difficult to describe. If I do it for a while, I get a strange sort of warm, achy feeling inside. Haven't you found that?”

They are approaching the dayroom now, and Shipman feels increasingly self-conscious.

“No, I never have.”

“Oh.” Carter sounds disappointed. “Perhaps it's just me, then.”

Most of the girls regard Carter as a freak of nature. Only yesterday, Clark had made some malicious comment about Shipman's “strange fascination” with “the

changeling girl”, and the others had laughed. At the time, Shipman had felt quite indignant: just because the others shun Carter, why should she do likewise? Nevertheless, she cannot help feeling uneasy with Carter in the face of general, and increasingly explicit, disapproval. She needs to make an excuse.

“Well, I’d better go and get on with my prep.” She does not, cannot meet Carter’s eye. She turns and enters the dayroom, rightly anticipating a chorus of questions about the new scientific equipment from her form-mates.

“I’ll see you later, then,” Carter murmurs wistfully; and, under her breath, “maybe.”

The buzz of conversation dies down rapidly as Miss Paulson enters her lecture-room with a clutch of paper at her breast, exactly one minute late by her silver pocket-watch. The girls all stand in silence as she walks to her desk. As one, they curtsy as she bows to them.

“Ladies, please be seated.”

That is part of her magic: she says “Ladies” – most of the staff say “Girls”. But that is not all: Miss Paulson almost sings it, and in that one word she manages to concentrate hope, expectation and a kind of conspiratorial complicity that never fails to evoke a gasp from one or two of the pupils.

She looks out at them now, all eyes expectantly upon her — ha! with the exception of one. But Carter’s other eye is charged, brilliant with hope. For an instant, she looks down, shamed. She was too hasty about Carter — the result of inexperience. For it is clear that odd-looking girl has outstanding mathematical talent – talent which she, Georgina Paulson, failed to notice in her anxiety to address only the brightest, the best.

Her eyes travel across the room. There is Abigail French; there Emma Denning; there poor, poetic little Prudence Miller; and there, stiff and eager as a whippet, that formidable Miss Felicity Shipman – a bright little button, perhaps the brightest of all the girls. Her whole face glows with cleverness; her every essay is painstakingly perfect; she is the very model pupil – and yet, suppress it though she tries, Miss Paulson finds her irritating, unspeakably irritating – it is quite irrational, she knows it. And there, in the front row, bless her, is dear Carry Walmsley, her fair hair drawn neatly back, her magnificent bosom heaving with expectation, her eyes round and trusting like those of a little fawn. Why is it that everyone loves her so?

“Now, ladies, I have here some detailed notes for experiments.” It is a formidable stack of paper, painstakingly written over many late nights, a remarkable compendium of the world’s knowledge concerning the Electrical Force, detailing both what is known and what is unknown; a century hence scholars will painstakingly reconstitute it from the archives of various distinguished families. “And today we will finish by demonstrating the galvanic principle, which will show you how the Electrical Force is the force of life and motion itself.” Again there is a chorus of enraptured gasps.

And for the next hour, Miss Paulson explains the basic principles of the Electrical Force: conductivity and insulation, circuits, batteries, coils. There is only one slight interruption, and that is when Miss Paulson asks for a volunteer to warm the lacquered wire – for unless it is quite warm, the lacquer will not be pliant and the insulation will crack.

“I’ll do it, miss!” says Shipman at once, her hand – as ever – the first to be raised. Shortly afterwards, there is the sound of a brief scuffle and a muted squeak.

Looking up, she sees a guilty smile on Shipman's face and a deep blush on the face of her neighbour, Lucy Carter.

"What was that?" demands Miss Paulson.

"I'm sorry... it was... nothing, miss," says Carter, tugging at her dress. Miss Paulson gives her a stony stare, and resumes her disquisition.

And then, finally, it is time for the experiment.

"Gather round, ladies, come round the table."

There are little soft squeals of revulsion as with her tweezers she extracts one of the frogs' legs from the jar of alcohol, and places it upon a dish. Several of the girls make "ugh" noises. Miss Paulson chuckles. There is a clatter; Carter blushes again, and Shipman dives to retrieve something from the floor.

"Sorry, miss, I dropped the wire." She holds it to her cheek. "But it's nice and warm now."

"I hope so. You might have broken it." But no: it is sound, and so Miss Paulson dons her gloves, attaches lengths to the battery terminals, and then advances the two wire-ends to the frog's leg. "One here..." There is just the sound of soft, intent breathing as the girls crane forward to see the magical spectacle. "...And one here."

There are soft squeals, and a number of the girls jerk backward. It is unspeakably, miraculously exciting, for the leg, the leg of the dead frog, actually twitched! Miss Paulson repeats the action several times, so that all the girls can see, actually see the tiny muscle contract.

"Very well, ladies: now back to your places."

Almost without a sound, the girls return. If their gazes were expectant before, they now stare at Miss Paulson as at a miracle-worker, one who has raised the dead from the grave. More than one bosom is heaving prettily.

“For preparation, I shall ask you, ladies, to make careful copies of these notes, and study them. Next time, we will discuss any points which any of you do not understand. And then, I believe we may go on to perform some interesting experiments. Some of you may wish to work with me on a continuation of the work I began with my father, and continued under Professor Roger in Paris. Some of you may wish to explore the use of the coil, and its power of producing an electrical current. This is indeed an exciting field, one where each of us may explore and discover something new, something which one day may bring health or healing to the world. But first, it is for you to learn what is known already; so I shall expect very diligent study of the notes which I have worked so hard to prepare for you. Miss Walmsley, perhaps I could ask you to organize a rota so that by next week, each of you may have a complete set of copies.”

That night, Miss Paulson is glad to get to bed early. She has been up late for the past fortnight, painstakingly preparing the notes for the girls, ensuring that they are both neat and clear. But how good it is to see such enthusiasm! As she drifts off to sleep, Miss Paulson remembers the girls' shining eyes, their luminous faces and — oh yes, that entrancing sideways slip of her jaw as Carry Walmsley said that “Yeth Mith”. Why is it that everyone finds that so adorable?

The object of Miss Paulson's reflections, exhausted by a particularly punishing session of battledore practice with Kershaw, has also retired early; and perhaps that is why, the next morning, she is awake before the bell: wise for her years, and wealthier than some, she is indisputably at the peak of health and vigour. As Head Girl, she enjoys more privacy than most, with a small sitting-room, study and bedroom all to

herself. At once she rises and goes to her wash-stand, carefully dabs her eyes and cleans her teeth. Then, slipping off her night-gown, she studies herself in the tiny mirror. The daughter of handsome parents, she has the body of a thoroughbred; tilting the mirror, she appraises its flawless curves, its full, generous breasts, its immaculate, cream-pale skin. Used to Nanny's praise, and the fulsome compliments of dear Mrs Crichton, her governess, she accepts her beauty as unquestioningly as all the other privileges of her high estate. For although she passes here at Hepplewhite as plain Miss Carry, this ravishingly fair maiden is in truth Lady Caroline Artemis Gloriana Walmsley, daughter of the Duke of Grantshire. As a girl, long did she envy the Grecian statues in the orangery their graceful curves, their shapely limbs; but now, full-grown, she outshines them all.

It is time to dress; and Carry looks distastefully at her hated corset, oppressive symbol of male domination. "Why should I wear that thing any more?" she mutters crossly, with a little toss of the head that, had she seen it, would have made Miss Paulson's heart flutter. "Why should I be the shape men want? Why should I be forever hot and breathless? Why can I not move freely, as God intended me to move?"

Only yesterday, Miss Paulson had quoted Miss Harriet Taylor:

"When, however, we ask why the existence of one-half the species should be merely ancillary to that of the other – why each woman should be a mere appendage to a man, allowed to have no interests of her own, that there may be nothing to compete in her mind with his interests and his pleasure; the only reason which can be given is, that men like it."

"Well," thinks Carry, "today will be different." She slips on her chemise, her petticoats, her blouse, her blue dress with frills. Yes – she moves so much more

easily. She twists and turns in unaccustomed freedom. The unaccustomed touch of the soft silk upon her upper body fills her with a delightful tingling.

It is the afternoon break, a few days later. Strolling through the grounds in their long blue dresses, Victoria Penrose and Sarah Clark are deep in gossip. They walk close together: theirs is a long intimacy, the intimacy of close confidences and shared secrets.

“So why do you think she lets that awful Carter girl follow around with her all the time?” asks Clark, meditatively. Clark has been talking a lot about Shipman lately: ever since they came up to the lower sixth, Shipman has seemed more outgoing, more assertive, almost wild at times – nothing like the quiet, bookish little creature they remembered in the fifth form.

“What makes you think it’s Carter following Shipman?” asks Penrose slyly.

“Oh, you can’t mean —”

“Why not?”

“But she’s —”

“Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, don’t you know.” Penrose’s tone is derisive. “And besides, you know, her bed is next to mine. She’s started to do it, too.”

“Do what?”

“You know...” Penrose points her finger discreetly. “Like what I caught my nanny doing when I was little.” Penrose and Clark have discussed that incident several times. Nanny had been very angry at little Victoria’s intrusion, and assured the curious little girl that only if afflicted with a “grown woman’s pains” was it ever permissible to touch oneself “down there”. But still it seemed bizarre and rather disgusting.

“What, Shipman?” Clark seems incredulous.

Penrose nods, grinning, her eyes glinting derisively. “Every single night!”

“Every night?” Clark looks down thoughtfully. “Shipman too...”

“So many people seem to do that, Clark! So many! It can't really be woman's pains, can it? How on earth can they bring themselves to touch... I can't even say it!”

“What — you mean you don't know why?” Clark stops walking and turns to face her friend. “You honestly don't know? You've never even tried it?”

Penrose blushes. “Why... Sarah! What are you saying?”

“I can't describe it to you, Vicky. If you want to know, there's only one way to find out.”

“Do you mean you've... oh my God!” Penrose's hands fly to her face. “Oh Sarah! You too! Oh no!”

Clark looks down, abashed for a moment by her friend's shocked incredulity. But there is no turning back: she would rather Penrose take her for what she is. She looks up once more, and her gaze is steady, unflinching. It is the gaze of an adult; Penrose's, that of a startled child.

“I wonder if I could...” Penrose is suddenly daring. “I mean... Do you think I should? Just once, to see what it is like?”

Clark turns and continues on the walk. “You could, I suppose,” she says tonelessly. “If you wanted to find out.”

Penrose stands still for a moment, then turns and catches up with her friend. They walk on in unaccustomed silence, each with her own thoughts.

“Good morning, ladies!”

“Good morning, miss.”

Miss Paulson seats herself with a mysterious, slightly smug air today. The girls are aware of it at once. While her Politics lectures are always interesting, they do not usually begin with quite this charge of excitement. It is as if Miss Paulson has just been let in on an exciting secret.

“Ladies, I have recently been sent a paper – a most interesting paper. It concerns the thoughts of that most zealous and distinguished Liberal, Mr John Stuart Mill. As I hope you will remember, he is a disciple of Mr Bentham. Can anyone remember what Mr Bentham is famous for?”

As always, Shipman's hand is up first. Miss Paulson looks around for someone else. “Yes, Clark?”

“Please miss, the greatest happiness of the greatest number, miss.”

“Yes, but what about the greatest happiness of the greatest number?”

“That is the principle of justice, miss.”

“Quite good. Anyone else? Yes, very well, Shipman.”

“Please miss, he says that we may judge a law to be good and right only if it tends to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number.”

“Yes, Shipman, that is very well said. Anyone else?”

“Please miss?”

“Yes, Kershaw.”

“He says that happiness is the avoidance of pain, and the enjoyment of pleasure.”

“Yes, that is quite right. Very well. Now, girls, let me explain to you how, according to this letter I have received, Mr John Stuart Mill has extended this principle to cover the whole of morality. He proposes that those actions are good which promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number.”

And so Miss Paulson expounds the theory which will soon see the light of day in Mill's famous *Utilitarianism*. It is clear that some of the girls are puzzled, while others are excited by the freshness of his vision.

"And so," Miss Paulson says finally, "are there any questions?"

"Please miss?" Miss Kershaw is the first.

"Yes, Kershaw?"

"If the 1850 census shows that there are more women than men, is it not true that the happiness of women should be more important than the happiness of men?"

"Why, yes, I believe it does."

"Why, then, miss, can women not vote for a Member of Parliament? And why can a woman not become a Member of Parliament? And why must a woman lose her property when she marries?" Miss Kershaw is a little flushed.

"These are very good questions, Kershaw. I happen to know that Mr Mill and those of his party are very favourable to improving the rights of women. There is no doubt at all that, according to Mr Bentham's and Mr Mill's way of thinking, our laws are unjust in that regard. But we are discussing morality today, and not laws, Miss Kershaw. I am sure you understand the difference."

"Yes miss. Sorry miss."

"Not at all. But we must not lose our way. Yes, Miller?"

"Please miss, what about a martyr – someone who dies for what he believes is right. Everyone says that's a good thing. But how does it improve happiness?"

Miss Paulson is a little taken aback, and decides to throw the question open: "Would any one of you like to answer that?"

"Please miss, perhaps in the long run it creates happiness, because people come to realize that you can't change people's beliefs by violence."

"That's very well said, Clark." Really, the girl has quite an intellect, thinks Miss Paulson.

"But miss, why do some say that it is bad to seek pleasure?"

"Perhaps, Clark, that is because the immoderate pursuit of some pleasures tends to create pain. For example, if you eat too much, you become ill. And those poor creatures who drink too much spirit, as we know, can die of it. That is why Saint Paul recommends us to follow moderation in all things."

"But miss, if a pleasure does no harm, then why should it be bad?"

"If it really does no harm, Clark, then it is not bad, clearly."

"Please, miss!"

"Yes, Walmsley?"

"If I have something that can give pleasure, why should it be better for me to give it to someone else than to enjoy it myself, if the pleasure is equal in either case?"

"Well," Miss Paulson frowns for a moment in concentration, "Mr Mill would perhaps argue that to give it to someone else increases the total amount of happiness, since the giver has the additional pleasure of enjoying the other person's happiness. And it is often said that a happiness shared is a happiness multiplied, is it not?"

"But what if it could give only her pleasure, miss?" asks Clark. Walmsley blushes, and there is a low tittering among the girls.

Miss Paulson seems disconcerted by the extreme improbability of Clark's line of speculation. "Why, Clark, whatever are you thinking of?"

Clark blushes too, but persists bravely. "Well... perhaps there is nobody else about to give the pleasure to, miss. Or perhaps it is not a pleasure merely, but the avoidance of some particular pain or discomfort which only Walmsley feels. Would it then be morally better to abstain from the pleasure, or to enjoy it?"

"I suppose, Clark, that Mr Mill would say that it is better to enjoy than to abstain, in such a case. Mr Mill does not appear to have a very high opinion of the virtue of abstinence."

"Nor do a lot of people, miss," mutters Clark in an undertone, glancing roguishly at the furiously blushing Head Girl.

Miss Paulson delicately inclines her head. "I beg your pardon, Clark?"

"Oh, nothing, miss."

"Please, miss?"

"Yes?" Oh dear: now it is Shipman, and Miss Paulson detects a strange gleam in her eye.

"Miss, I was reading Mr Bentham's book, the one in the library, about the principles of morals and legislation."

There is a faint intake of breath around the room. Everyone knows that Shipman is keen, but to read such book as that! Even Miss Paulson looks impressed.

"That is very good, Shipman. Well?"

"In the book, miss, Mr Bentham lists the types of simple pleasures, and I wondered if you could explain them to us."

"I will try. I'm afraid I don't think I can remember them exactly. Perhaps you can remind me."

"Certainly, miss." The class is spellbound. "They are: the pleasures of taste; the pleasure of intoxication; the pleasures of the organ of smelling; the pleasures of the eye; the pleasures of the ear; the pleasure of novelty; the pleasure of health and bodily exertion..." Miss Shipman's voice is soft, and she is speaking slowly, seductively. "...the pleasures of touch..." Someone lets out a quiet gasp, but in the frozen classroom it seems loud. "...and the pleasure of the sexual sense."

There is a long silence. Miss Paulson appears a little flushed. "I don't think this belongs in a discussion of morals, do you, Miss Shipman?"

There are several quiet, disappointed gasps of "Oh!", and Miss Paulson decides to relent.

"Oh, very well, Shipman, what is it you want explained?"

"First, miss, I wonder if you could explain to us what is the pleasure of touch?"

"Well, Shipman, if you were to run your fingers along a piece of smooth fabric – velvet, perhaps."

"Oh, I see, thank you, miss. — Or... skin perhaps?" Shipman's face is all wide-eyed innocence.

Miss Paulson bites her lip. "Perhaps," she breathes.

"Then in that case, Miss Paulson, can you explain what he means by the pleasure of the sexual sense?"

Miss Paulson looks down. She remembers asking her father to explain this very point, when she was not much older than Shipman herself; and she remembers how awkward and evasive he had been.

"That, Miss Shipman, is the pleasure that men feel when they... look upon a woman."

"So this is a pleasure that is for men only? Women cannot have it?"

"So I have been told."

"And do you think that that is true, miss?"

"I... I am not sure, Shipman." Miss Paulson's voice is little more than a whisper.

"That doesn't seem fair, does it, miss?"

Miss Paulson's voice is stronger now. "No, Shipman, no it doesn't."

"Thank you, miss."

"Why, Walmsley, whatever is the matter?" The blessed girl appears to be crying.

"I'm... I'm sure I don't know... I'm sorry, miss."

"Would you like to be excused, Walmsley?" asks Miss Paulson, kindly.

"If you please, miss."

As the girls disperse, Clark calls softly to Shipman.

"What is it?"

The girls link arms and walk slowly, their voices hushed.

"About pleasure, you know... it's supposed to be the principle of goodness, sort of..."

"Yes..."

"And... and the pleasures of touch..."

"Well?"

"I was thinking... about the Electrical Force, you know."

"The Electrical Force?"

"Well... it's the force of life, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose there's some connexion."

"What? You mean, between pleasure and electricity?"

"I was just wondering."

"Very well, Ladies. I trust you have been able to study the notes?"

It is the second meeting of the Scientific Society, and a number of the girls seem rather glum as they anxiously turn their papers over. Only some of the cleverest girls – notably Shipman, of course – seem relaxed and confident.

During the next half-hour, Miss Paulson deals with several questions, at the end of which the class seems a little brighter, a little more confident. Miss Paulson is a good explainer.

“Well, now, ladies, perhaps we can turn to something a little more practical, eh? It will help us to be clearer on the theory if we observe its effects in practice. Last week, we observed the galvanic reaction in a frog’s leg. This evening, I shall show you something even more remarkable: its effect on one of us. I shall be asking for a volunteer. Now before I start, I should say something about safety. It has been observed that the flow of electrical current stimulates the nerves, and that these in their turn control the muscles. Clearly, if certain muscles are disturbed in their functioning, it would be very dangerous. Can anyone tell me of a muscle that should on no account be disturbed?”

For once, Carry Walmsley’s hand is the first to be raised.

“Yes, Walmsley?”

“The heart, miss.”

“Oh yes, Walmsley, that’s right. The heart.” Miss Paulson’s flutters: it is that beautiful little sideways motion of the jaw. It is... almost electrifying.

“Well now – where were we? Ah, yes: if a current passes across the heart, the heart muscle may be shocked and the heart stop beating. And if we attach one wire to one hand, and another to the other, the current will go across the body, and the heart is at risk. Therefore we avoid any circuit which might go across the chest. Is that clear?”

The girls all look quite convinced.

“Very well, then. For our first experiment, we will go to the opposite end of the body: the foot. And I will demonstrate how the motions of the foot are controlled by muscles in the legs. Later, we can see how to trace the paths of the nerves that control those muscles.

“But first, in the interests both of safety and of scientific observation, I must acquaint you with the scientific method. When we experiment upon a human subject, we must take careful note of all the subject's reactions, not merely those we happen to be interested in. So, for example, if the subject is afraid, or in pain, this can affect our results. Unlike dead frogs' legs, we humans are very complex creatures. So we will need to have several observers on the look-out for various signs. Now what signs in particular should we look for? Heavens! Yes —” Walmsley's hand goes up immediately – “yes, Walmsley?”

“The heart, miss?”

“Yes, ah, goodness gracious, yes, that's right, Walmsley, the heart. Fear or pain may influence the heart rate. What other signs might there be?” No hands are raised. “Anyone?” No. “Well, sweating is another sign of disturbance. And where might we observe that? Yes, Shipman?”

“The armpit, miss?”

“Yes, that would be a good place. Now, finally, not only must we observe these things: we must record them, also. Who will volunteer to take our notes for us? Yes, thank you, Miller. Now, we need a volunteer. It won't hurt. Who will step forward?”

The girls look a little pale. Eventually, Clark steps forward.

“Ah, I'll volunteer, miss.”

“Excellent. You are very brave, to be the first. People do not always recognize the courage required of the scientist. We naturally fear the unknown, yet in science we

are dealing directly with the unknown. Now I think it would be best, Clark, if you were to remove your dress.”

Demurely, with a becoming modesty, Clark removes her dress. Beneath her chemise, the dark outline of her bodice, and the shadowy outline of her nipples, can just be discerned.

“And just slip off your shoes. That’s it. Now: up upon the table, please. And lie down. That’s it. There’s nothing whatever to be afraid of. You must just tell us if anything makes you uncomfortable. Now, ladies, gather round. You, Shipman, since you’re there, you shall check for undue perspiration. Walmsley? Here’s my watch. Do you know how to read someone’s pulse?”

“I think so, miss.”

“Good. Please to read mine.”

Carry takes Miss Paulson’s wrist and looks at the watch. After a few seconds’ silence, she frowns for a moment, then says, “Sixty-eight.”

“Very good. That is normal. Now please to take Miss Clark’s pulse.”

The exercise is repeated. “Eighty-four.”

“Again, very good. Our subject is a little nervous, that’s why it’s a bit high. Shipman: see if our subject is perspiring.”

“Ah... how, miss?”

“Put your hand through and feel under her arm.”

Shipman does so. “Dry, miss.”

“Good. Not too nervous, then. Now in order to detect any tremor or strange movement provoked by the electrical current, we will just tie this little bell to the subject’s toe. Please try to keep your feet still, Miss Clark.”

Miss Clark looks abjectly into Shipman’s eyes. “No! No!” she whispers.

“Miss Clark!” says Miss Paulson sharply. “Why can’t you keep your toes still for one moment? They’re like a sackful of puppies.”

“I... I’m sorry, miss.” The toes are momentarily still, and then suddenly begin moving frantically again.

“Miss Clark!” Miss Paulson is losing patience. She looks up sharply, to see a naughty grin on Shipman’s face, and a subtle motion of her arm. “Shipman! What are you doing?”

“I’m sorry, Miss Paulson. I was just tickling her.”

“Well don’t. You are being tiresome. Any further childish behaviour and I shall have to ask you to leave.”

Shipman blushes and looks cowed.

“Now, ladies, you will note that I have connected two batteries to the contacts this time. Can anyone tell me what effect that will have? Yes, Penrose?”

“Please miss, will it increase the voltaic force of the electricity?”

“Well done, Penrose: that is quite right. Since a human being is considerably bigger than a frog, we use a higher voltaic force. And now I am going to put the contacts here... and here,” says Miss Paulson, brushing Clark’s underskirts up to her knee and indicating two spots on her calf. “The current will stimulate the nerve, and that in turn will cause a muscle to contract. Very well: starting from now, Walmsley, I want you to call out the pulse every half-minute. Clark, you will tell us what you are feeling.”

“Ninety-two,” says Walmsley, looking at the watch.

“Do you observe the precise location of the contacts, ladies? Now, Clark, what are you feeling?”

“I... I don’t feel anything, miss.”

“And now?”

“N..nothing.”

“And... now?”

“Oh! A kind of warmth.” The bell on Clark’s foot jingles twice.

“Ninety-six,” says Walmsley.

“Perspiration?” The toes begin to twitch, and the bell jingles for several seconds.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to. She’s just ticklish. Nothing,” says Shipman.

“And... now?” The bell jingles again.

“It... tingles. It... doesn’t hurt exactly,” says Clark.

“You see how her toe is moving? Have you noted that, Miller?”

“Yes, miss.”

“One hundred and four,” says Walmsley.

“A little perspiration,” says Shipman.

“Good. We’ll take a short rest, then. All well, Clark?”

“Yes, thank you, miss.”

“And how do you feel?”

“Oh... strange.”

“Strange?”

“Well... I could feel that I was moving, but it wasn’t I who was making it happen, if you see what I mean.”

“Anything else?”

“Just some... strange prickling. Like a...”

“Yes?”

“Like a worm under my skin.”

“No pain?”

“Well... not exactly...”

“Pulse, Walmsley?”

“Eighty-four.”

“Now, Ladies,” Miss Paulson resumes her lecturing tone, “We are going to stimulate the very same nerve, but higher up this time. You should observe exactly the same reaction.” She draws Clark’s underskirts much higher on one side, taking care not to expose more than is necessary. “Again you will observe that I moisten the areas where the contacts are to be applied.”

“Oooh!” cries Clark, and,

“One hundred and eight,” says Walmsley. The bell rings. Miss Paulson looks sharply at Shipman, but she is not even touching the subject.

“Ready, Shipman?”

“Oh, sorry, miss,” says Shipman, getting her fingers into position; “Nothing now.”

“Aaah...” from Clark.

“One hundred and twelve,” says Walmsley.

“Feel anything?”

“Ooh... No.”

“And now?”

“Ah...”

The bell begins to tinkle persistently. Miss Paulson raises and lowers one of the contacts, and the toe flexes back and forth as before. Then she keeps the contact in place, and the toe begins to oscillate. The bell rings violently.

“Ah... Ah... oh, my!”

"One hundred and sixteen."

"What are you feeling?"

"Oh... gosh..."

"She's perspiring."

"One hundred and twenty."

"There! That's enough. Have you got all that, Miller?"

"Yes, miss."

"All well, Clark?"

"Oh, miss... I feel strange."

"One hundred and sixteen."

"Shipman!" Miss Paulson's face is thunder.

"Oh, but miss... I was just taking my hand away, when I noticed..."

"What were you doing?"

"It's true, miss. I noticed too." This from Kershaw.

"You too, Miller?"

"Yes, miss."

Miss Paulson is perplexed by this strange development. "Very well, Shipman."

"Thank you, miss." Shipman takes her hand away.

"And Clark, how are you feeling?"

"Oh, miss, it feels most odd! My whole leg!"

"Does it hurt?"

"Well, maybe a little... No, not quite... Oh!"

"Try to describe it for us."

"Sort of... fluttery."

"Fluttery?"

“Yes. And higher up...”

“Yes?”

“Strange.”

“Strange?”

“Yes.”

“And painful in any way?”

“It is a little like a kind of pain, but...” Clark breaks off with a gasp.

“Yes, Clark?” Miss Paulson tries to be patient. Really, the girl seems so vague, so incoherent, and it is most frustrating to the scientific enquirer.

“It’s a kind of ache... it comes and goes... not too unpleasant... and I feel strangely warm... and a sensation of fullness.”

“Fullness?”

“Yes... Ohh! – It seems to come and go.”

“Have you got that, Miller?”

“Yes, miss.”

“One hundred.”

“I’m just taking the bell off now, Clark.”

“Oh miss, ha ha ha!”

“Sorry, Clark, and thank you. — Help her to stand, ladies. — Well done for being our first subject. You can let her go, now, Walmsley. I think a round of applause, ladies, don’t you?”

There is brisk applause, and, “You were marvellous!” quietly from Kershaw.

Afterwards, Clark is rushed off by her friends, their arms through hers.

“What are you feeling?” they whisper.

She can only giggle and repeat, “Strange.”

Shipman and Carter help Walmsley and Miss Paulson tidy the laboratory; but Miss Paulson dismisses them before the work is finished, saying, "Thank you, ladies. I need to have a few words in private with Miss Walmsley."

Curtseying, they go out.

"What did you think, Carter?"

"It was amazing!"

"Wasn't it? Do you want to try?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"But what, you ass? Didn't you see?"

"Well, it's just that..."

"Go on!"

"Well, did you read that stuff about coils?"

"Coils? Who wants to know about coils?"

"But Shipman: with coils, we could make electricity do all sorts of things!"

"Like what?"

"Well... move things!"

"Move things?"

"Yes! And... we could make our own electricity! We'd need help, of course."

For the moment, Shipman is more interested in the possibilities of the galvanic experiments; but she senses an opportunity.

"Perhaps next time, Miss Paulson could help you with the coils."

"Oh – do you think she might?"

"I'm sure she would. Tonight was just a demonstration, remember. She won't want us all doing the same thing, now, will she?"

"I suppose not."

"We'll get her to help you, Carter."

Meanwhile, in the laboratory, Walmsley and Miss Paulson have finished the tidying away.

"Thank you, Walmsley. Now I believe that you need some extra tuition."

"That's right, miss."

"In French?" Miss Paulson raises an elegant eyebrow.

"Yes, miss."

"Ah. Well, that's... That's very good, Walmsley. I know that your duties keep you very busy. Would you chance to be free for half an hour tomorrow evening?"

"It can be arranged, miss."

"Very good, then."

"Thank you, miss."

"Good night, then, Carry."

"Ooh! Good night, miss."

"Hey, Clark?"

"Yes, Shipman?"

"How was it? The electricity?"

"Oh, Shipman. It was... It was strange."

"What do you think, then, about this connexion you were talking about?"

"What?"

"You know, between the Electric Force and the principle of morality."

"What... with pleasure?"

"Yes. With pleasure."

"Um... Shipman? Do you know... do you know anything of the pleasure of... of touch?"

"Why?"

"You do, don't you?"

"Well... A little."

"Would you happen to be free during recreation this afternoon?"

"I suppose so."

"Would you care to take a walk with me?"

"Why?"

"I know a nice bank. Where we could sit. And... talk about it." Clark looks around anxiously. "Nobody else goes there. Ever."

"A walk? Very well then."

"Where shall we meet?"

"By the big clock?"

"At two?"

"At two o'clock."

At the third meeting of the Society, Carter makes a special request:

"Please miss, I think I've had an idea for an experiment with the coils."

"With the coils?"

"Yes, but I need a machine to be made, and I was wondering if you could advise me, miss."

“Why, certainly. — Walmsley: while I work with Carter, perhaps I could ask you to take charge of the others. You could continue to investigate the effects of electric current on the body, perhaps.”

“Certainly, miss. Come, girls! Let's get the battery into position. So who's going to volunteer today?”

“Can I go again?”

“No, Clark, let someone else have a try.”

“Oh very well – I'll try it!” says Kershaw bravely.

“Good for you, Kershaw! — And Clark: since you were the volunteer last time, you shall apply the electrical contacts.”

“Ah, Walmsley, may I please be excused removing my dress, so I can be spared Shipman's roving fingers in my armpits?”

“Of course. I am sure Clark will notice if you start perspiring, won't you Clark? We'll keep Shipman out of mischief. Here, Shipman, you take the watch. You can be heart-rate monitor. I'm just tying on the bell, Kershaw.”

“Oh my goodness...”

“Why whatever is the matter, Kershaw?”

“It's just that... my feet...”

“Oh look out, girls, we've got another ticklish one. Come on, Kershaw, try to be serious. So where are you going to place the contacts, Clark?”

“I thought I'd try... a little higher up.”

“Very well. Can you do a rough sketch to show the position, Miller? — Oh really, girls, there's no need for everyone to look: only Miller needs to see.”

“Eighty.”

“Oh my Lord! Oh Lord!”

"Now what is it, Kershaw?"

"It's just that I'm so ticklish there! Does she have to do it there?"

"Well, Kershaw, it seems to me you're ticklish just about everywhere. No, it's too late to change it now. You'll just have to put up with it in the name of science. Oh, come on, Clark, I'm sure the skin is quite damp enough by now."

"Ninety-two."

"Oh hold my hand, someone!"

"French, hold her hand, for heaven's sake. And Benson, you hold the other ankle. Ready everyone? Very well, Clark!"

"Ninety-six."

Kershaw begins to whimper.

"What does it feel like, Kershaw?"

"Ohh... a kind of prickling... tickling... It's so strange..."

"Shall I take them off now?"

"Ohh... no... I think I'm beginning to get used to it."

"One hundred and eight."

"It's not hurting at all, is it?"

"Oh no. Not hurting, just prickling slightly. But... oh, my gosh!"

"What is it, Kershaw?"

"It's making me want to move. It's... oh, goodness..." Kershaw is beginning to pant a little. She seems very flushed.

"I do believe she's getting all squirmy, girls. Just try to relax, Kershaw."

"One hundred and twelve."

"She is squirming, isn't she?"

"Oh my gosh, oh my gosh..."

Kershaw's toes begin to waggle and the bell starts to ring.

"Right, I think that's enough now, Clark."

"Oh goodness, everybody!" Kershaw is round-eyed. "It's so amazing!"

"How do you feel, Kershaw?" asks Benson anxiously.

"I feel wonderful! Just wonderful!"

"I say, do you notice something, Walmsley?" asks French.

Walmsley follows the direction of French's gaze. "Do you mean...?"

"They're rather swollen, aren't they?"

"They are. I noticed that last time with Clark, but I thought that was just Shipman messing about. Make a note of that, Miller: slight swelling noticeable."

"Where? Oh! There." Miller blushes and continues her hurried note-taking.

"One hundred and four."

"Very well, Shipman, I think that's enough. Perhaps we should let someone else try it. How about you, Miller, since you've been working so hard on taking the notes?"

"Oh, goodness, no, er... no thank you!"

"All right. Anyone else?"

"Why don't you, Walmsley?" asks Shipman mischievously.

"Yes, good idea!" says Benson.

"Oh, very well then. You take over, Benson."

Charlotte Benson likes to be in charge. She gives a quick little lop-sided smile.

"Benson, may I help Clark this time?" asks Shipman innocently.

"Very well, Shipman. French, you take the pulse this time."

Shipman surreptitiously winks to Clark and mouths the word "Higher". Clark nods imperceptibly.

“Shipman,” warns Walmsley, “if you tickle me, I and several senior prefects will exact a lengthy and terrible revenge.”

Shipman turns a little pale.

“Eighty-four,” says French.

“Very well, moisten the contact points,” commands Benson; and, “Hey? How can you see what you’re doing if you don’t lift it up higher?”

“Oh, we can do it by feel,” says Clark nonchalantly.

“Oh my! Oh my! Hee hee! Hee! Right Clark, Shipman, I warned you, you two are for it!”

“I can’t help it if you’re so ticklish. We weren’t doing anything, Benson, honestly! Were we, Clark?”

“No, Benson, truly!”

“Now just a minute, Walmsley!” Benson is wonderfully authoritative. She gestures Clark and Shipman aside for a moment. “I seem to recall that you were not terribly sympathetic when it was Kershaw’s turn. You put me in charge and I am going to make sure that we conduct this experiment properly. Human knowledge cannot be held back just because Miss Walmsley happens to be a little bit ticklish. French, can you manage? Denning: take the other hand, and you, Penrose, hold her ankle – yes, and her knee. Make sure she doesn’t move. Very well, Clark and Shipman, proceed.”

“One hundred and two.”

“Hahaha! Benson, they’re killing me! — Ohh, thank heaven...”

“Shall we put the contacts on now, Benson?”

“Ready, Walmsley?”

“Very well. Ready. Aah! Oh goodness! Oh goodness!” It is clear that Walmsley is extremely receptive to the effects of the electricity. She begins huffing and puffing immediately, and her complexion seems to gain an additional lustre.

“She’s trying to move, Benson,” says Shipman self-righteously.

“I’m not, it’s just... Oh my!”

“What does it feel like, Walmsley?”

“One hundred and eight.”

“I can feel it in my... Oh Shipman, Clark, could you move the contacts up just a tiny little bit?” Clark and Shipman exchange a conspiratorial wink, unnoticed by everyone else, whose gaze is fixed upon Walmsley’s transfigured countenance.

“Aah! That’s amazing! Oh, ha ha! That’s quite amazing! I can feel it! I can feel it!” The bell begins to ring.

“Yes, but what can you feel, Walmsley?”

“It’s buzzing and prickling and oh! It’s just... I can’t...” The bell is ringing insistently, but the girls are too interested in the remarkable effects of the electricity to pay much attention.

“One hundred and sixteen.”

“It’s like... I mean it’s just...” Walmsley bites her lip and rolls her head helplessly, but there is no doubt that whatever she is feeling, it is not exactly pain.

“Right,” says Benson sternly, “I think she’s had enough, girls.”

“Oh my! Oh my!” groans Walmsley as the tinkling of the bell dwindles to silence. The girls watch the rising and falling of her well-rounded chest with rapt attention.

“Have you noted everything, Miller?”

“Um... nearly everything. I just need to see the contact points.”

"Oh go on, Shipman, show her. Look away, everyone else."

"Thank you, — oh!" Miller lets out a little squeak and nearly drops her notebook.

"What is it, Miller?" asks Benson.

"Oh... n-nothing."

"One hundred and twenty."

"Benson?"

"Yes, Walmsley?"

"I... I think I could take a *little* more, honestly."

"But your heart rate! We don't want our beloved Head Girl to have an apoplexy, do we, girls?"

"I feel absolutely fine, Benson. Come on, Kershaw had far longer. It isn't fair."

"Well, just a little longer, then. Clark, Shipman, do it intermittently, one second on and one second off."

"Yes! Ah!"

"Hold tight, there, French. Do you need help? Well just hold tight, that's all."

"Ahh!"

"One hundred and twenty-four."

"Again! Again, come on!" Walmsley's long fair hair flails and falls prettily over her eyes. "Ahh!"

Shipman and Clark cannot prevent her bucking her hips; it is difficult to keep the contacts in place. "That was never one second! More! Ahh!" Miss Walmsley's gasps are becoming increasingly impassioned. The bell now is jingling incessantly, as the pretty volunteer's toes writhe in nervous excitation. Everyone by now is becoming accustomed to the sound.

"One hundred and twenty-eight."

"Right, Walmsley, that's enough! Stop, Clark! Take it off!"

"Honestly, Benson, I'm fine! I can take more, *much* more!" Carry may be panting, but her eyes are bright and her complexion lively.

"How are you feeling, Walmsley?"

"Wonderful! Just wonderful! I could run ten times round the school, honestly!"

"You look as if you just have."

"Come on, Benson, just a little bit more. Please?"

"...I'm sure we could ask the clockmaker to manufacture such a thing, yes. We will ask him to come tomorrow during the recreation period, and show him your drawings. I think with those changes it ought to work, Carter."

"I think so too, miss."

"Now we'd better see how the others are getting on."

Miss Walmsley has just got down from the table. Flushed and glowing, she feels as if she could fight an army. "Benson, I challenge you to a battledore match! Right now! Yes! The Power of Electricity! — Oh! Hello Miss Paulson."

"Hello, Carry. You look... charged with energy. How did you find the electricity?"

"Oh... it was... wonderful!"

"Miss... Please miss?"

"Yes, Shipman?"

Shipman winks and points furtively.

Miss Paulson looks. "Oh! Beau... Oh my goodness."

Part IIa

At the fourth meeting of the Society, Lucy Carter again prevails upon Miss Paulson to assist her with her new contrivance: Mr Jepson, the clockmaker, has very obligingly produced a wooden pattern of the machine, and it is now a question of assembling the pieces to see whether the design is good, before remaking certain of them in brass.

Thus it falls to Carry Walmsley once more to supervise the other girls as they experience the reviving and stimulating wonders of the electrical force upon their delicate anatomies. This time it is Benson's turn; Shipman willingly dons the gloves and takes the contact wires.

"Up a bit, Shipman," urges Walmsley, "that's where it felt... ah... most effective."

"Are you sure about this?" cries Benson in alarm. "Is it really necessary to go... oh!" — and her doubts are swiftly extinguished as the unique sensation of the electrical current assails her for the first time.

"I think it is necessary to go 'Oh,' don't you, Walmsley?" asks Shipman, with an arch little smile. Walmsley blushes. "I'm next, after Benson."

"That's not fair! I should go next!" protests Clark. "I've been doing all the boring jobs!"

"But you've already had a go!" objects Shipman. "Don't be so greedy!"

"One hundred," pronounces Kershaw.

"How does it feel, Benson?" asks Walmsley.

"Oh, it's... Oh, my, I'm..." gasps Benson. She seems preoccupied, as if the strange sensation is depriving her of the power of coherent thought.

"She's very flushed," observes Shipman.

"She does seem rather short of breath, doesn't she?"

"Perhaps her corset is rather too tight."

"Try to breathe normally, Benson."

"I... O Lord..." murmurs Benson; her toes begin to move, and the bell, which Walmsley attached at the outset, begins to jingle. But her breathing becomes shorter still, and noisier, as if she were entering a state of panic.

"One hundred and eight."

"I think you'd better give her a rest, Shipman," says Walmsley.

"Oh no! No!" Benson cries in alarm. "I'm perfectly... Ooh..."

Walmsley and the others watch intently as Benson struggles to control her breathing.

"One hundred and sixteen."

"Is it good, Benson?" asks Walmsley, her cheeks colouring in sympathetic excitement.

"Oh... Oh! There's a strange... aching, right inside me!"

"An ache? Well, perhaps we'd better take them off, then."

"Oh no! It's only a little ache... Aah..." Benson begins to pant once more.

"What do you think, Shipman? Can she take it?"

"Oh, I expect so," replies Shipman, a curious glee in her eyes as she reaches with her other hand under Benson's dress. "Ah now this is interesting!"

"What?"

Benson parts her legs a little wider.

"She seems to be perspiring rather a lot!"

"Perspiring?"

“One hundred and twenty.”

Benson's hips are beginning to move.

“Yes, I suppose so. Unless it's...” Shipman removes her hand and sniffs the exploring finger delicately. “Well! I don't know what it is. It's not the other thing.”

“Kershaw, feel her forehead.”

“Just a little damp.”

“O my Lord, Walmsley, I don't know what's happening... that ache, it's...” There is a note of near panic in Benson's voice. The bell is ringing constantly.

“Shipman! Clark! She's had enough!” cries Walmsley authoritatively. They watch Benson's strange movements as she tries to recover herself. She seems to be raising her hips and thudding down upon the table-top.

“I think... I want... more!” gasps Benson.

“No, that's quite enough. You were beginning to scare us. Do you feel all right?” asks Walmsley, bending solicitously. She looks at the other girls, who are likewise fascinated by Benson's strange predicament — save for Shipman and Clark, who seem slightly amused, even starry-eyed.

“One hundred and sixteen.”

“Me next, remember!” says Shipman to Clark, wagging her finger. “That's what we agreed!”

“Just a moment, Shipman, Clark! Whose do you think it is to say who goes next, eh?” Walmsley sounds annoyed, and the two girls blush and hang their heads. But the next moment, Shipman looks up with a curious mixture of defiance and deference.

“Oh, I just thought that if this was science, then we should be finding out what longer periods of exposure might do. That's why I should go next. I'm not like

Benson or Clark. I'm strong. I won't make a silly fuss. I can put up with a little bit of electricity."

"Oh can you, Shipman? And how can you be so sure?"

"Oh, I just try to believe in myself, Walmsley. We women can do much more than people think, if only we are allowed to believe in ourselves. Isn't that what Miss Paulson says?" Her stare is a challenge. Walmsley's eyes fall.

"Very well, Shipman. You next."

There is a little giggle. Walmsley looks up sharply. She cannot be sure if it is Clark or Shipman. They are looking at one another, their fingers to their lips. Something is going on between those two. As she watches, Shipman reaches across and puts her finger under Clark's nose. Clark jerks back, giggling and blushing. Benson is still writhing, no doubt still tingling from the after-effects of the electrical current.

"Help her up, girls," commands Walmsley. "Do you want a rest, Benson?"

"Oh, no, I feel so... so full of energy, so..." Benson is still searching for words.

"Are you still feeling something?"

"Yes, it's still tingling. It's so..."

"Go on..."

"It's so wonderful, this electricity! I wondered what you meant, Walmsley, when you said you felt you could run ten times round the school. But do you know: that's exactly how I feel!"

"She looks exhausted to me," says Kershaw, sceptically.

"Oh no, I'm not! It's just... Ooh! I don't know... these strange feelings!" Benson hunches her shoulders and shudders, gives her head a sudden, rapid little shake.

"Are you still aching?"

"Yes, a little, but it's as if I were aching... to move! To jump and run!"

"Oh good! Me next!" cries Shipman, leaping on to the table.

"Have you got all of that, Miller?"

"Yes, Walmsley," says Miller, almost breathless herself from the speed at which she has been taking notes.

"So, now for the very strong and resilient Miss Shipman! Kershaw," Walmsley says with a surreptitious wink, "you shall keep her ankles still. You are quite good with feet, I believe? Denning, you take her right hand, please. And Clark, you take the watch this time, and monitor the pulse of our fearless volunteer."

"Oh, but..." Clark makes to protest.

"No, I know just where to place the contacts. Kershaw, will you kindly tie on the bell? Thank you. And now, Miss Shipman. Do you feel anything in your feet, at all?"

"Tell her to stop it!" breathes Shipman, through clenched teeth.

"Stop what, Shipman?" Walmsley's voice is honeyed with false innocence.

"This is supposed to be science, Miss Walmsley!" The bell begins to jingle insistently. Shipman's eyes are wide with outraged reproach. "Tell her to stop!"

There is a surreptitious signal from Walmsley, and Shipman relaxes her hunched shoulders, her tightly-locked jaw, as Kershaw stops her tickling.

"Shall I check for perspiration as well, Walmsley?" asks Clark, her hand moving to the buttons at Shipman's neck.

"I think the heart rate will be quite sufficient, thank you," replies Walmsley coolly, noting Clark's ill-concealed disappointment. "Very well, everybody: ready, Kershaw? Ready, Denning?" Walmsley takes the wires and plunges under Shipman's

dress. As she moves up the long, smooth thighs, she sees Shipman's wide eyes, her mouth sweetly open to take in extra breath. "I think it was about here, wasn't it, Shipman?" she asks softly, noting that delectable split-second of panic in the victim's eyes, before she plunges her hands down.

"Aah!" Shipman's little squeal is exquisite, unforgettable; but the next minute, she is biting her lower lip, bringing herself under strict control, the breathing smooth, regular.

"Ninety," lies Clark coolly.

"Not feeling much, Shipman?" asks Walmsley, a slightly playful note in her voice.

"Mmm..." The electrical current seems to have lent a strange resonance to Shipman's groan. The bell on her toe jingles slowly. Shipman struggles to keep still.

"Do you think the contacts are too far apart?"

"They are very well as they are, just... astonishing... Ha ha!" Shipman's smile is beatific.

"Come on, Clark, what's the heart rate?"

"Oh, ninety-four."

"We don't seem to be making much impression on you, do we, Shipman?"

"I told you I was strong, Walmsley..." Shipman's eyes flash and glitter. She looks at the anxious faces of the girls around her. "It just tickles a little, that's all. I can feel the energy soaking into me. It's soaking into me in waves." The bell starts to jingle once more, and again Shipman strives to keep herself still.

"Come on, it must be half a minute, Clark: what are you doing, girl?"

"Um... ninety-eight."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, Walmsley, I'm sure."

"Shipman, are you trembling?"

Shipman's eyes are closed, now. "Oh..." she says. The bell jingles louder.

"One hundred and two."

Shipman makes one last desperate effort to keep still. Her tongue is beginning to dart between her lips, and when she opens her eyes, they no longer focus. Denning is watching her.

"Her eyes seem to be glazed over, Walmsley."

The bell begins a rapid jingling now, impossibly fast.

"This is extraordinary. Her whole body is vibrating!"

"I feel it too!" says Denning.

"Oh... my God... ohh..." groans Shipman. She knows instinctively that something very nice is about to happen. The colour in her cheeks is high: even her throat seems flushed.

"Heart rate?" asks Walmsley, anxiously. "Come on, wake up, Clark!"

"Oh... sorry, I got distracted..." Clark counts thirty over the quarter minute. Shipman is still shivering and groaning, the bell jingling constantly. "A hundred and twelve."

"Right, that has to be enough! I'm taking them off!"

"You b... Walmsley! Oh Walmsley, put them back! Please! Oh! Oh!" Shipman is suddenly writhing as if in agony. She begins to sob hysterically.

"Let's just see about that mysterious perspiration, shall we?" says Walmsley, meaningfully, carefully removing the wires and handing them to Penrose.

The bell jingles incessantly as Walmsley's fingers grope their way up Shipman's leg.

“Oh Walmsley, oh yes! Just there!” Shipman is suddenly brighter, her eyes ablaze once more; but then her face falls. “Oh! You’re so cruel!”

“Turn away, girls, please. Miller, I want you to take note of what I’m about to show you. For the sake of science, of course.”

There is absolute silence. Clark is pink-cheeked, her eyes downcast. Denning, all obedience, still holds Shipman’s other arm tightly. Shipman is weeping softly, the bell still jingling angrily, her ankles held fast by Kershaw.

“What do you think of that, Miller?” asks Walmsley softly as she draws up Shipman’s skirts.

“Oh! What’s happened to her?” Miller sounds horrified. The others are dying to look. “Is she usually like that?”

“I somehow don’t think so, Miller. Just describe, in writing, what you see.”

“Well, I...”

“In writing, Miller.”

“Oh. Just a minute.”

“Haven’t you seen enough?”

“Um... well, yes.”

“Very well, Miller, get writing. Up you get, Shipman.”

“Walmsley, I could take it a little longer, honestly,” protests the disappointed volunteer.

“I’m sure you could, Shipman, but if we are to be scientific we have to advance the experiment slowly. We mustn’t rush things. We must see what effect such a prolonged exposure to the current has on you. Aren’t you in the battledore match tomorrow, by the way?”

“Well, yes, I am, but...”

“Well, then, Shipman, we shall have to see if it improves your game.”

“Oh! I am sure that it will...”

“Clark? Are you in the match?”

“Er... no, Walmsley.”

“No. Denning?”

“Yes, Walmsley. I'm playing.”

“Right. You're next for a dose. Hop up on the table, girl.”

“Does this mean I don't get a go?” asks Clark anxiously.

“Precisely, Clark. In the interests of science, we are going to examine the effects of the electrical current upon our battledore players!”

Denning's eyes open wide as Walmsley's fair hands glide under her skirts.

“You're not frightened are you, Denning?”

“No, but... do you have to do it just there?”

“It is the most effective place, Denning.” Walmsley lovingly applies the electrical contacts.

“How about there, Denning?”

“Ooh! That feels funny!”

“Or how about there?”

“Oh goodness... that's...”

“Or... hang on a moment... what about... there?”

“Eek! Hee hee! Oh gosh!” Denning's voice is a squeak. She tries to writhe, but she is held fast.

“Can you feel the energy entering your body?”

“Oh! Hee hee!” This seems to be all Denning can say, but her expression seems particularly lively and interested, so Walmsley judges that the position must be about right.

“One hundred and four,” intones Clark sulkily.

Soon the bell is ringing merrily – so merrily, in fact, that Miss Paulson leaves Carter bent over her machine and comes to see what is happening.

“Benson! Shipman! Stand still! You girls seem to have Saint Vitus's Dance! Goodness, Walmsley! Where on earth are you placing those contacts?”

“I've found a place, miss, where the energy seems to flow right into the body. Right, Benson?”

“Oh, gosh, yes, miss, I...”

“Keep still, Benson!”

“I'm sorry, miss, I...”

“You too, Shipman! What is the matter with you?”

“Oh, it's the electrical force, Miss Paulson. It seems to have that effect.”

“Yes, miss,” Benson chimes in, “my whole body seems to be tingling and glowing with... with life! With energy!”

“Goodness... that's interesting, Walmsley.”

“I ventured to think so, miss.”

“How do you feel, Denning?”

“O miss, goodness, ha ha! I'm... It's... Ha! Ha!” Denning's eyes close involuntarily, and her brow contracts as if in pain. “Ooh!” she says, “I can feel... Ha ha!”

“One hundred and twenty.”

“Right! That's enough!”

The jingling of the bell, which has become almost a trilling, gradually stills. Denning shakes herself like a puppy. "Oh gosh!" she says, her eyes clouded. "Oh my!"

"Please, miss," says Walmsley, handing the contacts to Kershaw, "we've noticed a most particular phenomenon. It seems a little like perspiration, but we don't think it can be. I wonder if you could give us your opinion. Turn away, girls."

"Oh! Can't we see?" asks Penrose.

"No! It's private – only for the scientific record. Now if I just lift Denning's skirts... do you see, miss?"

"But that's... You've given her too much, Walmsley. She's just lost control, that's all. Where did you put those contacts?"

"No, honestly, miss, it's not what you think it is. Look! I'm just dipping my finger into it..."

"Ooh!" cries Denning, and the bell jingles sharply.

"Now... just sniff."

"Sniff?"

"Yes. Does it smell like..."

Miss Paulson lets out a soft little cry of surprise. "No, Walmsley. It doesn't. What a strange smell! I don't believe it can be perspiration. Let me smell it again." Miss Paulson sniffs delicately. She gives a little shudder. "Let me take a little on my finger." Delicately, she reaches under the uplifted skirts and probes for a moment.

"Ooh! Hee hee!" cries Denning.

"All in the cause of science, Denning," says Walmsley sententiously.

“Goodness! It’s...” Miss Paulson inhales again. “...remarkable. It’s vaguely familiar.” She rubs the fluid between her fingers. “And it’s slippery. Do you notice that, Walmsley?”

Clark has been muttering to Shipman. The word “melting” is heard. Miss Paulson stiffens.

“What’s that? Did I give permission to you ladies to speak? Shipman, what are you doing? Stand straight! Arms by your sides!”

“Sorry, miss...” says Shipman, eyes downcast in pink-cheeked docility.

“You do not think, Walmsley, that perhaps Denning may have received a little too much of the current? She does seem rather agitated.”

“No, I feel very well, miss,” protests Denning anxiously.

“We had already noticed that the effects were very enlivening, miss. I thought it would be interesting to see whether it would help the members of our battledore team, since we have a match tomorrow.”

Miss Paulson looks thoughtfully at Shipman and Denning. They seem to glow: their eyes sparkle; they spring up on tiptoe. Perhaps, after all, the electrical current is firing their energy, rousing their animal spirits.

“Are there any other members of the team here, Walmsley?” asks Miss Paulson.

Carry Walmsley looks down, a charming blush on her cheek. “Well, miss... I am, of course...”

“Very well, Walmsley. It would be interesting to see the effect, I agree. Would you be prepared to volunteer?”

“Oh, but...” cries Clark. Shipman’s admonitory nudge is sharp enough to elicit a grunt. Miss Paulson looks up, her eyes fierce behind her glasses.

"Sorry, miss. Nothing, miss."

"Who shall apply the contacts?" asks Miss Paulson.

"Shipman," says Walmsley without hesitation. "Shipman knows where they go."

Carry Walmsley, like Shipman, is a strong and determined young woman. She is determined not to make an exhibition of herself. It is all the more humiliating, then, when despite her clenched teeth and tight-closed eyes, braced for the onslaught, the first sensations provoke a ridiculous, high-pitched whinny which seems to escape through her nose. "Get a grip on yourself, girl!" she thinks. She struggles to relax. Really, the sensation is overwhelming. It is the life force itself, flooding into her body.

Clark, still holding the watch, calls out as the heart-rate inexorably soars.

"Are the feelings very strong, Walmsley?" asks Miss Paulson sympathetically, as the bell begins its insistent jingling.

"No, not at all," is what Walmsley wants to say. But what she actually says, between heaves of her magnificent chest, is "Oh! O Lord! Oh my!"

Eventually, when the bell begins to trill and Walmsley appears to be trembling violently, Miss Paulson calls "Enough!"

As she removes the contacts, Shipman seems to be in a state of near collapse. So do Benson and Denning. And Kershaw.

"I will just check for the... perspiration," says Miss Paulson, insinuating her hand under Walmsley's skirts.

"Oh... Oh, Miss Paulson!" gasps Walmsley appreciatively, as her dear, dear teacher sensitively glides her fingers along the smooth, firm skin of her warm, tremulous thigh; and "Oh! Oh my!" as they reach the region of that distinctive, oily wetness. "Mmm!"

Quickly, Miss Paulson withdraws her hand, and again she sniffs. "Ooh!" she says appreciatively. It is a most beguiling fragrance. "I wonder what it can be." She sniffs again. "I think we must investigate this strange fluid. It may be something quite new."

"Please miss?" Denning interrupts. "I'm still feeling it, miss."

"Not now, Denning..."

"Excuse me, miss?" It is Miller, anxiously pointing with her pencil. "I must just note the appearance, if you please?"

"What, Miller? Oh, yes, yes of course. Shipman, would you oblige?"

"Look away, the rest of you," says Walmsley, crimson-cheeked upon the table as Shipman raises her skirts.

"You see, miss?" says Miller, primly, as she quickly makes her cryptic notes.

Shipman lowers the skirts once more.

"Oh yes..." breathes Miss Paulson, raptly. "Oh Carry..."

"But I'm still feeling it, miss!" says Denning piteously.

"Be quiet, Denning! And stop that ridiculous jiggling up and down!"

Miss Paulson has never witnessed a school battledore match before, for she prefers, she says, to concentrate entirely upon the things of the mind. Is it not a vulgar thing, she is wont to ask, to clap and cheer from the sidelines, as at a prize fight? But now, she is here, clapping and cheering with the rest, for now there is a new dimension – that of scientific interest. And certainly the match has got off to an auspicious start, for Denning – never a strong player – seems transformed: she is leaping gracefully about the court, smoothly returning every shot with almost faultless accuracy and surprising stamina. By now her success seems assured, for having lost

the second game at 12, she now holds the advantage, and her opponent is clearly flagging at 10-6.

“Ah, Miss Paulson, what a pleasure to see you supporting our girls!” cries Mrs Cunningham, coming up to her. “For the first time I believe we may have a chance of getting the better of Thomas More.”

There has long been a fierce rivalry between the two schools, but alas Hepplewhite has yet to win a match.

“Let us hope so, Mrs Cunningham,” says Miss Paulson, graciously curtseying.

“And do you not think, Miss Paulson, that the girls look very fetching in these more practical clothes?”

“Indeed I am of the belief that the tight and constricting clothing which custom obliges us to wear are one of the many means by which we are prevented from achieving our true potential, Ma’am. Women would be as able-bodied as men, were our clothing only to permit us free movement, and allow us to draw breath as nature intended.”

Mrs Cunningham looks a little startled. “I take it you are not advocating any form of indecency, Miss Paulson – forgive me, you are not saying that women should dress as men do?”

“Oh no, Ma’am, only that the very close and confining nature of our bodices and skirts have the effect of curtailing the free and wholesome movement of the limbs. See how beautifully Denning leaps to return the shuttlecock! Can it not be good for the girls to spend their natural energies in such healthy and vigorous sports? Is this not better than to swoon in helpless subjection, deprived of air by the over-tight corsets men would have us wear?”

“Perhaps you are right, Miss Paulson, perhaps so. Indeed, there are those I fear who would count it a scandal to see a young maid dressed as scantily as our players today.”

“Men, of course, Ma’am, or those who fear what men might think.”

At this point the conversation is interrupted by a burst of applause.

“Oh, lovely shot, Denning!” cries Mrs Cunningham. The shuttlecock has sailed clear over her opponent’s head, and Denning has her thirteenth point.

In the back row, Clark and Penrose clap lazily. Penrose is delighted to have the opportunity to talk to her best friend. Since Clark made her revelation, the uncomfortable sense of something unshared has somehow created an awkwardness between them. And truth to tell, Penrose has been feeling a little jealous of Shipman, who appears to have dropped Carter and now seems to be monopolizing her friend’s attentions. Clark is sitting stiffly, as if on the defensive. She does not turn to look at Penrose.

Penrose sidles closer. She takes a deep breath.

“Sarah... I found out.”

“Found out?” Clark half-turns, but does not look her in the eye.

“Yes. I found out why people... you know... do it.”

Clark looks down. She smiles. She takes Penrose’s hand gently in hers. She turns now.

“You don’t need to feel any woman pains, do you?”

“No,” breathes Penrose. A little anxiety comes into her face. “You don’t think it’s harmful, do you?”

“Of course not! What about Walmsley?”

“Walmsley?” To Penrose, and to everyone else for that matter, Walmsley is a paragon of youthful health and vivacity.

Clark turns to watch the game, but moves her mouth close to her friend's ear, speaking low. “Benson told Shipman that Milady Walmsley's been doing it for years and years.”

“O Sarah!” breathes Penrose, dazzled. “Even Walmsley!”

“Yes, dear. Especially Walmsley.”

Clark squeezes Penrose's hand gently, and feels an answering pressure. They turn to watch the game.

“You know, Sarah,” says Penrose confidentially after a while, “Shipman did it twice last night. One right after the other.”

“Twice? Hee! Hee!”

“But she's such an idiot, Sarah! She made such a noise. She's going to get caught one of these days, and then she'll be for it!”

“Oh look, here she comes now. I do hope she wins.”

“It looks like Denning's won.”

“Pooh! Who cares about Denning?” They applaud anyway. Denning is jubilant, wreathed in happiness.

“Look, she's jumping up and down! She seems so full of energy today. It must be the electricity.”

Despite losing the toss, Shipman is soon serving. If Denning was swift and elegant, Shipman is formidable: her forehand strong, her backhand assured, her returns frequently unanswerable. Before long, she is leading 10-2. It appears that this will be a short match.

"Isn't she magnificent, Vicky!" cries Clark, bouncing on the bench in her enthusiasm. She does not notice that when Shipman looks up, it is to Lucy Carter, alone as always at the end of the bench, nervously wringing her handkerchief to and fro in her lap, biting her lip with those funny, crooked teeth of hers. And then Shipman's eyes glitter, and she delivers another smooth, devastating service.

"Well, whatever she was doing, it obviously didn't tire her out," says Penrose.

"Of course not, silly! Oh! Lovely shot!" Clark bounces and claps.

"But don't you think perhaps she's doing it rather too much? Even her marks are suffering. Hadn't you noticed?"

"Her marks? Pooh! They're good enough. Anyway, it's done no harm to my marks!"

"But it's distracting her, Sarah. She must be thinking about it all the time."

"About what? Oh! Bravo! Fifteen-four!"

"Well, don't you find it... rather distracting? I'm worried that it's going to affect my marks."

"Oh honestly, Penrose, what rubbish! Why should it?"

"Well... I don't know. Perhaps it's true what they say. Maybe it saps one's energy."

"Nonsense! Look how much energy Shipman has! Oh! What a return! Did you see that?"

"Perhaps it's the effect of the electricity."

"Well, perhaps... But look here, you'll have your turn soon enough."

"Oh no I won't, Sarah. Milady Walmsley will see to it that her blessed battledore team always gets the lion's share."

"Don't be so despondent! Miss Paulson will make sure it's all done fairly – in the name of science."

"Well... perhaps," Penrose admits grudgingly.

"Oh what is it now? Oh Vicky, she's at fourteen! If she wins this point, it's the match! Just look! Look how assured she is! O Lord, those eyes! Go to it, Shipman!"

It is a rather sad end to Shipman's triumph, for her adversary seems to have abandoned hope; and with an ill-aimed swipe, she loses the match. At the sidelines, Carry Walmsley is leaping up and down in exhilaration.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" Clark is on her feet, applauding. Gradually the applause dies down.

"Sarah?"

"Yes, Vicky?"

"You haven't got... feelings for Shipman, have you?"

"What if I had? She's very pretty, don't you think? Why, you're not jealous, are you?"

For a moment Penrose stares in open-mouthed horror. Then Clark explodes in laughter.

"Oh Sarah Clark, you complete idiot!" Penrose turns away angrily. Carter has gone, but she does not notice. No one notices. Clark tugs Penrose's sleeve.

"Oh look, Vicky! It's Smythe on next!"

Smythe is one of the better players. Tall and agile, she has even beaten Walmsley a few times; but today she seems apprehensive, as if the unexpected success of the juniors has used up the team's supply of luck. And in one respect at least she is unlucky, for her adversary is Thomas More's star player.

“Oh dear!” remarks the Head a little later, “It seems that Smythe doesn’t have her usual sparkle today.”

Walmsley overhears the remark. “If we could get her into the Scientific Society,” she thinks, “we could give her a little sparkle.” And aloud, “Come on Smythe! You can do it!”

Alas, by the third game it is clear that Smythe will not; and despite a creditable rally towards the end of the fifth, creeping into the advantage twice, in the end her opponent’s skill prevails.

And so the two captains face one another at last. Last term, Walmsley got the better of her opponent; indeed, she was the only Hepplewhite girl to win. Now, Hepplewhite are relying on her for victory, victory at last. She wins the toss, and with her first unanswered service she sets the tone for a game which will be talked about for years to come. Her opponent has every bit as much skill and determination; but it is the sheer force of delivery, the smooth power with which Walmsley can send the shuttlecock so far to the back of the court, and then, when her opponent is rushing to and fro, trickle it just over the net with an effortlessly insolent back-hand. Her opponent rallies often, however, seemingly indefatigable; and in the second game (the first Walmsley won for 13) eventually prevails at 17-15. However, from then on it is clear that Walmsley has the greater stamina; and she goes on to win the third for 11. It is the fourth game, however, in which for the first time it appears that Thomas More may yet force Hepplewhite to a draw; for at 11-12 to the More girl, Walmsley slips and falls, bruising her elbow painfully. The More girl pulls ahead two more points before Walmsley seems to recover, and from then on wins point after point, to end victorious at 16-14.

Having shaken hands graciously with her opponent, she flies off the court to acknowledge the Head's congratulations, and Miss Paulson's rapturous embrace.

"We did it! We did it!" she cries ecstatically, and,

"You were superb! And my! How hot you are in all those clothes!" Miss Paulson responds. She would love to take Walmsley's pulse, for she feels sure that it is at least a hundred and twenty, but the etiquette of the situation prevents this: Walmsley and the team must now escort their guests to a special high tea.

And in the back row, Penrose and Clark get to their feet.

"You didn't mean that about Shipman, did you?" asks Penrose, eyes downcast.

"Of course not, you fool."

"Would you... would you like to walk with me tomorrow?"

"Oh Vicky, I'm sorry. It's just that I promised... So much is happening just now. I'd love to do it sooner, honestly I would. Could we go out, perhaps, next Monday?"

"Only if you want to."

"Of course! Don't be silly, Vicky! I'd go with you tomorrow if I could! I'll meet you in the study-room before recreation on Monday. Honestly."

They look into one another's eyes. Penrose is wrestling with hope.

"I'll look forward to it," she says, then hurries away, her face burning.

The next day, Carter enters the study-room, hoping that she can persuade Shipman to accompany her on a walk during the afternoon recreation period. Of late Shipman has been neglecting her in favour of Sarah Clark; but perhaps today she will be friendly again. She goes first to her desk. Shipman, French, Denning and several others are working at theirs. Denning turns.

“Ah, Carter. Perhaps you'd like to take part in a little game with us.”

Instinctively, Carter is on her guard. She is not used to being invited to participate in the girls' amusements. She cannot help blushing her gratitude, even though she suspects a trap.

“And... what game might that be?” she asks nervously.

“Oh, what do you think we could play with Carter?” Denning asks airily, of nobody in particular.

Nobody reacts. Everyone seems unnaturally still.

Carter is increasingly uneasy. She goes to her desk, trying to appear busy with her books.

“Ah, yes,” Denning continues, as if struck with a happy thought. “How about a game of ‘I spy?’”

There is a snort of merriment from Clark, and a snigger from several others. Shipman is bowed at her desk, her face in her hands. Her shoulders are shuddering.

“I have work to do.” Carter puts her nose in the air and sweeps out to the accompaniment of renewed sniggering. Her mouth twitching with a mixture of anger and mortification, she decides to take refuge in the library, where she is able to work undisturbed — and to weep unobserved, if weep she must.

At the fifth meeting of the Scientific Society, Miss Paulson begins by reviewing the notes that Prudence Miller has taken over the past three sessions.

“I find this rather difficult to interpret, Miller. For example, what does this mean: ‘damp and flowering at Q’ – what on earth is Q?”

“Um... it's a place, miss.”

“Well, what place? Quebec?”

The girls laugh. Everyone knows that Miller is mad, and suspects that her notes are worthless.

“No, miss; Queensland.”

“Queensland? Whatever do you mean? What has this to do with Queensland?”

“Um... it's a metaphor, miss. I couldn't really say it directly. It wouldn't be decent.”

“Decent? Metaphor? My dear Miller, this is science. We describe things directly, we don't use metaphor. Explain!”

“Um... can I whisper, miss?”

“Oh, very well...” Miss Paulson rolls her eyes, and again the girls laugh.

Miller stands on tip-toe, puts her mouth to Miss Paulson's ear and cups her hands. With innocent, girlish lips, she softly mouths a tiny, explosive word.

“Oh!” Miss Paulson straightens, her cheeks aflame. “In that case, damp means... Oh! But flowering?” Again she stoops, and again Miller whispers, at greater length. “Oh, I see! Oh, that makes sense after all.”

“But what does it mean, miss?” asks Walmsley, intrigued.

“Just what it says, Walmsley. Damp and flowering... burgeoning...” Miss Paulson makes gestures of a flower opening with her fingers – “in Queensland.”

“Queensland, miss?”

“Yes, Queensland. A tract of country that kings don't have. Now then: let us see what reports we have of the effects on our noble volunteers. Hmmm... Tingling... Tickling... Throbbing... Energy.” She snaps the notebook shut. “It seems to me, Miller, that we need a volunteer with your descriptive power, to record what it is really like. These words seem to tell us nothing.”

“Oh no, miss, please no! I'm not brave, really I'm not!” stammers Miller, her voice a squeak of terror.

After a moment's pause, Walmsley speaks up, her eyes aglow with adoration. “Why not show us, miss? We are young: we just don't have your experience, nor your rich vocabulary. We could learn.”

“Oh! Well...” Miss Paulson colours slightly at Walmsley's praise. But then she remembers how educational this will be for the young ladies. “Very well. In the name of science...” Miss Paulson hops on to the table and lies down obediently.

As smoothly as she can, Walmsley takes charge. “Kershaw, you tie on the bell.”

“Can we do the contacts, Walmsley?” urges Shipman.

“Can we?” echoes Clark.

“I shall do the contacts, Shipman. You shall monitor the pulse rate. You, Clark, shall take the other hand.”

“Is this really necessary, Walmsley? I don't need everyone tugging on my limbs.”

“I think you will find that it is, miss. The girls pulled pretty hard after a little while, didn't they, Shipman?”

“Er, yes, Walmsley.”

“Benson, the other ankle, if you please. Ready, miss?”

“Ready, Walmsley.”

“Here I go...” And slowly, slowly, Walmsley advances the wires up under Miss Paulson's skirts. “I'm going for the usual place, Miller.”

“Right.”

“O Walmsley! Oh!” gasps the astounded teacher.

"I haven't quite got there yet, miss..."

"One hundred," says Shipman in a cool, scientific voice. Miller is taking rapid notes.

"Oh goodness! Walmsley, that tickles most dreadfully. Ah! Aha!"

"Not quite there yet, miss."

Clark and Shipman grunt with the effort of holding Miss Paulson still.

"Here we go!" cries Walmsley, and

"Oooh! Ahaha! Eee!" cries Miss Paulson. "Oh Lord oh Lord!"

"All right, miss?"

"Just a moment, Walmsley! Off a moment, please!"

"One hundred and twelve."

"They're off, miss."

"Are they? Goodness. I just wasn't ready. I'm sorry, ladies. Just let me compose myself..." Miss Paulson wiggles her hips, shakes her head, concentrates her expression into one of fierce determination. "Very well! On again!" She shuts her eyes tightly and waits for the onslaught. But as it recommences, she cannot help voicing her body's shock and surprise at the amazing sensation. "Mmmh! Oh! Oh..."

"You are not in any pain, miss?"

"Oh, I've never... Oh, my!"

"Can you describe it for us?"

"Ohh..."

"Does it tingle?"

"Yes!"

"Anything else?"

"It feels... oh!"

“Invigorating?”

“Oh... yes!”

“Do you feel an ache at all?”

“I can... oh! Oh my!”

“Any ache?”

“It's just that... oh! My...”

“Queensland, miss?” interjects Miller, helpfully.

“Oh yes yes yes yes...”

“One hundred and sixteen.”

Miss Paulson lapses into silence; her eyes are closed, her breathing rapid. She seems intoxicated by the force of life and motion as it takes its scintillating course through her most sensitive areas. The bell begins to jingle.

“Oh my... Oh my oh my...” she gasps. “This is so... invigorating!”

“Got that, Miller?”

“Yes, Walmsley.”

“I feel as if...”

“Yes, miss?”

“I could crush rocks in my... Oh!” Miss Paulson is becoming tense.

“Crush rocks, miss?”

“Yes, naked... rocks in my — ah! — naked... hands...”

“One hundred and twenty-four.”

Miss Paulson seems to be becoming a little agitated. The bell is jingling continuously. “Enough!” cries Walmsley, and lifts off the contacts.

Miss Paulson is shuddering; “Oh! Oh!” she gasps in a little, high-pitched voice. They watch in silence as she struggles to recover herself.

“Ahem!” Miller coughs sententiously.

“Yes, Miller?”

“Um... Queensland.”

“Oh... yes... yes, of course. Turn away, everyone.” She raises the skirts. Miller looks carefully. “Very well, Miller. Seen enough?”

“Umm... not quite.”

Walmsley continues to hold up the skirts.

“Enough now?”

“Um... yes, probably.”

“Let me look... Oh, Miss Paulson...” Walmsley drops the skirts. “Oh, Miss Paulson...”

Too much aware of her own predicament to notice Walmsley's, Miss Paulson heaves herself upright and tries to step down off the table. All she can say is, “Oh, my! Oh my goodness!”

Miller is still scribbling in her notebook. “Q inundated,” she writes, “magnificent bloom.”

“You seem very out of breath. Are you all right, miss?” asks Clark anxiously.

“Oh, ha ha! Yes, never better!” Miss Paulson smiles vacantly into the middle distance.

Miller looks up from her notebook. “And what do you now feel, miss, please?”

“What, Miller?”

“It's for the notes, miss.” Miller does not conceal her irritation. “What effects do you now feel?”

“Oh, let me try to describe it... I can still feel it, you know. It just goes on... and on... Oh my... Yes, it's a tingling, yes... an ache, yes, of sorts, that seems to come and go... Oh!” The last interjection is a sudden little moan. “That was one of them.”

“Is that like a little pain, miss?”

“Well, not pain exactly, Miller. Actually it's — Oh! There it goes again. It's actually quite an agreeable sensation. Rather sharp. It's somehow... refreshing.”

“Refreshing, miss?”

“Yes. It makes me feel young. It makes me want to laugh and run.”

“Thank you, miss.” Miller sounds disappointed. Indeed, she had secretly hoped for a torrent of illuminating metaphor and florid vocabulary from Miss Paulson. It is as if this electrical force deprives the volunteers of the powers of coherent speech. She notes Miss Paulson's remarks, and then, after a blank line, writes “Confused platitudes!”

“Well, miss, we have time for at least one more. What about Clark?”

In no time at all, Clark is up on the table, offering her long, slender toe to Kershaw, who attaches the bell. Once more, the familiar pattern is observed, Clark's initial extreme agitation gradually subsiding into a kind of trance, and then increasingly agitated gasping and panting, until the heart rate becomes dangerously high. Miss Paulson, though, notices an extraordinary sympathetic reaction, both in herself and in certain of the other girls. There is Walmsley, also apparently gasping for breath and rotating her hips in a strange, rather enticing rhythm. Shipman's eyes are heavy-lidded, her knees bent as if in a half-swoon, her breast rising and falling almost as much as Clark's. There is a strange flush on Kershaw's cheek, Benson is breathless, and Denning seems as limp as a rag doll. And yes, in herself also, that strange tingling, which never had quite stopped, seems to have intensified. Turning

modestly aside for a moment, Miss Paulson hitches up her skirts and, feeling cautiously, confirms her suspicions: the strange wetness has returned.

“Who next, miss?”

“Who hasn't had a turn yet?”

“I think it's only Penrose and me, miss,” says French.

“You should say, ‘Penrose and I.’” Miss Paulson corrects her while she searches her memory. Penrose and French, both rather timorous souls, have always been rather aloof from the activity, silently observing. Had she observed those strange symptoms of excitement in either? No: they had been stock-still, just like Miller.

“Shall we do French, then, miss?”

“No, Walmsley, I think instead we should have them helping a little more first, instead of just standing at the side-lines. I am inclined not to have anyone new just at the moment. Perhaps you would oblige us this time, Walmsley?”

“Willingly, miss.”

“French, you monitor heart rate. Penrose, you take the other hand. And I will manage the contacts. I should like to see how they are positioned. Will you be able to give guidance, Walmsley?”

“I shall try, miss.”

“Very well. Bell in place?” Walmsley gives her toe a little waggle, and it rings. Clark lets out a little gasp. “Heart rate?”

“Seventy, miss.”

“Very good. So, Walmsley, it's up here somewhere, is it?”

“Ooh! Oh yes, miss. Up a bit, miss.”

“Here?” Miss Paulson makes an effort to sound detached, dispassionate; but truly, just feeling the contours of Carry Walmsley's smooth, warm body under her

gloved fingertips is having an unexpected effect upon her feelings. She feels the urge to take off the gloves, and feel more carefully, more delicately.

“About there, miss. Mmff!”

“Is that right?”

“Up... just a... oh! Just a tiny bit, miss. Aaah! Aah! Yes! Mmmm...”

Walmsley's eyes close and she begins chewing on her lower lip.

“Hold tight, French, Penrose...”

Already, Walmsley's body seems to be writhing in the strangely hypnotic, sinuous rhythm that the electrical current always seems to provoke.

“Oh, this is lovely, miss...”

“Lovely?” Miss Paulson looks searchingly, but the girl's eyes are closed in the intensity of sensation; indeed, it seems as if, quite on the contrary, the electric current is a source of anguish.

“Oh, when you get used to it, miss, it's... Oh! Mmmm...” Walmsley bites her lower lip with her perfect teeth.

“Ninety-two.”

As the heart rate rises, and Walmsley's tremors cause the bell to jingle once more, Miss Paulson forces herself to look carefully at French and Penrose. They are quite unaffected. But Clark, Benson, Kershaw, Shipman – all seem to be reacting in different ways, ranging from Shipman's high colour and rapid breathing to Clark's apparent state of near-collapse.

But now she needs to concentrate, for Walmsley's gyrations are making it difficult to keep the contacts in position. Miss Paulson notes with something more than interest the instinctive movements, the constant rise and fall of the pubic area, the delicious flush upon the pretty face and neck, the sinuous flexing of the smooth, warm

skin. As she watches, Walmsley's brow concentrates into a frown, causing her to wonder if perhaps she has applied the electrical current too long. When, shortly, Walmsley's mounting excitement manifests itself in a sudden, rapid tremor, she withdraws the contacts in horror. But at once Walmsley wails, as if in reproach:

“Oh please, miss: I can take more, miss, honestly I can!”

Miss Paulson chides herself for her helpless folly, for it is clear that Walmsley has received too much of the electrical current: as she is helped to her feet, still moaning and shuddering, her hands flapping, her shoes chattering upon the hard oak floor, the anxious teacher fears that she has permanently harmed this beautiful, perfect specimen of aristocratic womanhood. As she watches Walmsley clasping and unclasping her hands in nervous over-excitation, still supported by Clark and Penrose, she is accosted by nightmare visions of a distraught Duke and Duchess, terrible with righteous indignation, calling down disgrace upon her head, the end of her career, the blighting of her aspirations, the ruin of the school.

But then Walmsley totters into her arms, clinging to her shoulders, and looking up with those beautiful, imploring eyes, she murmurs,

“O miss... You don't understand: I could have had more, just a little more...”

“Are you... all right, Carry?”

“Oh, yes, miss, but why... why are you...”

Miss Paulson turns away to dab under her spectacles with her handkerchief; and with an effort, she calls out:

“Time to tidy up, ladies.”

To herself, she cannot deny it: at some point during that intimate physical contact, Miss Paulson felt for the first time a kind of oneness, some deep and almost spiritual bond with another, a bond so wonderful that the prospect of never renewing

it seems an inconsolable loss; and Carry's last, imploring glance has left her in the troublesome certitude that her heart is no longer her own.

Part IIb

If one or two of the girls notice Miss Paulson's sudden emotional crisis, it is not remarked upon; and soon, very soon, they call "Thank you, miss," curtsying to her back as one by one they take their leave. Miss Paulson stands rooted to the spot, handkerchief to her mouth, staring sightlessly out of the window. To lose her heart like this is impossible, dreadful. Nobody would understand, least of all poor Carry. To betray the slightest sign of it would cause terrible scandal, and doubtless make it necessary to resign her position at Hepplewhite. She must be strong, strong for her own sake, and especially for dear Carry.

At last, it is quiet, and she turns. But she is not alone: there is Carry Walmsley, still fixing her with that pleading gaze. Despite her momentary tremor, she succeeds in injecting a cool neutrality into her voice:

"Miss Walmsley! You startled me! Are you recovered? What is it?"

"Oh Miss Paulson! I am well — very well. Only..."

"I was afraid for you, Walmsley. You seemed so... overcome."

"It is so difficult to say this, Miss Paulson. I... I hardly know how to put it into words. My feelings are so very vivid and yet confused. The... the electrical current..."

"Yes?"

"I feel its effects often."

"Often?"

"Yes. It is not pain, Miss Paulson. When my body stiffens, I know I tremble, but it is not in pain or in suffering. When you hear this little bell ring like this..." she takes it from the desk and gives it a rapid shake, and as she does so, a pang of

sweetness and warmth seems to suffuse the teacher's body, causing her to stoop and gasp.

"Oh Miss Walmsley... when you ring that bell, I feel a most extraordinary weakness..."

"Oh no, Miss Paulson, it is not weakness, but strength: it is the electrical force, calling us to a greater, fuller life..."

"I acknowledge what you say, but yet I feel it as a yearning, a yearning that clouds my mind, a yearning for I know not what..." Alas, the wretched teacher knows full well for what – for whom – she yearns, but dares not voice it.

"You know not what, Miss Paulson?" There is something eager in the younger woman's stance, her hands clasped as if in supplication. "Is it not a yearning for happiness, for fulfilment, for the heart's desire?"

"Ah, but what does my heart desire, Walmsley? Of that, I am not sure..."

Carry Walmsley's face falls. "Well, good night, miss."

"Good night, Walmsley."

"Oh, Carter! I thought I'd find you here."

It is break time on Monday, and as is often the case, Carter is in a corner of the library, deeply absorbed in diagrams and formulae.

"Hello, Shipman." Carter does not seem pleased to see her friend.

"I was wondering if you would care to come walking with me this afternoon."

"Why? Is Clark busy, then, Miss Shipman?"

"Oh Carter, don't be like that. Just because I like to go walking with Clark, it surely doesn't mean that I'm not your friend too."

"You don't know what they are saying about you."

“Why? What are they saying?” Shipman sits in a facing chair, suddenly a little pale.

“You know how people like to say disagreeable things to me, Shipman. Unfortunately so many people are saying them that I have to believe that they are true.”

“Tell me! What are people saying?”

“They are saying, Shipman, that both you and Clark have acquired an extremely dirty, vulgar, unladylike habit, which you both practise with such an utter want of modesty that you have become the laughing-stock of the school.” Carter looks up. Shipman’s cheeks are scarlet. “And I wish that were all.” She looks down, searching for words to express what she has to say. When she looks up again, Shipman’s eyes are glistening with tears. “They say that on your so-called walks, almost every afternoon, so I believe, unmentionable things happen. I am aware that you are ashamed to be seen with me, Shipman: I am not made of stone. But now I am afraid that it is mutual. You may not be stupid, nor ugly, as I am, but I do have my standards.”

Swiftly, without another word, Shipman rises from her chair and walks rapidly out of the library, the dwindling sound of her rustling skirts succeeded by a brief silence; brief, for after a few moments, Carter bursts into solitary tears. She crosses her legs and squeezes, and squeezes again; the feeling is strange, but somehow comforting. She has been doing it rather often lately: it is her only distraction from the heaviness in her heart.

That afternoon, Clark meets Penrose in the study-room. Penrose smiles in delighted anticipation. She has her parasol ready. But Clark does not meet her smile. She is looking downcast, apologetic.

"I'm sorry, Vicky. I'd love to, but I can't. I just have to talk to Felicity... to Shipman."

"Oh Sarah!"

"I'm sorry, I really am. But honestly, she needs to talk to me. It can't wait. We'll go out together soon, I promise. Perhaps tomorrow."

"If dear Felicity doesn't need you tomorrow, I suppose."

"Why, Vicky dear..."

"Then I shall go out on my own, today and any other day I care to!" And Penrose flounces out angrily, before Clark can see how upset she is.

"Good evening, ladies," Miss Paulson greets the members of the Club at its next, extraordinary meeting. Despite the short notice, most have been able to attend. "As you know, the obvious utility of the electrical current was demonstrated at the recent battledore match against Thomas More. A number of you had approached me to see if we might meet more often, and so I consulted the Head Mistress. I trust that she will give her approval, but very reasonably she has asked for a demonstration of the process."

There are one or two gasps – notably from Shipman and Clark. Carter, Miss Paulson notices, is scarcely concentrating, instead looking wistfully at the newly-delivered parts for her electricity generating machine. It is clear that the dear girl can hardly wait to test her new device.

"I think it best," Miss Paulson smoothly continues, "if we were on this occasion to deliver the electrical stimulation to a... shall we say, less intimate part of the anatomy. I therefore suggest we demonstrate administration of the current to... the forearm."

There are one or two soft moans of disappointment.

"I am aware that the effects upon the arm are likely to be of lesser interest, and indeed a discontinuation of our previous line of enquiry, but I am anxious not to muddy the waters by inviting any indelicate and, I might add, wholly unscientific speculation to our entirely scientific enterprise.

"I should add, ladies, that although we have been investigating some interesting phenomena, our experiments will have no scientific value unless we can soon put forward a hypothesis."

"Please miss, what's a hypothesis?" asks Denning.

"Anyone?"

Carry Walmsley is eager with her reply. "It's an idea about how things might work, which we can test by means of an experiment."

"Very good, Walmsley. Later, we will look for some hypotheses to test in our future experiments. But for now, we will content ourselves with a simple demonstration of the galvanic principles. Perhaps, Walmsley, you would consent to volunteer to demonstrate the effects of the current upon the forearm."

"Gladly, Miss Paulson. However, my sleeve is I think too tight to draw up sufficiently."

"I take it that you are correctly dressed, Walmsley?"

"Of course, miss."

"Then it will be in order to remove your dress."

This is a calculated move on Miss Paulson's part. The happy combination of a well-worn and oft-washed school chemise and Carry Walmsley's magnificent chest will ensure the Head Mistress's rapt attention: of this Miss Paulson can be sure. And no sooner has Carry Walmsley stepped out of her tight regulation dress than the Head Mistress sweeps into the room. She catches sight of Walmsley at once. She is all smiles.

"Well!" she says. "Good evening, girls."

"Good evening, Mrs Cunningham," the girls chorus in unison.

"And what, pray, is the purpose of this, er, undress?" Mrs Cunningham gestures at Walmsley, but the question is addressed to Miss Paulson.

"We proposed to give you a demonstration of the galvanic reaction, Ma'am," replies Miss Paulson smoothly, "as applied to the nervous tissue of the forearm. However, the electrical contacts must necessarily be applied to the naked skin. Owing to the tightness of the regulation dress, it must of course be removed for the purposes of the demonstration."

"Of course. Hmmm." Mrs Cunningham admires for a moment the admirably firm curves of Walmsley's delightful breasts; the well-worn regulation chemise reveals the shadow not only of the bodice beneath, but of the young lady's large, tender areolae. "Charming," she remarks somewhat irrelevantly.

"Kindly sit in this chair, Walmsley," prompts Miss Paulson. "Now, Head Mistress, in order to gauge the reaction of the subject's muscles to the stimulus of the electrical current, we place a bell upon the finger controlled by that muscle."

As she ties the bell to Walmsley's finger, it jingles slightly. Clark, she notices, makes a little "Hmm" noise as the bell sounds: the girl seems a little flushed already. A significant idea begins to take shape at the back of Miss Paulson's mind.

“Next, Head Mistress, we lightly moisten the area of the skin where the electrical contacts are to be placed.” So saying, she moistens her finger and dabs it on to Walmsley’s forearm, which lies along the arm of the chair. “Normally, we monitor the volunteer’s heart rate while applying the electrical contacts. But in the case of this demonstration we may dispense with that formality. So, finally, we apply the electrical contacts in the chosen locations.” Slipping on the gloves, she takes the wires and delicately points them into the smooth, white skin.

For Miss Paulson, this is an elementary experiment: the effect upon the flexor muscles was well known before ever she commenced her studies in Paris. But to a newcomer like Mrs Cunningham, it seems like magic. The finger curls, and the bell jingles. As it does so, Miss Paulson looks sharply at the girls, gauging reactions. Walmsley is pale, but that is easily understood: the close attention of the Head Mistress is no doubt a distraction. However, Shipman is flushed and breathless as before; and Clark seems to sag a little, letting out a little “uuh” sound.

“Anything wrong, Clark?” asks Miss Paulson.

“Uhh... no, miss – sorry, miss.”

“So now, Head Mistress, I remove and replace the electrical contacts. Please observe the rhythmical flexion of the muscle as I do so.” She lifts and lowers one of the contacts, and behold, Walmsley’s finger curls and uncurls, jingling the bell delicately.

“Uhhh...” groans Clark again.

Miss Paulson looks at Miller, who is impassive. So are French and Penrose. But Clark seems to be in an interesting condition. Forgetting the Head Mistress’s presence, and excited by her current train of thought, Miss Paulson seeks some data on which to found an interesting hypothesis.

"Clark!" she cries sharply.

"Oh! Yes, miss?"

"You seem distracted. Can you perhaps inform us of the current climate in Queensland?"

"In Queensland, miss?"

"Yes, Clark: a young lady with an interest in science knows the basic facts of geography, surely. What, pray, is the climate in Queensland, just at this particular time?"

"Oh... well, miss..." Clark stammers, "Just now it's... unusually damp."

"Thank you, Clark."

Suddenly uncomfortably aware of the opacity of this conversation, Miss Paulson looks to the Head Mistress, aware that some kind of explanation may be in order. But Mrs Cunningham's attention is clearly elsewhere. Following the line of her gaze, Miss Paulson at once finds her superior's preoccupation entirely understandable: for the outlines of Walmsley's engorged nipples are now clearly discernible through her thin chemise; and really the effect is most flattering. However, in the interest of science it is necessary to press home the advantage.

"And so you see, Ma'am, how the force of electricity is indeed the force of life and movement. I am sure it would be beneficial to our girls if the opportunity for studying its vitalizing effects were to be extended to, let us say, three times a week — particularly if, as I understand it, Thomas More has challenged us to a return match."

Mrs Cunningham seems unable to divert her gaze.

"I am sure that our girls would greatly benefit from such study. It is really... most becoming for a young woman. Permission is most certainly granted. Thank you, Walmsley... Miss Paulson... for your most eloquent demonstration. I have not seen

anything so... perfectly fascinating in a long time." With quiet dignity, the Head Mistress takes her leave, doing Miss Paulson the especial honour of a particularly gracious return to her dutiful curtsy.

"Thank you, ladies," says Miss Paulson, by way of dismissal. "But, ah, Walmsley, perhaps I could ask you to remain behind for a few moments."

"Very good, miss."

After the last of the girls has taken her leave, Miss Paulson sits upon a bench. Carry Walmsley, still seated in the experimental chair, does not face her, but sits motionless, staring through the window into the evening sky, her lovely cheek smooth, her expression blank. Her recent charming tumescence appears to have subsided. Quietly, gently, Miss Paulson removes the little bell from the young woman's finger.

"Miss Walmsley: I had one or two questions to put to you, if I may."

"Very well, miss."

Carry Walmsley is looking obstinately straight ahead, blinking rapidly, as if to banish tears.

"When a strong and forceful idea frequently occurs in close proximity to another strong, forceful idea, the philosopher David Hume postulates that there arises in the imagination a connexion between the two."

"Is that so, miss?" Walmsley's gaze remains unfalteringly upon a distant infinity. She bites her lip and blinks.

"I think that I have observed something upon which a hypothesis may be built, Walmsley. A most interesting hypothesis."

"Yes, miss."

“When a certain, very special, kind of excitement has been reached, we have been accustomed to hear this sound...” Miss Paulson shakes the bell rapidly. The sound of its jingling, though quiet, seems to reverberate around the empty room.

At once Carry Walmsley blushes and begins to breathe faster. Miss Paulson watches her heaving breast, and sure enough, those charming nipples once again begin to attest their presence.

“Walmsley? Do you feel something when I ring this bell? Do you?” Miss Paulson rings it again, and Walmsley gasps, grasping the arms of the chair.

“Oh miss... do I have to answer?”

“Walmsley... I confess I feel something.”

For the first time, Carry looks into Miss Paulson's eyes. “You do, miss?” She looks down, then, and away.

“Do you, too... Carry?”

“Yes, miss.”

“In Queensland?”

“Flooding, miss.”

“Flooding?” Miss Paulson's voice is quiet, almost hopeful.

“Yes.” Carry's voice is a hoarse whisper.

“What does it mean, Carry?”

“I don't know.”

“But Miller, Penrose, French... They haven't had the electricity. It does nothing to them. Only to us. That's... interesting, isn't it?”

“Interesting, miss.” Carry seems abstracted, but Miss Paulson persists.

“But Kershaw, Benson, Shipman, Clark... and we...”

“We, miss?”

"We feel it."

"Yes."

"Do you feel it, now?"

"Yes, miss. And...?" Walmsley dare not ask; but Miss Paulson is searching for the truth.

"Yes, Carry. And I, too. I feel it now. It is like a madness within me. I can scarcely sleep. And Carry..."

"Yes, miss?"

"What do we do?"

"Do, miss?"

"I feel impelled to some... some nameless violence. Strange images come to me in the dead of night. I scarcely know my own mind any more."

"Oh, miss... you mean you've never... touched it?"

"Touched what, Carry?"

"Where it tingles?"

"Tell me, Carry."

"Oh miss..." Carry drums her heels upon the floor. "I can't... can't sit here any more..." Carry Walmsley is becoming tearful. Miss Paulson is confused. Why on earth is the girl being so emotional?

"Don't go, Carry!"

"I can't stay, miss."

"What's the matter?"

"It's getting worse and worse, miss."

"What, Carry, what?"

“The feeling, miss. I tried to... tried to... But it kept coming back, stronger and stronger every time...” Blinking away her tears, Walmsley is struggling into her dress.

“Carry, what are you talking about?”

“Don't you see, miss? It's not just that bell. That's not it at all. It's... O Lord! It's thinking of *you*, miss!” – and with a half-stifled sob, Carry Walmsley rushes precipitately from the room.

Miss Paulson is thoughtful. “It all makes sense: association of ideas – myself, the bell, strong feelings... Strange, how in learning about the science of the body, we find that we learn about the workings of our own minds. There is so much to be done! So much!”

“Ladies, we welcome Miss Smythe to our number. Since she is a member of the battledore team, I thought it would be interesting, upon Miss Walmsley's suggestion, to see whether the electrical current has a comparable effect upon her playing as upon the others. Welcome, Smythe!”

The other girls mutter words of welcome, Penrose and French in a somewhat surly manner.

“Before we introduce Smythe to the wonders of the electrical current, ladies, it occurs to me to investigate in a little more detail a curious phenomenon which we have observed in our noble volunteers. I refer to the dampness.” Miss Paulson looks at her pupils to ensure that her meaning is understood.

“You mean, in... er... Queensland, miss?” asks Kershaw.

“Yes, Kershaw, exactly: in Queensland.”

Miss Paulson surveys a charming array of girlish blushes – although Smythe naturally looks blank, and Miller tight-lipped.

“Remember, ladies, that in the pursuit of scientific knowledge, notions such as modesty must be disregarded as mere stumbling-blocks, placed in the way of women in order to fetter our understanding and hinder our natural progress.”

Miss Paulson's eyes flash at these words, and she is pleased to see an answering glint in several eyes – notably Walmsley's.

“I have noticed, ladies, that some of you others appear to be somewhat affected when one of our brave volunteers receives the electrical current.”

Clark's hand goes up at once. “Oh yes, miss, please miss, I find I get really wet and um...”

“Wet, you say, Clark? Would that be... in the place we were referring to before?”

“Ah, yes miss, in Queensland.” Clark nods vigorously, trying to suppress a curious little smile that just twitches at the corners of her mouth.

Miss Paulson gazes curiously at her. “Well that is most interesting, Clark. I do believe I have noticed the same thing; and it may be that we are about to stumble upon a phenomenon of the greatest importance for science. Have any other ladies noticed this... reaction, when another person is undergoing the electrical current?” She looks at Kershaw, who blushes and looks down.

“I think so, miss,” she says quietly.

“Benson?”

“Yes, miss,” mutters Benson, a tinge of red upon her cheek.

“Is something wrong, Benson? Something bothering you?” Miss Paulson asks, apparently surprised at the prefect's embarrassment.

“No, miss. No, um... nothing wrong.”

“Well, then. Ah, Denning?”

"Yes, miss, I notice it."

"And... Walmsley?"

Walmsley shrugs her shoulders prettily. There is a blush, too, upon her cheeks. She gives a rapid, nervous little nod.

"Penrose?"

"I hadn't really noticed it, miss."

"I see. Miller?"

"No, miss."

"French?"

"I'm not really sure where you mean, miss."

"No dampness anywhere that you're aware of?"

"No, miss."

"Very well. Is that everybody? – Oh, no: Shipman – what about you?"

"Well, miss, I..." Shipman, too, is flushed, but there is a glint of relish in her modest countenance.

"Shipman wouldn't know, miss. She's wet all the time," says Clark sarcastically, eliciting scattered giggles.

"Shipman, would you be willing to volunteer this time?" asks Miss Paulson.

"Certainly, miss!" Shipman hops nimbly on to the table.

"Walmsley, you apply the contacts, please. Penrose, here is the watch: you will take the pulse. We will use just one cell, I think, this time."

"Oh, miss!" Shipman sounds desolated.

"I just want to see whether you will be able to submit to the treatment a little longer, Shipman, if the current is a little less violent," the teacher explains.

“Oh, I see, miss. Longer, miss...” Shipman closes her eyes and braces herself as Kershaw ties on the bell.

“And just before we begin, Walmsley, let us just examine... Queensland, so that we can verify the changes before and after the application of the current.”

Walmsley raises Shipman's skirts. “Looks dry to me, miss.”

“Miller, just note what you see, please.”

Miller looks quickly over the edge of her notebook, and then writes “Q: drought.”

“Very well, Walmsley, apply the contacts as before, please.”

Walmsley leans forward, reaching up under Shipman's skirts, until she finds the place which trial and error have shown most effective.

“Are they in contact?”

“Yes, miss.”

“Oh, miss, I can't feel anything! It's not strong enough! It's... oh!” Shipman's complaints end prematurely in a little hiccup of surprise.

“Something wrong, Shipman?”

“Mmm...” Shipman closes her eyes and begins to stretch luxuriously. “No... it's all right, miss...” She appears to go to sleep, but occasionally her lips twitch into a smile. The room is very quiet.

“Ninety-two,” says Penrose.

Shipman appears very relaxed. There is a long silence.

“One hundred.”

After quite a long while, Shipman lets out a little silent giggle.

“Are you feeling something, Shipman?”

Shipman hums dreamily.

“What is the pulse now, Penrose?”

“Still one hundred, miss.”

Shipman appears to be breathing a little faster; then, although she seems a little calmer, the bell begins slowly jangling.

“Just draw the skirts back for a moment, Denning,” says Miss Paulson softly.

“We’ll see if there is any change... Well, Miller. Have a look at this!”

Miller notes the time and, having jotted it down, leans slightly as she looks over her notebook. “Oh!” she says, and steps a little nearer. “Oh!”

Miss Paulson murmurs, as if to herself: “It’s quite different, isn’t it? Quite, quite different.”

Miller writes: “Q: abundance of flora. Inundated.”

The bell jingles on.

“Are you finding it difficult to keep still, Shipman?” asks Miss Paulson anxiously.

“Oh... it’s nice...” is all that Shipman can say.

“One hundred and eight.”

“What do you want?” exclaims Denning rudely, as Carter approaches the table.

“I just wanted to ask Miss Paulson something — why, what is the matter with Shipman?”

“She’s concentrating. Don’t interrupt!”

Shipman’s eyes are closed; her brow is tensed in a very slight frown; her lips are parted. She lets out a little moan.

“Oh Shipman, what is the matter?” whispers Carter, anxiously.

Shipman opens her eyes. She begins to moan louder and more insistently.

“One hundred and sixteen.”

“Don't distract her!” cries Denning.

The bell jingles more vehemently; and now Shipman seems to be trying to curl up, dragging her arms and legs in towards her body. Penrose and Denning at the arms, and Kershaw at the feet, brace themselves to keep their volunteer in the correct position.

“One hundred and twenty-four,” says Penrose in an ominous tone.

“Right! Contacts off now, please, Walmsley,” chirps Miss Paulson, and Walmsley straightens, raising Shipman's skirts as she does so.

“O miss! It's... throbbing! O how it tingles! Oh! Oh!” Shipman sobs, “Please couldn't I just have one minute – *one minute* more?”

“No, Shipman, that's quite enough!”

There is a little commotion as Shipman snatches her right hand free of Penrose's grasp and begins to rub agitatedly at the source of the overwhelming sensations.

“Penrose, you fool! Get her hand!” snaps Walmsley; and after a brief struggle, this is done. Shipman seems to be in considerable distress.

“One hundred and twenty, miss,” says Penrose.

“I'm not surprised, with all that struggling,” Miss Paulson remarks in a mildly reproving tone. “Really, it is only a little tingling sensation: nothing to become so excited about. Now let us examine the area. Lift her skirts, Walmsley, please.”

While Miss Paulson is distracted, Denning decides to blame their favourite scapegoat. “Look at her, Carter. It's all your fault. Why don't you go back to whatever it was you were doing, and leave her alone?”

“Why, what did I do?”

“She was fine until you came along and spoiled everything!”

Carter looks from one accusing face to another. Nobody says anything. Shipman is still sobbing, real tears now. Carter's face gradually collapses from righteous innocence into shamed defeat, and she returns to her bench, shoulders hunched.

Miss Paulson, who has been investigating quite closely, turns to Walmsley in a spirit of scientific curiosity. "Do you think you may be similarly affected, Walmsley?"

Carry Walmsley colours slightly and gives a little nod.

Miss Paulson straightens and addresses the girls. "Ladies: some of us may be suffering an unusual dampness. This is a point of great scientific interest. I would like Miller to note who is and who is not affected."

"Should I go round and check everyone, miss?"

"That is a good idea, Miller."

Miller busily takes notes as, with maidenly blushes, the girls one by one raise their skirts and allow her to assess the degree of dampness. She writes: "Q: Smythe, no. Penrose, hardly. French, no. Clark: plenty. Others: yes."

Shipman is standing now, still somewhat overcome; Clark comforts her. Carter occasionally turns and, unnoticed, casts angry glances in their direction.

"Next," calls out Miss Paulson, "I should like a volunteer from among those girls who have not yet come forward. This is entirely voluntary, but it would greatly help the cause of science. Well, ladies?"

French and Smythe, a little overawed by Shipman's reaction, turn pale; but Penrose offers herself "in the interests of science".

Wisely, Miss Paulson decides to keep Shipman's mind occupied. "Give the gloves to Shipman. She shall apply the contacts this time."

Again, the room quietens to watch as Shipman moistens the contact points. Almost all the girls seem to experience a thrill as a nervous shiver sets the little bell a-jingling.

"One hundred," says Clark, watch in hand. "Don't worry, Vicky," she smiles.

Penrose braces herself, eyes closed.

"Contact!" says Shipman suddenly, and Penrose's eyes fly open. She becomes still, and the bell falls silent.

"I can't feel anything at all," she says. Most of the girls look disappointed; only Shipman wears a confident smile.

"Down to eighty."

After a few moments, Penrose begins to speak again. "I don't think... Oh! Wait a moment..."

Clark leans over her, looking into her eyes, laughing quietly. Penrose's eyes sparkle with merriment now, and she lets out a soft giggle.

"Are you feeling something, now, Vicky?"

"Oh, it's just like... you know... Oh, I had no idea..."

"What are you feeling, Penrose?" asks Miss Paulson.

"I feel... the electrical energy... flowing into me."

"Is it uncomfortable at all?"

"Oh no... it's more like... a kind of itch."

"An itch?"

"Yes, it makes me want to..."

Clark's eyes flash a warning.

"To do what, Penrose?" persists Miss Paulson.

"Oh... to move about..."

“Yes, I think we all felt the same. Notice, Miller, how with the lower voltage, the feelings are less intense, and the girls are better able to describe the sensation.”

“Oh, this is so lovely...” Penrose is naturally talkative, and Miller takes careful note. “It feels absolutely... wonderful. Oh... it’s growing... growing inside me.”

Miss Paulson is most interested. “What, Penrose? What is growing?”

“Oh, the feeling, miss, in fact I think I’m going to...”

“One hundred and twenty.”

“Going to what, Penrose?”

“Oh no, it’s dying down... no, wait, it’s... oh, yes, I’m... oh, yes... oh my goodness...”

Penrose seems to be becoming almost uncontrollably excited, and the bell begins jingling. Shipman, Clark and a number of others seem flushed and agitated. Shipman, in particular, is also making strange motions with her hips. Miss Paulson herself feels an extraordinary elation, and a quick check reveals that her own pulse is racing.

“That’s enough, Shipman!”

“I think she’d like just a little more, miss...” says Shipman respectfully, but —

“Shipman! I said enough!”

“They’re off, miss,” says Shipman sheepishly.

“Oh, miss, may I please be excused?” pleads Penrose.

“Excused? But I thought it was perfectly clear right from the third form that girls are to attend to all necessities before coming into any meeting or lecture. We cannot have disruption, Penrose. No, that is a rule, and we are not sweeping the rules aside for you.”

"It is just the effects of the current, I believe, miss," explains Shipman, "I am sure that if she were just to sit for a few minutes, they will pass."

"Thank you, Shipman. Yes, there is a chair over by Carter. Go and sit down."

Penrose goes and sits, whimpering. Out of earshot of the others, who are now preparing Smythe for her first treatment, Carter whispers to the unfortunate girl:

"What's the matter, Penrose?"

"I need to be excused."

"Oh..." Carter clicks her tongue sympathetically. "I'll tell you what you should do: cross your legs tightly and squeeze. That works for me."

Penrose looks dubious, but tries it. "Oh, goodness, Carter!" she says after a few seconds. "However did you discover this?"

"Well, I suppose it was Shipman," admits Carter. "But you have to be careful: after a while you begin to feel rather strange."

"But it feels wonderful!"

"You mean you are feeling something already?"

"Absolutely. Mmm!"

"I thought it wasn't just me. But you do have to be careful, don't you know?"

"Oh, you can trust me, Carter. You're a friend, you know. Thanks for telling me."

"Oh, that's all right." Carter turns to her generating machine. It is almost ready to test; connecting the coils has proved a little harder than expected, but she is getting the hang of it now.

"Um... Carter."

"Yes?"

"You know Shipman and Clark are always going out walking together?"

"I know very well. I don't want even to think about it... Oh, fiddlesticks!" her hand has slipped.

"Do you want me to hold that still for you?"

"If you wouldn't mind. Thank you."

Penrose moves her chair closer and holds one of the wires.

"Would you like to come for a walk with me tomorrow?" she whispers to Carter.

"I? With you? You wouldn't be ashamed to be seen with me?" Carter's voice is high and quiet.

Penrose bites her lip. She herself has often been unkind to Carter, both to her face and behind her back. Actually, Carter is not that bad, really.

"I'm sorry..." is all she can say.

Carter is intent on joining the wires. They do not speak for a few minutes. When Smythe's bell begins jangling, Penrose does not react: she is watching Carter's hands at their careful work. Eventually, it is done. Carter looks up. Penrose looks at Carter's deep violet eyes: yes, one of them is looking piercingly into hers.

"Thank you for asking me, Penrose. Yes, yes, I should like that."

Penrose smiles.

Carter smiles back, just a very little. The effect is beguiling. Penrose looks away and blinks: she has just made two very surprising discoveries.

Miller, too, has made an interesting discovery. She has been carefully noting the degree of wetness of all the girls: Smythe, after her first treatment, was decidedly damp, and only the briefest of pats was necessary to confirm the similar state of all but French. Clark, however, insisted that she feel properly, and even went so far as to press her fingers quite hard against – and it must be said, into – her most tender

person. The act of touching seemed to cause Clark extreme gratification, and Miller was surprised at how agreeable was the sensation upon her fingers of the warm, succulent, sensitive flesh. She was reminded of one of Mr Bentham's classifications of pleasure mentioned by Shipman in a recent lecture, and has noted in the margin: "Pleasure of touch". And now, much to her surprise, she has noticed an unfamiliar sensation in her own personal Queensland, one which may well merit some private investigation later, when she can obtain some privacy. It would be pleasant indeed, would it not, if her own parts could afford her fingertips such a delicious sensation? And is not the investigation of pleasure a most worthy aim of science?

But now French has finally been induced to conquer her fears, and submit to the electrical force which has so reinvigorated the other girls. The pattern repeats itself in a manner most gratifying to the scientific mind: Smythe, who is holding French's violently twitching hand, is clearly as affected as all the other girls; and even Penrose, sitting over by Carter in a strange, contorted posture, seems to be in some sort of sympathetic delirium. This is curious, for she is not directly observing the proceedings.

"Miss?"

"Yes, Miller?"

Miller points at Penrose. "Obviously affected, miss, even though she's not directly watching. Could it be the sound of the bell, do you think?"

"Miller," declares Miss Paulson with a triumphant gleam, "I do believe you have the makings of a scientist. It requires imagination, which you as a poet seem to have in abundance." Miss Paulson is amused to see Miller's pretty blush at the compliment. "It would seem that in those who have received the treatment, even the

sound of the bell, by association of ideas, produces a sympathetic reaction. This is an important observation, which may lead to further great discoveries in the future.”

“Yes, miss.”

“And now you had better just check the girls, to confirm our theory.”

“Very good, miss.”

Quickly, and as delicately as she can, she makes her rounds. As before, Clark invites a more thorough probing, which Miller is happy to accept, until, seeing Miss Paulson's questioning eye, she pushes Miller away and smoothes her dress decorously.

Having completed her entries, Miller suddenly remembers that surely she, too, should be part of the experiment; and so, modestly, she turns away and feels her own personal corner of Australia. It is a dazzlingly pleasant, but inconvenient discovery. She can scarcely believe what she feels: for not only is she quite as damp as Clark had been, but her fingers seem unable to tear themselves from their exploration, as if they cannot believe their own evidence, but must constantly move back and forth, confirming her own engorged and slippery condition.

“Is something the matter, Miller?” asks Miss Paulson, noting their faithful scribe's apparent preoccupation.

Miller tears her hand away and wheels round, slightly flushed. “Sorry, miss, just completing my notes.” And, exercising that poetic imagination of which Miss Paulson so approves, she writes: “Miller: dry.” For sometimes the prosaic truth is damaging to the beauty of scientific theory.

“Thank you, ladies,” Miss Paulson dismisses the girls once the equipment has been tidied away. As usual, Carry Walmsley is the last to leave.

"Oh miss," she says softly, her blue eyes lustrously appealing.

"Yes, Walmsley?"

"I was wondering if you could explain something to me, miss?"

There it is again: that little sideways movement of the jaw.

"Of course, Walmsley. Come, sit down."

"Miss, I'm not sure I quite understand this hypothesis about sympathetic reaction. Could you just rehearse it for me?"

"Certainly, Walmsley. As you know, Hume believed that if two ideas are constantly conjoined, the mind forms an association. So, for example, if we experience a sensation such as that induced by the electrical current, and our bodies naturally react in a certain way, let us say by producing a particular fluid, and this occurrence is conjoined by the ringing of a little bell..."

"Tied to our toe..."

"Just so, tied to our toe... then it is possible that the idea of the sensations, and the idea of the sound of the bell, may become associated in our minds. So, for example, if I just take the little bell and ring it..."

As she jingles the little bell, Carry begins to rock to and fro, clutching her hands in her lap. "Oh, miss... Oh miss! I feel it!"

"You are becoming a little damp again?"

"Oh, miss, I feel such a tingling and such an aching inside when I hear that sound!"

"I confess, I do myself, a little," admits Miss Paulson with a little chuckle. "And that is because the sound is associated with the sensation, and the sensation with the bodily reaction."

“But miss, I feel the bodily reaction at other times, too: not only when I hear the bell.”

“Oh, Walmsley? Perhaps it is associated with other ideas.”

“I feel it, miss... Oh, I feel it whenever I think of you.”

“Oh Miss Walmsley, you cannot be serious.”

“Oh but I am, miss. I am just looking at you now. And inside, I feel such strong emotions that they amaze me. Oh miss: do you think that I am beautiful?”

“Carry! You must not ask me such a question!”

“Am I ugly, then?”

“O Lord, no! No, Carry – never ugly: you are the sweetest, the most... O Lord!”

Miss Paulson claps her hand to her mouth, but the word is out.

“Oh Miss Paulson: you cannot imagine! You cannot imagine how I burn when I look upon you. It is as if the electrical current is surging through my body!”

“Oh Carry! You must not say such things!”

“Why not? Why not, when it's true? See me, I burn for you! And more! Oh, I... I melt for you!”

“Carry, darling, hush!”

“I can show you. Look: look and see.” Delicately, Carry reaches to her knee and raises her skirts. As her pretty calves are revealed, Miss Paulson feels her heart fluttering, a strange tightness in her chest.

“Oh Carry, I can't...”

“Am I ugly, miss?”

“No, Carry, no... My fingers, I...”

But Carry draws her skirts higher, gathers them about her waist, jubilant at Miss Paulson's helpless gasp. “Do you like me?”

“Oh Carry, so fine, so fine! They look so smooth, so...”

“Touch them, miss. Tell me if they are as smooth as they look.”

Miss Paulson reaches out, then hesitates. But Carry's head is back a little, her breast heaving, her eyes closed, her lips parted in sweet anticipation.

“Oh Carry, how I have fought your beauty! Night and day! But now, your mouth... so red... I can no longer...”

It is her first real kiss. Afraid of its instinctive passion, and still more of the power in such yielding softness, of the unfamiliar thrills that threaten to convulse her, Miss Paulson draws back a little.

“Touch me,” Carry breathes. She pursues her with her lips until they lightly brush; and even this lightest touch sends thrills of such piercing pleasure through Miss Paulson that she falls upon her beautiful pupil in a yet warmer passion. Only Carry's excess of pleasure, and the need to gasp endearments, force their lips apart for the briefest of intervals before resuming their ardent union.

“My fingers, my fingers... They cannot resist you... How is it that you are so wonderfully beautiful?”

“Oh Miss Paulson... I feel such delight in your touch! Do not desist, I beg you!”

“Oh Carry... I cannot stop myself! What is happening to me?”

“Dear Miss Paulson... I feel just as if the electrical current were flowing into me! The touch of your gentle fingers seems to inflame my entire body! I ache for you: it is an all-consuming hunger!”

“You ache for me? O what is happening to us, Carry? What is happening?”

“Oh miss, even the very thought of you does this to me. Look, and see!”

“Oh, Carry!” For a moment, their embrace is broken, and Miss Paulson’s eyes are naturally drawn to that most delicate, hidden area. Gently she parts Carry’s legs with her thumbs, her face aglow with wonder. “It’s beautiful! I had simply no idea!”

“It is alive, miss. It throbs and it yearns; it aches for your tender touch... whenever I think of you. It gives me no rest. I can think of nothing else.”

“Why, Carry, this is terrible. Then you must stop thinking of me!”

“But how can I? Your slightest frown wounds my heart. Your least smile thrills me through and through. It is as if your every sentiment is magnified tenfold within me. How can I not think of the lady who rules my heart? I ache for your kiss: I will die without it – Oh! Again! More!”

Miss Paulson’s lips are tender, worshipful; Carry’s, avid.

“Oh Carry you are so, so beautiful...”

“What you do to me... Here... your hand... feel me...”

“Oh Carry, what...”

“Feel me! O touch me! Soothe away my pain!”

“What, Carry – what must I do?”

“Just here... O I beg you... Aah! Your touch is such bliss!”

“Just there, Carry? Really? Just there?”

“Just there, miss.”

“Like this?”

“Oh, miss, you cannot imagine... I beg you... I beg you not to stop, it is so...”

“Oh Carry you feel so delicious... Kiss me again...”

Part IIIa

But soon Carry's head falls back, her senses ravished, and Miss Paulson can only rain kisses upon Carry's outstretched throat.

"Take my honey, take my honey..." murmurs the delirious girl, guiding Miss Paulson's obedient fingers.

"Love, you are so wet!"

"It is all for you: just thinking about you makes it happen!"

"But why, Carry, why?"

"So beautiful... oh, so beautiful..."

"What, my love? Why do you tremble so? This is hurting you! It must be..."

"Oh miss... oh miss..."

"What is it, Carry? Why, darling, how you convulse! What awful sickness is this?"

Caught up now in her final urgency, Carry has seized her hand with unsuspected strength and is frenziedly teaching it those surprisingly forceful movements which will damp for a time the fire of her passion. Indeed, Miss Paulson fears that some injury may be done, until Carry falls back with a sweet moan, seemingly at peace once more.

"Carry, are you hurt, my beautiful darling? What awful thing just happened?"

Carry is still out of breath, but her flushed features are now radiant with dreamy satiation. "I am well, dear Miss Paulson, I assure you! — Oh! Oh!" — Carry shudders again — "But in that one sweet moment, the sweetest moment, I am freed from the agony of love... Oh!"

“But you were sobbing! Confess it, I have hurt you! O my darling Carry, what have I done to you in that moment of madness?”

“Dear Miss Paulson, do you not see that with your healing fingers you have released me —”

“Released you? Do you mean that that takes away the pain, as we rub a child's knee when she falls over?”

“— Yes, just so! — and then to find you kissing me with your sweet lips...” Her eyes brimming with grateful tears, a tender smile upon her lips, Carry lightly rests her fingers upon Miss Paulson's cheek; slowly, she shakes her head, as if in disbelief. “...Oh, it is not for you to call me beautiful. It is you who are beautiful.”

“Carry, Carry, do not look at me like that, or I shall be compelled to kiss you again.”

“Kiss me, then, dear Miss Paulson, and rekindle in me that sweet agony...”

“Oh, no!” Miss Paulson draws back. “What has happened to us — to me? I have become mad. O Carry, darling, forgive me!”

The last bell begins to sound, summoning the girls to night assembly. Miss Paulson stands, suddenly mindful of duty.

“We must go!”

“O stay, dearest...”

“Carry! This cannot be! We cannot listen to the voice of passion, of madness! No! You'll tear my blouse! You'll tear it!”

“O stay!”

“There will be scandal! Ah, you know it! We shall be ruined, Carry!”

“I shall go mad without you!”

Miss Paulson begins to be afraid, and an edge of severity enters her voice. "Carry Walmsley, someone will find us! Now let go, let go at once!"

Carry looks down abashed; then, artfully, using her eyelashes to greatest effect:

"Then... will you promise me that we will have our next tutorial at your cottage, dear Miss Paulson? At least, give me hope of that!"

"Very well, just so long as you let go!"

Finally, Miss Paulson is free.

"Good night, then, dear Miss Paulson."

"Good night, Carry! Oh, what have I done?" and Miss Paulson bustles out, overwhelmed and afraid at the forces she has unleashed.

At first, Miss Paulson had been rueful about being accommodated in the crude little gamekeeper's cottage in the school grounds. The floors of rough stone, the cracked walls, the ill-fitting doors and windows make this a spartan abode indeed in foul weather. But for the first time she must count her relative isolation as a blessing, for in her turmoil she must needs pace to and fro, crying out alternately in joy and despair.

And is there not cause enough for joy? Ever since adolescence, Miss Paulson has written herself down for the solitude of a spinster: with her somewhat pinched nose, thick glasses and accursedly freckled complexion, she has convinced herself that no man would look twice at her; and now, the immaculately fair Carry Walmsley has attested to her beauty, not only in words but in the most passionate of deeds. Hotly though she denied those attestations, their memory makes her blush with pleasure.

But is there not cause enough for despair? For surely the eldest daughter of an impecunious duke will be marked down for marriage. Even without that, to imagine a

life of harmonious intimacy with her beloved is to fly in the face of every social norm; and to allow such intimacy to repeat itself must be to risk disgrace, dispossession and eviction even from this poor little cottage.

But then, unbidden, comes the recollection of Carry's ruby lips, her breathless endearments, the wonderful warmth of her exquisite body; and once again Miss Paulson winces in forbidden joy. And there it is: that damned throbbing, that insistent ache – what Carry had spoken of as the “agony of love”. Sighing, Miss Paulson seeks to distract herself, as she has done a number of times before, by reading from Mr Bentham or Mr Mill; for she knows that without such diversion she will not have even an hour's rest.

But after a quarter of an hour attempting to read Mr Bentham's *Principles Adverse to that of Utility*, she is forced to acknowledge the truth: her imagination is wholly occupied with the recollection of the delicious Miss Walmsley – her soft, gentle lips, her eager yet tantalizing kiss, that long, smooth thigh, and yes, that beautifully shy and sensitive area where the least touch elicited such sweet sighs, such grateful gasps!

It is a matter for shame that for many years Miss Paulson had assumed that part of the anatomy was but a simple, discreet crease between the limbs; but the examinations after the electrical treatment, and still more of beautiful Carry, have revealed a surprisingly complex arrangement of tissues within – almost like a delicate, pink flower.

For a moment, Miss Paulson anxiously considers whether the electrical treatment may have caused some harm to the girls, and indeed to herself — could it have provoked some kind of hernia, perhaps, or a burst vein? And is that not related to the itchy throbbing she feels so often nowadays? Yet if it were an injury, how could it

be so swiftly aroused by the association of ideas – the sound of the little bell in the laboratory, for example – or the merest thought of Carry, and Carry's thought of her?

For a moment Miss Paulson puzzles over this strange circumstance; and then, with a leap of insight, she finds a comparison: the flow of saliva before a meal. Yes, yes, that is it: it is a reaction of some kind, a natural reaction. And perhaps, if the expectation of a meal were associated with the sounding of a bell, the flow of saliva might likewise come to be provoked by the sound merely? It is an interesting theory, and Miss Paulson makes a mental note to observe her own reactions tomorrow when the bell rings for lunch.

And now another thought comes to her. Saliva flows for a purpose: it is to facilitate the swallowing of food. Its appearance betokens need, the satisfaction of hunger. What of the wetness provoked by the electrical current? — And by the pangs of love? For sure, its purpose seems plain: to prepare for penetration by the male member. And for the first time, Miss Paulson grasps the reason why women, even those of the highest birth, permit themselves to be subjected to an act so... nauseating, so disgusting as copulation. It must be so! There is, analogous to the hunger for food, a hunger for penetration – and it is to this that the human race owes its survival.

Yet if it is a woman's lot to feel this hunger, what if no man is available? And does she not feel it, and Carry too, when they are together? But ardently though Carry encouraged her to stroke the outermost parts, she seemed not in the least anxious for penetration.

And now she thinks of it, Miss Paulson clearly recalls the distinctive swelling to which Carry directed her fingers: a small tumescence that seemed to dance delightfully under her finger-tips. Could this perhaps be part of some ingenious mechanism, provided by a beneficent Creator for the comfort of virgins, whereby the

hunger for penetration might be assuaged? Could such gentle manipulation truly banish the agonizing pangs of love? Can such a simple remedy exist?

Miss Paulson realizes that it is time to correct her ignorance: fastidiousness can play no part in scientific enquiry.

Rising, she fetches down her heavy book of anatomy and consults it carefully. Sure enough, the cross-sectional diagram shows vulva, urethra, vagina, cervix, uterus, ovaries — but nothing to correspond to the surprisingly definite little swelling she remembers so vividly. Over the page, there is a frontal drawing; and yes, there are the various parts, more or less as she remembers them. Heavens! With what delicate shudders has she turned this page in the past, unwilling to cast her eye immodestly upon such a shameful image! And yet, every detail is carefully indicated with a number and a line, and in the legend she sees the Latin description: Labia Majora, Labia Minora, Vulva, Vagina, Mons Veneris... And what is this? A little protrusion, just where she had felt Carry's swelling, at the upper junction of those tender petals: number eighteen. She looks down to the legend; and to her frustration, it contains only seventeen entries. She scans the text to see if the omission is explained; but to her annoyance there is nothing, nor even any mention of the swollen, moist state induced by the electricity. What, then, is the mysterious eighteenth part? Why is its name omitted? And why is there no explanation of its function?

Stung into curiosity, Miss Paulson retires into her bedroom with the textbook, there to make careful comparison between the diagram and her own anatomy. She draws a low table up to her bedroom chair and there positions two lighted candles, close enough to illuminate their subject; and then, scientific curiosity overruling modesty, she disrobes and sits naked, her mirror in her left hand, the book in the right. Sure enough, her own Queensland is no barren ravine, but copiously flourishing

indeed: below, two distinct inner lips, a deep, lush pink, moist and heavy with the fragrance of some exotic jungle flower; and there, at their apex, they merge into a little swollen ridge, quite similar to Carry's, and somewhat more prominent than that depicted in the textbook. Yet it has none of the angry, inflamed appearance of a hernia or other injurious swelling.

She puts down the book and, with the lightest and most tentative touches, she parts the tangle of red hair, the better to see this unknown territory which has awaited exploration these twenty-five years. Even this light touch is beguiling, and gently, anxious not to emulate Carry's intemperate avidity, Miss Paulson places one finger on the little swollen ridge, and with the most delicate motion explores the contours of the hidden tumescence beneath.

At once she experiences an amazing onrush of sensation which seems to temper and soothe the quite savage, almost burning irritation she has suffered so long. Suddenly limp, she puts the mirror down, allowing it to tumble noisily from her fingers in fascinated negligence. Yes, indeed it is here, this long-neglected spot, this nameless Number Eighteen, that has tormented and so implacably disturbed her concentration these last few weeks! Her eyes fall closed, her spine moulds itself to the chair, her body falls into delicious relaxation as her finger seeks and finds the precise spot where the very gentlest of movements bring the most exquisite, almost agonizing relief.

And then, sensing that even the effort of remaining upright in a chair may soon become too great, she rises from the chair, reluctant to part her finger from its precious discovery. She tears the covers from her bed and, heedless of night-dress, wriggles between the sheets, unconsciously gasping as her nipples drag deliciously against the harsh, cool linen.

Soon she finds a comfortable rocking motion which massages Number Eighteen to perfection; it is as if her limbs are weightless, her body floating, her head spinning in sheer blessed relief. It is as if she has been suffering an agony all her life, and only now has it lifted. With her free hand, she gently touches her right breast. The nipple is unusually prominent and sensitive: the gentlest touches seem to intensify her weightless bliss. And then, suddenly, her finger makes a little motion which sends a little dart, a little thrill, deep into her. Too astonished by its novelty to recognize that she has discovered the last of Mr Bentham's simple pleasures, Miss Paulson only tries to adapt the motion of her finger to recreate the unique sensation; and after a few moments, she finds that a slightly greater pressure brings another little dart, and then another. Her breath catches, her legs jerk and she whimpers with the force of each one.

It is not long before her fingers have discovered an irregular circular motion which brings the little darts more and more often, until they seem to merge and gather force within her. And then, all of a sudden, it is as if the balance of forces is reversed: for at first the sensations were the cool, refreshing wine of relief, then they sparkled with the champagne bubbles of intensifying pleasure; and now they have distilled into a fierce, choking brandy. "No! No! Too much!" thinks Miss Paulson; but her fingers seem to know better, and nothing now can upset the rhythm of their dance. Unaware that she is pinching her nipple almost painfully hard, unaware of her bucking hips, deaf to her own little cries, Miss Paulson's consciousness is snatched away by a tide of sensation that sweeps all before it, tosses it high and holds it, holds it, rigidly awash in torturous ecstasy, before hurling it down, down – not upon jagged rocks, but into the warm, soft nest that is her own bed; and gradually the familiar contents of the

room – sheets, blankets, pillow, candles, furniture – steal back into her universe, gently welcoming her home.

And now, turning over on to her side, it is no longer in the agony of desire, but only a flood of warm content that Miss Paulson recalls the sweet, innocent face of her beloved Carry – not the fierce, energetic Carry of the battledore tournament, but the soft, gentle Carry of the classroom, of the French lessons. How can such a tender creature possibly endure such a fierce onslaught of sensation, except to bask like this afterward in blissful release? And with such thoughts, Miss Paulson falls into profound and dreamless slumber.

The next morning, Miss Paulson's lateness at the staff breakfast table is excused with friendly smiles by her colleagues.

"Did you sleep well?" asks Mrs Bateson, the Head of English, as Miss Paulson takes her seat beside her.

"Never better, I thank you; and I hope the same for you?"

Mrs Bateson notices the flush on Miss Paulson's cheek.

"My, you do look well this morning, dear!"

"You are very kind, I am sure," murmurs Miss Paulson, her shoulders twitching with a little involuntary shiver; and it is true, she has never felt better, nor more comfortably relaxed.

"Won't you have some porridge, dear?"

"Oh no, I don't think I could eat anything, thank you — just some tea, don't you know..."

Mrs Bateson chuckles as she passes the pot. "Why, my dear Miss Paulson, I do believe you are picking up naughty modern habits from some of the girls!"

Miss Paulson blushes scarlet: how could Mrs Bateson possibly know?

Mrs Bateson laughs again to see the young woman's confusion. "Ha! Ha! Terribly contagious, ain't it? I say, everyone, even Miss Paulson's started to say 'Don't you know'!"

That afternoon, Penrose and Carter meet as appointed, and depart along the path toward the battledore ground.

"I wanted to thank you, Carter, for your great kindness to me," murmurs Penrose after a while.

"Why, what kindness have I done?"

"You know, telling me about that trick of crossing your legs. I know it sounds stupid, but I suppose we were always taught not to sit that way, and I'd never discovered it before."

"Oh, that..." Lucy looks away, somewhat puzzled. "Well, it helps if you want to go during classes..."

"I know! I've never heard it called that before, but... well, just between us, I've been 'going' in all the most boring classes. It's such fun, Carter. Nobody has the least idea what you're doing, do they?" Penrose turns a starry smile to her benefactress, who however seems utterly confused.

Carter's expression is one of startled horror. "What, you wet yourself in class? Ugh! I can't believe that's what you mean!"

"No, silly! Of course not! — Oh, I see what you meant now. No, I do it when I want to come off. That's what you're supposed to call it, don't you know." Carter still appears utterly confused. "Oh you know, the climax! When one goes all a-shiver!"

“You sound as if you think I should know what you’re talking about, Penrose. I’m afraid I don’t.”

“You mean you’ve never... you’ve never come?”

Carter weathers Penrose’s look of incredulity with honest bafflement. “Come?”

“Never...?”

Carter shakes her head in sad incomprehension.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I just assumed...” Penrose turns away, suddenly blushing.

Carter burns to ask her new friend to elaborate, but senses Penrose’s embarrassment. They walk on in an awkward silence.

Soon, they are overtaken by Miss Paulson, who has picked up her dress a little and is running, actually running down to her little cottage, an ebony ruler in her hand.

They curtsy as is customary, but Miss Paulson scarcely acknowledges them:

“Good afternoon, ladies!” — and she is gone in a swishing of silks.

“What a hurry she is in!” remarks Penrose.

“I expect she’s busy now she’s doing all this extra science.”

There is another pensive silence, eventually broken by Penrose.

“Do you think she’s pretty, Carter?”

“Honestly, Penrose, I try not to think about it.” Carter’s eyes are downcast as they walk.

“Why, what do you mean?”

Carter sighs. “I mean that for one such as I, thoughts of physical beauty are apt to be rather depressing.”

Too late, Penrose claps her hand to her mouth: she should have guessed that Carter might find this a painful subject.

“It is not as if I am not reminded almost daily,” Carter continues in a wry monotone, “that with a surfeit of women to choose from, no man will take for a wife someone with a wayward eye and crooked cursed teeth.” The corner of her mouth momentarily descends into a little grimace which is oddly fascinating.

“Oh but Carter, not all men go by physical appearances,” Penrose rushes to reassure her; but then, doubting the wisdom of this approach, she adds rather lamely, “— don't you know.”

“Ah, yes, there will be the philosophical type of man,” Carter waves her hand in airy irony, “for whom appearance is nothing. He will seek a warm and cheerful heart, the inability to spell, and excellence in mathematics. And how charming that will be – a life spent earnestly discussing calculus and the volumes of spheres! And then one day he will see a pretty creature like Walmsley or Shipman or you, Penrose...”

“Oh...”

“Yes, or you, indeed, and he will hate and despise me for being an ugly obstacle to his happiness, and will ill-treat me and berate me for the rest of my life. No, Penrose, I have humiliations enough without aspiring to marriage.” She narrows her eyes once or twice in a twitch of displeasure.

“But... but you have a very pretty smile,” protests Penrose, “really you do, Carter.”

Carter blushes at this, the first compliment she has ever received, but nevertheless turns upon her companion a grimace of a smile which is deliberately and comically hideous.

Again, Penrose's hand flies to her mouth, she hunches her shoulders and squeals with laughter. Her eyes are bright. Penrose's mirth is contagious: Carter relaxes and laughs too, but at once Penrose is serious.

"You know, it's true, Carter. You are pretty when you laugh. Your teeth don't look so bad really."

"Even a dragon looks pretty when she laughs. Have you ever seen a dragon laugh?"

"No, Carter, I'm not just saying it."

Carter is silent, still pink-cheeked. Penrose presses her point.

"Besides... there are those men who... I'm told... judge us girls on other things, don't you know."

"Other things?" Carter's voice is low.

"Yes. Such as... our ankles... our legs... or..." Penrose bites her lip. "...Or our chest, don't you know."

"Huh! A very low, common sort of man that would be," Carter asserts with a dismissive toss of her head.

They walk on a while in silence.

"Why do you say that, Carter? About that sort of thing being low and common?"

"Why... you speak of a woman's body... unclothed. That kind of attraction is base, animal. That is how savages are. Gentlemen, on the other hand, go by one's face alone. Nanny always said to distrust a man who looked upon your... chest. It is a sign of vulgarity, of coarseness. It is indecent to look upon a lady so. What sort of man would judge a woman on the shape of her body?"

“But surely that is nonsense, Carter. Why think you that dukes and earls furnish their gardens with marble statues of fair naked maidens?”

“I do not deny that even those in high position may have a savage and ignoble temperament,” Carter replies with crisp aloofness, “but you must remember the words of our blessed Saviour, who said that he who looks lustfully upon a woman has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” And she gives a delicate little shudder.

Again, Penrose falls silent for a while. When she turns aside on to the path that leads to the rose garden, Carter follows her lead.

“D’you find it agreeable in the rose garden?”

“It is tranquil there.”

“Yes.”

The roses are past their best now, but there are benches where one may sit, surrounded by hedges. It is a pretty spot, no doubt set up by the people at the Great House long before it became a school. And there, sure enough, is a charming statue upon a pedestal, making a centre-piece. It is Diana, fitting an arrow to her bow. She is not naked, but her perfunctory drapes leave little to the imagination.

“There!” cries Penrose, indicating the statue.

Carter looks toward it briefly, then turns back to her companion. “Well? What of it?”

“Is it not beautiful? Can one not appreciate its beauty without lustful thoughts? Why, I am a lady, and even I can appreciate its beauty. Where is the lust? Can one commit adultery with a little statue? Come, let us examine it closer.”

Reluctantly, and with blushing countenance, Carter lifts her skirts a little as she steps on to the raised lawn, her other hand grasped firmly by the resolute Penrose.

“Look at her from this angle, Carter. Even as a mathematician, your eye must see and admire the curve of her back, the shape of that arm. Confess it, now, the human body is a marvel of beauty, which this artist has displayed to perfection. Why should it be dark sin to admire the handiwork of the Lord God?”

Carter is speechless, and seems to be breathing heavily, apparently wrestling with her reluctance to admire the statue.

“Do you feel nothing? Does it not affect you, to see this beauty?”

“She is... she is...”

“...Beautiful, yes. Of course, she doesn't have your lovely figure, Carter, but then again she isn't tight-laced into a corset either.”

“But I wear no corset!”

Penrose wheels round, round-eyed with derision. “O Carter! You of all people! What nonsense!”

“No, I have never worn a corset. My mother would not permit it. Such things are precisely designed to attract the baser type of man. She would never have it. No, she wrote to the Head, and I was excused.”

“But everybody says you —”

“Oh, everybody says, everybody says... It is quite clear that I know only the tiniest fraction of the lies and gossip which circulate about me.”

“So it really isn't true? I can scarcely believe it.”

“What? That I am really thin at the waist? Why should that be so hard to believe? Some are thick: I am thin. That is all.”

“And they say you lace yourself so tight to make up for your... oh dear...”

“...for my ugly face, is that it? Well you can tell them that for once they’re wrong!” Carter’s good eye – it is surprising how quickly one learns to ignore the other one – is blazing with anger now.

“O Carter, I’m sorry. Why are we so horrible to one another?”

They stand for a while, looking at the graceful Diana. Carter puts up her hand, feels the smooth marble of the huntress’s leg. As she calms, her caress becomes slightly more sensuous. From behind her, Penrose’s voice is deeper and a little tremulous.

“When I was at Elementary, my freckles were worse than they are now. And do you know what they used to call me?”

Carter looks at the statue, runs a finger over the ridge of a tendon, not knowing how to reply.

“They called me spotty, and laughed at me when I cried. I hated it when they did that to me; so then, why do I... O my God, Carter, I’m so sorry...”

It is simply the done thing, one does it without a thought: when a young woman bursts into tears, another will take her into her arms to comfort her. It is only natural.

“O Penrose, Penrose, I forgive you... You weren’t the only one...”

Penrose shakes her head a little and looks at Carter imploringly through her tears. Carter’s mouth has lost its ironic tightness now. Her lips, though thin, are warm and soft, concerned, caring; and so close, really so close to Penrose’s, a little open in supplication.

And for Carter, it is only natural to seal the forgiveness with a kiss; only natural that her hands should forsake the horrid, leathery hardness of Penrose’s corset – one up to a snuggling shoulder, the other down to the warm, voluptuous curves beneath; natural, too, to respond to the gentle, affectionate pressure of those sweet young hips,

those charmingly pointy little breasts whose delightful soft friction against one's own, even through two sets of clothes, inspires the tenderest affection, the sweetest of kisses.

"Dear Penrose!" breathes Carter, overcome with emotion.

"You must call me Vicky — that is, if you'd like."

"And we shall be friends?"

"Yes, we shall."

"Then you must call me by my first name, also. I'm Lucy."

Penrose jumps back, apparently shocked. "Your name is Lucy?"

"Yes. Lucy. Why?"

"Of course! Of course! It all fits together!"

"What do you mean?"

"O bother! — I and my stupid wagging tongue... I wasn't to say anything! Now look what I've done..." Penrose lectures herself in an angry undertone; then frowns and bites her knuckle as if in thought. "Mind, I'm beginning to see why..."

"Why what, Vicky? Why are you being so mysterious all of a sudden?"

Penrose looks at Lucy Carter with a kind of awe: "I... I promised not to tell... But yes, I believe you should know some of it... Come, let's sit over there on the bench. I need to think a minute."

"Why are you looking at me like that, Vicky? You make me feel like the Loch Ness Monster." Again, that fascinating little ironic twitch at the corner of the mouth.

"I do believe I am beginning to understand it myself, now," Penrose says, gazing wistfully at her friend.

"I don't know what you mean. I do wish you would stop speaking in riddles, Vicky."

“Let me explain. Of course people... we... have been rather ill-treating you recently. It's so stupid.”

“Recently? People have always been unpleasant to me. Teachers, the other girls, everyone. Perhaps I'm just used to it by now.”

“Well, one person... I mustn't tell you who... One person has been particularly catty about you recently — just in the last few days. But the fact is...” Vicky lowers her voice almost to a whisper, her eyes suddenly alight with mischievous relish — “...she has the most terrible crush on you! Now what do you think of that?”

“Crush? What's that? Oh, you don't mean...”

“I mean she's in love with you, Lucy. She loves you madly, and she's afraid to let anyone know! She was so nasty about you behind your back! — And everybody else just joined in. And now I see why she did it! It was so that nobody would suspect!”

Lucy stares unseeing into the distance, carefully assuming a vague expression. Inwardly, she seethes with emotion: a mix of almost vertiginous elation and boiling anger. She wants to cry “The bitch!”, as she once heard one of her least favourite Nannies described by her father in a moment of rare passion after she had received a particularly savage beating. All she does say is:

“I think she should be taught a lesson... whoever she is.”

Vaguely sensing Lucy's elation and anger, Vicky remains silent.

“And whatever it is she feels for me, it cannot be love. You say she is in love with me. But if that were true, would she not tell me so? And how could she speak ill of me to others? How could she? No, that is not love, Vicky. Whatever it is, it is not love: it is something base. No wonder she is ashamed. I think you love me more truly than she does.”

There is another thoughtful pause; and then, "Lucy, I think I may have lit upon a good way to teach... her that lesson. For you are right, you know. She cannot truly love you."

"And so what do you propose, pray?"

"We let it be known that there is someone else who loves you truly, and not in any base sense; and that you truly love her too."

"But how would that teach this person a lesson? I do not see it."

"It would make her jealous! If her love for you is of an ignoble sort, then she is sure to be afflicted with jealousy!"

"I suppose you are right... But nobody would believe such a thing!"

"But if someone were to see you, Lucy, arm-in-arm with your friend, and maybe even chastely kissing in purest friendship, would not people then have to believe?"

"But who would be seen kissing the changeling girl?" Lucy looks into Vicky's eyes, puzzled at first, and then, with the dawning of her realization, she sees once more those supplicant lips: and what more fitting way to acknowledge such nobility of spirit than to kiss them in most tender gratitude? But what a strange burning there is now in her chest! What strange flutterings in her belly!

"O Vicky! How very noble you are! But... I am not sure..."

"Not sure, Lucy?" Vicky looks deep into Lucy's eye, and moves to return the kiss.

But Lucy puts her hand to Vicky's cheek – a gesture of the most tender restraint.

"Vicky, you are most wonderfully kind — and courageous... Only I am afraid..."

"Afraid? But why?" Vicky's gaze seems to search for an answer.

"I do not know... Only, let me ponder it for a little while, dear Vicky, I beg you. I am so confused!" Lucy turns away, overwhelmed by her thoughts.

Sensing her friend's distraction, Vicky takes Lucy's hand in her own, and kisses it softly.

"Dear Lucy... of course you shall think, my dear. And now I shall leave you to do so."

"Vicky, dear..."

But Vicky has already sprung up, light as air, as if freed from the guilt of her misdeeds, and is skipping away down the path. At the gate, she turns for a moment to smile and wave, but Carter is already distracted in thought once more.

Her mind racing, Lucy gives her thighs a squeeze. Could it be Shipman? With a shudder, she remembers their confrontation in the library: Shipman had not attempted to deny it; but what if Shipman were circulating a similar rumour about her, as a kind of revenge? No, surely not. Besides, if Shipman cares for anyone, it is Clark. She squeezes her thighs again in annoyed contempt. And what of Denning? Yes, why not Denning, indeed? She had been particularly unpleasant recently, had she not? What if it were Denning that felt some base, unnatural attraction — Lucy gives an excited little shudder: how sweet it is to have such power over another, for once! Another little squeeze, and a thrill of power!

Yes, if an attraction is not true love, then it must needs be something base and physical. What was it Vicky said? Ankles, or legs, or... breasts? Her own are tingling still from that delicious contact with Vicky, and as she squeezes her legs again she feels deep in her stomach a kind of excitement. How exciting, to think that a woman's breast might actually be found beautiful — even the subject of adoration! She looks at

the statue of Diana. Yes, true, a naked breast is a comely thing; and true, her own are larger than most girls', almost as prominent as Walmsley's — and does Walmsley not receive almost universal, uncritical adulation?

As is her habit, she has been sitting with her arms across her chest, her fingers lightly tapping on her shoulders as she thinks; it is a defensive, comforting position; but now, curious, she lowers her hands, looks down at herself, raises her breasts a little. "Is it you? And you?" She gives them a little squeeze: they tingle still, and the nipples are firm and tender. Another little gentle squeeze — really very comforting. Just to think: some wretched girl — yes, perhaps Denning — doing what? Dreaming of her? Wanting to hold her, kiss her, fall at her feet? A jealous, possessive passion, perhaps? She must stand more upright, Lucy thinks: shoulders back, make the most of her charms — and be watchful: surely, if she is watchful, she will see some sign — a stare, perhaps, or a longing glance — and then she will know that she has power, power that she must use wisely, the power to raise up or to cast down.

Once more she squeezes her legs and aching nipples — it is a sweet ache — and once more comes that strange thrill of elation: deep inside at first, it seems to surge within her. She can visualize her mystery lover now, at her feet, imploring. But whose face does she have? Shipman's? Denning's? Again she flexes her thighs, and again, and an emotional tide seems to rise up and propel her into a state of the most extraordinary elation, followed by an equally extraordinary mental calm. "The good Lord has shown me the way," she thinks as her mind clears, "and if He in His wisdom has granted me some small degree of power, then I must use it wisely and mercifully."

Rising unsteadily, and just a little breathless, she makes her slow and thoughtful way back to the school buildings.

“Please miss?” It is the seventh meeting of the Scientific Society, and Shipman has a special request. “May I do some work with coils, please?”

“Yes, of course, Shipman. I am sure that Carter will be able to explain things to you — why, Carter, what’s the matter? There’s no need to look so embarrassed. Remember the old saying: to teach something is to understand it for the first time. I am sure I can rely on you.”

“Very well, miss,” murmurs Carter sombrely.

It is odd: normally Carter is so keen, but now she seems to be making a show of reluctance.

Miss Paulson watches the awkward pair until she can be sure that Carter has begun a methodical explanation of the work so far. The girl has a good understanding, and soon her awkwardness seems to be forgotten. Good: Miss Paulson turns to the others.

“Very well: who will be brave enough to volunteer today?”

Inconveniently, all but Prudence Miller seem anxious to demonstrate their courage. Eventually, Kershaw is chosen.

While Miss Paulson’s attention is distracted, Shipman tugs at Carter’s sleeve, interrupting her discourse on the properties of coils.

“Yes, yes, I know. But Lucy, Lucy, why are you being so horrible to me?”

“I’m not being horrible, Shipman. You are. I’m trying to explain this to you and I don’t think you’re listening.”

“I am!”

“Then kindly don’t interrupt. As I was saying, the movement of a magnet through the coil produces an electrical current...”

Shipman is trying to listen, but there is something so wonderful, so admirable about Lucy's clear, competent enthusiasm: it is as if she were a born teacher.

"...but the interesting thing is, that if a current is passed through the coil..."

"Lucy!"

"Shipman, please!" Lucy's whispered exasperation strikes Shipman like a whiplash.

Shipman looks down in shame, her eyes glittering with repressed tears; then looks at Lucy in soft-eyed penitence, determined to listen.

Appeased, Lucy continues her monologue as placidly as she can. "As I was saying, if a current is passed through the coil, it becomes magnetic, and an iron rod in the centre, which we call a core, will be attracted magnetically. I am now interested to see whether, by interrupting the electrical flow, some inconstant, oscillating motion might be induced into the core." For the first time, Carter turns to Shipman and looks into her eyes.

"Oscillating?"

"Yes. A reciprocating to-and-fro motion could then be used to propel a rotary engine, as with steam." Lucy Carter's good eye has the glint, and her voice the quiet tremor, of enthusiasm. It is infectious.

"You mean... the electrical current could be used to replace steam?"

"Perhaps... in places where steam might be inconvenient, you know... such as underground, or..." Carter stares into the distance, her eyes unfocused, contemplating the infinite possibilities.

"...And actually move things!" Shipman's imagination is suddenly caught.

"Yes!" Carter turns back to Shipman, and sees in her face the birth of the same enthusiasm. "But how do we introduce the reciprocating motion?"

“Think of a steam engine, Lucy! How do they cause the piston to reverse direction?”

“Why, with valves, of course.”

“And with electricity, what is it that works like a valve?”

“Why, a switch!”

“Exactly! Then, Lucy, can we not connect a switch to the moving core, just as in a steam engine a valve is connected to the reciprocating piston?”

“Ah!” Lucy rocks back in her chair, her eyes unfocused and widely divergent. “Felicity, that is wonderful! I think I see it! Wait! Yes! Some paper, and a pencil!”

Miss Paulson turns momentarily aside from her observation of Kershaw's mounting excitement, diverting though it is, to look at Carter and Shipman. Carter has evidently been sketching a diagram; and whatever it is, Shipman is standing, bent over it, pointing and talking excitedly. “Dear me,” she thinks, for the graceful sideways curve of Shipman's lower back, and the fall of her skirts, are wonderfully fetching.

“Please, miss, it's now a hundred and twenty-eight!” remarks Walmsley sententiously, recalling Miss Paulson from her reverie.

“Very good, Walmsley.” Miss Paulson congratulates herself on the calm, level tone of her reply; it seems that every time Walmsley speaks or moves she now feels a thrill in her heart, an extraordinary excitement deep in her belly. She is like Saint Sebastian, a martyr to love's exquisitely painful darts.

“Shall I take them off, miss?” asks Clark.

Miss Paulson forces her mind to address the question. Kershaw seems wildly excited: it is as if the pangs of the electrical force have the same character and effects as those of love. The bell is ringing constantly.

“No... No, keep them there!” pants Kershaw.

“Kershaw seems extraordinarily anxious to continue, does she not, Clark?” asks Miss Paulson coolly. “Your stoicism does you credit, Kershaw. Perhaps we should wait a little while, and observe.”

“Oh yes, oh yes...” Kershaw begins tugging violently with arms and legs, causing her holders to brace themselves; her face is frowning as if in intense concentration. Then, suddenly, her eyes snap open. Her breath comes fast and shallow: “Ah! Ah!”

“Is it becoming too much for you, Kershaw?” asks Miss Paulson anxiously – for is this surfeit of agitation not strangely familiar?

Clark bends forward, using all her weight to maintain the contacts in position. “Benson! French! Hold her knees! Hold her knees!”

All the girls seem to be breathing heavily; eyes are gleaming, lips are parted, bosoms heaving. Penrose seems a little unsteady on her feet. Miller looks from one to another, observing, scribbling furiously in her exercise-book.

Staring, Kershaw takes an immense lungful of air, as if to cry out. But instead, her entire body becomes tense, her eyes fall closed once more and her mouth forms an agonized grimace. Surely this nervous excitation is becoming excessive, thinks the anxious teacher:

“Oh! Kershaw! What’s wrong?”

But the girls seem unconcerned, even a little determined that Kershaw shall not escape their grip; still rigid, she exhales noisily through her clenched teeth once, twice, three times, in deep, vehement gasps like stifled coughs. So rigid is she that only the trilling of the bell, and the quivering of her stomach, betray her inner turmoil. And then she exhales a long, sweet sigh, and falls back as if exhausted.

Instinctively, the girls holding her limbs relax. whatever it was, the crisis seems to be over. Clark removes the contacts with a satisfied air.

Overcome, Penrose totters in a swoon, and is caught by French. "Unlace her, please, French," says Miss Paulson calmly, and under her breath, "silly girl," before turning back to the dazed Kershaw. "Is she recovering?"

"I think she's very well, miss," murmurs Clark, "— aren't you, Kershaw?"

But a dreamy sigh is the only response of which Kershaw is capable.

Miss Paulson turns to Carry Walmsley. She too is panting a little, an attractive flush upon her cheeks, eyes glittering. It seems unusually warm: there is a curious fragrance in the air. Miss Paulson has noticed it before.

"Please miss, what... what happened?" asks Denning; but Clark elbows her and whispers something in her ear.

Miss Paulson appears preoccupied for a moment; but then gathers her wits. "Ah, Miller?"

"Yes, miss?" Miller has been scribbling her notes assiduously.

"Be quick with your notes; and then perform the usual tests."

"Very good, miss."

"And Miller?"

"Miss?"

"Don't forget to test Shipman and Carter."

"Yes, miss. No, miss."

Hearing her name, Carter is distracted. "Did she say we should be tested? What does she mean?"

"You'll see," responds Shipman, "I'll get her to do me first. Now look, Lucy, I've had an idea. Give me your pencil..." And she begins to sketch another diagram.

When finally Miller approaches with her notebook, Shipman raises herself a little way off her chair, and lifts her skirts at the rear.

“What on earth are you doing?” asks Carter, aghast.

“She’s just feeling my underneath,” says Shipman with a little grunt, “to see if I’m wet.”

“Ugh!”

“It’s all in the cause of science,” says Miller piously, inscribing “Damp” against Shipman’s name.

Reluctantly, Carter likewise raises herself and lifts her skirts. “Be quick! We’re busy! Ooh! My God!”

“Oh, language, Carter!” grins Shipman.

“What’s she doing?” gasps Carter.

“I’m just testing,” says Miller in a small voice; and after a moment she withdraws her hand. Against Carter’s name she writes “Nothing!”

Carter pulls her skirts down and sits heavily, her eyes staring. “Well!” she exclaims, breathless with indignation: it is most surprising to be handled so brusquely in such a sensitive place. But then, in the absence of any reaction from Shipman, she leans forward to examine the new diagram. “Oh yes... I see... that should work. Perhaps we should arrange to see Mr Jepson, to see how such a thing can be made. But this drawing is too imprecise. Give me the pencil. I think I can see how it should be done...”

“Ah, Carter?”

This time, it is Miss Paulson who interrupts. Carter quells her impatience and assumes a meek expression.

“Yes, miss?”

"I think you're the only one here who hasn't had the treatment. Would you be willing to undergo it? It would very much help our experiment."

Carter pales and bites her lip, then reluctantly rises from her chair. "Very well, miss."

"Don't worry, Carter," says Walmsley reassuringly, "it's not that bad."

Carter flashes her a look of gratitude, then hops up on to the table. Benson slips off her shoes. The next moment, Carter lets out a piercing squeal, causing everyone to jump back in shock. "I'm sorry, it's just that she touched my toes and... I'm terribly ticklish. Might I do it myself, please?"

"Yes of course she can, Benson," says Miss Paulson soothingly, while Carter ties the bell to her toe. "Clark, you had better be particularly careful. I will hold her skirts for you."

Clark is as careful as she can, but the trailing wires are her undoing.

"No no no no no!" squeals Carter. Again, everyone jumps back, ears ringing. The room seems still to reverberate with Carter's high-pitched squeal. "I'm very sorry..." mumbles Carter abjectly. "I... I could do it myself, if you showed me where to put them."

"Hmmm. Very well. But we will need to monitor your heart-rate somehow. And... I am afraid that we will have to raise your skirts... rather far."

"Oh, that's all the same to me," says Carter airily. "It's all for the good of science."

"Exactly, Carter. Very well: give her the gloves, then, Clark."

"Please, miss, how are we to monitor her heart if she is holding the contacts?" objects Walmsley.

“Miss Carter, would you have any objection to opening your blouse a little so that Walmsley can feel your heart?”

“Very well, miss. Would you do it please, Walmsley? I can't with these gloves.”

Walmsley unbuttons Carter's blouse.

Carter whimpers and kicks her legs as Walmsley slides her hand into position: “Please don't move your hand, Walmsley. I'm so very sensitive there.”

Walmsley's eyes sparkle as she takes up the watch. “Ninety-eight,” she pronounces after a few seconds.

“Very well. Now I shall raise your skirts, Carter,” says Miss Paulson in her most soothing tone of voice. “Ready?”

Carter nods, biting her lip, and Miss Paulson smoothly gathers the layers of fabric up to Carter's waist. There is a universal gasp of approval at what is revealed, and one or two envious glances.

“Just guide her hands, Clark.”

“One hundred and eight.”

“You're very nervous, Carter.”

“I'm well, I think, miss.”

“Whenever you're ready, then, Carter.”

There is a long pause, and then, with an effort of will, Carter puts the contacts firmly in position. Her eyes go wide, and then she begins to moan as if in considerable discomfort. The bell jingles constantly.

“All right, Carter?”

“Mmmm.. I think so... Oooh...” she gasps.

“Try it up just a little,” suggests Clark, closing one eye and narrowing the other as if gauging the best position.

“Up? Like... Aaah...” For a moment Carter is silent, seemingly a little shocked, and then her face breaks into a lazy smile. She begins to laugh, and then to giggle: “Ha ha ha oh my, oh my...”

Miss Paulson raises an eyebrow at Miller, who is faithfully noting this over-sensitive subject's extraordinary reaction.

“One hundred and twelve.”

“Oh ha ha ha... may I just have a little rest?”

“Yes, Carter, of course.”

Carter takes a few deep breaths, then carefully reapplies the contacts, adjusting their position until she lapses once again into quiet laughter, almost noiseless this time.

“She's very tense, miss,” observes Benson, panting. She lets go of Carter's ankles, and at once Carter draws up her knees, spreading her thighs more comfortably.

“Did Kershaw lick her lips constantly like that, Miller? I know one or two of the others did.”

“Walmsley certainly did, miss,” Miller responds while leafing through her exercise-book, “and Shipman... Yes, Kershaw too.”

“It's a curious phenomenon, Miller. We must keep an eye out for it. It may be significant.”

“Yes, miss.”

“One hundred and twelve.”

Carter's quiet laughter has subsided by now, to be replaced by noisy and erratic breathing, and the occasional whimper. Suddenly her legs kick out straight, causing the bell to jingle all the merrier.

"She's gone stiff... frowning... Just like Kershaw... Oh my goodness!" Miss Paulson is not the only one to spot what has happened. "Don't touch her, Clark."

Clark draws back her hand and brings it to her mouth in anxiety: for Carter has pressed one of the contact wires clear through her skin and drawn a tiny bright bead of blood.

Carter's mouth is wide open, her lips quivering as if she is trying to stretch them to their widest possible extent. Her heels drum upon the table: in such a state of over-excitation the little bell seems a ridiculous superfluity. And then, after two gusty exhalations which seem to shake her entire body, she flings the wires away, clutches both hands to the affected area, clamps both legs together and rolls on to her side.

"Carter, Carter, are you all right?"

"Ohh... Ohhh..." she moans.

Miss Paulson looks at the bystanders. Clark, Walmsley, Kershaw and Penrose are beaming, eyes twinkling, apparently not in the least concerned by these dramatic symptoms. Even Miller does not seem particularly distressed. But Shipman, who has been panting rather more than most, totters dangerously, her eyes rolling. "Kershaw, Walmsley! It's Shipman – catch her, quick!" It is an annoyance, thinks Miss Paulson: girls are continually fainting. It is only to be expected if they must vie with one another in over-tightening their corsets.

Meanwhile, Carter is laughing again, weakly, helplessly.

"Carter, are you all right, my dear?"

“Oh, yes, yes, thank you, miss.” Gradually recovering, she raises herself upon one elbow.

“I think you’ve hurt yourself: look.” Miss Paulson points.

“Oh, that’s just a little prick. It’s nothing,” shrugs Carter, untying the bell with something akin to nonchalance. “That was so strange!”

“Well I think she was very brave, don’t you, ladies?”

There is a universal hum of admiration.

“You were wonderful, Carter,” murmurs Walmsley appreciatively. “I’d like to talk to you some time about your family.”

“Are you feeling better?” Miss Paulson asks, still a little anxious.

“Just a little weak... But quite well, I think.” Carter looks about her, vaguely.

“It’s always a little strange — the first time,” Walmsley reassures her with a smile.

Carter returns the smile. Everybody seems to be smiling quietly at her – even Shipman, who seems already quite recovered. Carter blushes.

“Come on, then,” calls Shipman, pointing to Carter’s incomplete drawing. “I want to see what you had in mind.”

She returns to her desk, watched in awe by all the bemused members of the Scientific Society. She picks up her pencil, and begins to hum a little tune quietly to herself.

Miss Paulson shrugs, amazed at the resilience of youth.

Part IIIb

Late that evening, there comes a knock at Miss Paulson's door.

"Come in," Miss Paulson moans in despair. Her heart is hammering: the very thought of further intimacy with Carry fills her with a mixture of joy and panic, and it is the panic that is predominant. She knows that once unleashed, she will be unable to control her passion — and to what disgrace or tragedy would that lead?

And that is why, for the past quarter of an hour, she has steeled herself to end this folly: she has recited once again the speech she composed in her mind this afternoon, re-enacted the scene in her mind. She will stand just so, her hands just so, expressive of resolution.

"Miss Walmsley!" she will say in a clear, firm voice.

"Yes, miss..." Carry will be deferential, as always.

"This simply cannot go on. Your parents expect you to marry. I am your teacher, entrusted with your virtue. Your good name as Head Girl, mine as a Senior Mistress, and that of the school cannot be tarnished by scandal. Miss Walmsley, I must ask — no, I must demand — that whatever affection you feel for me you should henceforth channel into pure thoughts, hard work, greater achievement, and the good of your family and your school. And I must require that in future you confine your discourse with me entirely to that which is proper to our standing as teacher and pupil. Is that quite clear?" The clenched fists: they are important. The commanding nod of the head. And Carry will respond,

"Yes, miss..." — sadly, to be sure, but obediently.

And then she will turn, and she will look thus – just a little over Miss Walmsley's head – the stern glare of duty!

But what has happened? She has heard those dainty footfalls, that little hesitation on the step, that musical little gasp of emotion – and now, a sudden, rapid, tremulous knocking; and in her mind's eye she sees, as if upon a mountain-top, outshining all heaven's rays, that vision of beauty now standing upon her doorstep – knows, too, that if once she weakens and turns to confront those clasped hands, that yearning breast, those ruby lips, those pleading, innocent, lapis lazuli eyes, she may as well cast herself upon the ground in worship.

In despair, clenching those fists not in resolution but in desperation, "Come in!" moans Miss Paulson. And there it is, that familiar yet unfamiliar sound: the click of the latch, the light feet upon the flagstone, the closing door. Together, alone.

"Miss Walmsley!" she tries to say; but it is nothing but a sob of breath.

"Miss Paulson, I must apologize for my unseemly behaviour. It is with the sincerest regret that I beg your forgiveness for my..."

Miss Paulson clasps her hands in impulsive gratitude. O wonderful, noble spirit! How wonderfully does this unexpected contrition ease matters!

"...most forward and unladylike behaviour. I assure you that never again will I address you other than in the terms of utmost respect, and never should I wish to bring down dishonour or scandal upon your most respected and admirable person, nor upon the untarnished reputation of our school."

Miss Paulson feels that some suitably magnanimous response should issue from her lips. She opens her mouth to speak, but nothing happens.

But if she lacks resolve, Lady Caroline seems to gain in confidence.

“As you recommended in our last lesson, I have now committed to heart the conjugations of all the families of verbs. To assure you of my most assiduous attention, I will now recite the chiefest of these. For brevity, I will confine myself to the first and second persons singular, and the first person plural, from which the other formations follow naturally. Will that be acceptable?”

“Oh, yes, most acceptable,” gasps Miss Paulson, hearing Carry’s words but scarcely grasping them in her relief.

“Very well. *Aimer: j’aime, tu aimes... nous aimons. Tenir: je tiens, tu tiens, nous tenons. Frémir: je frémis, tu frémis, nous frémissons. S’émouvoir: je m’émue, tu t’émues, nous nous émouvons. Se dévêtir: je te dévêts, tu me dévêts, nous nous dévêtons. Voir: je vois, tu vois, nous voyons.*” Carry’s voice becomes lower, more musical; she pauses seductively. “*Plaire: je te plais, tu me plais, nous nous plaisons. Lécher: je lèche, tu lèches, nous léchons. Venir: je viens, tu viens, nous venons. Jouir: je jouis, tu jouis, nous jouissons...* Have I learned well?”

Miss Paulson’s breathing is beyond control. “What are you doing to me?”

Carry seems to ignore her. “But now, if you please, miss, I should be grateful if you would instruct me further: for I find that our textbooks do not teach all the words I need.”

There is the rustle of clothing. “Carry! What are you doing?”

“I do not know the words I should say... Perhaps they are not ladylike. But in French, they would not be improper, surely?”

“No, no, Carry, words cannot be improper, unless they are used to slander or to contemn... But child, what are you doing with your dress?”

“There... it is off... all quite... off. Now miss, I pray, what is the name in French for this?”

“I cannot see what it is you are talking about.”

“I do not wish to use an unladylike word. I find that I must... point my... finger.”

Orpheus cannot have looked upon Eurydice with greater dread; for it is to incur her own undoing that Miss Paulson turns. Lady Caroline Artemis Gloriana Walmsley is stretched decorously in her armchair, quite naked, her lovely limbs thrown out with artless grace, her golden tresses flowing over her breast, her slim white finger negligently designating the navel deep welled within her flawless belly. It is a vortex to Miss Paulson's gaze.

“This is *le ventre*, I know,” Carry murmurs, drawing her finger lazily across her skin, “but what, pray, is this in French?”

“Oh, Carry!”

Idly, Carry dips her finger in and out, takes a deep breath. Miss Paulson cannot remove her eyes from that slender finger, gently probing in and out, caressing that velvet softness.

“It's rather deep, is it not, miss? My governess says that's pretty. I like to feel how deep it is. What is it in French, please miss? I need to know. I need...”

“*Le nombril.*”

“Ah,” she gasps, “*le nombril...*” Slowly, sensuously, she draws the finger up, up the valley in the firm muscle, up between the rib-bones, and then, her hands moving with graceful deliberation, she cups her breasts. “And these?”

“*Le sein.*” Miss Paulson's voice is but a tremulous whisper.

“Ha! *Le sein, le sein...*” Her eyes almost closed, Carry smiles, quietly amused. “I can’t say it right. *Le sein, le sein...*” The more she tries to avoid lisping, the more delightfully her jaw moves. “But why not *les seins*, if there are two of them?”

“The word means just... the whole area of the breast. One does not speak of them in the plural.”

Gracefully, Carry releases her right breast and places the flat of her right hand softly upon her left. “*Le sein, le sein...*” she laughs a soft, dreamy laugh, but then sits upright, her gaze more serious and intent. “But I need to know what to call just *this* one: this one, that I’m touching. Is there a word for this, miss? I need, I *need* to know.”

“La mamelle.”

“La mamelle?”

“La mamelle.”

“They’re just a little larger than most people’s, don’t you think? I’m glad my hair is long, long... I like to feel my hair, just gliding, gliding over the skin... I like the feeling. Do you ever let your hair down, miss, over your breasts, and feel it touch, just lightly?”

“Oh, Carry...” Miss Paulson clenches her fists in exasperation.

“I’m just making a little parting. There... do you see?” Carry’s areolæ are large and pale. “I’m just drawing a little circle round it. I know what this is called in English. But it’s not a polite word, is it, miss?”

“No, Carry.”

“What is it in French?” Carry’s voice is soft but insistent. “I need to know!”

“*Le mamelon.*” Miss Paulson’s whisper is hoarse.

"Mamelon!" Carry sinks back with a little giggle and flicks her finger lightly over the tip of the nipple. "Oh... *mamelon mamelon mamelon... Le mamelon*. Is that good? Am I saying it right?"

"Yes, Carry, you're saying it beautifully." Miss Paulson clenches and unclenches her hands.

"Ma... me... lon... it's a nice word. Do you think mine are too big? They're much bigger than most people's, aren't they? Do you think they're ugly?"

"No, Carry, they are..."

"But oh, they're funny, miss. I like to take my hair like this..." she takes a bunch of her hair, forms it into a little soft brush and circles it round and round the nipple. "And then it makes them shrink a little, and they get all crinkly. Haha! I like to do it to each of them! And then I wait, and watch them go all flat again. I like to do that again and again. Do you ever do that, miss?"

"No, Carry, no." Miss Paulson's chest is heaving.

"You should. Haha!" Carry gives a soft little giggle. "It's nice. How would you say it in French? *Je chatouille... mon mamelon?* Oh no! I remember! It must be like washing your hands! *J'aime... me chatouiller les mamelons; c'est...* — how do you say 'It's nice?'"

"*C'est agréable.*"

"*Agréable... ah, oui, c'est très agréable... me chatouiller les mamelons... celà me fait fondre...* do they say that?"

"Why, no... that means to melt... oh!"

Carry raises her leg, crosses her ankle over her knee and takes her foot. "And now... *le pied*, I know, and these, *les doigts du pied*... And this?" She strokes her fingers lightly over her sole.

"*La plante du pied.*"

"*La plante*... that's easy. *Le mamelon, la mamelle, le nombril, la plante*... And this part?"

"*La jambe.*"

"But doesn't that go all the way up..." again, she draws her finger slowly up the smooth, pale skin, "...to here? Is this not *la jambe*?"

"Yes..."

"But what is this part of my leg, that I'm touching?" Carry strokes her calf up and down.

"*Le mollet.*"

"*Le mollet*... *le genou*... And this?"

"*La cuisse.*"

"*La cuisse*... That's difficult for me. *La cuisse*... but I like to do this..." she draws her finger slowly along the inside of her thigh. "I do it again and again... What's the French for 'smooth'?"

"*Lisse.*"

"*La cuisse*... *lisse*... I must practise... *La cuisse lisse*... *J'aime*..." Carry seems to be breathing faster now. Her eyes are glassy, for she sees how affected Miss Paulson is.

"Carry..."

"...*glisser les doigts sur la peau lisse de ma cuisse*... Is that right, miss?"

Miss Paulson staggers: again those agonizingly sweet motions of the jaw!
“Carry...”

Eyeing Miss Paulson's ill-suppressed agitation with a calculated air of innocence, Carry raises her leg and rests her ankle upon the arm of the chair, pointing her foot gracefully.

“And this is *la fesse*, isn't that right, miss? So could I say '*J'aime glisser les doigts du genou jusqu'à la fesse*'? — Oh, look what's happened!”

“Carry, Carry, my God!”

“It's tingling so much. I have to! I have to! And does yours, too? Oh!”

Miss Paulson's self-control has finally snapped. The teacher falls to her knees, showering the breast of her beautiful pupil with ardent kisses. How sweet the smile of her lovely pupil — how sweet, and wickedly confident!

“Aaah... let me... undo... this beautiful red hair... Oh Miss Paulson, Miss Paulson...”

“Carry... Oh Carry: don't call me 'Miss Paulson'. Call me Georgie.”

As they kiss, Carry buries her fingers in Miss Paulson's hair, brushes it out into a dense copper-gold curtain.

“Beautiful, beautiful Georgie... I'm getting cold,” Carry moans softly, and then whispers into her lover's ear, “Georgie... darling... take me to bed.”

Her mind in turmoil, her heart hammering, Carter creeps away from the window. Of course, there had been whispers. She ought not to be surprised. Everyone knew about Walmsley. But Miss Paulson — well! Shipman's little diversions rather pale into insignificance, do they not, in the light of this revelation?

Carter turns off the path to the main building, directing her steps towards the rose-garden. Soon it will be dusk, and the bell will call her to night assembly. But now she needs time to think.

How strangely her fortunes seem to have been reversed! Yesterday, she was friendless, universally derided. Today, she has a mystery lover, Penrose offering her championship and at least the semblance of a romance, Walmsley showing interest in her parentage – and since that extraordinary electrical experience, really everyone has been most conciliatory! Even French went out of her way to be pleasant at supper.

But more than that: now Carter has knowledge, knowledge about the Head Girl and one of the most highly-respected teachers in the school.

Knowledge is power, power which must be used wisely.

“Oh Carry! What did we just do?”

“Didn't you like it?”

“It was just... I am overwhelmed. I thought I was going to die.”

Carry lets out a musical little giggle, which Georgie instantly punishes with a passionate kiss:

“I suppose this is pillow-talk, isn't it?”

Carry smiles. “Yes.”

“It is so delicious, just to be in bed with you, to touch you, to feel you...”

“Mmmm...”

“But tell me... how did you find out?”

Carry giggles. “What do you mean?”

“About... I don't even know what it's called... your...”

Carry strokes lightly with her finger-tip. “This?”

“Oh Carry! My Lord! Yes! Oh Carry, what’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing! Georgie, darling, you’re lovely!”

Miss Paulson grips the naughty hand – somewhat ineffectually. “But Carry: I had no idea. Nobody told me. I looked in my textbook last night, and there was nothing. This bit and that bit and the other bit, all with little arrows and numbers, and by the numbers, their names.” She opens her eyes wide, staring into Carry’s delighted gaze. “But that bit... the bit you touched... there was no name. It was just number eighteen. So I don’t even know what it’s called.”

Carry giggles again. She begins counting, with a kiss after each number. Beneath the bedclothes, her finger moves slowly in time with her counting.

“Oh Carry, I don’t want it to stop, but...” She grips Carry’s wrist, as if to draw it away – but finds herself holding it firmly in position.

“But what?”

“I don’t think I’m strong enough. I don’t know how you stand it!”

Carry lets out a beautifully soft, bubbling laugh. Her finger begins to move again. “Georgie... beautiful Georgie... I want to watch you... seventeen... eighteen...”

Georgie’s voice is suddenly urgent: “Carry... Carry... Oh my God!”

Carry laughs delightedly as Georgie is overwhelmed once more. “It gets easier and easier, and nicer and nicer!” And as Georgie begins to sob in a mixture of release and gratitude, she gently kisses away the tears.

“It’s so beautiful...”

“You’re beautiful.”

“For so long... I never knew...”

“Well, darling Georgie, you know now.”

“When did you find out?”

Carry gives a little laugh. "I was twelve."

"Twelve? As young as that?"

"Yes. It was my governess. Mrs Crichton. Dear Mrs Crichton."

"She... she told you?"

"She didn't tell me... But... if I was good at my lessons, she used to sit me on her knee and cuddle me, and then she used to stroke my knee..."

"Like this?"

"Yes, and then higher... and higher..."

"Mmmm. I can see why. Oh Carry I so love you..."

"And then when it began to tingle, she'd just set me down, slap my bottom lightly and tell me to run away and play."

"And... did you?"

"After about the third or fourth time, yes. I felt for it and... and I found it."

"And do you know what it is called?"

"No. But I have a name for it, one I made up." Carry gives a little giggle. "It's silly..." Her eyes are beautifully wide: they shine like a new doll's. "Promise not to laugh?"

"No!" Miss Paulson laughs delightedly. "Tell me!"

"My feelie. Because I like to feel it."

"That is silly!" Their giggles subside into a wonderfully long kiss. When they separate, they lie quietly regarding one another for a long time, each intoxicated by the other's beauty, until eventually Georgie is driven to confess: "I can feel it again."

"Does it tickle?"

"Well, it..." she purses her lips. "Yes."

Carry begins to touch, very gently and soothingly. Her smile is bewitching.

But Georgie's eyes are wide in seriousness. "But what is it for, Carry? It must have some purpose."

Carry giggles. "Oh Georgie, Georgie darling... You are so wonderfully scientific! So earnest! I adore you!"

"Yes my sweet, but what?"

"Don't you know? I think it's for this..."

Carry begins to move her finger more, and it is clear that her prediction was correct: right from the first, the pleasure is searingly intense.

"Oh no, Carry, not again. Honestly, dear, I really am not strong enough... O my God... Carry... Oh Carry..."

Close as she is to exhaustion, Georgie has no reserves with which to resist the ferocious onslaught of the climax: she can only submit to its devastating, terrifying sweetness.

The spectacle of Georgie's helpless abandon makes Carry squeal with delight. "I want to do this to you all night, all day for a week!"

"No, no..." – Miss Paulson is still quaking – "Just hold me, hold me tight... Oh Carry darling..."

They embrace in warm silence.

"Oh, it keeps happening!" Miss Paulson gasps.

Carry kisses her beautiful companion in loving reassurance after every violent after-shock, until finally she is still. "Mmmm... That was a big one."

"Darling Carry... I cannot even think. — But you... Darling Carry..." Georgie seems quite exhausted.

"You're so lovely... Next time. I'd better go back now."

Carry straightens the bedclothes and pads to the door, smiling at the disarray of hastily discarded clothes. She turns to blow her lover one last kiss. Georgie is already asleep, but she blows it anyway.

“Psst, Clark!”

Clark is instantly awake. “Wha... what?” She raises herself, but sees no one.

“Are you awake?” The voice is so quiet that Clark can scarcely hear it.

“Who is it?” Clark half-knows, but her mind is still extricating itself from complicated, enjoyable dreams. She grips the side-rail of her bed and looks down. Beneath her, a pair of dark eyes, a blur of pale face and a smudge of long, black hair attest to the fact that Shipman is presently lying underneath her dormitory bed. “Uh... what do you want?”

“Everyone’s asleep. Can I come in?”

The last word brings Clark immediately back to the present. “All right.” She pulls back the blankets. “Take it off,” she breathes.

“And you.”

Clark’s night-gown is already up around her waist; she tugs it off, shoves it under her pillow and wriggles sideways to make room.

“You won’t tickle?”

“No!”

Shipman leaps noiselessly to her feet, pulls her night-gown off over her head, and with a little hiss of breath, slips into the bed alongside Clark. “Give me your hands!”

“Why?”

“So you won’t tickle.”

“You cold?”

“Yeah.”

Shipman holds Clark's hands now, and after a few moments, she slowly brings them to her breast. Sarah Clark knows exactly what to do, and soon Shipman's breathing is slow and deep.

“Warming up?”

“Yeah. Ohhh... That's so nice...”

After a little while, Clark feels Shipman's hand brush her pubic hair. She jerks away.

“Mhh... No... Had enough.”

Shipman retracts her hand with a quiet giggle.

“Couldn't wait?”

“No... That nice?”

“Yeah.” Shipman sucks her breath through her teeth appreciatively.

Clark's teasing becomes more gentle now: she has interesting news to impart.

“Want to hear about Vicky Penrose?”

“What?”

“Went out with Carter today.”

“Ohh... How did she do?”

“Quite well. Carter said she'd think about it. I reckon she'll say yes.”

“Really? Good for Vicky.”

“Yeah, she did really well. Carter kissed her twice.”

“What?” Shipman slaps Clark's hands away.

“It's true!”

With a moan, Shipman rolls on to her front and crushes her face into the pillow. After a moment, she turns to Clark, parts her legs and whispers "Do me! Please!"

Clark licks her fingers and reaches down. But Shipman is already wet enough.

"Ohhh..."

"Hush! For heaven's sake be quiet, you idiot!"

"Oh Clark, that's so-o lovely!"

Clark gives a tiny giggle. She is really rather good at this, and it is so nice to be appreciated.

Lucy Carter cannot sleep. It is common enough to find that someone has poured water into her bed – she is ever the butt of practical jokes – but tonight it is far worse than usual. At around two in the morning, she very quietly dresses and goes out into the grounds to take some air, to calm her whirling, angry thoughts.

It is not the identity of the practical joker, however, that consumes her interest. There is perhaps not one girl in the dormitory who has not at some time done something mischievous to make her companions laugh.

No: it is the much more novel and thrilling question of who might be her mystery lover. "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord" – but nonetheless, this person must be taught the error of her ways.

Could she be trapped into betraying her feelings? Carter has considered various tactics: walking to the wash-rooms with her chemise unbuttoned, as some of the girls do, and looking for untoward stares; taking more care over her hair; standing more upright; affecting a more pretty stance — but despite the strange, and rather pleasant, physical restlessness she feels when she considers these ploys, she fears that they will involve her in a quite unladylike wantonness. Besides, what if the mystery lover –

whoever she might be – is nonetheless able to conceal her unnatural, base affections? This thought, while undeniable, incites in Carter an inexplicable melancholy.

And then, as she wanders in the grounds, an idea occurs to her, one so cogent that she gives a little leap of exhilaration. Of course! She must use the knowledge that has been given to her! It is simply a matter of identifying the rumour-monger. And yes, there is a way... If only Walmsley could be persuaded to co-operate...

And what sort of a person is Walmsley, really? Carter shudders at the recall of what she saw through the window; but now that she has seen into the pit of damnation, she is no longer sure that such wickedness is quite so wicked as people would have one believe.

Down the path she walks, toward the silent rose garden. It is pitch dark: there is scarcely any moon, and that just now hid behind a vaguely luminous cloud. Her mind is a jumble of thoughts: such beauty... such depravity... such passion... Can that be love?

And then her reverie is broken by the sight of movement: a shadowy figure approaching stealthily beside the path that leads from Miss Paulson's cottage. She retreats into the shadows and waits until the figure is close enough to be recognizable. When it is, Carter feels the surge of power that comes from superior knowledge.

"Good morning, Walmsley." Her voice is cool and neutral as she steps out from the shadows.

"Jesus Lord!" Walmsley spits in terror, wheeling round, fingers grasping air.

"It's all right, it's only the changeling girl." Carter's voice is light, mellifluous with confidence.

"What? Carter? Bloody hell!" Walmsley is shuddering still.

“Yes. I couldn't sleep. And since you're here, I thought you might like to discuss my ancestry.”

“Hell! Hell! Carter! Huh!” Walmsley struggles to control herself. “Sorry, Carter. You gave me the fright of my life. What are you doing out here, anyway?”

Carter waits until Walmsley has recovered from her surprise before responding. “I've had a rather shocking day, actually, Walmsley. I couldn't sleep.”

For a moment, Walmsley wonders why; then, “You mean, after the electricity?”

“Well, partly.”

“Mmmm. It does rather wake one up, doesn't it? Er... Was that your first?”

“Obviously.”

“No, I mean the first time you've come?”

“Come?”

“You know – that amazing feeling at the end...”

“Oh, that...” Carter is beginning to understand now. “I think so... but I'm so confused... I believe I've learned more in one day than I've learned in the whole of the rest of my life. May I talk to you?”

“Ah...” Carter has no business being out in the grounds at this hour; but Walmsley realizes that she is in no position to throw the school rules in Carter's face. Perhaps complaisance is the better course. “Very well, then.”

“I feel as if I've gone from being a little child to being an adult, all in one short day.”

Carter's serious tone makes Walmsley thoughtful. “‘When I was a child, I thought as a child...’ That sort of thing?”

"Yes. And I think I ought to make a confession, too. You see, I have had another rather shocking experience."

"Oh? What, pray?"

"Well... I went down to Miss Paulson's cottage after dinner, to ask for her advice about making an electrical switch."

"Yes?"

"Actually, it was quite late. And she wasn't alone."

"What?" Walmsley tries to conceal the thrill of terror.

"As I came to the door, I could hear voices. There was someone with her. Miss Paulson sounded upset. I thought perhaps I'd better not interrupt. But I looked in at the window. I suppose I shouldn't have."

"Oh my God."

They stop walking. They stand, both looking from afar upon the school buildings, gloomy black against the dark velvet of the night sky. To Walmsley, the high roofs, the pinnacles, the weather-vane are suddenly hostile, signs of stark condemnation.

"I saw our very beautiful Head Girl..."

"Oh Jesus Lord..."

"I don't need to say any more, do I?"

"Thou shalt not be happy. That's the rule isn't it? Dare to be happy, and suffer everlasting torment?" Walmsley's voice is already rich with tears.

"Look, Walmsley... Don't be upset. I know, we're supposed to think all that sort of thing is incredibly wicked and you're damned to hell for eternity..."

"Look, Carter, what is it you want? Eh?"

"Walmsley..."

Carry stoops, holds out her hands in supplication. "Tell me! I'll do it! I'll find money if that's what you want. I'll resign, I'll go away, I'll even kill myself if I have to. Only, don't hurt her! Do you understand? She's the best teacher this school will ever have. If one word, one word of this ever gets out..."

"Walmsley!"

Carry pauses. There is something in Carter's voice.

"Well?"

"You love her, don't you? I mean to say, you really, really love her?"

There is a pause.

"Yes." Carry's response is heavy with despair.

"And she really loves you. I think I saw that." Carter begins to murmur, as if afraid to voice her thoughts too loudly. "I felt terrible to have spied on you. I don't know whether it's right or wrong, what you were doing. I used to think I did." She turns to Walmsley. "But I promise you this: I will never, never tell another soul."

Carry collapses to her knees.

"Walmsley. Don't cry. Don't cry." Carter kneels facing her. "Get up, Walmsley. Do you really think I would?"

With Carter's gentle reassurance, Carry begins to rise. She tries to smile bravely, but then her face crumples once more. "Oh God! Oh God! I'm so afraid!"

Despite her shock at the ferocity of Walmsley's emotion, Carter embraces her, holds her tight.

Eventually, Walmsley's sobs subside, and with a final gasp she returns Carter's embrace shyly, gratefully. But then she cannot suppress a little chuckle.

"Carter, you're so thin! And you're cold!"

"I'm positively freezing. But I have to talk. I need to talk to someone."

"You want to talk to me?"

"You're tired... I'm tired. But yes, if you'll listen."

"Come inside. Come to my rooms."

"So: what is it you wished to talk about? About me?" Walmsley's lip quivers. She still cannot quite meet Carter's eye.

"No. About me and... someone else. I don't know who. I found out something yesterday. You know of course that people are always remarking upon my spelling, or joking about how stupid I am."

"Well..."

"You must have heard such things."

"Well, yes."

"Why do you think that is?"

"I don't know how to explain it, but..."

"I look strange."

"Yes."

"People seem to think it is funny or clever to be rude to an ugly person." Carter brushes aside Walmsley's protest. "I've had to put up with a great deal, Walmsley. From time to time, when nobody is looking, someone will be friendly – but not in front of her other friends. They think it's funny to pour a cup of water into my bed. They make unkind remarks, and people laugh. This term it has been worse than usual – so much so, that I have begun to avoid people. I try to go where it's quiet. But yesterday... Well, someone was friendly to me. We had a talk. She told me something which explained why things have been getting worse. I was very surprised; but after thinking about it I believe it to be the best explanation."

“And what was that?”

“You will be surprised. For she told me that someone, I don't know who, has got a... crush – on me. Me!”

“Well, why not? I was thinking only today —”

“But this person is dying of shame. People laugh at you if you have a crush, don't they? People always think it clever to laugh at love. But a crush on the changeling girl? She would be laughed to scorn. Don't you see?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“How does she conceal her feelings? Why, she joins with all the others, encouraging them to be nasty to me, making rude jokes about me, so nobody will suspect her.”

“Perhaps she's trying to hide her feelings from herself.”

“Ah. Yes, I hadn't thought of that.”

“You've suffered, haven't you?”

Carter nods. “For a long time. The teachers are no better. They love to make the class laugh at my expense. A clever joke wins them popularity; and I get the ridicule, as usual.”

“My God...”

“I'm so tired of it, Walmsley. I want to try and stand up in the world. I think I can do Maths quite well. Mrs Probert says so, and in fact I've started on a new paper, which I shall send to a friend of my uncle in Russia. I want a new life. I know I'm only seventeen, but I have suffered for enough of those seventeen years.”

“I understand.”

"I do not want revenge. But I don't see why people should get away with treating others as I have been treated. I wish to find out who this person is, and make her reconsider her ways."

"She should be punished!"

"I do not think that would help."

"Well, she should be taught a lesson."

"Yes. But to do that, I need your help."

"What should I do?"

"Well, I have thought of something. If we could communicate some scandal about me – something we can easily explain later – but communicate it only to one of the suspects, then we could wait to see if the rumour spread or not. If it did, that would prove that it had to come from that one person. Does that seem logical?"

"Yes. Whom do you suspect?"

"One: Emma Denning. Two: Felicity Shipman."

"Denning! Shipman! Well... It could be..."

"I want you to write an anonymous letter, and slip it into her pigeon-hole. I can't spell, I know that, so they'd know it was from me. Disguise your writing."

"But won't she suspect something?"

"Address it to 'C' and sign it 'A'. That way, she'll think it was put in her pigeon-hole by mistake."

"Very well, I'll try it. It sounds quite exciting. But what do I write?"

"You write that I was seen creeping out of your rooms before the waking bell."

"But won't people think that we slept together?"

"Exactly. If you will let me."

"What do you mean?"

"Somebody poured water into my bed last night."

"Oh no!"

"Not for the first time."

"But doesn't the prefect..?" Carry is horrified.

"You know as well as I how sneaks are treated." Carter hangs her head in despair.

"Well, you can't sleep in a wet bed!"

"So I've found." Carter's wry grimace reveals a dogged inner strength.

"Of course I'd let you share. But Carter – suppose someone did find out that it was true? We'd both be in terrible trouble, you know that."

"But don't you see? If our rumour is true, but the explanation an innocent one, then when the truth is revealed, the rumour-mongers will be put to shame."

"Yes, I see..."

"And so, in the morning, you should go to the Head and tell her all. You explain that I was upset and unable to sleep. You found me, you comforted me, you treated me like a little sister. My bed was wet; so rather than send me away, you allowed me to sleep in your own bed. And you could add this: that you wanted her to know the truth, just in case any false rumours arose."

"Which they very well might."

"Exactly."

"Mmmm. That's clever." Walmsley ponders. True, the Head extols compassion, and has spoken out against malicious gossip on a number of occasions. But sleeping together – would she not object? Of course, it is common enough for sisters to share a bed. Why not? It will seem so strange after Georgie... But then again, it could be a useful alibi.

"I'll do it."

"I think you're my truest friend." Carter smiles, and yawns.

"You've been very kind to me, Carter. I don't understand why."

Carter shrugs. "I used to sleep with Elsie – my big sister. We used to cuddle sometimes, you know. I miss that now."

"She married?"

"She died nearly eight years ago." Carter speaks in a matter-of-fact way, almost lightly. Ignoring Carry's little gasp, she continues: "She was beautiful, unlike me. My parents were so disappointed." She makes the same wry grimace as before. It makes her seem far older than seventeen.

Carry does not know what to say to this. "Oh Carter – I'm sorry."

"You can be my sister for the night, if you would like. And so you should call me Lucy."

"Lucy: well, then, I shall be Carry. See here, we must get to bed. You take that candle..."

In Carry's bedroom, Lucy begins to undress, placing her clothes neatly on the floor at the foot of the bed. Carry is suddenly wide-eyed.

"You don't intend going to bed naked, do you?"

"I can't sleep in my day clothes, nor have I any night-gown here. Is it not a little strange that you, of all people, should be shocked, Carry dear?"

Lucy accompanies her question with a dry chuckle and a strange ironic little quirk of the mouth. Again, Carry glimpses Lucy's mysterious inner fortitude, and she looks down, abashed.

Naked, Lucy stretches out her arms and does a little pirouette.

“There you are: your deformed changeling sister!” her voice is hard with sarcasm. She feels suddenly rather brazen. Perhaps it is her tiredness, or the emotional extremes of the last twenty-four hours; but perhaps it is the extremity of fortitude. To stand up to gossip: that requires fortitude. To be ugly: that, too, has demanded fortitude; and so, in a different way, has the possession of secret knowledge. And to stand naked before one of the most beautiful girls in the school: that requires equal courage. But there is something thrilling in it – fortitude is a quality she will need henceforth, if she is to surmount life’s obstacles.

But — “No, never deformed, never!” Carry is staring. “Honestly... Lucy... You have a lovely body.”

Lucy blushes and lowers her shoulders. “With one or two blemishes.”

The sudden droop of Lucy’s breasts expresses a vulnerability so winsome that Carry cannot suppress a gasp of sympathy. “Yes, but all the same... You’re beautiful.”

“Ha! I’m really tired.” Blushing now, Lucy clambers nimbly into Carry’s bed and snuggles tight up against the edge, leaving as much room for Carry as she can. Compared with her own, this bed is marvellously comfortable.

“But you’re thin!” Carry slips alongside her protégée and touches her back.

“Ee! Don’t tickle don’t tickle!” Lucy squirms.

“Shh! I won’t. But why are you so thin?”

Lucy half-turns to Carry. “Don’t you know? Who serves the food?”

“Well... The prefects.”

“And the most popular girls... get the most.”

“Oh, Lucy... I’m sorry...”

Lucy turns away again.

Carry puts a comforting arm around Lucy. “Shall I cuddle you?”

Lucy makes a soft little noise that might mean anything; and then, in a voice suddenly tender, "I'm not used to it any more."

"But you don't mind?"

After a pause, Lucy gives her head a quick shake. Even in the darkness, Carry understands. She moves her fingers to caress Lucy's arm. Her least movement causes Lucy to tense and gasp. Softly, so as to soothe her nervous companion, Carry murmurs,

"So... your family... There must be some noble blood, surely?"

"O yes. But what makes you think so?"

Carry's fingers move gently, and Lucy's breathing becomes faster once more.

"Oh... Lucy..." Carry breathes the words as soothingly as she can. "One can always detect the signs of quality... You are so sensitive... Tell me, then... whence this noble blood?"

"My mother's father – ah!... was a Russian Count... Related to the Romanovs."

"The Romanovs!" Carry snuggles closer. With the greatest caution, and with extreme gentleness, her fingers finally stray on to Lucy's breast. In a whisper that is more soothing than ever, "Does your mother speak Russian?"

Lucy gulps, but manages to answer. "French, actually. They all speak French in Russia."

"I didn't know."

Their voices become quieter and slower.

"Well they do. And my mother's mother was... a dancer. Of some kind."

"You have a dancer's body..."

"My mother was in the ballet."

"...Except for these, Lucy Carter..."

“Ahhh... That tickles.”

“But Lucy... You’ve got such amazing nipples...”

Carry’s touch is so gentle and so reassuring that after a little gasp, Lucy’s tension seems to evaporate; but after a few delightful moments, she stiffens again:

“But don’t touch me anywhere else! Please!”

The slight up-and-down motion of Carry’s nose on Lucy’s neck indicates sleepy acceptance, and Lucy relaxes once more into new-found bliss.

A few moments later, slower and quieter than ever, Carry breathes her good-night:

“Lucy Carter, I think you’re wonderful.”

“Mmmm...” Lucy yawns; and for the first time this term, she falls asleep smiling.

Part IVa

There is a knock at the Head Mistress's door.

"Come in!"

"Ah, good morning, Mrs Cunningham."

"Doctor Straker! Pray sit down."

"Thank you. I trust you are in excellent health?"

"Never better, I thank you, and I wish you the same. So this would be... the half-termly report?"

"The very same."

"How time flies! I must be getting old..."

"Oh, indeed."

The eagerness of the doctor's reply confuses Mrs Cunningham for a moment, but she soon recovers herself.

"And so – how are our girls?"

"Well, Head Mistress, I am glad to say that the surgery has been unusually quiet. I cannot recall having had fewer patients. We have had the occasional bump and scrape and sprain, of course — the normal minor incidents of youth, and soon mended. But of the more troublesome things – ladies' problems, you know – rather fewer — in fact, far fewer."

"I'm very glad to hear it."

"At first I thought it might be the unusually clement weather we have been having, and of course the steady progress we are making in the matter of hygiene. But

on reflection I am inclined to attribute this happy state of affairs to the dietary improvements we have managed to negotiate.”

“Ah. Good. I shall make a point of that at the next governors’ meeting. It was extremely difficult to persuade them to increase the catering allowance.”

“I am sure. And I take it that there has been no evidence to substantiate that ridiculous supposition?”

“I don’t follow you, Doctor.”

“I thought we mentioned it before. Some governors feared that a more generous level of nutrition might encourage... a certain waywardness, mm? Harmful secret practices?”

Mrs Cunningham blushes, despite the tactful delicacy with which the Doctor has expressed himself. “Ah yes, I remember. No, I am glad to say that there has been no evidence of such a thing. Carry Walmsley is an excellent Head Girl, and she and her team of prefects have been particularly vigilant. I have had no such reports.”

“I am glad to hear it. Such injurious habits would, I know, swiftly undermine this happy improvement – which, I might add, is particularly noticeable among the more senior girls this year. Really, from the sixth form, I think I have seen scarcely one pupil. There is still little Parkinson of the fifth, who is bleeding far too much. Between ourselves, we are worried about her. But for example: Felicity Shipman was in and out of surgery almost weekly last year. This term, we have simply not seen her. And there was another... yes, Miss Penrose...”

“Ah, Victoria Penrose.”

“Yes. Just the same. Well, it is most satisfactory. I don’t know what lies behind it, but as a man of medicine, I can only hope that this blessing continues.”

“Most gratifying, doctor.” Mrs Cunningham places her hands flat upon the desk and leans forward. “And are you aware that we beat Thomas More at battledore for the first time in our history a few weeks ago?”

“I was not. That is remarkable evidence indeed. Yes, I feel sure that we may attribute this happy state of affairs to the improved quality of the diet.”

“But have you heard about the electricity treatment?”

“Electricity?” The Doctor leans forward. “That is interesting: tell me more.”

“One of our more talented... to be frank, Doctor, our most talented teacher has studied some form of electricity at the Sorbonne. She has been subjecting the girls to electrical currents. They seem somewhat painful, but the girls are benefiting tremendously.”

“I should like to learn more of this.”

“You must address yourself to our Miss Paulson. She has made a particular study of the electrical force. Her father is a doctor also, I believe... Very good, then, Doctor Straker.”

“Very good, Head Mistress. I wish you a very good morning.”

“Good morning to you. Please the Lord your next report will be as cheerful.”

“Amen!”

Polite smiles, a bow and an inclination of the head conclude the interview.

Once the door is closed, Mrs Cunningham clicks her tongue contemptuously.

“Harmful secret practices, indeed! Pah!”

The next knock is less self-assured.

“Ah: Carter.”

“Good morning, Mrs Cunningham.”

“Good morning, child. What a pretty curtsy. Pray sit here.”

Carter advances to the straight-backed chair before the desk, and sits stiffly.

“Not too tired, I hope?”

“A little, Ma’am.”

“Then you shall have the rest of the morning off lessons. After this, go and rest. I have seen Walmsley, and I have spoken with some of your teachers.”

Carter is pale, but attentive.

“I will be honest with you, Carter... Lucy. I feel we at Hepplewhite have failed you. I wish that you had come to speak to one of us... to me... sooner. You know, I am sure, how very much I hate bullying and gossip. Such things should not be allowed to blight the happiness of anyone’s childhood years.

“Now I will be honest with you, Lucy. You are a very unusual girl. You have... shall we say... your little blind spots, hm? I don’t mean to be rude. For in other ways, you show signs of real brilliance. Schools like this should make it possible for girls like you to reach your true potential in a world which is very much controlled by men. Girls like you, Lucy, are not one in a thousand, nor even one in a million... Mrs Probert has been talking to me about your mathematics.”

“Please, Ma’am, Mrs Probert is a wonderful teacher...”

“I am well aware of it, and it does you credit that you say so, Lucy dear. Mrs Probert tells me quite openly that some of your recent work she can scarcely even understand. You know that Professor Anderton —”

“— Will be visiting next Thursday?”

“Indeed. He is very interested in you. I think he would like you to work in his department, my dear.”

Carter blushes deeply and kicks her feet to and fro.

Mrs Cunningham takes a breath and adopts a more sombre, portentous tone. “Lucy, indeed we have failed you. I am so sorry that you have endured such treatment for so long – without complaint. I know we’re taught not to complain. But to suffer so much, for so long, in silence... Why, Walmsley was almost in tears when she spoke of it —”

“Mrs Cunningham, may I interrupt to say something?”

“Yes, Lucy?”

“Ma’am, Walmsley is good.”

Mrs Cunningham waits for a moment, as if the sentence is incomplete. “Good what?”

“There is no vice in her, Ma’am. Her heart is open. I don’t know anything else, but her heart is open. No one has ever known her do an unkind thing.”

“Yes, Lucy, that is well said. We are proud of her... She even suggested that it might be better if you were to share her quarters, which was very generous of her. But of course that is quite impossible. — Nonetheless, you cannot remain in your dormitory. Things have clearly gone too far.”

“I should be so grateful, Ma’am.”

“Walmsley tells me that your bed was found to be excessively damp.”

“Oh yes. I thought that was well known. People like to say that I wet the bed.”

“This is intolerable!”

“It is one of the jokes, Ma’am. Sometimes it is merely water upon the pillow.”

“How it pains me to hear this, Lucy! I am ashamed of our prefects for not preventing such disgraceful bullying. I apologize to you, and I shall do my utmost to ensure that such a thing never happens again at Hepplewhite. As for you, I think it

best that henceforth you stay in the home of one of our members of staff, as a member of the family. I have spoken both to Mrs Probert and to Miss Paulson —”

“Miss Paulson!”

“— And both are very willing to accommodate you. You would prefer to stay with Miss Paulson?”

Lucy blushes and nods, biting her lip.

“Then it shall be arranged. Now go and rest, dear.”

“Why, Benson, what’s the matter?”

Benson has just burst into Carry’s study without knocking. “Walmsley! Have you heard what they’re saying about you?”

Carry’s surprise is genuine. Having learned that it is Denning’s time of the month, she has had to transfer the anonymous letter surreptitiously to Shipman’s pigeon-hole: only three hours have elapsed since. Truly, the word has travelled quickly.

She affects ignorance: “Will you tell me, then?”

“It is a scandal, Walmsley. They say that you have taken Carter into your bed. Of course I said that was absurd. But we must do something, Walmsley. Things are getting out of hand!”

“I shall tell you an interesting story in a moment, Benson. But first, please just look quietly into my bedroom. Try not to make too much noise.”

When Benson returns, she is pale and staring.

“So it is true! And she is quite obviously naked! Walmsley, you must be mad! Are you trying to get expelled? And what about her?”

Carry stretches back in her chair, reaching into the air with her fists. She smooths her long blonde tresses.

“Her bed was wetted last night. It was a practical joke. I decided to let her sleep here with me. I informed Mrs Cunningham first thing this morning — and I might say that she commended me for my kindness. It appears that Carter’s parents are exceedingly rich, Benson. Mrs Cunningham was very unhappy to learn that we prefects had been unable to protect Carter from bullying. She is very much afraid that unless we take extreme care of Miss Carter from now on, her parents might take exception and whisk their very gifted daughter away from Hepplewhite. I need hardly say that Mrs Cunningham does not relish that prospect.”

Benson sits down heavily in the armchair beside the revolving bookcase. She swivels it aimlessly to and fro with one finger.

“I see. I must apologize. I fear I leapt to the wrong conclusion.”

“Yes. You were meant to. Carter has been the victim of malicious rumours before, you know, Benson. I decided to try to discover the source of those rumours. That is why I myself started this particular one at ten o’clock this morning.”

“You started it?”

“Yes. Since I had my suspicions about her, I left an anonymous note in Shipman’s pigeon hole. And within a few short hours the story is all over the school.”

“Shipman!”

“Felicity Shipman.”

“Then she must be punished! We must make an example of her! We must go to Mrs Cunningham!”

“I fear the situation is not quite that simple, Benson. Consider: the anonymous letter was a deliberate trap. I do not think Mrs Cunningham would be pleased to know

that I wrote it — nor should I like her to. And in any case, Carter is quite adamant that she does not wish Shipman to be punished. Rather, she wishes her to be taught a lesson.”

“I see. But how?”

“I think this is something we may be able to deal with ourselves, don't you agree?”

“I suppose so. What had you in mind?”

Musing, Carry takes a shuttlecock from her desk. “We have the away match at the end of the week. I wouldn't like this to be damaged.” She turns it to and fro. “Shipman is not really a bad person, Benson. No worse than all the other people who spread rumours. But have you not noticed, during the Scientific Society meetings, that friend Shipman has quite a sense of humour? She likes to make people laugh, does she not?”

Eyeing the goose quills in the shuttlecock, Benson grasps Carry's meaning.

“You mean... as your mother likes to chastise the maids?”

“Precisely so.”

“We cannot do it here. She would make too much noise.”

“Shortly, Carter will have a room in Miss Paulson's cottage. She will be able to come and go as she pleases. She will admit us.”

“But what about Miss Paulson?”

“There are the staff meetings on Friday afternoons. They never last less than an hour. That should be quite long enough.”

Benson's eyes gleam like the sword of justice. “I should love to help.”

“I was hoping you would offer. Perhaps you could obtain some rope from the groundsman. Four three-foot lengths should suffice, don't you think?”

“It will be a very great pleasure.”

“Thank you, Benson. And perhaps you could inform Mrs Cunningham about the rumour. No doubt she will wish to call an Assembly.”

“Certainly. And if I were you, Walmsley, I'd get young Miss Carter out of here as soon as you can.”

After dinner, Miss Paulson introduces Carter to her new accommodation. Having helped her to put her clothes away in the spare bedroom, they return downstairs to what serves Miss Paulson as both sitting room and study.

“See, we have an extra chair for you, and for now you may work at this end of the table while I work at that. Are these your papers?”

“Yes, Miss Paulson.”

“Why, what is this? May I look?”

Carter nods anxiously.

It is a sheaf of papers containing various diagrams and complex mathematical formulæ. The few words are written in a large, round, childish hand; and several are most comically misspelt. Yet it is quite apparent that the whole is the product of an astonishingly acute and rarified mind.

“Why Carter... this is most extraordinary...” Miss Paulson puzzles for a moment over the misspellings. “It is a monograph upon... the resonance of springs — is that so?”

Again Carter nods, biting her lower lip as if in fear of harsh correction: for despite Mrs Probert's kind assurances, and the encouraging letter from the Professor, she cannot forget the horrified disapproval her work customarily arouses.

“That is most astonishing. I begin to understand why Mrs Probert speaks so highly of you. Perhaps, when it is finished, you would like me to set it down fairly for you.”

“That would be a great kindness, miss. And...” Carter looks down for a moment, as if searching for the appropriate words.

“Yes, Carter?” Miss Paulson prompts kindly.

“I was wondering if you could help me to set it down in French, you know.”

“In French? Why, certainly, if I can. But why?”

“I wished to send a copy to my uncle.”

“Is he French?”

“He is at the university in Saint Petersburg. See, these are his letters. He has been most encouraging.”

Miss Paulson sees the sheaf of letters, neatly tied with a ribbon.

“I had assumed that those were from your parents.”

“Oh no.” Carter says it dismissively, as if she would as soon receive a letter from the Emperor of China. “Were I to attempt a reply, I should only remind them of their disappointment.”

Miss Paulson sighs, remembering her own parents. “I take it, then, that like me you have no brothers?”

“No, I have not; but that is not the only reason. Elsie, my elder sister, wrote beautiful letters; but alas she died.”

“Oh no!”

“It was long ago. I think they love me. They say they want me to progress in my mathematics. But I do not think they can have any other hopes for me.”

Miss Paulson is touched by Carter's wistfulness.

“Come, Carter: I have some camomile tea. We will brew it upon the fire, and have a warming cup together before bed.”

Delighted by the prospect of this unexpected treat, Carter can only hunch her shoulders and beam a grateful, crooked smile. The light in her eye radiates such surprised eagerness that Miss Paulson finds it impossible to suppress a chuckle.

It is midnight. The atmosphere in the dormitory has been solemn, chastened by Mrs Cunningham's severe words at the evening Assembly. One thoughtful spirit, however, is very much awake.

“Psst! Vicky!”

“Wha... What? Oh, Shipman!”

“Let me in, I'm getting cold!”

“Bohhh...” Penrose turns over languidly. “Come on, then...”

Shipman chuckles, and holds her fingers to Penrose's nose.

“Pooh! Lord, Shipman, what have you been doing? As if I couldn't guess...”

Giggling, Penrose pushes Shipman's hand away. “Anyway, what do you want?”

“Well, I've been thinking about that note.”

“Oh, yeah... The note.”

“Well... Who could have written it?”

“I don't know.”

“And why put it in my pigeon-hole? ...You didn't write it, did you?”

“No, of course not. Why would I do something like that?” Penrose yawns. She is very tired; but Shipman's wakefulness banishes sleep.

“Well I don’t know. Why would anybody? — Unless... Wait a minute. What was it you told Carter? Someone had a crush on her, yes? And that if she pretended to have an affair with you, she’d make that someone jealous. Isn’t that right?”

Penrose stiffens, and is silent.

“Well, isn’t it?” Shipman persists.

“Yes, more or less...”

“That is what we agreed, was it not?”

“It was not quite as simple as that. You see, she didn’t believe that anyone could have a crush on her. I had to persuade her that it was true.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I said that her mystery admirer was so afraid of the ridicule if anyone so much as suspected, that she never missed the opportunity to speak ill of her.”

“Oh! You didn’t!”

“Yes, I did. Well, it’s true, isn’t it?”

Shipman is silent.

“Well, isn’t it?” Penrose feels a flush of righteous anger on Carter’s behalf.

Shipman sighs into the pillow. Penrose senses her friend’s contrition. Her anger melts; she extends a comforting arm.

“You should tell her you’re sorry.”

“Yes.” Shipman rolls on to her back and stares at the high dormitory ceiling.

“You were too upset to notice the harm you did.”

“Perhaps.”

“She will forgive you.”

“Perhaps.”

There is a long silence. When Vicky Penrose yawns, Shipman speaks again.

“Vicky: that changes everything, don't you see? Of course she wants to know who it is that has a crush on her. Who wouldn't?”

“You mean...?”

“I mean she suspected me. That was why that note was put into my pigeon-hole. To see if it was I!”

“You mean that the note was from Carter? But who would wish to create such a scandal about herself — and implicate Walmsley, of all people?”

“Carter is not stupid, you know, Vicky. She made sure there was a perfectly innocent explanation. She couldn't have written the note herself, don't forget. She must have prevailed upon someone else to write it for her.”

“Then who did write it?”

“Walmsley, of course. Lucy could never have allowed a rumour like that to spread without Walmsley's consent.” Shipman yawns too, now.

“You really think she could get Walmsley to do that?”

Shipman wriggles out of the bed. For a moment she stands, a pale, ghostly figure, the white night-shirt streaked by her long black tresses.

“Lucy really is not stupid, you know.”

Penrose reflects. It seems improbable; but perhaps Shipman is right. She looks up to reply: but Shipman has gone.

The caretaker answers the knock at his window in the stable yard. It is Shipman. “Good afternoon, miss, and what may I do for you?”

Shipman is all wide-eyed supplication. “Miss Walmsley sent me, Sir, to ask if you would be so good as to oil the hinges of her doors – for the wretched things are creaking so!”

"Ben!" The caretaker turns to his wizened assistant. "Take the oilcan up to the Head Girl's rooms directly, if you please, and oil the locks and hinges."

"Miss Walmsley will be so grateful!" Shipman flashes him a winning smile and trips away gaily. Everything is going so well!

"Shipman! What in heaven's name..."

It is the afternoon recreation period, and Shipman is at Walmsley's door. She is carrying a battery, and wearing a look of triumph.

"This thing is killing me, Walmsley. Do you have a bedside table?"

"Yes, but..."

"Please let me just put it down."

Mystified, Carry guides Shipman to her bedroom, where Shipman carefully disposes of her burden and casts herself, exhausted, upon the bed with an explosive sigh.

"How on earth did you get that battery?"

"Simple. I went to Miss Paulson and explained that since there was to be an away match soon, you decided it would be helpful if the entire team could be given a comprehensive dose of the electrical treatment."

"You said that I..."

"Yes." Shipman sounds very pleased with herself. "Rather than take up too much of her time, you thought it would be more convenient if you were to borrow a battery and keep it here. It worked like magic. Actually, Walmsley, I think I saw her blush a little when I mentioned your name. Do you think perhaps she feels a little tenderness in your direction?"

"My goodness!" Carry turns to the window for fear that Shipman will notice her flaming cheeks.

Shipman does. "I thought you'd be pleased. Think of the fun we can have!"

"Yes, yes of course..." Carry murmurs vaguely.

"You could get the team to come and have a treatment each evening... and you've got it all to yourself for the night." Shipman raises herself on one elbow.

"Aren't you pleased, Walmsley?"

There is a long pause; and then, suddenly, Carry begins to laugh. She sits on the edge of the bed, laughing. "Shipman... You are astonishing. You really are."

"So do I get my reward?"

"Reward?"

"Yes. There's an hour of recreation left, and I think I'd rather like a proper dose of electricity without stupid people grabbing my ankles and shouting out my pulse rate every fifteen seconds. Not to mention the outrage of busybodies jumping like frightened chickens and whipping the contacts away when I'm just about to come!"

"Yes, I see what you mean."

"So, is that all right, Walmsley? I've done well, haven't I? Remember, you've got this thing all night."

"Yes, I suppose so, Shipman. You're the limit, you truly are the limit."

"Thank you." Shipman preens herself. "So... Do you wish to stay and watch, Walmsley, or will you perhaps dance naked before me? Or am I to have a little peace and quiet, now?"

"Oh, yes, of course..." Walmsley mumbles, rising and going out, shutting the door. She shakes her head. "Why on earth did I not think of that before?" Walmsley returns to her study, still shaking her head slowly. In truth, she does feel rather slow-

witted. No doubt it is the lack of sleep catching up on her. She settles into an armchair and falls into a light doze.

“Hey Walmsley! Where were you? What, asleep?”

“Oh... Kershaw... what time is it?”

“It’s half past four. I thought something was amiss when I didn’t see you at tea.”

“Yes, I must have slept. I haven’t quite caught up on my sleep, what with talking to Carter, and... er... so forth, don’t you know.”

“Yes, yes we heard about that at last night’s Assembly. How is Carter?”

“She’s quite a tough little lady, as a matter of fact, Kershaw. Oh! I feel giddy!”

There is a muffled moaning sound from the bedroom.

“Good Lord! What on earth was that?” Kershaw is aghast.

“Oh my goodness. That was Shipman. You won’t believe this. She went to Miss Paulson and said that I wanted to borrow one of the batteries from the laboratory, to give the battledore team a good dose of electricity before the match on Saturday. And what does Miss Paulson do? She agrees without hesitation!”

“You mean to say...”

“Heavens, Kershaw... She’s been in there for an hour and a half! We have to stop her at once, or we will have a case of total exhaustion on our hands!”

“Will she not more probably be filled with a prodigious surfeit of energy?”

Walmsley looks at Kershaw through narrowed eyes. “Kershaw, dear, I think you will find that when carried a little too far, the electrical treatment becomes... shall we say, profoundly, although temporarily, enervating.”

It is swiftly apparent that Walmsley has the better grasp of the situation: despite her manifest reluctance to be separated from the electrical apparatus, Shipman is by now incapable of any significant resistance of a non-electrical kind. By a combination of tugging, threatening and poking, Walmsley and Kershaw propel Shipman into the study, where she collapses into the armchair like a marionette.

“Shipman, you idiot!” Walmsley seethes. “We have a match the day after tomorrow, and just look at you!”

“More...” croaks Shipman with a dreamy smile. “I want mo-ore...”

“Shipman, you’re a disgrace! Honestly, Kershaw, what depravity!”

“How are we going to get her into class?”

“Mmmmm...” purrs Shipman, closing her eyes and snuggling her cheek against the wing of the armchair.

“Look at her!” Walmsley kneels beside the chair. Shipman is absurdly, infuriatingly pretty, her cheeks ruddy with health, her warm body limp yet elegant, her smile at once satisfied, mysterious and deeply annoying.

“Shipman darling,” croons Walmsley in a musical voice, stroking Shipman’s cheek with one finger, “You’ve got to get up and go to cla-ass...”

Shipman affects a babyish voice. “Mmmh... Iyum tiyud...”

“Shipman...” Walmsley’s voice becomes a little threatening, “If you don’t get up this very moment, dear, and go into class, I’m going to have to make you...”

“Na-o-wwww,” croaks Shipman grumpily.

Walmsley positions her hands at Shipman’s rib cage, her fingers like talons.

“Shipman...” she sings; but Shipman is blissfully unaware of her imminent peril.

Her scream, when she is finally compelled to bound from the chair, might have reduced a chandelier to dust: seconds later, Walmsley collapses laughing over the arm of her chair at the clatter of Shipman's precipitate departure.

Kershaw shakes her head slowly. "That girl is extraordinary... exactly like a cat!"

"A cat who has had far, far too much of a good thing."

"Yes..." Kershaw muses. "You'd think she actually enjoyed that extraordinary electrical feeling."

"Oh I do assure you, Kershaw, Miss Shipman has a most stoical temperament. There is no inconvenience, no discomfort she would not subject herself to for the greater good of the school team."

Kershaw shakes her head in feigned disbelief.

"Kershaw, we'll let the other members of the team come up for some electricity after the evening Assembly. But we will make it a rule: five minutes each, at a maximum. But for you, Kershaw, perhaps ten. For the good of your soul, don't you know."

"If you think so, Walmsley."

"I like a girl with true courage, Kershaw. It will improve your game no end, I know it will."

After lights-out, Shipman composes herself, forcing her mind to be still. Unusually, she holds her arms rigidly by her sides. Gradually, she becomes serene. "This usually works," she thinks to herself, as she raises her head and bangs it down upon the pillow five times. It always works, though nobody knows why. Within seconds, she is asleep.

And, as if by magic, she is suddenly awake as the bell high on the roof chimes its mechanical five. In the dark, Shipman raises herself suddenly. There is nothing but quiet breathing. Quietly, hastily, she dresses herself, breathing sharply in the cold morning air. Then, carrying her shoes, she pads noiselessly to Walmsley's rooms.

It was so easy! So easy! Time and again, Shipman has had to pause, panting, at every creak of the floorboards; but nothing stirs.

Walmsley's bedroom is still warm, the coals upon the fire now but a dull glow. And what a sight is here! The esteemed Head Girl, all uncovered, prone now, her night-gown gathered up above her waist. Her hands are upon the pillow, submerged in a sea of golden tresses. And if reason were sought for such an abandoned, shameless pose, the battery wires are fallen untidily upon the floor.

As quietly as she can, Shipman strips for action, ready for Walmsley's least untoward movement; but the Head Girl is lost in deepest slumber. Gently, gently Shipman places one knee upon the bed, then hauls herself up, straddles Walmsley's waist. Lightly, carefully, Shipman begins to touch. After an initial groan, Walmsley parts her legs a little more. Clearly she is having happy dreams. But all too soon,

"Uh... Georgie?" Walmsley is awake.

Shipman manages to maintain her gentle stimulation despite her gale of quiet laughter. "I might have guessed! Not tonight, Walmsley!"

"Hey... what?" Carry tries to move, but Shipman has her too well pinned, and her knowing touches are irresistible. "O Lord... Shipman... It has to be you..."

"Hush, Walmsley. Just relax."

Walmsley groans again. After a couple of ineffectual heaves, Shipman feels her victim succumb to the delicious movement of her expert fingers. "O my Lord... Stop it... O God... O stop it, Shipman, ha ha..."

"You awake now, Walmsley?"

"O God... what are you doing to me, Shipman? Aahh..."

"What's the matter? Don't you like spiders?"

"Haha... O God..."

Shipman's movements slow and gradually still. Walmsley's hips begin to buck in passionate frustration.

"I want to talk to you, Walmsley." Shipman's fingers begin their slow, exotic dance once more.

"Ooohhh... Ohhh..." Walmsley is incoherent, her intimate tumescence awash with the slick evidence of her helpless delight. "O Shipman... O Shipman, that's incredible..."

"The trouble with you aristocrats, Walmsley," says Shipman smoothly, "is that you have no imagination. In a hundred years' time, you will all be pushing handcarts. It will be those with intelligence – doctors, lawyers, scientists – who will have the power... You duchesses and countesses will all be eating out of our hands... won't you?" Shipman abruptly ceases her movements, well aware that upon their resumption, Walmsley's pleasure – and her gratitude – will be more than doubled.

"O Shipman... oh what... O please! Don't stop now!" Walmsley is desperate.

"You like spiders, do you, Walmsley?" Shipman knows very well: Walmsley's copious leakage speaks for itself.

"O please!"

"Do you? Hm?"

“Yes, Shipman, yes I like spiders... Aaah!”

Shipman gives a musical little laugh as she gently, exquisitely brings Walmsley to the very brink; then pauses once more.

“Agh Shipman!” quivering, Walmsley pounds her fists into her pillow in an agony of frustration. “For heaven’s sake... Oooohh...”

Shipman resumes with the very slowest, gentlest of touches, so that Walmsley cannot at first be sure that she feels anything. “There, Walmsley, just float, dear... Just relax and float... You’re in my web now, aren’t you?”

Walmsley gives a self-indulgent sigh. It is a lovely web. Why try to resist? She drools into her pillow. Shipman is so wonderfully clever.

“I know you wrote that note, Walmsley. The note about Carter.”

Walmsley tries to gather enough resolve to counter this statement, but the delicious agony eats away her strength. “Uhhh...” she gasps in acquiescence.

“You did, didn’t you?”

“Ahh... yes, yes...”

“Good.” After rewarding her victim with a few more delectable strokes, Shipman withdraws her hand, allowing Walmsley enough time to register the import of her confession. When she groans, Shipman continues, “It would not reflect well on the Walmsley honour were Mrs Cunningham to know who wrote that note — now would it?”

Walmsley shudders.

Smoothly, Shipman resumes: “I hold all the cards, Walmsley. Don’t you think it would be most sensible if we worked together, hm?”

“Yes, all right Shipman, all right, if only...”

“There, there, Walmsley, I knew you’d be sensible.” Shipman gently resumes her delicious movements. “Here’s something lovely you can teach to Georgie,” she murmurs sweetly to the accompaniment of Walmsley’s increasingly impassioned gasps. “After you’ve done this to her, she won’t be able to resist you, Walmsley. She will never be able to say ‘no’ to you again — h’m? Will she now?”

It is one of the privileges of the Head Girl at Hepplewhite that she sleeps a little apart from the rest, and is thus able to surrender to the final onslaught of pleasure without regard to the sensitivities of light sleepers. In the event, Miss Walmsley signals its arrival with something of a bellow; and in the tremulous, shuddering aftermath, she is most receptive to Shipman’s patient explanation of what she is to do.

“...So you see, Walmsley,” Shipman concludes, “I could threaten you with exposure, but I don’t need to, do I? You see that I have the right of it. And when all is said and done, it is much more sensible to work with me than against, now isn’t it? I’ve been a good friend, haven’t I? I brought you the battery. And I have a wonderful plan for the away match, Walmsley. Yes, my dear, you shall see: we shall be invincible. Just think what we can accomplish together, working as friends? Hmm?”

Walmsley nods. “Very well, Shipman. I’m sure you’re right.”

Shipman snuggles closer. “Say, Walmsley... do you think you could manage another, hmm?”

“O Shipman, I don’t think I could... Oh... perhaps I could... O Shipman!”

“Hush, Walmsley! Hush, dear... Just think what this will do to Georgie... Remember now... just float...”

“Ohh...”

“That’s it... just float...”

It is a tribute to Miss Shipman's skill that Walmsley is as unaware of her departure, some fifty minutes before the waking bell, as she was of her silent arrival.

The matron is surprised to see Miss Shipman in the infirmary: everyone has been remarking on how she has blossomed into the picture of health this term.

"What is the trouble, Miss Shipman?" she asks sympathetically.

"Miss Gurney sent me to ask if we might have two rolls of bandage — for the away match tomorrow, don't you know. In case of any sprains. Of course we'll return them immediately after."

"Well, that is an unusual request... But really, I don't see why not. Let me see..." Matron pulls open a drawer. "Yes, here we are. We have plenty. Take three: better to be safe than sorry!"

"You are so very kind, I'm sure, Matron," murmurs Shipman, gratefully fluttering her eyelashes.

"Aah... such beautiful manners," muses Matron, staring after Shipman as she skips away in glee. "— And such a lovely, graceful curtsy."

"Of course I can drive!" It is with some hauteur that Miss Paulson declines the ostler's repeated offer to take the reins. "I have driven in Paris, you know!"

Unsure what sort of a qualification this might be, the ostler merely tugs his forelock and wishes the ladies a good afternoon.

Miss Paulson looks splendid in one of her finest frocks, grey with dazzling, effervescent white lace. It is perhaps fortunate that the impressionable Carry is not here to see her: instead, Shipman and Carter in their plain but elegant dark blue dresses, trimmed with red.

Miss Paulson eyes the duo with quiet amusement: they seem to be acting so unnaturally.

Carter is particularly awkward in Shipman's presence – constantly blushing, turning away, twitching her shoulders, one minute aloof, the next sneaking glances at her companion. As for Shipman – she seems relatively at ease; but there is something almost coquettish in her manner. If one did not know that such things were quite impossible, one would imagine that she might be making eyes at her companion; but at other times her manner could not be more aloof. Friends sometimes have their little disagreements; and Miss Paulson guesses this may be at the root of this pair's odd behaviour. Tactfully, she says nothing, but assists the young ladies into the trap.

At opposite ends of the bench, pressed into the corners, Shipman and Carter affect to admire the view. After a little while, Carter adjusts her skirts with a cross little motion. She senses Shipman's gaze. After a moment, she half-turns. Did Shipman suddenly turn her head? She thinks so. She crosses her legs; then uncrosses them once more and turns away irritably. She readjusts her skirts; and, for good measure, straightens her back, thrusting out her breast to its best advantage.

After a while, Shipman slowly turns to look at Carter, whose attention is resolutely fixed on the glories of the countryside. But her light brown hair is tied back so neatly, so strictly, and oh! — Shipman's hands tighten in her lap. When at length Carter straightens in her seat, Shipman avoids her eye, trying to breathe normally. Over and over in her mind, she rehearses the words she needs to say. But she cannot both look, and say them. She closes her eyes and tries to summon her strength.

“Carter... I'm truly sorry about the rumours... the bullying... I beg your pardon for my part in it. I am so very ashamed...” She extends her hand a little towards

Carter, then rests it upon the seat between them. "I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive us... to forgive me."

Carter has not moved. She is still looking away; but perhaps she is breathing a little faster than before.

Shipman looks down at the floor of the trap. She blinks her tears away. But then her heart leaps; for though Carter has not turned, she has rested her own small hand upon Shipman's, lightly, reassuringly. Shipman blinks away more tears; she interlaces her fingers with Carter's and gives a little squeeze of gratitude. She thinks, she thinks there is an answering pressure; and then, with a little sigh, Carter withdraws her hand.

After a while, Carter senses Shipman's gaze: she can feel it. She thrusts her shoulders back. She turns very slightly and a quick glance confirms it: mystery lover or not, Shipman is most certainly looking at her. She bites her lip. She crosses her legs: she has to. To be admired is very charming, after all, even by someone as unprincipled as Shipman.

It is not long before they arrive at the clockmaker's. Mr Jepson greets them respectfully and leads them into the large workshop at the back.

"Here is the mechanism you asked for, ladies," he says, taking them to the end of a long oaken work-bench. There, amid a profusion of tools and tiny components, is the mechanism, carefully made to Shipman's and Carter's design.

"Oh, is that not rather heavy?" asks Carter.

"I can machine away a little more of the brass if you wish," he replies.

"I think if you were to take some away from here... and here..." Carter points.

"Very good, miss."

“Oh! May I see how it is done?” cries Shipman.

“Very well... I'll just bring it over here...”

Shipman and Miss Paulson follow Mr Jepson to watch the milling, which is done on a machine at the far rear of the workshop. Carter remains, suddenly interested in a coil spring which had lain unnoticed upon the bench.

“Mmmm,” she murmurs to herself, “this is just the kind of thing, just exactly...” Supporting herself on her elbows, she stoops and takes it, and turns it to and fro in her fingers.

Immersed in her thoughts, she does not notice when Master Philip Jepson enters the workshop behind her, having just descended from the store-rooms with a parcel of lead.

“Oh!” he says, startled, for the very last thing he expected to encounter in the workshop was the elegant posterior of a smart young gentlewoman decorously leaning over the work-bench. How prettily, too, her light brown hair is put up into a neat bun! He is a fine, fresh-faced, upstanding lad of fifteen years, already becoming quite expert in his father's trade. Wistfully, he realizes that young ladies of this quality are far beyond his social aspirations; but it will surely do no harm to summon all his charm. He affects a smile which he hopes will be both polite and ingratiating. “Ahem! Excuse me, miss.”

The exquisite creature turns; and at once his smile turns to a look of dismay: for this young woman is astonishingly plain, and wall-eyed to boot!

Seeing his face fall, Carter completes his discomfiture by pulling a deliberately hideous grimace. Then she turns back, as if to contemplate her spring. “What do I care?” she thinks angrily to herself. “What should I care what a tradesman's son

thinks of me?" But the memory of that vanishing smile will return to mortify her many times over the next few weeks.

But then Master Philip catches sight of a truly heavenly vision: Felicity Shipman, who, with the others, is making her way back to her friend's side, clutching a small piece of brass in both hands. To his eye, her sinuous motion is the epitome of grace; her little smile sets his heart racing.

"Is that not more faithful to our design?" she asks of Carter; but a glance at the young man prompts her to thrust out her hip provocatively.

Carter takes the object and probes it carefully. "Yes, I think this will answer. But Sir, I wonder if you have a short length of spring steel – perhaps of five gauge?"

"I believe I have some somewhere, miss. I pray you, just one moment..." Mr Jepson turns to his son. "Well, stow that with the others, and then, on with thy work: don't stand there gawping!"

With a rosy-cheeked smile, Philip puts down his burden and retreats upstairs to the store-room. Shipman's answering smile fades into a blush as she turns back to find that Carter has been eyeing her balefully.

In a moment, Mr Jepson is back, two short lengths of spring steel in his hand.

"I have this in five, miss, or this longer piece in six."

Carter looks a moment, then says, "The five is quite long enough. Now would it be possible to affix just twenty-five sixteenths to this spring, here, across-wise, with no more than five grains of lead? For I have something particular in mind..."

Mr Jepson looks for an instant to Miss Paulson. At her nod, he takes the spring carefully from Carter. "Just where, miss?"

"I have marked it here, do you see?"

"Very good, miss."

Mr Jepson carries the spring to a spirit-lamp. Leaning on his elbows, he carefully affixes the prescribed length of steel to the coil spring, across-wise as instructed. The three women watch him at his work.

“There, now, miss,” he says, standing back and removing his eye-glass, “I think that may hold.”

“It seems well done,” says Carter, carefully taking the spring from his huge but nimble fingers. “And now I pray, could you bite seventeen grains’ weight of shot upon the end, just here?”

Again Mr Jepson looks for confirmation to Miss Paulson, who raises an eyebrow and inclines her head in assent.

Mr Jepson weighs some shot, bends to his lamp again, and melts the little leaden ball on to the steel so that it is neat and round.

“There... with the resin, that should hold, I think,” he says, blowing upon it to cool it before handing it back to Carter. “But may I enquire, miss, why you desire so strange a contrivance?”

“I am thinking,” Carter responds softly, “about the properties of springs and their motion.”

“Miss Carter is a mathematician,” explains Miss Paulson.

Mr Jepson’s expression stiffens into one of respect.

Shipman disguises her puzzlement with an archly raised eyebrow and a bewitching little smile. She is about to make a slightly derisive comment, but checks herself: Miss Paulson’s countenance makes it plain that she takes Carter’s strange preoccupation very seriously.

For once, Carter is not blushing, but is regarding the spring with intent, childlike fascination. Cautiously, she extends a finger and flicks the end of the spring.

She watches its vibration, and appears satisfied. "Lovely," she murmurs, "just lovely." Her mouth sets in a tiny smile.

Now Shipman is entranced. "How very pretty her mouth is — when she has it closed," she thinks. And when, their business done, they make their way out through the shop, she does not notice Master Jepson at the foot of the stairs, worshipping her with his eyes.

In the trap once more, Carter holds the spring up in her left hand and touches it exploringly with her right index finger, sometimes flexing it one way, sometimes another.

"What are you going to do with it, Carter?" Shipman is gazing intently at her now.

"I'm going to think about it. Just feel how it moves... and think about it," says Carter mysteriously.

Shipman finds the motion of Carter's finger oddly hypnotic.

Miss Paulson looks up from her marking. It is nearly nine o'clock, and the candle is getting low. Lucy Carter is seated in the armchair by the fire. In her hands, she holds her spring, which she occasionally stretches and flexes, absorbed in thought. Miss Paulson smiles. It is pleasant to have company in the little cottage, and Lucy is an agreeable, tranquil soul.

Aware of Miss Paulson's gaze, Lucy looks up and returns the smile. Neither of them speaks.

For Miss Paulson, Lucy's presence has an additional advantage: there is now no question of Carry repeating the rash behaviour of that unforgettable night. At the thought of Carry, a mix of sorrow and yearning floods her heart: but to hope is

madness, this she knows. With a sigh and a little shake of her head, she returns to her marking.

Later, curled in her comfortable bed, Lucy marvels at Miss Paulson's extraordinary self-discipline. What finer, more inspiring example could a young woman aspire to emulate? She listens to the rhythmic sounds, clearly audible through the thin wall. Whatever Miss Paulson is doing, it seems an astonishingly strenuous form of exercise for so late an hour; but no doubt it promotes deep and restorative slumber. Half asleep, Lucy hears a sudden, grating moan.

"Goodness," she thinks, "I hope she hasn't strained herself too badly."

But then there is a happy sigh, and within moments the two occupants of the little gamekeeper's cottage are cosily asleep.

Part IVb

Miss Gurney, who is in charge of sporting activities at Hepplewhite, looks with satisfaction at her charges. Despite the excitement of travelling by the railway, the members of the battledore team have been models of propriety. Now they are seated primly in their first-class carriage, hands in their muffs, swaying gently as it rocks upon the clattering rails. In just two hours, they will be arriving at Thomas More for the first away match in Hepplewhite's history.

Big-built and handsome rather than beautiful, Miss Gurney is a kind, cheerful and well-liked teacher: she has no objection to the girls whispering to one another on these occasions, provided that they maintain modesty and decorum.

Shipman, lulled by the motion of the carriage, places her hands, still in their muff, prayer-like against the cushion, rests her cheek upon them and falls into a doze. It is well, thinks Miss Gurney. Let them conserve their strength for the match. Their game has much improved over the last few weeks, and she is quietly confident of another victory. She voices her thoughts to Walmsley, who is seated opposite.

Walmsley would like to mention Shipman's plan, but she has been sworn to secrecy. There are reasons to fear that Miss Gurney might regard such a thing as "unsporting"; so in reply she merely offers a polite "I venture to hope so, miss."

On Miss Gurney's left, Smythe too seems to have been lulled into a doze by the movement of the carriage. Her weight is beginning to press upon the teacher. Her body is warm. She is a fine, strong girl, and so willing: her technique and agility have improved astonishingly in recent weeks. She is quite transformed. Smythe moans quietly in her sleep and snuggles against Miss Gurney. Her firm young breast presses

into the teacher's arm. Miss Gurney smiles indulgently: after all, the dear girl is asleep. Let her rest.

Lessons are over, and Carter is already hard at work on her mathematical paper when Miss Paulson returns to the cottage from the staff lunch. At the sound of her approach, Carter blushes and uncrosses her aching legs. Really, this leg-crossing is becoming something of an unconscious habit. As Miss Paulson enters, Carter murmurs a polite greeting.

“My, my, Carter – hard at work again? It's quite a fine afternoon. Ought you not to take advantage of the weather, and have some exercise?”

“Perhaps you are right, Miss Paulson. But speaking of exercise: I wondered if you would be so good as to tell me about your exercises. They sound most formidably relaxing.”

“My exercises? Why, whatever do you mean?”

“The exercises you perform after retiring. Do they assist you in falling asleep? Sometimes I have great difficulty falling asleep, although I confess that my new bed is wonderfully comfortable...”

Fortunately, Lucy is too distracted to notice Miss Paulson's scarlet embarrassment. And while Miss Paulson is at a loss for words, salvation arrives in the form of a knock at the door. Miss Paulson turns to open it.

“Why hello, Penrose. What may I do for you?”

“If you please, Miss Paulson, I came to enquire whether Carter would like to accompany me for a stroll.”

“An excellent suggestion, since it is such a fine afternoon. — Carter! A friend has come to see you.”

And once Carter has taken her shawl and departed with her friend, Miss Paulson closes the door with a grateful sigh. Alone at last! And what reply can she make to Carter? Exercises, indeed! — But O, fie! She had been so careful not to make a noise. What can Carter have heard?

Miss Paulson grips the back of the armchair and tries to collect her thoughts. Evidently Carter has no inkling of the truth. — And why should she? After all, Miss Paulson herself has spent twenty-five years in ignorance. Should she not, then, as a teacher committed to her pupils' welfare, explain what she has so recently discovered? For it cannot be gainsaid: Miss Georgina Paulson has found the tender manipulation of her Number Eighteen to be most wonderfully refreshing and invigorating. Indeed, she cannot remember ever before feeling so fit, so healthy, so relaxed.

She walks over to the table. There is Carter's exercise book, covered with indecipherable jottings in her childish pencil scrawl; there the pencil hurriedly set down; and there Carter's ruler — rather a fine ruler, with ivory end-pieces. She picks up the ebony rod. It has a pleasant weight in the hand. She sets it down again and rolls it pensively to and fro.

How to explain such delicate matters without indelicacy? Poor Carter is so thin, so frail! Of course, she would have to be warned: at present, her constitution could not possibly withstand the awesome force of the paroxysm.

And O, the paroxysm! — So fearsome, so momentous, and yet what blissful calm in its wake! Why, even to think of it is to desire it. And now that she does, Miss Paulson recognizes an insistent summons from Number Eighteen. A few minutes all to herself — a few minutes should be enough! She hurries upstairs, tears off her clothes: no sense in wasting time. "Yes," she gasps as she leaps naked on to the bed.

Where is it, that spot? Here? Here! O, the relief! The blessed relief! "O yes!" It is a whispered scream. "O yes! O yes!"

"No, Vicky, I don't think that would be wise." Carter and Penrose are making their thoughtful way to the rose garden. "It doesn't seem right. If we kept it secret, then what good would come of it? I don't like the idea of arousing her jealousy — whoever she may be. And anyway, if it became public, then just imagine what those chatterbox scandal-mongers would make of it!"

"But Lucy: there's no harm in kissing." Vicky laughs. "Why, what harm could there be? We should be just like sisters, that's all. Sisters are always kissing, don't you know. Do you not have sisters?"

Carter looks down. They are just passing the gate into the rose garden. "I had one, once," she murmurs.

Penrose is all sweet concern. "Why Lucy — what happened to her? — Come, sit with me. Tell me."

Once more, Lucy recounts the sad tale of her clever, beautiful elder sister. "My parents miss her terribly," she concludes wistfully.

Vicky, who has been holding her hand, turns toward her now. "And you? Do you not miss her?" Vicky is pretty. Her lips tremble. Her eyes are full of compassion. Her eyes scan Lucy's brow, her beautifully neat hair, her nose, her mouth. She parts her lips, and looks into Lucy's eye.

Lucy takes a sudden, gasping breath. Vicky's eyes are beautiful. Slowly she shakes her head. Their lips are not far apart. "No," she breathes. "No, I don't."

“Very well, Shipman, what do we do?” Shipman has just slipped into Walmsley’s changing cubicle with a roll of bandage.

“Strip to your waist!”

Walmsley is round-eyed with horror. “What? You cannot be serious!”

“Quick! I haven’t much time!”

With a shrug, Walmsley complies, turning away modestly. Shipman unrolls some of the bandage.

“Very well. What next?”

“Put your hands on your head.”

Obediently, Walmsley does so. Shipman reaches round and weighs Carry’s magnificent breasts.

“Does Georgie like them, h’m?”

“What are you doing, Shipman?”

“Just finding out what we have to reckon with. Mmm.” Shipman closes her eyes for a moment, relishing the delightful warm softness of Walmsley’s skin. “Now turn round, pray.”

Blushing prettily, Carry does so. Aware of Shipman’s intense scrutiny, she begins to breathe a little faster. Shipman stoops a little, examining closely, critically. Carry can feel her breath. Her nipples react. With a shiver, she whispers: “Well, Shipman? What do you think?”

Shipman stands up once more, looking Walmsley in the eye. “Perfect. Now pray turn round once more. Yes, I see how to do this.”

She begins to wind the bandage around Carry’s neck, under the breasts, across the back, under the arms, binding tight.

“Stop it, Shipman! Stop it! Ow!”

"Sorry. How's that?"

"That's... bearable. Very well..."

Soon Carry is satisfactorily trussed, and Shipman ties off the bandage.

"Comfortable?"

"Not bad," murmurs Carry, working her shoulders.

"Good. Now jump up and down." Carry does so. "Flap your arms. Still comfortable?"

"Why... yes..." Carry is amazed. Like this, she will be able to leap about as never before. "Why, thank you, Shipman."

"Good. I think that will hold. Now get dressed. I'm going to do Smythe."

Furtively, Shipman peeps round the cubicle partition. The coast is clear. For a moment she turns back. "Walmsley: this will be a massacre, I promise you." Then, in an instant, she is gone.

Amazed and delighted, Carry jumps some more. It is so comfortable. Really, that Shipman is an irresistible force. She tidies her hair, collects her battledore and emerges into the changing room. A soft, rather musical squeal from Smythe's cubicle indicates that Shipman's second fitting is progressing satisfactorily.

Miss Paulson feels a little chilly. She pulls the bedding over herself. What a dilemma! She is sure that Carter is too frail, much too frail. And yet — what right has Miss Paulson to keep her in ignorance? For despite the agony — O yes, it is agony — is there not something... really quite marvellously pleasant about it, also? And is not all pleasure a good? Why should Carter — or indeed anyone — be deprived of such pleasure? What good is served by this ridiculous secrecy? Ah, yes, the pleasure...

Despite her state of blissful satiation, Miss Paulson remembers what Carry said: “It gets easier and easier, and nicer and nicer!” Yes, Carry had brought her to climax after climax, and yet she had felt no ill-effects. And in truth, the later ones were almost unbearably delightful. The mere recollection re-ignites the tingle in her Number Eighteen, and without thinking Miss Paulson’s finger returns to the spot. “But it’s not so very bad now,” she thinks, “I don’t really need to do this again.” She does not wish to exhaust herself. But then she remembers, with some mortification, that she had intended to do it silently — and yet Carter heard her. Undoubtedly, it requires practice to be able to do this in a discreet and lady-like manner. Assuredly Carry would never be so coarse as to cry out like an animal. Yes: it would be good to practise doing it silently.

She lies rigid, determined not to make the bed squeak. She clamps her teeth together. Good. Now: just gently there on Number Eighteen. Oh yes, easier and easier, and nicer and nicer – how astonishingly quickly it seems to happen – “Ooh!” Miss Paulson gasps aloud. — Damnation!

She jerks her hand away. “Really, Georgina Paulson, take a grip on yourself!” Once more she tenses herself, hunches her shoulders, clamps her mouth tightly shut. Now... finger... oh... amazing... lips tight... screw eyes shut... it is so... so... too much... too, too much... “Bah!” she cries, lurching in frenzy, her finger moving sweetly, so sweetly, while her eyes roll and the room spins — “Haugh!” as the pleasure buffets the breath from her body. At length, she trembles to a halt, the sound of her gasps ringing in her ears. After a moment, she laughs at her failure, laughs and quietly laughs, her whole body shaking with the force of it. She feels wonderful. Oh well, she has the resolve, and practice will make perfect...

At the sound of a quiet cough from nearby, Carter and Penrose abruptly jerk apart.

Penrose turns in the direction of the cough. "Oh, hullo Miller."

"May I join you? I'm not interrupting, am I?" asks Miller anxiously.

Penrose thinks quickly. "I was just consoling poor Carter. Her sister has died."

"Oh! I am so sorry, Carter," murmurs Miller, taking a seat on the bench next to Penrose.

Carter is scarlet with embarrassment, but is able to dodge behind Penrose to rebutton the front of her dress. Really, Vicky's gentle touches and kisses were extremely consoling, but now she is uncomfortably aware of a violent throbbing and tingling in her nether regions. Sighing in abject despair – really, this is becoming a constant habit! – she crosses her legs and squeezes. Oh! She almost cries out at the sweet relief.

"I'm worried," says Miller. She looks preoccupied. "It's that electricity business."

"And what of it?"

"Well... I know that before long, everybody will expect me to... to have it, don't you know, and... well..."

"Pooh! Miller, it is really nothing to be afraid of."

"I know, I know, but still I'm afraid. I... Oh! It's so difficult to speak of!"

"Why? It's just a slight tingling sensation, that is all."

"Well you say that, but... What did you think, Carter?"

"Well!" Lucy casts her mind back, and finds it necessary to have another squeeze. "As a matter of fact I thought it felt rather lovely at first, but then..."

"Yes?" Miller is intent with interest, leaning in order to hear every word.

“Well, it all became very strange... strong feelings inside me... they seemed to fill me up...”

“And... was it unpleasant?”

“Not exactly... it was frightening, certainly. I felt perfectly well afterwards, though. I don't think I would be so frightened if I had to go a second time.”

“Would you say that you felt relaxed, after?” — this from Penrose.

“Why yes, Vicky; relaxed... and totally calm. Quite, quite calm.”

“There you are, Miller. Nothing to be afraid of, you see.”

Carter rises to her feet. She is trembling a little. “Vicky... would you mind if we continued our stroll? I'm feeling... as if a walk would do me good.”

Penrose looks at her friend. “Why of course. — Miller, won't you join us?”

Miss Gurney is almost shouting with delight. Walmsley, Kershaw, Denning and Smythe have all won outright, and by a far greater margin than at the home match. Having verified that Shipman, too, is playing like a demon, she hastens into the changing room to congratulate Smythe.

“Smythe?”

“O Miss Gurney... I wonder... could you help me?”

It is Smythe, calling softly from within her cubicle.

“Is it all right for me to come in, dear?”

“O yes... I can't seem to...”

Miss Gurney draws aside the curtain. She gasps. “Why Smythe! What is this?”

“It was Shipman's idea. To make it easier to leap around, don't you know. But I can't seem to...”

“Why Smythe... I'll do it. Just place your hands upon the wall, dear, just relax. That's it.” Carefully, Miss Gurney undoes the bandaging. “Oh, it was very tight.”

“Yes.”

“Are you a little sore?”

“A little.”

“I think it has cut into you. It has left red marks. Poor thing. But you played magnificently, Smythe.”

“O Miss Gurney... thank you.”

“Is that better?”

“O yes... O yes...”

“You played so well...”

“O Miss Gurney...”

“You moved so beautifully on the court...”

“O Miss...”

“Would you like to come to tea on Thursday?”

“O Miss... That would be... a very great pleasure, and I'm sure I'm most honoured.”

“It would be lovely to have you, my dear. Well, I had better go and see how Shipman is faring... hadn't I?”

“Oh dear... yes, I suppose so, miss.”

“That was a good idea of Shipman's.”

“She's wonderfully clever, miss.”

“I'm surprised I never thought of it before. Best not to say anything, of course.”

“Certainly not, miss.”

“Until Thursday, then.”

“Yes, miss. Until Thursday.”

The day after the battledore team's victorious return from Thomas More, the team members bask in universal adulation. Everywhere the talk is of Smythe's devastating backhand, or Denning's historic rally. But while nothing is explicit, somehow nobody is in any doubt that the highest honour is Shipman's. Whenever an anecdote is told, whenever praise is voiced, the players turn aside modestly, saying, “O no, I merely did my best. The real credit goes to Shipman.” But Shipman, unusually, is quite inscrutable.

The team's recognition is crowned at the evening Assembly, when the Head gives a glowing eulogy of the team's prowess, extolling the excellence of everyone at Hepplewhite and especially its team's magnificent *esprit de corps*.

So it is that at lights-out, all the Hepplewhite girls glow with pride as they snuggle into their beds. And Felicity Shipman glows with much else besides: she is decidedly frisky, and full of a quite different sort of *esprit de corps*. After half an hour of delicious self-torment, she judges it safe to sally forth.

“Pssst! Penrose!”

Victoria Penrose manages to suppress her scream of surprise. She had been so sure that everyone was asleep. She had had to wait so long!

“Who is it? Where are you?”

“Sh!”

A face, pale in the moonlight, appears above the edge of Penrose's bed.

“Oh! Shipman! How you startled me!”

Shipman lets out a low, breathy chuckle. “I know... Now let me in, or I'll get cold.”

“No, Shipman, go away!”

“I just wanted to ask about your little walk with Carter yesterday.”

“Go away and leave me alone!”

“Why? Was I... interrupting something?” Shipman chuckles again.

“It’s none of your business! ...Oof! You’re cold!”

“Aha! ...Why, Penrose! Your night-gown is all bunched up...”

“Stop it! Your hands are cold!”

“Aaah!”

“Shipman! No, Shipman! Uh...”

After a brief struggle, Shipman succeeds in capturing Penrose’s wrists. “Now!”

“Let go!”

“Sh! Just let me... aaah!” She draws Penrose’s hands to her nose.

“Shipman, damn you...”

“Mmmm... I know where these have been!”

Penrose wrestles her hands from Shipman and turns her back on her.

“Go away!”

“Penrose... Penrose...”

“Stop it! Don’t touch me there!”

Shipman chuckles, but continues to touch, gently and persistently.

“Oh Shipman... Oh my God... It tingles so much...”

“Mmm...”

“I just can’t help...”

“I know... Do you think you’re the only one?”

Shipman knows exactly how to do it, and with a little sigh of despair, Penrose rolls on to her front and parts her legs.

“Oh Penrose... You're so wet...”

“My God, My God...”

“Haha! You were close, weren't you? So... close...”

“Mph!”

“So... close...”

“Oh Shipman... Shipman... Please don't stop... not now...”

“Well then, tell me... what happened with Carter?”

“Oh please, Shipman!”

“I just want to find out what happened. Then I'll give you one of my Spider Specials, if you like.”

Penrose, giddy with lust and maddened by Shipman's gentle caresses, squeals softly and grinds her hips ineffectually into the mattress.

“Hush! Now tell me!”

Penrose takes a few moments to compose herself.

“Well, she seemed reluctant at first, don't you know.”

“Good...”

“But then we sat down together, and... well, she let me kiss her...”

“Go on...”

“And so I started to touch her... Like this...”

“Ahhh... O Vicky!”

“That's what she said!” Penrose giggles. “And then of course she let me undo her dress...”

“What?”

“She let me. I was kissing her all the time. And oh, Shipman, she was so... excited! Her... you know, these...”

“Oh yes...”

“They were huge, Shipman! All goosey! Why, so are yours, I think...”

“Mhhh...”

“And so I tickled and tickled her there, and she kissed me harder and harder...”

“That’s brilliant, Vicky! That’s all I need!”

“And then Miller came along.”

“What? Miller? She didn’t see anything, did she?”

“I don’t think so. But listen, Shipman, I think you need to speak to her. She’s in a terrible state about the electricity. Really I don’t know what’s the matter with her. She wants to leave the society, you know.”

“What?”

“Yes, truly! She’s so frightened. I couldn’t really get much out of her.”

“Well... I’d better find out whether she saw anything. I can’t be too careful, you know.”

“Yes... Yes, I understand.”

“Anyway... You did well, Vicky. But listen: I don’t want you to touch her any more.”

“But why?”

“You’ve done very well, but I don’t want you to touch Lucy any more, do you understand?”

“Why not?”

“I... I just don’t, that’s all. No kissing, either. Promise, and I’ll give you a Spider Special. Like this.” Shipman gives a brief example.

“Uhhh...” Penrose is speechless with pleasure.

Shipman stops and waits patiently for her to recover. “Come on, promise.”

“Oh... very well. I promise.”

“Good girl!” Shipman breathes the words lovingly, confidently, and her fingers begin their skilful work.

“O Shipman! Oh, that's... that's so lovely...”

“Yes... Try not to squeal...”

“I'm not... oh! ...squealing.”

“You were...”

“Shipman! Ah! I think... Ach! I'm going to...”

Shipman does not need to be told. With her free hand she forces Penrose's head down into the pillow — very necessary and scarcely sufficient to muffle Penrose's helpless, ecstatic gasps. When at last the tumult is over, and having verified that everyone else is still asleep, Shipman kindly eases Penrose's night-gown back down as far as her knees, remakes the bed and slips noiselessly away into the night.

“Psst... Miller?” Shipman rises silently beside Miller's bed. There is a dark shape on the pillow, but an exploratory hand reveals that it is only a bundle of clothing. So Miller, too, is out on the prowl... Clearly, she has hidden depths.

Within five minutes, Shipman is dressed and padding quietly through the deserted corridors, shoes in hand. At the laboratory door, she stops and listens. For a while, it is quiet; but then, she hears from inside the unmistakable sound of whimpering. At first it seems suggestive of distress, but soon escalates into the noisy breathing of a young lady about to give herself wholeheartedly to the sweetest bodily passion. Always considerate of the needs of others, and aware of how rude it is for latecomers to enter a theatre before the entr'acte, Shipman decides to delay her entrance until a happy moan signals that matters have reached at least a temporarily satisfying conclusion. Then, quietly, she opens the door and slips noiselessly inside.

At once she sees a figure lying upon the cold, hard floor beside one of the equipment cupboards. It is difficult to see much, but the figure appears to be wearing a white night-gown, gathered up to the waist, and long dark woollen stockings, from which emerge pale, slender thighs, widely parted.

“Don’t be afraid, Miller. ‘Tis only I – Shipman.”

The thighs snap closed, and the figure struggles into a position of greater modesty.

“Shipman! My God! I... I was just ah... checking...”

“I know perfectly well what you were doing, Miller. But how long has this been going on?”

“What do you mean? I was just...”

“Please, Miller, I’m not stupid. I heard you, dear. You’re obviously not new to it, or you wouldn’t be enjoying it so much. Come, tell me, how long?”

“Only... only... well, about five days...”

“Five days! – But why? Why take such a risk of getting caught?”

“Well... I couldn’t help noticing that people seemed quite to like the electricity...”

“Go on...”

“But – I don’t know – I just couldn’t face doing something like that in front of everybody, and not knowing what to expect. So I thought that maybe if I were just to see what it was like... on my own...”

“And what did you think of it?”

“Well... the first time, I quite liked it to begin with, but then it was... well... terrifying, you know, Shipman. I didn’t know what was happening.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“But then, the next day, I kept thinking about it, and... well, you know...”

“Yes. And so you did it again. And you discovered that you liked it.”

“It’s lovely, Shipman. I can’t stop wanting it.”

“Hush!” Shipman is suddenly tense. “Quick, Miller, get up! Get up! I’ll put the wires back — there! Now where can we go? — Quick, in here!” Shipman opens the door into Miss Paulson’s study and darts inside, hauling Miller by the hand. In the dark, the two terrified young ladies hug one another, their ears straining to catch a sound.

Their breaths catch in their throats as they hear the creak of the laboratory door being cautiously opened; then, a long silence. Miller quakes in terror. Then they hear a low whisper.

“All clear, Benson. You stay by the door.”

Miller’s shudders become even more pronounced.

Shipman puts her mouth close to Miller’s ear. “Kershaw,” she breathes.

It is essential to keep absolutely still and quiet: whatever these two senior prefects are doing, things would not be pleasant for Shipman or Miller if their presence were detected.

They hear the sound of an equipment cupboard door quietly sliding open.

And then Miller is astonished to find that Shipman is gently tugging her nightgown up, up... She inhales sharply as Shipman’s hands rove expertly over her shivering nakedness... O exquisite! Nicer, by far, than the electricity! And Shipman’s lips brush her ear again:

“You’re wet too! It’s fear...”

Quietly, as Shipman’s fingers continue their exploration, Miller struggles to breathe inaudibly.

From the laboratory, Kershaw's whisper, louder now: "Oof! This is heavy!"

And from Benson: "Hush! Be quick!"

After a few moments of quiet shuffling, the laboratory door closes, and Miller and Shipman are alone.

"Oh! Shipman... Shipman... what are you doing?"

"Do you like it?"

"Ohh yes..."

"It's called 'blissing', dear... You don't need electricity for this... Here, give me your hand."

"Oh I couldn't..."

"Yes, yes, come on... There now... feel?"

Miller does indeed feel, as the tightness of her arm around Shipman's back soon attests. It is not long before Shipman is tottering under Miller's shuddering weight.

"Ha! Ha!" Shipman chuckles, "There, there... better now, Miller?"

"Oh, heavens! Oh my!"

"See? No need for silly old electricity!"

"O Shipman, you shouldn't have made me do that..."

"Why not? Everyone does it, silly."

"Surely not!"

"Why yes... Almost everyone, anyway."

"But... but... Shipman... Oh, I'm so afraid..." Miller is still clinging to Shipman, both for support and for warmth.

"Why, what are you afraid about?"

"I need to tell someone..."

“Well?”

“Shipman... Sooner or later, they're going to ask me to have the electricity. I know they will.”

“At a Society meeting?”

Shipman feels Miller's nod against her shoulder.

“Well, what's wrong with that? You've tried it, and so you know there's nothing to worry about.”

“Oh but there is... Don't you see? If they see that my, ah... Queensland is already... ah...”

“...Drenched?” suggests Shipman sweetly.

“Aaah!” Miller writhes a little, as if her body is anticipating the event. “Yes... Won't they suspect something?”

“Hmmm... You could be right, Miller. Of course you could pretend to be ill...”

“That might work once, but not every time. I'll have to resign, won't I?”

“No, I don't think so. I'm sure I'll think of something, Miller. I generally do. Anyhow, you must thank your lucky stars you didn't get caught in here.”

“It is you I must thank, Shipman. I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't been here.”

“No, but I can guess,” replies Shipman grimly. “Now we'd best get back to bed. Why didn't you put on your frock, silly? You must be getting cold.”

At the eighth meeting of the Scientific Society, everyone is agog to see the machine that Shipman and Carter have designed. They crowd round the table while Carter connects the terminals, one by one, to the battery wires.

The first signs are not dramatic: a scarcely audible hum, and a feeble motion of the core.

"I'll just relax the spring a little," murmurs Carter apologetically. She takes a small screwdriver and pokes the machine with it. There is a spark, and she jumps back with a squeal.

"Let me, Carter: you're so clumsy," says Shipman, taking the dropped screwdriver and poking the machine in her turn, lower lip trapped under her top teeth.

All at once the machine begins to rattle: it is clear that something is happening.

"It works! It works!" Shipman and Carter cry delightedly.

"Do you see, ladies? Watch the motion of the core, to and fro inside the coil," urges Miss Paulson.

After much delighted cooing and pointing, the machine clattering and shivering about awkwardly on the table-top, the motion begins to slow.

"Oh dear, I do believe it is tiring the battery," says Clark in disappointment.

Hastily, Miss Paulson disconnects the battery wire.

"What are you going to call it?" asks Kershaw, eyeing the machine in breathless wonder.

"I shall call it an Oscillator — that is, if Shipman agrees," says Carter.

"Yes, indeed."

"Very good, Carter, very good, Shipman. Now, ladies, for those of you who have not understood the principles of the design and motion of this oscillator, I shall now put up on the board a diagram..."

And while Miss Paulson explains to the rest of the Society, Shipman and Carter take the oscillator back to their work-table.

"A pity that it tires the battery so, is it not?" sighs Carter.

“Yes...” Shipman narrows her eyes. “But wait a minute: what of your generator, Carter? Would that not perhaps produce enough of the electricity?”

“We could try it, could we not?”

“We shall need some more wire. I’ll fetch it...” Soon Shipman is back with two suitable lengths. “Now, we shall need to warm them...”

“Ow! Why must I always do this part?” grumbles Carter as Shipman insinuates the pieces of straight wire into the collar of Carter’s dress and down Carter’s back.

“Oh! They’re cold! Stop it! Oh!”

Shipman does not answer, but stands back, smiling. Carter is flushed and angry; but her frock cannot hide the fact that her breast has risen charmingly.

Shipman’s smile is so delighted that Carter has to look away. “Beast!” she mutters. After a few moments she plucks out the wires, now pliable. She looks up to see Shipman still gazing at her breast. Carter crosses her legs and squeezes them angrily. “Don’t stare at me like that! Come on, help!”

Soon the generator is connected to the oscillator.

“Careful, Carter: it might make a noise,” warns Shipman, gesturing towards Miss Paulson, still busily explaining to the others. “We don’t want to disturb them, do we?”

“But how...”

“Tuck it in here,” says Shipman, “come, part your legs a moment.” Soon the oscillator is clamped between Carter’s clenched thighs, swathed in the folds of her frock. “Ready?”

Carter nods dumbly. Shipman begins to turn the handle of the generator. From deep in her lap, there is a strangulated buzzing – “Good,” thinks Shipman – but then

Carter lets out a crystal-shattering squeal, which causes everyone else to leap in shock.

"I'm very sorry, Miss Paulson," says Shipman at once. "We were just doing some further tests. It won't happen again, I assure you."

"Very well, Shipman," gasps Miss Paulson after a moment, "It had better not." After a few moments to recollect herself, she resumes her patient explanation.

Shipman turns eyes of thunder to her abashed collaboratrix. "Give it to me," she says in a disgusted tone.

"Shipman... I'm sorry... I'll try..."

"No, no, give it to me."

"Honestly, Ship..." Carter looks up imploringly. "Honestly, I'll try..."

Shipman looks away angrily; but she cannot resist Carter's entreaty. "Very well," she growls through clenched teeth, "but you'd better be quiet, that's all." She purses her lips once or twice, and then turns back to the generator. Slowly now, she begins to turn the handle. After a few revolutions, the soft buzzing is heard from Carter's lap once more. At once Carter's mouth flies open, and her eyes are round. But this time, there is no sound other than a quiet gargling, until Carter's eyes take on a sudden brilliance and she begins to pant.

Shipman stops turning the handle of the generator. Carter looks around in aimless dismay. "You stopped!" she squeaks. "What are you doing? Why?"

"You've had enough." Shipman is curt, and firm.

Carter's brows descend. "What do you mean? Turn the handle."

"No, Carter, you've had enough. It's my turn."

They glare at one another.

Suddenly, without warning, Shipman turns the handle rapidly. Carter's mouth flies open once more — thankfully, without another shriek. She doubles up in consternation at the suddenly renewed, greatly intensified oscillation. Equally suddenly, Shipman stops. Carter, now deeply flushed, is too surprised, too weak to protest as Shipman pushes her roughly backwards, forces her legs apart and snatches the oscillator.

“My turn,” Shipman pronounces. With a little shiver of her hips, she seats herself upon the bench next to Carter, and decorously positions the oscillator in her own lap. She places her hands, one over the other, upon her knee and hunches her shoulders, eyes closed, mouth in a moue. She rocks her hips and shoulders as if to make herself comfortable.

Still angry, but nevertheless interested to see what Shipman's reaction will be, Carter reaches for the generator handle. Grim-faced, and watching Shipman intently, she begins to turn it. Almost at once, as the buzzing makes itself heard, Shipman's mouth tightens. Again she rocks her hips. And again. And then, as Carter continues to turn the handle, Shipman's eyes fly open. They are blazing. Her mouth, too, opens in an expression of delighted surprise. Smiling angrily, Carter abruptly stops, and is immediately rewarded by Shipman's look of appalled disappointment:

“Oh Carter!” she wails.

“My turn.”

“Oh, but Carter, I was just about to...”

“Well, well, what is happening here?” comes a stern voice from overhead.

Sheepishly, Shipman and Carter look up to see an inquisitorial Miss Paulson standing over them. Shipman would like to say something brilliant, but the emergence

of two gleaming wires from the region of her most sensitive organs seems somehow bound to detract from its effect. Nevertheless, she summons all her courage.

“We have just discovered a new and very interesting effect, Miss Paulson,” she says in a creditably level voice.

“It looks to be... most interesting, Shipman,” says Miss Paulson in a tone of glacial calm. “And since clearly Carter has been doing the less... interesting work in investigating this... interesting effect, I think your talents lend themselves admirably to the writing of some comprehensive notes, describing your discovery in detail — don’t you, Shipman? On my desk, if you please, at nine o’clock tomorrow morning.”

Shipman looks down, vanquished. She can just imagine Carter’s look of gloating triumph. But when, angrily, she looks up in defiance, she sees in her friend’s face nothing but defeat and resignation.

“Don’t worry, Carter,” Shipman says reassuringly. “I’ll think of something.”

Carter heaves a sigh and turns away.

After the young ladies have been dismissed – even a forlorn Carry Walmsley – Miss Paulson carefully takes Carter’s oscillating machine into her study and closes the door. There, her hypothesis that Shipman and Carter have stumbled upon something truly interesting is swiftly verified, by a series of increasingly delightful experiments.

And when, late that evening, Miss Paulson finally returns to her cottage, Carter notes how tired she is – too tired even to perform her customary exercises.

At two minutes to nine the next morning, Miss Paulson stands before her junior French class.

“Good morning, ladies.”

“Good morning, miss,” they respond with the usual dutiful wistfulness, as if letting her know that they would far rather be out in the fields, running and jumping and laughing. Miss Paulson is quite used to this: within ten minutes, they will be vying with one another to conjugate their verbs and stammer out French sentences. It is her job to warm them to the task, and she is good at it.

There is a knock at the door. Unwillingly, Miss Paulson takes her eyes off her class and looks to see who it might be. “Come in,” she calls.

It is Shipman, bearing a sheaf of paper, and wearing an expression of fierce triumph. Miss Paulson shivers with irritation, aware that her junior girls are, as one, eyeing this senior scholar with something akin to adulation.

“I’m extremely sorry to interrupt, Miss Paulson,” says Shipman, dropping a faultless curtsey. Her hair is immaculately neat, her dress spotless. “I have had some very interesting ideas on the subject of scientific experimentation and I would consider it an honour if you would give me the benefit of your opinion on them.” Smoothly, ingratiatingly, she approaches the desk, and lays the essay neatly in one corner. For a moment she stands immobile, as if in humble submission. But then she stands upright, and looks at Miss Paulson: she is polite, beautiful, irreproachable, serene — and wearing the slightest, the very merest trace of a most infuriating smirk.

Miss Paulson looks down at the essay. As usual, it is immaculately neat and painstaking. Slowly, searching for words, Miss Paulson looks up again to meet Shipman’s eyes. They are brilliant. It is a struggle, but she manages a cool, courteous response:

“Thank you, Miss Shipman. I shall read your ideas with great curiosity.”

Again, Shipman curtseys. “I am most grateful, miss, and beg your pardon for interrupting.” Her eyes are laughing as she turns and leaves the room.

Miss Paulson presses her knuckles hard against the desk. It does not help. She presses harder. She must say something to the class. She breathes deeply and relaxes, then looks up. All the girls are still looking at the door whence Shipman made her graceful exit.

“Very well, ladies,” she says at last with practised smoothness, “let us open our comprehension books at page twenty-three.”

“Ah, Miss Paulson! Please do sit down! Now to what, pray, do I owe the honour of this visit, h’m?”

Mrs Cunningham leans forward, elbows on her tidy desk-top, fingertips lightly pressed together. Her eyes are bright.

“Mrs Cunningham: As you are no doubt aware, the electrical force has already been associated with a quite remarkable transformation in the health and vivacity of our girls.”

“Quite. The decisive victory over Thomas More will greatly encourage our parents.”

“Indeed. But now it appears that, thanks to the work we have been doing with the electrical force, there may be another means to deliver its benefits which is... still more efficacious.”

“I see.”

“I cannot stress too strongly the scientific importance of this new avenue of enquiry. However, science demands that all results be tested by experiment and evaluated with the greatest care. It will therefore be necessary to acquire certain new equipment and build several devices.”

“And this new equipment will be expensive.”

“Somewhat costly, Head Mistress, yes. However, our initial findings do suggest that there might be benefits to health, which would have the potential to diminish our expenditure upon medicines.”

“I see.” Mrs Cunningham looks reflective. “That would be no bad thing.”

“Indeed not. And of course the improved well-being of our young ladies would as a matter of course lead to higher achievement, thus enhancing the standing of Hepplewhite in the eyes of our parents, and the public at large.”

“Of course. Miss Paulson: are you finding it difficult to breathe?”

“Why no, Mrs Cunningham.”

“Then I am led to ask just how much money this new equipment will cost.”

“I have prepared this schedule, Mrs Cunningham.”

Miss Paulson hands a sheet of impeccably-written foolscap to the Head Mistress.

“Coils. Wire. Labour.” Mrs Cunningham makes a pretence of careful examination, but it is the figure at the bottom that is uppermost in her mind. “Sixty pounds is a very great deal of money, Miss Paulson.”

“However, I think you will see from the calculations shown on the reverse that we may expect savings of some forty pounds in medicines; and it may be that other economies can be made. And as before, I am most willing to devote twenty pounds from my salary towards this worthy end.”

“You are most persuasive, Miss Paulson. But surely these savings – forty pounds, you say – are the merest speculation.”

“But just consider, Mrs Cunningham, the honour that would accrue to Hepplewhite if it were associated with such an effective demonstration of women’s ability in the field of science, and with such dramatic results!”

“Again, you are most persuasive; yet I am curious to know what precisely you would intend to do with this equipment. If we are to find such a considerable sum of money, would it be too much trouble just to explain the use you envisage for it?”

“Not at all, Head Mistress. I should be delighted to explain. As you know, the effects of the electrical current have had a marked and salutary effect upon the girls who have submitted themselves to it. All, without exception, report themselves to feel delightfully relaxed after the treatment, yet at the same time to experience a prodigious increase in energy.”

Mrs Cunningham places her fingertips together, watching the young teacher intently. Miss Paulson is wonderfully earnest as she continues her explanation.

“According to a most exemplary essay written by a member of the battledore team, our players have often experienced nervous tension, frequently expressed as a physical tension of the muscles – particularly those of the inside leg – and these have rendered their movements stiff and awkward. It is thought that the application of the electrical current leads to nervous discharges which in turn relax these muscles, enabling freer movement and greater muscular power – and thus, of course, to greater sporting ability.”

“That is most interesting, Miss Paulson. Do continue.”

“One of our very talented young ladies – Miss Lucy Carter – has now designed an electrical machine which produces a rapid oscillating motion. We call this machine an oscillator.”

Mrs Cunningham nods sagely.

“It has been found that the oscillating motions produce a similar effect to the application of electrical current, namely, to relax the tense muscles and provoke beneficial nervous discharge.”

“Nervous discharge, you say? – Where exactly is the oscillating machine placed in order to achieve this singular result?”

“Why, Head Mistress,” Miss Paulson blushes faintly, “in the region of the... of the lap.”

“Dear me, this is most interesting. But why, if these beneficial effects can be produced by the direct application of electrical current, must we bother ourselves with expensive oscillating machines?”

“It is important in science to be sure of exactly what is producing the effect which we observe. For example, if we find that the oscillator produces a similar effect to an electric current, then we may conclude that the beneficial effects result not from special powers of electricity, but rather from a kind of nervous excitation which may be done equally well by electricity or by a certain kind of... tactile stimulation.”

“Very well, Miss Paulson, once more I will see what we can do. I and several parents have been most impressed by the effects of the electricity upon our girls – notably in the field of sport. Fathers set much store by these things, you know. I am not entirely persuaded by your arguments, but I will see what we can do. You may order your equipment. I hope it will be ready for us at the start of next term, when your science classes will become part of the official syllabus at Hepplewhite.”

“O Mrs Cunningham!” Miss Paulson rises from her chair, clasping her hands in gratitude.

“As it happens, one of our parents won a thousand pounds as a result of a wager in connexion with the recent match against Thomas More. He has most generously donated to the school a sum which would assist me in satisfying your request. Of course I may rely upon your discretion.”

“Oh – of course.”

“And I may – I repeat, Miss Paulson, I *may* – be able to persuade the governors to authorize a regular allowance for these scientific activities.”

“But... this is wonderful!”

“No doubt I may call upon your assistance if a case needs to be made to the governors?”

“Naturally.”

“Oh — and Miss Paulson?”

“Head Mistress?”

“You may not be aware that various members of the medical establishment, including our own Doctor Straker, are of the opinion that certain kinds of nervous discharge, procured by certain kinds of tactile stimulation, produce insubordinate conduct, extreme lassitude, sterility, emotional volatility, nervous exhaustion, moral laxity, physical degeneration and insanity — in short, any distemper you care to name.”

Miss Paulson clasps her hands in an instinctive gesture of dismay. She is visibly pale.

“It would give me considerable personal satisfaction, Miss Paulson, if by means of careful scientific investigation you were to expose such absurd beliefs as the nonsense they are.”

As Miss Paulson digests the import of the Head Mistress's words, she becomes aware of the conspiratorial glint in Mrs Cunningham's eye.

“That would be my greatest pleasure, Mrs Cunningham.”

Slowly, Mrs Cunningham's mouth compresses and widens into a pugnacious little smile.

“I wish you good morning then, Miss Paulson.”

“Good morning, Mrs Cunningham.”

Part IVc

“Hey, Miller!” Shipman hails her as they pass in the corridor at break the next day.

“What, Shipman?” Miller stops and turns, noting Shipman’s gloating smile.

“I’ve just seen Miss Paulson. It worked! It worked beyond my wildest dreams!”

“What are you talking about?”

“The Scientific Society, don’t you know. Listen: I have managed to persuade her to obtain lots more equipment – lots and lots.” Miller looks confused, but Shipman ignores this in her enthusiasm. “And I have convinced her that you should not be subjected to the electricity.”

“You have? But Shipman, that is simply wonderful! How did you manage to do it?”

“I explained that in order to test the new oscillating device, we would need someone who had no experience of the electrical current. That way, we could be sure that the effect of the oscillating device was not in some way connected with the effect of the current. Do you see?”

“But... does that mean that I am instead to be subjected to the oscillating device?”

“Of course. But since you’ll be completely new to it, nobody will suspect that you’ve been secretly... you know.”

“But Shipman... what does the oscillating device do, exactly? I mean...”

“It oscillates, Miller. Please don’t panic, dear. It is no worse than the electricity, I assure you.”

“Very well, Shipman, if you say so...”

“And when Miss Paulson asks you to volunteer, try not to look as if you expected it. Just your normal terrified reluctance. Do you think you can manage that?”

Miller nods blankly, her eyes round with dismay.

“Good for you, Miller. I knew I could count on you.”

And before Miller can think of an objection, Shipman has disappeared.

It is Thursday afternoon, and quite by chance, Carter enters the dayroom to find only Penrose at her desk. She is reading a book.

“Hello, Lucy. Have you seen the professor? It was today, was it not?”

“Yes, Vicky.” Lucy’s face is radiant with pleasure. “He said such wonderful things about my work...”

“Why, that is splendid!” Vicky beams her delight.

“He said that I would be welcome to come to work in his department whenever I wished, and that board and lodging would be provided for me...”

“And are you going to go?”

“I am not sure. I think I will wait to hear from my uncle in Saint Petersburg. But it is good news, is it not?”

“It is wonderful!”

“And do you think perhaps that it is worth a kiss?”

“Ah, yes, Lucy... But...” Vicky clasps her hands now.

“But what, Vicky?” Lucy looks more intently at her friend. She seems embarrassed, awkward.

“Well... Shipman... Shipman said I was not to, don’t you know.”

“Shipman?” Lucy recoils in scarlet anger. “What has Shipman to do with it?”

“You see... I did promise her, and... well... one must keep one's promises, you know...” Vicky looks down, too ashamed to meet Lucy's furious stare.

“What is it to do with Shipman, pray?”

Vicky is wearing a pained expression now. “Well, Lucy, I... I... I don't think Shipman would like it if I were to say, and...”

“Shipman this! Shipman that! Bah! You're like a flock of sheep!” Lucy storms out angrily, leaving Penrose helplessly wringing her hands.

“Why, you saw the professor today, did you not? Professor...”

“...Anderton.”

It is Thursday evening, and in only two days' time the young ladies will be returning to their families for the Christmas holidays. Miss Paulson is at her end of the table in the little cottage, and has just completed her marking – earlier than usual, since there is less work set at the end of term.

Carter sits opposite, contemplating a complex diagram which forms part of her paper on the properties of springs. She seems unusually mournful.

“Did not things go well?”

Carter sighs.

“Let me make some camomile tea,” Miss Paulson suggests kindly. “You put the kettle on the fire, and I'll fetch the pot. Then you can tell me all about it.”

Miss Paulson emerges from the kitchen cradling the pot in her hands. Carter is now in her chair beside the fire. Miss Paulson sits in her own armchair opposite. She resolves to wait in silence until Carter is able to collect her thoughts, but gives her a sympathetic smile. The kettle begins to sing, and after a brief hesitation, Carter gives her characteristic shrug and turns to look unsmilingly into the fire.

"It went well enough, I suppose." She sighs. "He was impressed by my work. He said that I could come and work in his department. He would find me board and lodging."

"Why, Carter, that's wonderful!"

"Is it? There would be no actual salary. Nor would I be allowed to hold an official teaching position. I could teach of course – day in and day out, if I wished. For board and lodging."

"No official teaching position?" For a moment, Miss Paulson is nonplussed.

"The University rules state that one must hold a degree in order to teach in an official capacity, and of course..."

"Oh, yes, of course..." Miss Paulson sighs. "And we may not even learn in an official capacity. I know."

Both women stare moodily into the fire, until at length the kettle reaches the boil and Miss Paulson pours the scalding water into the pot, which has been warming on the iron hob.

Again they sit, ruminating morosely. Miss Paulson searches her mind for something to brighten the conversation, but can think of nothing. Finally, in desperation:

"And so will you accept his offer?"

"I said I would give it careful consideration. But..."

"Yes?"

"I think I will wait until I hear from my uncle. I do not know, but maybe in Russia they would think more of my work. Do you think perhaps they might, Miss Paulson? Do you think I will be ever worth any more than a bed to sleep in, and food to keep me alive? They tell me that I am as able at mathematics as anyone in England.

If I were a man, my ugliness would be no handicap: I would find myself dressed in a professor's robes. But I am twice cursed, for I am both ugly, and a woman. Yet can I not dare to hope that one day I will be able to buy my own clothes? Or must I resign myself to living upon the proceeds of pity, and forever wear charitable cast-offs?"

"O Carter, Carter, don't be despondent! — Here, take your drink. It will warm you. — I am sure that things won't be as bad as you say. You could teach at a school..."

"Hah! The equal of all the professors in England, teaching multiplication tables to children!" Carter shivers her shoulders, and glowers into the fire.

More anxious than ever to distract Carter from this gloomy train of thought, Miss Paulson decides upon a complete change of subject-matter. She crosses the room and takes down from the shelf her anatomical textbook. There is now a slip of paper to mark the page she once by-passed in disgust.

"Carter, have a look at this picture. Do you know what this is?"

"Ugh! Is it some strange animal?" She holds the book high, close to her face. "Why, no. The print is too small. I cannot read it."

"Why, Carter, you need glasses, dear!"

"Do I?" Carter looks up in complete astonishment.

Miss Paulson laughs. "Of course! Why didn't anyone notice before? I'm so stupid! You are always hunched down over your work. I think you must be short-sighted. Why, we must get you some glasses. I know a very great optician — a friend of my father, you know. We will send you to him. I will write to your parents. Why, I think you would look very pretty in a pair of pince-nez! Here, borrow mine."

Carter wrinkles her nose as Miss Paulson fits them. They both laugh.

"Why, I think I can see better... a little."

Again Miss Paulson laughs. "They won't be right for you. But they might help." She takes a candle and holds it so that Carter can read. "Take another look and see if you can tell me what that picture is."

Carter studies it, raising and lowering the book experimentally.

"Pu... no, I can't make it out," she says at length.

"Carter: if I were quite naked, you know, and you were sitting on the floor, and I on a chair, and I were to part my legs wide, like this... that is what you would see... here." Miss Paulson points delicately to the area of her lower belly.

"Oh no!" Carter sounds scandalized. "Oh no!" Again she pores over the illustration. "surely not!"

"Why, what did you think it was like?"

"Well... just a... just a line. A sort of crease." Carter laughs awkwardly, then looks more intently at the diagram again. "What is all this? Why, there's a great big hole here... I don't... Or is that..."

"No," Miss Paulson screws up her eyes with the unaccustomed effort of reading in low light without glasses. She points. "That is where your... water comes from. Just there."

"But that's tiny. What's that great big one?"

"Mine isn't as big as that, not at all," Miss Paulson admits. "That is where babies come from, Carter. I imagine that after giving birth, it is somewhat enlarged."

"Oh... So that's where..." Carter is quite fascinated.

"And Carter... do you see this, just here?"

Carter begins to turn the book, as if to correct its orientation. Miss Paulson hastens to correct her.

“No, no, it’s the right way round. See, your tummy-button would be about here...” – she points to an imaginary place just above the page – “and down here, that is where, um... waste matter comes from...”

“Oh, it’s just a tiny little hole. It’s tiny! That can’t be right!”

“Yes, it is right, Carter. I think it works like your mouth. You can make it tiny... like this...” – Miss Paulson makes a moue – “Or big, like this...” and she gapes, rolling her eyes dramatically. Carter laughs, then turns back to the fascinating illustration.

“It can’t be right... It can’t be,” she says, over and over, her voice full of frightened, high-pitched laughter.

“But now let me tell you the most wonderful thing of all, Carter.”

Carter looks up suddenly, and the pince-nez fall ridiculously askew. They both laugh as Miss Paulson straightens them for her.

“Look here... here.”

“Why, what’s that?”

“We all have one, I believe, Carter. I don’t know what it is called. The people who wrote this book did not want to tell us. It is as if people wished to keep it secret, as if they were afraid of what might happen if we knew what it was, and what it could do. Do you see, right at the top?”

“I see.”

“If you just touch here, gently, with one finger, just here, where I’m pointing...”

Carter gasps. “But why should I do that, Miss Paulson?”

Miss Paulson is so distracted by the difficulty of this question that she lowers the candle, leaving them both illuminated only by the red glow of the fire.

“Carter... Have you ever felt a hunger inside you? A hunger that will not let you sleep?”

“Why, yes...” Carter’s eyes grow round and dark. She resembles a shy creature of the night.

“At first I thought that it was the hunger for penetration. But that is not quite right. It is the hunger for tenderness – yes, for bodily tenderness. It is our woman-instinct. We long to be held – protected – comforted — and when these things are denied us...”

“Miss Paulson?”

“Yes, child?”

“I just...” Carter falls silent and looks down. The pince-nez fall from her nose, and are swiftly caught by Miss Paulson. A moment ago, they would have laughed at the ridiculousness of the incident; but now, Carter is struggling to say something. “I just... want someone to want me.” She looks up, staring straight ahead, as if afraid now to look Miss Paulson in the eye. “You see, I do try, but nobody...”

Suddenly Carter’s brow creases, her mouth tightens, her whole body shakes. Instinctively, Miss Paulson puts down the candle and takes Carter in her arms. Carter clings to her like a frightened child; and the sudden violence and desolation of her weeping, as she buries her face into Miss Paulson’s shoulder, causes the teacher’s own tears to start forth.

“Oh Carter, Carter...” Miss Paulson whispers, “You are so young... you have so much to give... I am sure many people want you... far more than you think... come... drink some more of your camomile tea. Eh?”

Soon, perhaps too soon, Carter overcomes her emotion. She takes the cup, and Miss Paulson rocks back on to her haunches. Carter sees Miss Paulson’s face, wet with tears.

"I'm really sorry," she breathes hoarsely. She gulps her tea, still warm from the heat of the fire. Suddenly her face is older, hard with determination. "You are good to me. I should never have... I am sorry." She takes a last mouthful from her cup, and sets it down. "I will feel better in the morning." She puts a hand – almost fatherly, thinks Miss Paulson – upon the teacher's shoulder; then makes her way up the crude wooden stairs, in the darkness, to bed.

It is the beginning of the afternoon recreation period. Miss Paulson is at the staff meeting, and Carter in their little cottage, where Walmsley had told her she must wait. For it is to be here, this very afternoon, that Shipman is to be taught her lesson. Carter had begged to be excused whatever strange ritual Walmsley has in mind, but Walmsley was adamant. Carter laughs bitterly as she recalls Walmsley's insistence that she be alone: "If only," she thinks.

At last, she hears the approaching footsteps. It is with a sense of foreboding that she rises to answer the knock. It is Walmsley and Benson, tall and solemn; and between them, eyes downcast and unusually pale, a shivering Felicity Shipman.

"All well, Carter?" asks Walmsley.

"Yes, I believe so."

"Then please go up to your room and wait until we call you."

"Very well." Carter turns and hurries up the stairs. She closes her bedroom door, not wishing to hear the low conversation downstairs. It sounds as if Walmsley is speaking in sententious tones. She sits on her bed, tense with anxiety. She wishes, now, that she had never agreed to this. "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord" — but no, vengeance is rotten. Carter prostrates herself on the bed, gripping the counterpane, trying to calm herself.

“Carter!” – It is Walmsley’s summons. Her heart lurching in her chest, she rises, opens the door, descends the stairs, her feet heavy, fear like lead in her stomach.

“Very well, Benson. You go out and keep watch. Nobody must come even close.”

“Very good, Walmsley.”

Carter watches as Benson goes out, quietly closing the door. Walmsley looks grim. And finally, although she has seen her out of the corner of her eye from the first, Carter confronts the sight of Shipman. They have bent her double over the back of Miss Paulson’s heavy armchair. Her head rests on the seat of the chair, her long, nearly black hair loose, tumbling to the floor. She is reaching down, as if to support herself, but her arms do not reach the floor. They are bound by ropes to the legs of the armchair. Neatly placed to one side, Shipman’s plain blue school shoes. As Carter approaches, she sees that Shipman’s ankles, too, are bound to the rear legs of the chair, and she is forced to stand on tiptoe. She is utterly helpless. But, horrifying though this forced and degrading posture is all of itself, it is not the reason why Carter’s blood suddenly runs cold and her heart aches in dread. No: for the prefects have gathered Shipman’s skirts right up to her waist, tumbling them down over her shoulders, leaving her posterior uppermost, pale and utterly vulnerable.

“Very well, Carter,” says Walmsley smoothly. “The senior prefects have conferred and decided to offer Miss Shipman a choice. Either she will submit to the discipline of the Head Mistress for what she has done, or she will be punished according to the Walmsley Rules. We would not have given Miss Shipman the benefit of such leniency, but for two things. The first is that you, Carter, very generously said that she should not be punished, but merely taught a lesson. What do you say to that, Shipman?”

"Thank you, Carter, for your most noble generosity."

"Good." Walmsley nods and stands silent for a moment; then turns and begins pacing up and down beside the door as she continues her discourse, her hands clasped behind her back. "The second reason is that, as an honourable and distinguished member of the Hepplewhite battledore team, Miss Shipman is entitled to punishment according to the Walmsley Rules, for a first offence of this gravity. Now, Shipman, kindly state the first of the Walmsley Rules."

Shipman's face is invisible, covered by her cascading hair and tumbled dress. In a muffled voice, plainly quaking with terror, she recites as if by rote:

"Rule the First. The culprit must be chastised by the injured party. The injured party must take a standard battledore. The culprit must present her... her..."

"Say it, Shipman!" growls Walmsley, ominously.

"...must present her naked posterior for the chastisement. The injured party must... must... must beat the culprit... continuously... for ten minutes... O Lord..."

"I don't remember 'O Lord' being part of the rule, Miss Shipman."

"...for ten minutes, to the best of her ability."

"Good. And the next rule?"

Shipman gulps noisily. "Rule the Second. If she cause the... If she cause..."

"Come on, Shipman..." Walmsley's tone is dangerous now.

"If she cause the culprit to scream, the injured party must kiss that part of the culprit's body upon which the last blow fell."

"Thank you, Shipman." Walmsley is like an icicle. From a bag by the door, she now takes out a battledore. It is an ugly, harsh piece of wood. She turns it over and over in her hands, then makes a sudden swing with it, as if to strike a winning shot. It whistles in the air. "Here you are, Carter." Walmsley holds the battledore by the neck,

and now offers the handle to Carter, who stands hunched in terror, not daring to touch it. "As Miss Shipman says, it is you who are to administer the chastisement. Take the battledore. Carter: take... the battledore."

Carter's hands wrestle with one another. "Walmsley, I c... I can't do it. I cannot do this."

Walmsley stands back. "You wish Miss Shipman to submit to the discipline of the Head Mistress?"

Carter shakes her head. "No. No." Her voice is hoarse.

"Very well, Carter. There is one last option. Shipman, the Third Rule, if you please."

"Rule the Third. In the alternative, the injured party may torment the culprit with two goose feathers, one held in each hand, the said goose-feathers to be drawn from a shuttlecock. The injured party may leave no visible part of the body untouched, and only when every part has been touched by a feather may the chastisement cease."

Shipman falls silent.

"Yes, Shipman, what else?"

"Rule the Second still applies."

"Thank you, Shipman. Very well, Carter." Again, Walmsley swipes the air with the battledore, before replacing it in the bag. "If it is not to be the battledore, then it is this." She brings out from the bag a shuttlecock. "Take two feathers, Carter – or Shipman goes to Mrs Cunningham forthwith."

With quaking fingers, Carter plucks two feathers from the shuttlecock.

"You understand the rules, Carter? Are you prepared to abide by them?"

Carter gulps, then nods rapidly. She seems more afraid even than Shipman.

“It is now your duty to carry out the chastisement according to the second and third rules, as you have agreed. This is upon your honour, Carter. Once more I ask: do you agree to abide by the rules?”

Carter nods. “Yes.”

“Very well. There are other rules which need not detain us now: they apply only when the injured party breaks one of the first three. The penalties are dire, but I cannot imagine you, Carter, having given us your assurance, being the first to... Well, well... I shall wait just outside. The chastisement may proceed.”

Carter waits until Walmsley has closed the door behind her, and then listens as her footsteps recede along the path. Finally, she turns to contemplate in silent wonder the long, naked legs of her helpless victim. For an instant she recalls the graceful swell of Diana the Huntress's marble calf, crafted with all the loving eye of the artist. But what much greater artist could have conceived these firm, fresh young limbs? For a moment, Carter reaches out to touch, but then draws back with a gasp. Her eyes travel up, up to marvel at the sweetly rounded hips; and there, at the secret meeting-place of those two lovely limbs, nestled, refuged between them, shy yet striking, as if it had grown in the notch of a bough, the deep-cloven peach.

“Oh...” Carter breathes, spellbound to see for the first time the anatomy of woman. It is nothing, nothing like the illustration in Miss Paulson's book. A crease, yes, a curious smile – and is there not, perhaps, a suggestion of a pink tongue lurking between those grimly-smiling, taciturn lips? And just above, like a pink, wrinkled knot, the place from which... Carter cannot even bring herself to think the thought. And yet it seems clean, modest, natural – not some hideous scar or deformity, but part of the whole. She is overwhelmed by a sudden sense of tenderness, almost pity. And

there is a gentle warmth, a subtle fragrance that makes her breast full and heavy, tingling with unknown excitement.

Shipman, maddened by the gusts of Carter's hot, impassioned breath upon her most intimate places, groans in frustration. "Carter, I beg you: the sooner you begin, the sooner this is ended, for both of us."

With a heavy sigh, Carter kneels. Cautiously, experimentally, she touches the tip of one feather to the sole of Shipman's foot. At once Shipman gasps and jerks the foot away, jarring her shin against the back of the armchair. Clearly, this will not work. Sighing again, Carter lays down one of the feathers and grasps Shipman's ankle firmly. Then, with gentle strokes, she begins painting the feather across the skin of Shipman's foot, working methodically from heel to toe.

"Aah! Aah!" gasps Shipman, exasperated, violently wriggling her toes, shaking her head, clenching and unclenching her hands.

"Goodness," thinks Carter, astonished, "how sensitive she is!" And indeed, it is really quite fascinating how violently Shipman seems to react to the very merest brush of the feather.

"Carter! Aah! Carter! You've done that bit! Ah ah! Stop it! You've got to move on! No! No!"

As Carter's feather slowly approaches Shipman's writhing toes, Shipman's shuddering breath gradually collapses into desperate, whinnying laughter. And as she begins to torment the toes, the laughter becomes increasingly high-pitched, until Shipman lets out a piercing squeal. Carter jerks the feather away and waits for Shipman to get her breath back.

"Ahh... was that a scream?"

"No... I think I'd call that more of a... squeal, don't you know."

“Ah. Yes.” Carter proceeds to work her way up Shipman’s shin to the knee. Shipman seems to have gained a little self-control, and manages to restrict her reactions to violent agitation and hectic breathing. By now, however, Carter is beginning to enter into the spirit of things, making little soft whooping noises as she sweeps the feather along; and this has the unforeseen effect of weakening her victim’s resistance, so that when she finally arrives at the sensitive back of Shipman’s knee, Shipman begins to howl with laughter once more and plead for her tormentor to move on.

Carter decides to attack the other leg next, beginning as before with the foot. And as Shipman tires, pounding the armchair with her bound fists and howling in desperation, Carter laughs and teases more and more: she is beginning to enjoy herself. Indeed, she is enjoying herself quite immoderately, laughing almost as much as her victim, and vaguely aware of the dampness at her crotch. Normally she would be ashamed, but the comparative indignity of her victim allows her to forgive herself. Besides, she is now becoming quite an expert with her feather. It is all a matter of suspense and timing: she gives Shipman a few moments to recover, then —

“Whee!” she cries, drawing the feather up from Shipman’s ankle to that deadly sensitive spot behind the knee; and Shipman screams. This is wonderful, simply wonderful. She has to do it again, and she does. Shipman screams again. Carter is helpless with laughter for a moment, and this allows Shipman time to recover her wits.

“Just a moment, Carter,” she says breathlessly, as she feels Carter grasping her leg in preparation for another attack. “I screamed.”

“Oh.”

“You remember the rules, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Right. Well you’ve got to kiss me just where the feather was when I screamed.”

“Yes, you’re right. That would have been about here, wouldn’t it?” Carter pokes the back of Shipman’s knee with the tip of the feather, causing Shipman to buck.

“So now you must kiss me there.”

“Hmmm...” Carter turns her head this way and that, wondering how to approach the task. Finally, she puts down the feather and grasps Shipman’s thigh with both hands, then cocks her head to one side and moves in with her lips. Shipman’s skin is beautiful: lustrous in the dim winter afternoon light that strains in through the little cottage window, its smooth vulnerability is heightened by the discreet tracery of blue veins. And as she nears her target, Carter feels the warmth, smells the delicate scent of clean, fresh maidenhood.

Shipman has been moaning in delight for some moments, for, quite without thinking, Carter’s hands have been doing what hands naturally will when presented with a young woman’s thigh; and, weakened already, Shipman suddenly becomes aware that her nipples are bursting, her crotch on fire, and the delicate, inquisitive creeping of Carter’s fingers – unspeakably delightful – is propelling her toward climax. And then she feels the brush of Carter’s hair, and then the kiss – warm, passionate – why, Carter is actually licking her, tasting her! In an agony of pleasure, Shipman rocks her hips, trying to agitate her pubis on the back of the armchair. It is just – only just – enough, and suddenly Shipman is groaning, groaning in a mixture of surprised pleasure and anticipated release from the torment of desire.

Carter is amazed, for all of a sudden Shipman's satin thigh has erupted into a rash of prickles. She draws back, amazed: this is more than goose-flesh. Wonderingly, she runs the palm of her hand lightly over Shipman's rump as Shipman frantically rocks her hips in an attempt to wring out the last drops of sensation — with only partial success.

“Are you all right, Shipman?” asks Carter, unnerved by this evidently violent seizure.

But Shipman can only moan, “My God... My God...” over and over again, twitching and shuddering.

And then Carter looks up, and sees, and is further amazed. For what had been a neatly-cloven peach has swollen, ripened and burst magnificently open. “Oh... perhaps it is like the illustration after all. Wait a minute.” She goes to the table and opens the heavy book at the bookmark. Yes: there it is. She inverts the page, kneels behind Shipman again and looks from one to the other, comparing. “Oh my... why, yours is almost like a flower,” she murmurs.

“Carter, what are you doing?” asks Shipman, annoyed.

“Just having a look. Comparing with the book.”

“O please, Carter, can we not get this done?”

Carter sighs, lays the book aside, picks up her feathers and begins to work on Shipman's thighs. All Shipman's resistance seems now to have crumbled. Carter is enthralled. Time and again she raises squeals and gales of laughter as she wields both her feathers, sometimes attacking with both in tandem, sometimes roaming independently. Shipman is in a frenzy now, her shapely posterior writhing in delightful desperation, her knees jerking and trembling in the agony of overstimulation. Soon Carter finds it effective to draw a single feather from the knee

right up the back of the thigh, and then perform some mischievous detour upon Shipman's rump: this elicits the most delightfully musical yelps of outrage. And then, having played an arabesque just on the point of the buttock, finally Shipman screams.

"Oh..." gasps Carter, suddenly aware of what she has done. She blushes scarlet.

"You've... you've made me... scream again," pants Shipman. "Come on, you know the rules."

Eyes clenched closed, Carter pecks a kiss on the apex of Shipman's rump.

"Oh come on, Carter, that's not a kiss. You just banged your face against me. Come on, a proper kiss! Aaah! That's it! Come on, use your tongue. Mmmm..."

Carter draws herself up again, honour satisfied. Shipman's skirts have now fallen so far down her back that there is ample territory for her feathers to explore. Soon she finds places, just near the bottom of Shipman's rib-cage, which have the interesting property of depriving Shipman of the power to breathe, forcing her to thrash in silent panic. Carter amuses herself for a while by playing little games with these spots, sometimes approaching them and then bypassing them, sometimes attacking them with deadly effect. Shipman's movements, particularly the sinuous flexing of her spine and the helpless gyration of her pelvis, are compulsively delightful to watch: Carter is almost swooning in erotic delight, her nipples tingling, and a sensation of astonishing sweetness in her lower belly. She has never, never had such fun.

After a while, Carter decides to allow Shipman a brief respite; and then, with infinite mischief, she places one feather on Shipman's back, in the deep channel of her spine, just where it emerges from the tumble of her skirts, and draws it slowly, slowly up, across the plateau, and into the cleft of Shipman's bottom, slowly approaching the most unmentionable place of all. As the feather gets closer,

Shipman's gasping gives way to hysterical squealing. Delighted, Carter repeats the procedure several times. She is not sure, but there is something in Shipman's vocalizations which seems to dare her to draw the feather ever lower. So she does, and is rewarded by an extraordinary yell of surprise, delight and – strangely – triumph. Carter's fascinated gaze cannot miss the florid tumescence of Shipman's private parts now: they are positively gaping, gleaming with moisture and rich with a strange, bittersweet odour. Once more, and again and again, she lightly draws the tip of the feather down over these most sensitive, hidden parts, and finally, in a rush of devilment, twirls the feather-point in the deep valley of Shipman's anus. Shipman screams again and again, as if in monstrous jubilation. Carter roars with laughter, as if she has accomplished Shipman's most complete humiliation. She staggers backwards, helpless with delight, pointing with one of her feathers, her head back, her mouth wide with the sheer madness of it all.

Patiently, Shipman waits for Carter to recover from her amusement.

"Carter," she says menacingly. "You made me scream just then."

"I... I did what?"

"You heard me, Carter. You made me scream. Not once, but several times."

"Oh no..."

"Oh yes, Carter."

"But... But I can't."

"You must. Those are the rules. You agreed – you promised – to abide by them. Now it is your duty, Carter."

Horrified, Carter drops the feathers to the floor. As if in a trance, she approaches Shipman's naked, outraged posterior. True, it looks clean, but...

“And Carter: you have to do it properly. You made me scream again and again, remember. It's your duty, Carter. It's the rules.”

Suddenly, Shipman feels the contact as Carter, with almost mechanical desperation, forces her lips into that most unholy valley.

“And tongue, Lucy, and tongue... Aaah!” Shipman begins to growl in savage delight. “Oh Lucy! Lucy! Oh, my God!”

After a few seconds, Carter staggers back, mortified. She is not sure if there was an unpleasant taste or not. She spits into her handkerchief, wipes her lips. And then, in abject horror, she watches as Shipman rises, stands upright, kicks her bonds aside and swirls her skirts back into place once more, her eyes ablaze with lust, triumph and unspeakable menace.

Carter slowly shakes her head in disbelief. “But Shipman... You were bound!”

“Well!” roars Shipman. “You certainly taught me a lesson, Lucy! I never thought you had it in you! The least I can do, the very least I can do...”

And then Shipman is upon her.

“And now, before we move on to the pleasanter topics of the Christmas Dinner and our various seasonal engagements, I should like to raise as our last business today the introduction of Science to the curriculum. Nobody here will be surprised to learn that Miss Paulson is in favour of it, and indeed I am sure that nobody would object to something that will offer so much benefit to our girls. But I thought it right to acquaint you all with our reasons for this proposal, which I intend to put to the Board of Governors at our meeting next week. Miss Paulson, perhaps you would say a few words.”

“Thank you, Head Mistress. As many of you will know, we have been experimenting this term with the electrical force. This has been an introductory period for our young ladies, and as a voluntary activity I have wished to ensure that our meetings have been interesting but also enjoyable.” Miss Paulson blushes slightly at the realization that not many of her colleagues will yet suspect just how enjoyable the electrical force has proved to be.

“By giving a fairly free rein to their creative imaginations, we have already made some quite fascinating discoveries, which will need to be more rigorously tested in the more formal sessions we would propose for next term. With the help of Mr Jepson, the clockmaker, we have constructed some remarkable machines designed entirely by the girls, one of which generates an electrical flow upon the turning of a handle – this we call a generator. Another, when supplied with an electric flow, oscillates rapidly to and fro. Although of little apparent practical value, such a device could, with certain modifications, be made to perform a number of useful tasks. Already we have learned that, when applied to aching muscles, the motion of the oscillator produces a pleasant relaxation. We therefore think that such a device may be useful for sprains and strains – for example, in sports.”

Miss Gurney nods wisely. In her opinion, sports and science, when combined, are invincible.

“We have also seen signs of other health benefits,” continues Miss Paulson. “Quite apart from the manifest benefits of electrical treatment to the members of our battledore team —” at this point, there are a number of murmurs of “hear, hear” — “we begin to suspect that this treatment may help to alleviate the symptoms we experience at... our time of the month...” (Murmurs of interest) “and even the possibility that the period of rest may be somewhat curtailed, thus allowing recipients

of the treatment to miss fewer lessons and have the benefit of more healthy exercise. I must stress that further careful testing must be done before we can place any reliance upon these very early findings, but they are encouraging, nonetheless.”

Miss Paulson earnestly continues her discourse, accustomed as she is to a raptly attentive audience.

“Now, Lucy Carter...”

Shipman has her fiercely by the shoulders, pinned against the wall. Her long, wavy black tresses are down across her face, but her eyes blaze through and into Carter's soul.

“...I shall repay your kindness by teaching you a lesson. And yours shall have two parts: the first theoretical, the second practical.”

Carter would like to call out for Walmsley to come to her assistance, but she is petrified by Shipman's glaring intensity.

“First, then, little Lucy Carter...”

In fact, they are very much the same height; but Carter seems to shrink back against the wall, her good eye held fast in Shipman's gaze while the other seems to be trying to slink off into hiding. A lock of Carter's hair has come loose, with a rather delightful effect. Despite the ferocity in her eyes and the ominous quiver in her voice, Shipman's finger is gentle as she loops it back over Lucy's ear.

“I have learned a lesson about gossip: let me tell you the story. Someone I know, just a few weeks ago, heard a rumour about me. A rumour that I had been doing ‘unmentionable things’. As far as I know, that somebody did not spread the rumour. Oh no: that would be bad. And this somebody never does anything bad. She tries to keep out of trouble, this person. No: instead she came to me, and told me that I

wasn't good enough for her. That she wanted nothing more to do with me. Our friendship was over.

“After she told me that, I was very angry and upset. I went into the chapel. I stood there and I waited until God had recovered from his surprise. I told him why I was there. He probably knew, because he's supposed to know everything, but I wanted to give him my point of view. And I finished by saying something like this: ‘If, God, your son Jesus could dine with tax collectors and prostitutes, then perhaps you sympathize. I'm not meek and mild like Jesus; but I do recall that he hated hypocrites. And I hereby swear that with your almighty help, within the month I shall have that stuck-up, priggish bitch kiss my arse!’”

Carter is round-eyed in amazement.

“Well, Lucy Carter, God helps those who help themselves. I thought to myself: why would Miss Lucy Priggish Carter not kiss my arse? Because it's disapproved-of. Because nice girls don't do that sort of thing. Because you're not supposed to. You wouldn't cross your legs because people say ‘naughty girl, that isn't ladylike.’ You're not supposed to. And I thought: all I need to do, in order to get you to do anything, is to convince you that you were supposed to. I'd kiss a girl's arse if I really loved her, Lucy, if I wanted to give her pleasure. But not you. Oh no. But you'd do anything out of a sense of duty. You'd even let Miss Vicky Penrose kiss you and feel your breasts happily enough, just provided nobody was there to see and disapprove. But if someone did disapprove, why, you'd leap back as if she'd been murdering you, and look all innocent.”

“Shipman, I... I'm sorry...”

Shipman moves forward and rubs her breasts gently against Carter's.

“Are you sorry I'm doing this?”

"I... I don't know what you mean."

"Does it feel nice?"

Carter bites her lip and nods. She cannot look Shipman in the eye now.

Shipman draws away again.

"Lucy, look at me. Do you know the difference between me and you? I do things because I want to. I refrain because I don't want to. Does that make them wrong? Does that make them right? And you: you do things because you're told to. You refrain because you're told not to. Does that make it right? Does that make it wrong? Was it really your duty to kiss my arse?"

"Shipman, Shipman, I don't know..."

"When I believe something is wrong, Lucy, I don't want to do it. When I believe something is right, I want to do it. Sometimes I get it wrong. But when I do the right thing, Lucy, it's because I want to do the right thing. Not because someone told me to do it. Don't you see? You're just a little child, Lucy. I'm not a saint, but at least I'm trying to be a woman."

"Oh Shipman... I'm so, so sorry..."

Shipman takes Carter's head in her hands. "I forgive you. Some people, knowing where it's been, wouldn't dream of kissing that filthy mouth of yours. But actually it's not filthy. I was very careful to make myself extra clean for you. And it's a nice arse, isn't it?"

Carter looks down. She nods. "Yes," she whispers.

"Here's a proper kiss, then," says Shipman. And yes, it is: Carter melts in her arms. Penrose never kissed like this. She parts her lips, and Shipman's tongue teases them lightly, deliciously, making her squeal softly again and again in delight.

Shipman's fingers, squeezing her bottom; Shipman's breasts, pressed against her own; Shipman's tongue, licking her gums, tickling her palate —

“Oh! Oh!” she cries, as Shipman breaks the kiss. Her legs can hardly support her weight.

“Now for the practical part of the lesson,” says Shipman, still speaking smoothly despite her own laboured breathing. “This is a lesson you will never, never forget. Come on: get over that chair.”

Carter is too overwhelmed to resist. Shipman propels her, gives her a gentle push and she topples headlong over the back of the armchair. In an instant, Shipman has raised her skirts up, right up, and in the next has cast them over her head, leaving her immured in a black tent. In a moment, she feels Shipman's breath on her naked, vulnerable posterior. It tickles.

“O don't... O don't...” she moans in terror. She feels Shipman's fingers, stroking her. It tickles madly. “O please! Please no!” she squeals.

“I don't aim as high as you do, Lucy,” comes Shipman's voice, “But I can be sure that I shall hit my target.”

Before Carter has the chance to consider the meaning of these words, she feels Shipman parting her, pulling her apart. It is strange. She does not know where Shipman is touching her. And then she feels Shipman's hair on the backs of her thighs. It tickles. She cannot help herself giggling sobs, or sobbing giggles. But then there is something else. Shipman is touching her very lightly somewhere. She has never felt anything like this before. She is not even sure now if Shipman is touching her at all. It is as if her whole body has been turned inside-out, and now, in some hitherto unknown place, something is touching, just very softly, and her head is spinning, it is so strange, so completely unknown, and it is taking away her thoughts,

there is nothing but this strange something, so soft, so very slow and gentle, that is all, and there is this great pit, she is right on the edge, it is so deep, and yes, it is still there, still slow and gentle, and this is what the end will be like. To fall into this pit. To fall, fall... And it is incredibly soft, and yet...

“O Ship...!” Lucy wails. “O Ship...! O Ship...!”

And yet... on and on, this soft thing, probing gently on the outside inside, until it has got her. Got her now, pulling her, wrapping her around, consuming her, devouring her...

“O Ship...!”

But all is well: her body is pulling itself together again, every single part now fitting so sweetly together, pulsing, pulsing, finding its proper place, and now there is Shipman helping her up, kissing her, reassuring her, holding her.

“There,” says Shipman tenderly, helping her into the armchair. “Taste! Go on, taste!” She puts her finger into Carter’s mouth.

Carter tastes. She sucks. It is strange.

“That is the taste of a woman. That is what you are.”

Before Shipman has finished gathering up the evidence of the afternoon’s activities, Carter’s torpor has subsided into sleep. Shipman goes to the window. Good old Walmsley: still on the look-out. Hurriedly, she lifts her skirts. “I wonder, if she turned and saw me, whether she’d know what I was doing,” she thinks. But she does not care. After the first gentle touch, she cares about only one thing.

At the click of the latch, Walmsley turns. It is Shipman, of course, gaily flicking back her long, dark, wavy hair, carrying the bag. Her step is jaunty and her

eye merry, as if she has just learned a tremendous joke which she is now beside herself to impart to any who would listen.

“All well?”

“Of course. But thank you for your concern, Walmsley — and for your help. You're a dab hand with rope, I must say. The Walmsley Rules worked beautifully. Interesting little games you aristocratic types must play. Oh, and speaking of aristocracy, I have a little test for you.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Take the bag. Now smell my fingers. This first... Now this. Which is which, h'm?”

“Let me smell again...” But Walmsley is clearly baffled.

“Shall I tell you, then? Surely, dear Walmsley, there must be something wrong with your nose. This alone —” she loftily flicks the fingers of her left hand in Walmsley's face — “has the distinctive bittersweet Romanov twang. This, on the other hand, is the fragrance of the *sans-culottes!*”

Walmsley laughs good-naturedly. “And Carter?”

“Oh... Dear Miss Carter had a most exhausting lesson, and is now having a nice little afternoon snooze.”

Shipman begins to walk away.

“Shipman, you're incredible,” Walmsley chuckles, shaking her head slowly.

Shipman stops suddenly and wheels round.

“Walmsley, I'd be obliged if you didn't call me ‘Shipman’. From now on, I'd prefer simply ‘Ship.’”

Walmsley cocks her head to one side, amused. “Ship.”

“Yes. Ship.”

And she skips away, light as an autumn leaf.

Part V

“Monstrous!” Henry Carter tears the letter into four.

“But Henry! That was addressed to Lucy!” Joanna, Lucy’s mother, protests faintly.

“All the same – monstrous impertinence!” Henry is purple with indignation. “Spectacles, indeed! Have you ever seen a girl of seventeen wearing spectacles?”

“Ah... No dear, I must confess I have not...”

“Of course not! I’ve never heard such a thing! She must learn to see properly with the eyes God gave her! In any event, she is much too old now for Christmas presents! Seventeen? Ridiculous!”

“But Henry, dear,” Joanna protests faintly, unsure of her ground. “I was only just now re-reading *A Christmas Carol* by Mr Dickens, and —”

“Ach! These modern novels! Full of bogus morality and popular sentimentality! All very well for you soft-hearted women, no doubt: but where are we taught to seek the eternal truth, eh? In this year’s great novel, or that year’s great novel? Not a bit of it! But here, here!” And Henry Carter jabs his finger at the great, heavy Family Bible in its place of honour, carefully positioned in the very centre of the table between them like a great black altar. “There is all the truth, unvarying from generation to generation, the eternal, unchanging will of the Almighty! Where in the Book do we read of Christmas presents, eh? And what sixpenny novel can supplant the eternal truth of Holy Writ?” Henry’s voice has become a little harsh with passion, and his complexion acquired an unhealthy tinge.

Joanna is downcast, defeated. "Of course you're right, dear," she mumbles in a placating tone.

"Hmph." Henry takes out and consults his fob watch. "And now I must go to the office."

Joanna rises with him. "Have good day, dear."

"Thanks, m'dear," he says in a softer tone, hastily embracing his wife.

"Yes, Simpson?" Mrs Carter looks up from her reading. It is a book of sermons. Although she has heard the doorbell, and knows it must be Lucy, she feigns ignorance.

"Mistress Lucy, Ma'am," says the maid, curtsying.

"Very well. When she has completed her toilet, I wish to speak with her."

"Very good, Ma'am."

And so, ten minutes later, there is a timid knock at the sitting-room door.

"Good afternoon, mother."

"Ah, Lucy." Mrs Carter looks at her daughter. Yes, it cannot be denied: Nature has finally transformed her daughter into a young woman – the fuller figure, the more assured stance, and even a certain lustre to the skin — alas! Poor Lucy! For though Nature proclaims her ripe, who will pluck so plain a fruit? If only they had had a son! If only...

"Why, mother, what is the matter? Why do you stare at me so?"

"My dear child, I was just thinking how grown-up you have become. Why, you are now older than poor Elsie was when..."

"Mother, I beg you..."

“Forgive me. It was thoughtless of me, dear.” Mrs Carter is well aware of the chagrin it causes Lucy when – as so often happens – her parents make sorrowful comparisons with her oft-lamented sister. “But have you any news, pray?”

“Well, I do have news.”

“Then do sit down, and tell me all.”

“Mother: do you recall Mrs Probert’s report at the end of last year?”

“Yes, I believe I do recall... Did she not say that you had some ability at... was it mathematics?”

“Yes, mother. In her report I believe she used the word ‘exceptional’.”

“Very well. Go on.”

“At the beginning of the term I wrote a little paper. It was about...”

“Dear, you know very well that I know nothing of mathematics. I would not understand it.”

“Yes, mother, of course. Well, Mrs Probert found it very good, but a little beyond her understanding. She sent it to a professor at the university...”

“Goodness!”

“...who was so kind as to say that in his opinion I had as great a mathematical talent as any in England.”

“But Lucy, I... I... I am astonished!”

“And he has offered me a position – unofficial, of course – to work with him and his colleagues in his department.”

“But this is wonderful! Your father will be so delighted! Of course you did not discuss salary?”

“O but I did, mother.”

“You did? Excellent!” Mrs Carter is delighted. “And how much?”

"He was very apologetic. It would not, unfortunately, be possible to find any salary for me. However, there would be a provision of board and lodging..."

"Oh." Mrs Carter's face falls. "I see."

"Nevertheless, mother, I am not without hope of finding someone who will be able to pay me a salary."

"And who, pray?"

"Mother, the foremost universities in England have no especial need of my skill. As the professor told me, there are men in plenty striving for positions there. But perhaps in another country..."

"Such as?"

Lucy blushes. "Russia, mother."

Mrs Carter raises her eyebrows. "Well, I suppose it is possible. Perhaps I should write to your uncle Fyodor."

"I have already done so."

"You?" Mrs Carter looks alarmed. "Oh, no! Then..."

"Mrs Probert wrote it fair for me."

"Ah. Well, that was wise. Did he respond?"

"He has been very encouraging, mother. If I can present a paper on something entirely new, and if it is as good as my earlier paper, he says he will be confident of finding me a teaching post."

"And... salaried?"

"We have not spoken of that yet, mother."

"There is not much money in Russia. I should not harbour too much hope."

Lucy looks down in dejection.

“Well... we shall see.” Mrs Carter sighs. “And now there is another matter I wished to discuss with you. One of your teachers, one Miss Paulson, wrote to you enclosing a note for your father.”

Lucy looks up, surprised. “Oh.”

“Of course your father was furious.”

“Why? What did she write?”

“She made so bold as to state that you had a need – a need, if you please – for spectacles! And that she had taken the liberty of making an appointment for you to consult an optician in the City. Liberty indeed!”

“Where is the letter, mother?”

“Your father tore it up. Nevertheless, I have kept it. It is upon the table by the window.”

“Oh!” Lucy hurries to look at it.

Sadly, Mrs Carter watches as Lucy stoops over the table, her lips working as she reads.

“Oh... Oh! And this is... Oh!” Lucy reads for a long time, carefully holding the torn edges together.

“I am sorry, Lucy. Your father will not hear of it.”

“Oh!” Lucy’s hands are fists. She rises and falls on her toes, unable to find words to voice her frustration. But her mother has noted all this; noted, too, how Lucy stooped to read the letter.

“I have a little money put by. I think it will be enough. But do not tell your father.”

Lucy’s hands fly to her mouth. Her eyes suddenly shine with incredulous joy.
“Oh mother... Mother...”

Mrs Carter does not like emotional displays. "Go now," she says, taking up her book. "We will say nothing. Send in Simpson."

"Well, that was a quite excellent dinner! How very kind of you to invite me! And how lovely to meet the staff," the Duchess murmurs in her mellifluous contralto as she sweeps into the Head Mistress's sitting-room.

"It is an honour for us, your grace. And might I offer a little of my own sloe gin? So very comforting at this time of year."

"Sloe gin? I have heard of it, but I don't believe I have ever had the pleasure of trying it. Why, how very educational you are, Head Mistress!"

"It is an old country recipe. My mother used to make it."

"How charming! I hope it is not too strong. May I sit here?"

"But of course. No, it is not strong at all. The sloes draw out all the harshness of the spirit. Miss Hanson! The sloe gin, if you please!"

"Very good, Head Mistress."

The Duchess's eyes follow Miss Hanson as she departs. "Still single?"

"Yes, your grace. But a wonderful secretary. Very discreet. And very faithful."

"Ah, faithful! Yes!" The Duchess half-closes her eyes, a superb smile upon her lips.

Mrs Cunningham responds with a look of irreproachable innocence.

"And so, dear Head Mistress, we come no doubt to the purpose of this kind invitation. You are clearly seeking more money. Tell me all."

"Well," Mrs Cunningham looks down, now, with a slight blush, "to tell the truth, your grace, we were hoping that we might be able to rely upon your influence at the governors' meeting next week."

The Duchess sighs. "Explain."

Before Mrs Cunningham can begin, Miss Hanson returns with the sloe gin and three glasses. She sets them down on the table between the two ladies. Mrs Cunningham pours. The Duchess follows Miss Hanson out with her eyes.

"No doubt you have heard about the remarkable discoveries made by our new Scientific Society," begins the Head Mistress, pushing a glass toward the Duchess.

"A little," says the Duchess, bright-eyed. She does not take her glass. "Carry told me a little, but was rather sparing with the details."

"Yes, your grace." Mrs Cunningham proceeds to explain about the galvanic experiments, and the equipment that is needed; but then moves on to draw a lively picture of the remarkably beneficial effect the electrical current has had upon the battledore team.

The Duchess nods sagely, her glass still untouched. "No doubt this is true, Head Mistress, but is this not something we may safely leave to the men? Surely it will be objected that wives and mothers do not need to understand the intricacies of electrical flows or nervous anatomy – after all, such things have no place in the nursery."

"But on the other hand, your grace, if we can but enable our girls to do their part, then we are demonstrating that there is no field of human endeavour in which women cannot make their distinctive contribution. Think of the benefit – not only to science itself, but to our girls and to the nation as a whole!"

The Duchess frowns and looks doubtful. "That is all very well, but..."

There comes a hesitant knock at the door.

"Come in!" calls Mrs Cunningham, with an inward sigh of relief. "Ah, Miss Paulson!"

“Ah, so this is the Miss Paulson of whom my daughter thinks so highly! Why, I am sure I noticed you at dinner!” The Duchess’s eyes are now all a-twinkle.

Miss Paulson, who is carrying a deal of electrical machinery, blushes and curtsies upon the threshold, eyes downcast.

The Duchess laughs kindly. “And what, pray, is that extraordinary contrivance?”

Miss Paulson lays it upon the low table in the middle of the room. Both the generator and the oscillator are now neatly contained in baize-lined mahogany boxes, which Mr Jepson has only just been able to finish in time for the Duchess’s visit. Miss Paulson opens them, one by one. The Duchess gasps as if they were jewel-cases, for the glint of freshly-milled brass and the neatly-wound copper are beautiful against the dark green baize.

“These machines, your grace, were designed by our girls. This, a generator, produces an electrical flow when the handle is turned. It passes through these two wires to this device, which is an oscillator. It converts the electrical flow into a rapid reciprocating motion.”

Eyes wide in wonder, the Duchess sips her sloe gin for the first time, and is momentarily distracted. “But this is delicious!” she cries. She sips again. “To think that I have never tasted such a thing before! Mrs Cunningham, you simply must give me the recipe!”

“I shall have a bottle brought up for you to take tomorrow,” replies the Head Mistress, gratified. “Let me pour a little more.”

In truth, it is not very strong – hardly more than forty percent – but it is Mrs Cunningham’s hope that the agreeable warmth it imparts may endear her plans to the Duchess.

“Now, Miss Paulson. All this is remarkably clever, I don't deny it; but of what possible benefit could such a device be to mankind?”

“I must admit, your grace, that our first intent had merely been to show the practicability of such a thing, and only afterwards to look at how we might make use of it.”

“Hmph!” The Duchess takes another sip.

“But our young ladies soon discovered that the oscillator, when applied to certain muscles, brings about complete relaxation, together with a most refreshing and invigorating sensation.”

“Is that so?” The Duchess is suddenly intent.

“It is well known to science that muscular cramps and tensions render us women less effective, particularly at certain times of the month...”

The Duchess nods, looking in fascination from one machine to the other.

“...and our early findings give us hope that with the aid of devices like these we may soon find a means to alleviate these female discomforts. It is a point of particular significance that when women participate in scientific endeavour, they are not only quite as capable as men, but are apt to make discoveries that are of particular benefit to their own sex.”

The Duchess sits back, impressed.

“Perhaps, Miss Paulson, a brief demonstration would be in order,” suggests Mrs Cunningham gently.

“Why —” Miss Paulson blushes charmingly — “of course, if your grace would like to see...”

The Duchess reclines comfortably, not demurring when once again Mrs Cunningham refills her glass. "This sloe gin is remarkably good, Head Mistress. Yes, Miss Paulson, please do show us."

Miss Paulson closes the lids of the boxes and takes up the smaller, the one containing the oscillator. "Very well. I shall tuck the box between my legs, like this, and then cross them, thus holding it fast."

Mrs Cunningham leans forward and takes up the generator. "Quite remarkable, is it not, the courage with which our girls experiment, pushing back the boundaries of knowledge, utterly regardless of any personal risk they might encounter?"

"Indeed," replies the Duchess. The excellent sloe gin has already somewhat softened her haughty countenance, and Miss Paulson feels a frisson as she suddenly catches a fleeting resemblance to her daughter. Yes, despite the many superficial differences – the Duchess is dark-haired and just showing a hint of grey – there are certain expressions, certain little tricks with the eyes, that recall Carry. And in that recognition, Miss Paulson feels a little spark of excitement: little can the Duchess suspect just how intimately this woman before her has known her daughter! It is as if thereby she has somehow gained a secret social advantage over the mother. And the recollection of that fervid, rapturous intimacy causes Miss Paulson to quiver with that hunger, that yearning that seems every day more voracious, more compelling.

"Very well, Head Mistress. I think... I'm ready..." Miss Paulson braces herself as Mrs Cunningham begins to turn the handle. "Just a little faster... Oooh!" And as the oscillator begins to make its buzzing, rattling sound, Miss Paulson lets out a little cry.

"What an extraordinary noise! Is this wise?" asks the Duchess anxiously.

Miss Paulson's eyes are closed. She is rocking to and fro, her hands clenching and unclenching upon the arms of the chair. "No... just..." she grates out, "Oh... oh..."

— and now the mounting pitch and vehemence of her inarticulate cries suggests that she is becoming increasingly excited.

“Whatever is happening to her? O this is horrible, Mrs Cunningham! It is affecting her most strangely!”

“Fear not, your grace. We have rehearsed this several times. No harm will come. Watch!”

Suddenly Miss Paulson's eyes snap open. She looks imploringly at Mrs Cunningham, rapidly nodding as if in desperate encouragement.

“But she cannot breathe!” The Duchess is becoming increasingly concerned herself, as is evidenced by the vehemence with which she downs the remainder of her sloe gin. “Should we not loosen her dress?”

Indeed, Miss Paulson's bosom is heaving and swelling most noticeably; but “Mmm... Mmmm...” she moans, as if tasting some particularly delectable sweetmeat, and “Oh... Ach... Ach...” – and now, to the Duchess's astonishment, Miss Paulson seems to be in a silent frenzy: her leg kicks out, her fists drum upon the arms of the chair, her teeth clenched and her head rapidly shaking from side to side like a dog worrying a tough piece of meat.

“It is a seizure! A seizure!” cries the Duchess; but with a long, melodious sigh of gratification, Miss Paulson suddenly falls back as if exhausted.

Mrs Cunningham's hand stills. All is silent: only the tick of the tall clock can be heard, unnaturally loud.

The Duchess is pensive. She rocks her empty glass to and fro. “Do you know, Head Mistress, I believe I am suddenly reminded of something...”

Momentarily, they are distracted by Miss Paulson's sudden jerk and loud intake of breath.

“Goodness!” cries the Duchess, turning to Mrs Cunningham who, however, seems quite unconcerned. “Will she be all right?”

“She will compose herself in a minute or two, you will see,” comes the smooth reply. “A little more sloe gin, your grace?”

“Why, thank you.” And then, in an undertone, as if to herself, “I cannot help being reminded... Dear me! — But that is not possible, surely...” She turns to Mrs Cunningham once more. “May I have another look at that remarkable little machine?”

Miss Paulson rises now and hands the little mahogany box to the Duchess. Her movements have a strange, floating quality. As she returns once more to her chair, it is difficult to overlook the peaceful radiance of her expression.

“Might I... just try for a brief moment?” asks the Duchess hesitantly.

“Why of course.”

“I put it... here?”

“A little higher.”

“Here?”

“Yes. It will help if you cross your legs. Just so.”

The Duchess is plainly nervous. “I see what you mean about courage,” she says faintly. “I am terrified to think what it will do.”

“Would you like to turn the handle yourself, your grace?”

“Perhaps that would be best... dear me, what a strange thing this is,” murmurs the Duchess as she takes the generator box, arranging the wires neatly. “So now I just... turn...”

“A little faster.”

“Ah...” She turns the handle faster, the buzzing sound is heard from deep in the Duchess's lap, and at once she stops and lets out a squeal. “Oh! forgive me. Let me

just try that again... Oh, haha, haha, that is most extraordinary... most..." she begins to laugh excitedly. She stops turning the handle, laughs, rearranges herself, turns the handle once more, and laughs again. "Why, that is just... extraordinary!"

"A little strange at first, is it not?" ventures Miss Paulson.

"Yes, haha... a little!" titters the Duchess, bemused. She closes her eyes tight and turns the handle once again. "I... I..." she stops and looks up, her eyes gleaming. "This is something quite, *quite* new," she says with a beatific smile. And then, as if recollecting herself, she removes the oscillator and places it, together with the generator, upon the table. "So this is... an oscillator," she says wonderingly.

"An oscillator, yes," replies Miss Paulson, as if encouraging a pupil.

"It simply... oscillates. Haha!" The Duchess lets out a delighted laugh. She takes her glass. "And you believe, Miss Paulson, that such a device may... benefit women's health?"

"There are promising indications, certainly."

"Well!" The Duchess takes up the oscillator again, and turns it over in her hands. "Of course I know the wives of some of the governors..."

Mrs Cunningham flashes a significant glance at Miss Paulson, and passes her a glass of the sloe gin. "Your grace, we should be so grateful if there is any influence you may be able to bring to bear..."

"Of course, people do need to be able to see the benefits of something like this for themselves, do they not? Until I had seen Miss Paulson's... most interesting demonstration, I must confess I could not see why the governors should need to find such a great deal of money. But if I were able to take this device and use it to demonstrate..."

Mrs Cunningham quells with a gesture Miss Paulson's movement of protest.

“Of course, your grace. You are absolutely right. I am sure Miss Paulson would have no objection — would you, Miss Paulson?”

“Oh, er... Oh no.” the young teacher agrees hastily.

“I wouldn't be... interrupting your work, in any way, if I were to take this?”
The Duchess smiles amusedly, her eyes half closed.

“No, no... I have various other projects.” Miss Paulson assures her.

“I am sure you do,” says the Duchess, her mouth twitching. “Hmmm... Perhaps we should invite you to Clathmorgan. I am sure that our Mrs Crichton would take to you greatly.”

“There! That will put some colour into those love-lorn cheeks!” Annie is with Jemmy, the new girl, in the dining-room, through whose tall and stately windows they have just observed Lady Caroline departing on horseback with the two young Lords. They stare for some moments at the bobbing backs of the three riders, the swishing tails of the horses and the puffs of breath wisping in the crisp December air. But Annie recalls them to their duty: “Come! This will not get the silver done!”

Still, Jemmy dwells for a moment by the window, sighing. “She is so lovely. Why do you think she is so sad? Liza said that she took to her bed for much of yesterday. And yet I do not think she can be ill.”

“‘Tis a sickness of sorts,” murmurs Annie, puffing on her spoon and briskly polishing with her rag. She pauses for a moment and fixes young Jemmy with her most authoritative eye. “There are some, young Jemmy, who'd as soon choose the quiet life as marry. And there are some who marry for love – though not in *their* class, I'll reckon.” Here she jerks her thumb in the direction of the party on horseback, just now disappearing round a curve in the sweeping drive. “But there's some as needs a

man, because they can't live without one. 'Tis like a sickness of the body. And that's what's afflictin' my young Lady Caroline, from what I hear whispered."

Jemmy looks puzzled, and Annie notes it. "Ay," she says, "There's those that will take a spinster's pleasure, and be comforted by it – and mind you, young Jemmy, there's many a wife will do the same, or so they do say – but not that Lady Caroline. No, try as she might, that one is yearning for a certain young gentleman, that's what they're saying, and 'tis only his hose will put out those flames. Why, even 'er grace is fair worried about it. Liza heard 'er only yesterday, goin' on – 'How can this have happened, Mrs Crichton? She will tell me nothing.' They say she won't tell a soul who he is."

"But what... what is a spinster's pleasure, Annie?"

Annie looks at Jemmy for a moment. Jemmy is only sixteen, a pretty waif whose seamstress mother, fallen upon hard times, is now a dependent of the Duke's charitable foundation at Askerley: and it was the Duke himself who brought the girl to work at Clathmorgan. Small, spindly and pale, the young maid yet has a lively aptitude for work, and a sweetly trusting nature. Her eyes are all innocence, her coarse, straight black hair emerging in a tight plait from beneath her white lace cap. Annie smiles impishly. To tease the young ones is, for her, one of life's innocent little pleasures. "Why, you do not know that? Fie, where were you brought up? But now, when Lady Caroline returns, you must attend her at her bath, and must ask her to explain it to you, for it is said that there is none more practised nor more diligent in the virgin arts than she!"

"Diligent? Virgin arts? I do not understand."

“Then you must ask her young Ladyship. An’ you you must be sure to ask how it is done genteel and lady-like. And do not neglect to tell me how she answers! Here, that fork is perfectly well done. Take another!”

For a while, they are intent upon their work. And then, hesitantly, Jemmy asks shyly,

“And do you think that perhaps I shall one day marry?”

“Lor, young Miss Jemmy, why do you ask me that?” Annie looks at her kindly. “You might, if you wanted to. You’re pretty enough.” She puts down her spoon and picks up another, puffing upon it. “There’s not so many that do, in service.”

“And why is that? Did you... did you never want to?”

Annie laughs, embarrassed. She is about to chide Jemmy for her forwardness, but again she looks at her, with her sweet turned-up nose, and the little rash of dark brown freckles across her cheeks. Really, the child is an innocent. “Why, Miss Jemmy, I might have done, I s’pose, if I’d wanted to...” Her voice trails off, and she pretends to concentrate upon her spoon. “— But then, I’ve good friends here, and all found, and I’m perfectly happy. Me an’ Liza, we been here p’raps twenty years now. We’re used to one another.”

“Are you really twins? You don’t look like one another.”

“Oh, there’s twins that are alike as two peas, and there’s twins so different you’d not know them as related at all,” Annie observes wisely, cocking her head and removing one final spot from her piece of silverware. “But no, dear, we’re not twins. They just call us that, we’ve been together that long. I don’t ‘spect we’d marry now. Anyhow, if what Mrs Crichton says is true, marrying could be the death of you. What with all these damn doctors taking things over and interfering, blast ‘em!”

“Why, what do the doctors do?”

“Well...” Here Annie narrows her eyes and takes up a knife, sweeping her rag with relish, “Mrs Crichton do say that of ten women in childbirth, the doctors now do kill four of ‘em. Safer to give birth out in the fields, she reckons. An’ that’s why she’d not have children herself, you see. ‘Safer to adopt, and there’s plenty up for adoption,’ she says, an’ that seems right to me.”

Jemmy screws up her face in an expression of distaste. “I could never do that! Never!”

“Never what, child?”

“Why, have a man’s thing in my mouth like that!”

Annie howls with laughter. “Why, who’s been tellin’ you such things? You’ve been had on a piece of string, my dear!”

“Why, then, is it not true? Aggie May told me she’d seen — Oh!” Jemmy claps her hand to her mouth — “I wasn’t to tell!”

“No, child, it’s not like that you get yourself a babby.” Annie is still shaking with laughter. “‘Tis how you get with pin-money, more like.”

“Pin-money?”

“Ay, pin-money.” Annie stoops, her voice now confidential. “That’s how a wife keeps herself safe, and her husband happy, you know. We don’t speak about it, but when a husband needs his pleasure, and a wife wants no babby, then that is how ‘tis done. An’ if he’s grateful, then maybe he gives her a present of pin-money. For her little things.”

“Oh.” Jemmy is round-eyed. And then there appears on her brow a little frown of determination. “I expect I’m not going to be marrying, then. ‘Tis all too dangerous, and... and...”

"You never know, child. Mebbe some handsome young man will come along an' sweep you off your feet..."

Jemmy blushes and picks up another fork. Annie notices the blush.

"Oh, an p'raps you've just met a young man already?"

Jemmy's blush deepens. "Well no. Well yes. An' I don't like the way they touch a girl."

"Why, who was this? What's he done?"

"No-one." Jemmy purses her lips tight. She is scarlet. And in a reflex movement that tells Annie everything, Jemmy crosses her arms over her chest.

"Was it Robbie in the stables? Ha ha! I see it was. 'Twas easy to guess. He's a fine one, that lad. He's touched you?" Annie laughs disparagingly. "An' made no very good impression, seemingly."

"Why do we let them hurt us so?"

"Why, dear, he is but an ignorant stupid boy! But now – one who knows – well, that's quite another thing." Annie adopts a lofty, somewhat pious tone. "A lady wants touching gently – a lady knows."

"Then what of that curious machine the ladies had at the card party last night?"

"Ah, yes. That was interesting, was it not? The ladies seemed mighty pleased."

"One of them was leaping up and down and squealing like a pig!" Jemmy laughs at the recollection.

"But she wanted to try it again and again, did she not?"

"Yes, I remember that she did."

"Mrs Crichton told me that it just shivers gently, for all that it buzzes like a swarm of wasps."

"I wonder if her grace would let me try it, just once..." Jemmy sounds a little wistful.

"Now don't you go gettin' ideas, young Jemmy. Such things are for ladies, not for the likes of us."

Jemmy sighs, her polishing-rag moving slowly and mechanically. She is looking out of the window, when something catches her attention. "Why... Is that not Lady Caroline? Lor! How she flies!"

Annie follows the direction of Jemmy's stare. Sure enough, unmistakable now, Lady Caroline is bent low, her steed at a precipitate gallop, snorting plumes of breath as he charges toward the main entrance.

"Why, yes! Quick! Quick! Run to the back kitchen and have them take up her bath!"

Suddenly, the house is a flurry of action. It is fortunate that the staff are well prepared, for scarcely have four stout lads, and as many maids, staggered up the main stair with their pans of hot water, drawn from the mighty copper in the back kitchen, than Lady Caroline prances up the front steps, her cheeks flaming.

"Ha! Some people have no spirit, no spirit at all!" she cries, flicking her gloves at Annie, who catches them awkwardly. "Have them prepare a bath for me."

"They are just carrying the water up now, m'lady," says Annie deferentially.

Carry pauses, frozen, and makes a pleased, inward smile. "Hmmm," she says warmly. "That is well."

Annie chuckles. She knows how to please the young mistress. "I am sending Jemmy up to attend to you."

Carry's smile disappears, and a haughty expression takes its place. "The new girl?"

“Yes, m'lady. She is new, but keen, and anxious to learn.”

“H'm.” Carry tosses her head. “Very well.” She strides energetically across the Hall and mounts the Great Stair, almost bounding with energy.

Annie shakes her head. “The young...” she murmurs. “One minute they're dying; the next, leaping over walls...”

The staff scamper out just as her young ladyship enters her chamber. She affects not to notice them – the maids' curtseys, the boys' tugs at their forelocks – but closes the door forcefully, almost slams it. She sees Jemmy, alone now, standing by the steaming bath. She is pale, a little overawed.

“I will take my bath at once, while it is still hot,” says Carry with a little toss of her head. “Undress me.”

She closes her eyes and extends her wrists with aristocratic grace. It pleases her to make a fine show of elegance. She imagines that it is Georgie's trembling fingers that fumble at her cuffs, then pick cautiously at the row of tiny, intricate buttons down her spine. She gulps, feeling an uncomfortable hollowness in her stomach. Rather that these nervous fingers were Georgie's, quivering in the sweet anxiety of lust, than those of an awkward serving-girl! O that these harsh, shallow breaths were not the nervousness of an inexperienced maid, but the panting of Georgie's desire!

Suddenly annoyed, for she had promised herself that she would not spend another day pining after Georgie, Carry thinks now of her ride, and of Neville, her splendid black stallion. Yes, Mother had been quite right: exercise does raise the spirits. She had received Neville for her fifteenth birthday, and is quite sure that he is the finest mount in all the Clathmorgan stables. She thinks now that she should have called him Sir Perceval, for he is a noble, knightly horse; but at fifteen she had chosen “Neville”, and now it is too late to change. Shouldering off her dress, Carry laughs to

herself to recall her brothers' astonishment as she spanked him into a gallop, their admonitory cries as they leaped the hedge into the meadow. She smiles as she steps from her skirts one by one, feeling the sweep of the satin against her thigh, imagining how Georgie would have adored to see her gallop past, her long golden tresses flying in the breeze.

And so Carry turns and steps and shrugs, until she is quite naked, and feels upon her bare skin the heat of the roaring fire and the moisture of the bath beside her. And then, hearing Jemmy's harsh breathing, she snaps her eyes open, her fantasy suddenly evaporated.

"Why, what are you staring at?"

Jemmy looks down, abashed. Her blush tells her mistress all.

Carry says nothing, but dips her toe into the water. "Ohh," she gasps luxuriously, as she puts one foot slowly into the warm water, and then the other. She looks again at Jemmy. Jemmy's eyes are lowered, but she cannot turn away; and Carry feels a sudden excitement. It does not matter that it is not Georgie, but a lowly serving maid: Carry feels admiring glances as if they were sensuous caresses. They intoxicate her, and she can no more reject them than she can change the colour of her eyes.

In a soft, melodious undertone, her voice suddenly gentle, "Do you like to look upon me?"

Jemmy nods, then looks up into Carry's eyes. Carry feels the tightness at her breast, the little shiver, the sensation of dampness. She wants... she wants...

"Bring the tall looking-glass," she commands, her voice suddenly loud again. "I wish to see what it is you are looking at."

Obediently, Jemmy turns in the direction of Carry's gaze. And there, against the wall, the tall glass before which Carry has spent many an hour in secret, contemplating her own charms with silent approval. Carefully, for it is heavy, Jemmy trundles the oaken stand forward on its eight brass castors, until it is right before the young Venus in her bath. Carry turns gently from side to side, gathering up her hair as she does so.

"Take the sponge, and wash me."

"I wonder when Alfred will return."

"His grace said he would be in time for dinner, did he not?"

"It's monstrous." The Duchess sniffs. "A father should be at home on Christmas Eve – not cavorting with fallen women. Nevertheless... I confess I find myself enjoying his little absences more and more." Lady Aurelia Walmsley, Duchess of Grantshire, stretches herself luxuriously. "Oh, what a lovely evening we had of it last night! That Mrs Fearnley – how she enjoyed the little machine, did she not?"

"Indeed, I do believe she came a half a dozen times!"

"Poor things. I feel sorry for them. I suspect it was her very first time, you know."

"And you think they will be able to win their husbands' co-operation?"

"I am sure of it. Lady Cleckheaton is very persuasive. They all are. And Fearnley is a most ambitious man – a very clever lawyer, don't you know. Yes, I can see a little syndicate forming in the not too distant future. The wives shall work on the husbands, and then we shall get the gentlemen together. Alfred will be so pleased. We shall have to make it seem as if it was his idea, you know, and not ours. But since it is

he who spends all the money, it seems only right that he should gain it for a change, don't you think?"

"Assuredly. Manufacturing is the answer, I am sure."

"So it is."

The two ladies reflect for a while on the subject of money, and its general desirability. It is only their combined sagacity that has prevented the Duke's schemes from ruining the family fortunes entirely; but the opportunity presented by the oscillating machine holds a quite new potential for making money, as opposed to merely conserving it.

The Duchess looks fondly upon her dear friend. Mrs Clarice Crichton, once the governess and now her intimate companion, seems lost in thought. But then she turns to her mistress, who returns her enquiring glance with a smile.

"Aury?"

"Mm?"

"Do you really think it was Mrs Fearnley's first time? And she a mother of five children?"

"We are not all as fortunate as you, dear Clarice. Your Martin must have been an exceptional man."

"Oh, he was."

"But you will admit that you have been an unusually merry widow."

"Yes, and I'm sure I have him to thank for that, at least in part. There are not very many who have discovered... what we have discovered."

"Not yet, Clarice dear. But when every reputable lady has a Walmsley Comforter beside the bed — Why, what a clatter!" Hearing a storm of approaching

hooves, the Duchess sits up a little. "Clarice, dearest, go to the window and see who it is!"

Clarice is shocked. "What – like this?"

"Of course. Nobody will see."

"Except you."

"Except I."

With a little giggle, Mrs Crichton rises and tiptoes to the window. "Why, it's Lady Caroline. Alone!"

"Come back. You'll get cold." The Duchess extends her arm.

"Ohhh! You're right."

When Mrs Crichton is settled again, their conversation resumes.

"Ah, Carry... Carry," murmurs the Duchess. "There's a young lady who knows a few secrets... And I do believe I know who taught her one or two, hmm? Did not her dear governess's roving hands map out some secret territory, hmm? Around this area, perhaps?"

Clarice writhes and giggles. "O Aury! Aury! Not there! Please!"

The Duchess chuckles lazily. Her hand continues to move. "Well, it doesn't seem to have done her any harm..."

Clarice turns, suddenly serious. "Why should it do her any harm?"

"I don't know." The Duchess is smiling, but pensive. "It's strange, is it not? We are always taught that what we enjoy is bad for us, and what hurts us is good for us. Yet nature seems to say exactly the opposite. And in going against nature, do we not create boundless misery? Does the human race not have a genius for creating needless suffering?"

"I think you are right. But speaking of suffering..."

“Oh — Carry. I know. She isn't herself at all. Did you see her yesterday at luncheon? Eyes all red from weeping, and scarcely a glance at that pretty new girl Alfred found us. When Carry ignores a fair maid, I think we must know what is responsible.”

“She's in love?”

“Of course she's in love — the silly girl.”

“She seems to wander about like a ghost — that is, when she finally deigns to leave her room.”

“Where, I suspect, she is dissipating just a little too much energy at present.”

“But who can it be? She cannot come across very many young men at Hepplewhite.”

“Oh, no. Not a young man, I think.” The Duchess's tone is dismissive.

“You mean... one of the girls?”

The Duchess chuckles. “O Clarice, Clarice, were you never at school? Did you never come across some wonderful young teacher, someone who inspired you, someone who lit a fire in your young breast?”

“A teacher? One of the teachers?”

“Of course. And I think I know which one.”

“I wonder if the teacher is aware of it.”

“I cannot tell. Needless to say, Carry will admit nothing.”

“Poor lamb! And I suppose she knows nothing of his grace's intentions for her.”

“Clarice, that man cares about only one thing — I mean of course his precious seamstresses. But his daughter's heart — pah! He will marry her to money, if I do not prevent it.”

“But will she not be broken-hearted?”

“Well, that depends, you know. If he's rich enough – and Alfred means him to be, of course – why, then he will do exactly what all the men do: get her pregnant and find himself a mistress. And then there will be nothing to prevent her finding herself a confidential friend...”

“O Aury! Aury! Don't!” Clarice titters as the Duchess begins to tickle her.

“I know what you would like... Hark! Hark now!”

The ladies are still again, and listen to the heavy footfalls of the servants in the passage.

“They are bringing up the water for Lady Caroline's bath,” observes Clarice.

“Yes, and I repeat that I know what you would like, to revive your wanton heart.”

“What, pray?” Clarice is stiff with anticipation.

“You would like to gaze upon beautiful Venus, rising from the waves. She will be fresh-cheeked and invigorated from her ride, and I think we should distract her before she dissipates all her energies for yet another solitary afternoon, don't you think?”

“Then we shall have to get dressed.”

“Yes, dear Clarice, I am afraid we shall.”

Obediently, Jemmy takes the huge sponge, dips it in the water and, after a moment's hesitation, dabs it into the hollow of her mistress's armpit. Noisily the water cascades down the glistening, perfect body.

“Ahhh!” Carry breathes rapturously, closing her eyes, tilting her head back. “Make me wet! Wet me all over! Quickly, now!” She cannot help giggling at the

hidden sense of her words. She twitches in delight at the caress of the sponge, the trickling of the water, the boiling wantonness coursing deliciously through her veins. She opens her eyes for a moment and sees herself in the glass, beautiful, twisting to and fro in quiet frenzy. "Now the soap! Rub it on my skin! I want it all over!" Carry moans and giggles: she cannot conceal her pleasure at Jemmy's soapy caresses. "Oh, I think you are good at this," Carry encourages her, "you are doing it exactly right. Now my legs... higher up! Yes, higher! Make me completely clean!"

And then, suddenly, Carry senses that she is going to come, that she is going to come most deliciously at the hands of this innocent maid. She will try to disguise it, but she knows it cannot be far off. "Now the other leg. Use more soap! Work it in! Harder! Oh! Oh!" She wiggles her toes in her excitement.

And then, abruptly, the door flies open, and Jemmy drops her sponge in dismay.

Carry struggles to conceal her rage of disappointment. "Good afternoon, mother," she says lugubriously.

"Why Carry, my dear, how charmingly healthy you look! — Come, Clarice, take a seat. — We have come to cheer you up!" The Duchess laughs silently at Carry's inner struggles. "Oh, you have the new little maid! Has she been washing you nicely? What is her name?"

Carry looks down at Jemmy, still kneeling before her. "What is your name?"

"Jemmy, m'lady."

"She says her name is Jemmy, mother."

"Jemmy, continue to wash Lady Caroline. — Yes, Carry, we have come to cheer you up. You know, of course, that your father intends to marry you off to someone rich? And that in our present circumstances this might have to be rather

sooner than later?" The Duchess pauses to observe the look of anguish that has fallen over her daughter's countenance. "Come, don't fret, child. I think I may have found a way to rescue you."

In Carry's eyes, the look of sullen despair transforms into a gleam of hope. "O mother – you cannot mean it! Truly?"

"But I shall require your co-operation, my dear."

"Why, what must I do?"

"In the first place, if your father should mention the subject of marriage, kindly do not make a commotion at him. It will do no good at all. You should feign meek acceptance. Do you understand?"

"Yes, mother."

"In the second, Clarice and I have thought of a way to make money – enough to make the question of your marriage quite irrelevant. We are proposing to send your father into manufacturing."

"Manufacturing?"

"Manufacturing. It makes a very great deal of money these days, as I'm sure you know. We intend that this manufacturing will benefit not only us, but your school as well. However, we will need you to use all of your persuasive powers to ensure that we receive all necessary support."

"Very well. Of course I will help."

"You are a good girl. One particular target I have in mind is one of your teachers. We shall need you to win her over. Now what is her name? Paulson, I think. Do you know a Miss Paulson?"

"Oh mother! Mother!" Carry's eyes are ablaze.

"Hmmm... I see you do. Stop doing that, Carry. You are splashing the girl."

It is gloomy in the Carter dining-room: there are but two candles at the table, and little enough light from the forbidding winter sky outside. The only quite cheerful thing in the room is the glowing fire, striking ruddy glints in the brass candlesticks.

Lucy glances at her father. Solemn as ever, she feels him as a brooding, oppressive presence. At least today her mother is making some attempt at gaiety, and for this Lucy is grateful. Their secret outing to the optician the day before yesterday has given them a fresh bond, a memory they revive together in quiet little smiles when Father is not looking. Indeed, that day was one of the happiest, for in the carriage on the way into town Mother had spoken at length of her childhood memories, and Lucy had listened and questioned with lively interest. And when she goes back to school, in just a week's time, a lovely new pair of gold-rimmed pince-nez will be waiting for her in a velvet-lined box. For a moment Lucy sits back in contentment: she has eaten heartily, and even had two glasses of wine; and although her dress now feels rather tight about the waist, she feels most wonderfully comfortable.

Again she glances at her parents, now also both staring into the fire.

"Shall I have another log put on?" asks Joanna.

"Hmph. Perhaps, since it's Christmas," murmurs Henry.

Lucy returns to her recollections of her day out with Mother. What of that absurd piratical eye-patch, that she must wear over her good eye? One hour each day, he had said, to strengthen her bad eye – and a strange and giddy thing it is to walk about with. How Mother had laughed!

But then that extraordinary ride home. What of that, indeed? It had been just as they were getting into the carriage, and she had gone to thank her mother with a kiss: that involuntary flinch, that little recoil, that grimace of regret – soon suppressed, but

not soon enough. And after that, Mother had been silent, morose, looking out of the window as if somehow the whole mood of the day had been spoiled. And on the road, blazing with anger, Lucy had clenched her thighs tighter than ever, squeezing and squeezing in her rage. And whether it was the heat of her indignation, or the rocking of the carriage, she does not know: but it had come, that sudden inside-out feeling, several times, until she had had a fit of coughing, and Mother had asked her if she was perhaps not feeling well. Such an extraordinary feeling! And afterwards, she had felt as light as thistledown, as if she might have just blown away in the wind! A curious discovery, and rather a strain for her poor leg-muscles – yet it had certainly whiled away a dull journey.

Henry Carter drains his glass. It is time to say grace. And not only that: for, despite an hour at Matins and a two-hour Christmas Service, he decides that there must be a thanksgiving psalm as well. And of course a prayer for dear, departed Elsie, and a tear from Mother.

“And now a reading, I think. Yes, Lucy, you shall read to us.”

“But Henry, you know how...” Joanna attempts to intercede.

“The girl must practise. It is sheer laziness! Now let me see...” Henry Carter opens the huge family bible and turns the pages carefully, reverently. “Although it is Christmas, and we have celebrated the dawn of our redemption, we should always keep the Law of the Lord upon our lips and in our hearts. Yes... Here.” He holds the book out to his daughter, indicating the passage with his finger.

Taking the heavy book, Lucy begins to read, haltingly, in a quavering voice. Her father's stern solemnity quite discourtenances her.

“And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, If a soul shall sin through ignorance against any of the commandments of the

Lord concerning things which ought not to be done, and shall do against any of them..." she breaks off.

"Well?" growls her father. By now it is darker still, and his face is in shadow.

"But father: how can anyone sin through ignorance?"

"Why, you question Holy Scripture? That is insolence!" He pounds his fist upon the table. "But of course ignorance of the Divine Law is sin! Why do you think that I strive and strive to imprint the Law upon your insubordinate heart?"

"Henry, dear..." Joanna leans forward beseechingly. She is mindful that they have had wine, and Henry has had perhaps a little too much of it. And, being now seventeen, Lucy has had a little, too, and drunk it perhaps a little too quickly.

"But father, surely, if a person doesn't know that a thing is wrong, then it is no sin. Miss Paulson says..."

"Miss Paulson? Miss Paulson? Who is Miss Paulson?" Henry stabs his finger towards the enormous, black-bound bible. "These are the words of Almighty God!" His voice rises dangerously high. "Do you think that the almighty Creator of all in the heavens and all upon the earth is going to sit like a schoolgirl, listening to what Miss Paulson says?"

"O but father! That was not what I meant!"

"Insolence! Intolerable! Get to your room!"

"Henry, dear..." pleads Joanna, but to no avail.

"To your room, I say!"

"Very well!" And, head held high, Lucy knocks over her chair and sweeps angrily out of the room.

"Come back here and pick up that chair!" yells her outraged father.

"There, there, Henry dear..." murmurs Joanna, picking the chair up and setting it in its place once more. "She is only young."

"Ungrateful wretch! Daring to preach to her father like that! Insolence!"

Joanna attempts to soothe him. "But she is very good, you know, very good in a mathematical way. Look how hard she has been working away at it, up in her room..."

"Mathematics be damned!"

"O not on Christmas Day, Henry, please!"

"Oh..." Henry looks, and notices Joanna's imploring countenance. "Oh, very well. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, my dear. Let us have some port. You too. It is Christmas, after all."

"Oh, Henry..." Joanna smiles fondly upon her husband. Like the Almighty, she thinks, he is quick to anger, but always merciful — eventually.

"Joanna..." Henry reaches across and pats his wife's hand. "Let us say a silent prayer for her."

In her room, Lucy paces up and down in a fury. "I hate this house," she exclaims to herself. "I hate it!" She takes up her treatise on the properties of springs. Yes, she has made a presentable conclusion: she has found a particularly pleasing expression for omega-null. She re-reads her last, triumphant steps and feels her strength return.

Fortunately, Simpson has been meticulous in keeping the fires well-banked, and the room is at least warm, if a little stuffy. Breathless in her tight-fitting dress, Lucy struggles out of it and places it over her chair. Then, to keep warm, she lies down on the thick rug before the hearth.

Lucy is still angry, but a little frightened to think that she has quarrelled with her father – and on Christmas Day, too. This has never happened before. If only she had someone to take her part! Miss Paulson would – wouldn't she?

But there is nobody, and so Lucy goes over the argument in her head, seeking to reassure herself. Could one sin through ignorance? Surely, if you are ignorant, then you don't even know that it is wrong. How could that be a sin?

But eventually, Lucy's confidence evaporates. She decides that it would be best to go and apologize, even though she knows her father was unduly harsh. Timidly, she makes her way downstairs; but when she returns to the dining room, she finds it empty.

"Simpson... Simpson... Where are Mother and Father?"

"They have gone out to Evensong, miss."

Determined to do the right thing, Lucy retreats to her room and writes a note. She struggles to make it neat, and re-reads it several times to ensure that she has spelled every word correctly. Then she hurries down, and leaves the note for her father upon the hall-stand, where he will see it upon his return. That done, she scurries back to her room, closes the door and lies once more upon the rug.

She is not sure that her father will forgive her, but at least she can now be at peace with herself. She does not care about the stupid argument anyway. She shivers, not because she is cold, but because she wants a friend, a sympathetic soul. She remembers walking into Miss Paulson's cottage, and being greeted by a smile. Here, whenever she enters a room, there is always that look of fleeting disappointment: not as good as Elsie, not as pretty as Elsie, poor dead Elsie. Damned Elsie, spoiling everything from the grave!

Elsie did not know about springs. Elsie was not very good at mathematics, even if her handwriting was so very neat. And, Lucy suddenly thinks, Elsie did not know about the inside-out feeling – that extraordinary thing that happened when Shipman touched her so very gently, and again in the carriage, when she squeezed. And what was it Miss Paulson said? “When we feel a hunger inside...” Yes, Lucy feels a hunger: just thinking of that inside-out feeling reawakens it. “Something wonderful...” It is strange certainly, and powerful; and afterwards, that wonderful lightness, that floating... “Just touching gently, with one finger...”

Yes, thinks Lucy, yes I will. She draws up her petticoats. She feels the heat of the fire upon her thighs. Carefully, she reaches down and explores. It is all very sensitive. She brushes the fluffy hairs with the tips of her fingers. It tickles slightly, and is very soothing. After a few minutes, she wants more. Where was it? Near the top? Oh yes. This is like the feeling she has when she squeezes, but stronger, and far less tiring. “I like this,” she whispers to herself. “I like it.” She does not hear the scuffling of her feet upon the rug, as she fidgets her legs into the most comfortable position. She does not hear her noisy breathing, echoing from the plain walls of her little, high-ceilinged room. She feels rays of pleasure flowing through her, swimming like eels throughout her body. Her hair is prickling. Her lips are dry.

For a moment, she stops. “Shall I do it some more? Or shall I stop now?” Curious, she jerks her petticoats up further, so that she can see where she has been touching. Yes, there is the little place. It has always been there, waiting for her to play with it, asking to be touched. Why then has she never found it before? Because she was told that it was ugly, so ugly that she was afraid to look. Watching her finger, she touches it. Immediately the sweetness floods into her again, stronger and stronger now. Again, she forces herself to stop, just gently playing with the hairs around it. She

thinks of Walmsley. Her parents are rich, rich beyond telling. Assuredly Walmsley will have received many Christmas presents today. Combs and jewellery and dresses... "Why can we not have Christmas presents, too? Everyone else does," she thinks, "everyone! Well, all I have is this." She touches it again. "It's for me. It's mine!" She begins to touch a little harder. She moans out loud: she needs to press more firmly. "I like it! Ugh! Yes, yes!" She is turning inside-out now, she can feel it, and yes, she wants it, her body wants it, and "Oh!" it hits her, it makes her crazy, and she drums her heels on the floor. And then it lets her go, and she can feel the squeezing, again, again, again.

She feels dizzy. She has been holding her breath, and now she lets it out with a little cough. Lovely little eddies and wisps of feeling, shivering in odd corners of her body. And then sweet calm. So this is what Shipman does, and Walmsley does, and Miss Paulson does. No wonder! "And I can do it whenever I like," she thinks to herself. "Even if nobody else cares, I can give myself this lovely feeling. They can take away my home, my food, even my clothes, but I shall always have this." She wriggles a little. She is supremely comfortable. She stretches her limbs. It feels good. And then she feels it again: where she touched, that little place, tingling and tickling. She touches it, and the tingling stops. She gives it a little rub – and laughs in delight. "Again! I'm going to do it again!" She thinks of her grave, mournful father and his stupid temper. She thinks of her mother, cowed and melancholy. What do they matter? "I don't need Father," she grunts, "I don't need Mother... uh... don't need Shipman... I don't need anybody!" And then she is inside-out again, and it is even stronger than before, oh madness, madness, lovely madness, so much so that she is laughing and laughing with the sheer release of it even as the contractions squeeze and squeeze and sweetly squeeze her.

"I'm wet!" She feels her wetness. Her fingers make a squelchy sound, but the smooth slipperiness is delicious. She strokes again and again. "I'm getting all messy. But I don't care!"

Now that the festive meal is quite cleared away, Felicity's mother goes to visit the children in the nursery. George and Frederick are playing with bricks. Felicity is bent over the table, her mouth full of pins. The room is warm and cheerful.

"Why, Felicity! What a busy little needlewoman you are! And I didn't think you liked sewing. And on Christmas Day, too!"

"It is fun, mama! I did not realize! I think I shall be finished tomorrow!"

"But what is it you are making?"

"She's making a pair of trousers, mama."

"Be quiet, Frederick!" Felicity scowls at her impudent brother.

"A pair of trousers, Felicity? Why, that's a strange thing."

"It's... It's for the school play, mama. Look, they're velvet! Feel them!"

"Lovely, dear!"

"They will be beautifully warm."

"So they will, dear. How very nice!"

Henry and Joanna return from Evensong. Simpson hangs up their coats.

"Miss Lucy left a note for you, sir," she says, indicating the paper on the hall-stand. And there, in a careful, childish hand, Lucy's peace-offering: "I am sorry. I was wrong. Lucy XX"

"Bah! Stupid girl!" cries Henry, dashing the note down again. He stalks into his study, shaking his head.

“Oh, poor dear!” cries Joanna. “I will go up and see her. She is a good girl really.”

Neither Lucy nor her mother will ever forget that moment, when Mrs Carter walks in without knocking, and finds Lucy toppling once more into a helpless rush of ecstasy. It is fortunate that Mrs Carter does not scream, but with commendable presence of mind slams the door closed behind her.

“O Lucy, Lucy, no, no, no! Dirty girl! Dirty, dirty!” She falls on her knees beside her daughter and grasps her wrist, tugging the petticoats down to cover her daughter's shame. “Never do this! Never again! Oh I cannot believe it! You too! What is to become of us?”

“Hush, mother! Why all this fuss?”

“Lucy, Lucy, never again, please! Promise me, now! Oh, to lose one is bad enough!”

“Mother! Whatever do you mean?”

“Never again! It's a wicked, wicked habit! Oh, I don't want to lose you as well!”

“What are you saying, mother?”

“Don't let your father know. I'm not going to tell him. I can't bear it. I don't know what he'd do.”

“Are you speaking of Elsie, mother?”

Mrs Carter is suddenly silent. She lets go of Lucy's wrist, and draws back with a sigh. After a moment, she nods.

“Did she do... did she do this?”

“Yes.” Mrs Carter is solemn. “Yes, she did. And by the time we found out, she could not stop it. We threatened to send her away. And she just said ‘good!’ Can you

believe it? She turned against us, Lucy. She was disobedient. She even told your father she hated him.”

Lucy turns away from her mother with a snort. “Perhaps Elsie was not all bad,” she thinks.

“We had to send her to the doctor.”

“The doctor?” Lucy turns back sharply. “Why the doctor? She was not ill.”

“Oh, but she was. It was a sickness of the soul. She was so full of fury.”

“But mother! Perhaps she needed to do this. That is what my body tells me, mother: I need it! It is like hunger, or thirst. I thought I could ignore it, but I find that I cannot.”

“Oh nonsense, Lucy! Your body needs no such thing!”

“But how do you know? How do you know what my body needs? Why should you believe some doctor? And what of men? Do they not talk continually of their needs? Why should women not have needs, too?”

“But Lucy – men like to believe that we are perfect. We are not supposed to feel such things.”

“But that is ridiculous! Elsie was perfectly normal.”

“She was unhappy, Lucy. She was miserable. The doctor said that it would ruin her health. He said he could cure her.”

“This is all nonsense. She was not sick.” Lucy shakes her head in disbelief. “What sort of doctor was this?”

“Oh, he is a distinguished surgeon – most distinguished – Mr [Isaac Baker Brown](#). He is very famous, and it was a very expensive operation. But we so wanted to cure our poor Elsie! It was the only way.”

“Mother, what are you telling me? What did this Doctor Brown do to poor Elsie?”

“He cut the parts away.”

Lucy squeals in rage and horror. “What?” she cries.

“Yes, dear. He told us that in obstinate cases, it is the only cure. So you see, we had to agree.”

“He cut her?”

“Yes, dear. With little sharp scissors. He said it would not be unduly painful.”

“So that was why she was in hospital! And I thought she was really ill!”

“She was ill, Lucy. She had to be cured. It is the law of God.”

“Where in God’s law does it speak of what she did? Where? And where in God’s law does it say that a man may cut off a woman’s parts? Mother, she died, didn’t she?”

“Yes, Lucy, she did. She wouldn’t eat, she wouldn’t drink, she wouldn’t talk, and she wouldn’t stop bleeding. In the end she died.”

“You make it sound as if it were her fault, mother. Why should she not die after such a barbaric operation?”

“Barbaric? What on earth do you mean? Mr Baker Brown is a highly reputable surgeon!”

“Why did he not rather cut off her hands?”

“That would indeed be barbaric! There was nothing wrong with her hands! We do not do that kind of thing in civilized England!”

“But mother – what is the difference? I do not understand you, really I do not!”

“Neither do I understand you, Lucy.”

“And how long did she live in agony after that barbaric operation?”

"Six days."

Lucy is silent for a while. Then, her voice choked with passion: "Murderer!"

"What?" There is fear in Joanna's voice.

"That Doctor Brown is a murderer. And so are you, and Father!" Lucy's voice rises in her outrage. "You murdered my sister, and then you lied and told me that she was ill. Murderer! Liar!"

Lucy begins to beat at her mother with her fists, but Joanna, pale with terror, restrains her. Something in her eyes quells Lucy, even in her fury. "Hush! Don't let your father hear! O Lucy, do you not think I have been in torment myself these eight long years?"

"Good!" Lucy breathes venomously. "You utterly disgust me. You go on and on and on about the law of God, you force me to read about wives being subject to their husbands and women being stoned for adultery and women belonging to men like beasts, and yet secretly you lie and murder, and say that it is the law of God!" Lucy shakes her head. "That is not my God, mother."

"What is your God?" asks Joanna, desolate.

"Mother: do you remember?" Lucy's eyes begin to fill with tears. "Do you remember the statue by Elsie's grave? The one of the angel weeping?"

Joanna sobs. "Yes, I remember."

"My God is not the angry, jealous Bonaparte in the sky you and Father like so much to worship. No: my God weeps for Elsie like that angel by her grave."

"Lucy, Lucy, do not do this to me!" Joanna is weeping too, now.

"Tomorrow I will go. You will find my fare, and I will leave this accursed house."

"But where will you go?"

"I will go back to school. I cannot stay here."

"But what can I tell your father?"

"Tell him... oh, tell him that I am ill, if you must."

Late that night, Henry turns over in his bed. "Joanna: are you awake?"

"Yes, Henry."

"Can you hear a sound? Is that weeping?"

"Yes, Henry. It is Lucy."

"Well, I am glad that she is sorry. Outrageous conduct today." Henry grunts.

"Something must be the matter with her."

"Indeed I think she is run down. She says she wishes to return to school, to work on her mathematics."

"Can she do that?"

"She says she can."

"Good. I shall be glad to be rid of her. She is a perfect fountain of misery."

"I will see what can be done."

"Thank you, Joanna."

Within a few minutes, Henry is snoring.

Part VI

Being Boxing Day, the coach is almost empty. Apart from Lucy, there is only a middle-aged couple inside. He is reading *The Times*, and she knitting what appear to be leggings, out of fine black wool. Her needles clatter with astonishing rapidity – Lucy watches in fascination, envious of her dexterity – while she looks aimlessly about her, now down at her work, now out of the window, and occasionally, with a little smile, at Lucy.

Lucy falls into a reverie, reviewing those memories of Elsie which, for the past few years, jealousy has thrust to the back of her mind. True, Elsie was not always kind to her younger sister; but then, there were also some moments of tenderness: huddling together on the rug before the bedroom fire; being comforted when Libby, Lucy's doll, lost an arm — and yes! Did not Elsie take needle and thread and stitch it back on for her? Lucy thinks regretfully of Libby: she was rather the worse for wear, but nevertheless she was a little token of Elsie's affection, the only one to have survived. "What a pity," she thinks now, "that Mother persuaded me to give her to the poor!" Mother had said that Lucy was too old for dolls, but "perhaps I'm not too old for a doll, even now," thinks Lucy, wiping a self-indulgent tear from the corner of her eye with her knuckle.

But then she remembers Elsie laughing at her drawing of a house, laughing and showing Nanny: "That looks nothing like a house! Does that look like a house to you?" – and Nanny being tactfully evasive, avoiding Lucy's eye. No, Elsie could be cruel; "but then, I've not been very kind to you, have I, Elsie? And all the same... whatever you did to me, you didn't deserve... that..." Lucy shudders as she imagines

the agony of Elsie's last miserable days in the hospital, remembers Mother's tears and Father's pale, tight-lipped solemnity. And then they had sent Nanny away...

Lucy is suddenly distracted from her introspection: the middle-aged woman's busy needles have paused, and she is smiling strangely at Lucy. When Lucy meets her eye, she turns for a moment to her husband, who seems to have fallen into a light doze. Then she looks back to Lucy and, with a twitch of her lips, crosses her legs and gives a little, barely perceptible wink.

Blushing, Lucy uncrosses her legs. "Bother!" she thinks. She had decided not to do that any more: she feels she needs to make some little sacrifice, as much in sympathy with Elsie's shocking privation as to atone for her past uncharitable thoughts. Poor Elsie! Fancy not being able...

Suddenly aware that these thoughts are causing a familiar tension in her private region, Lucy tries to distract herself by looking out of the window, craning her neck a little to see if she can yet make out the next toll-gate. Occasionally she glances at the couple, but both now seem to be dozing. He has put down his paper, neatly folded, and she has put away her knitting, her gloved hands now resting under the folds of her voluminous grey travelling-cape. She has relaxed a little into the corner, and only the toe of one boot peeps from beneath the hem of her cape, bobbing gently with the motion of the carriage. She seems very comfortable and relaxed.

Lucy, however, feels restless and irritable. She would like to be able to get up and walk about. Continually she has to stop herself crossing her own legs. Just thinking of the relief it would give her arouses that insistent little prickle in her loins. "No! I won't! I'm doing this for Elsie," she admonishes herself. For the sake of the distraction, she slips off her glove and, closing her eyes, explores by feel the contents of her purse. There are the six gold sovereigns — Father had been surprisingly

generous. Lucy counts them one by one. And then she feels the half-sovereign, the two half-crowns, the shilling and the four pennies – the remnant of the seventh sovereign, after she had paid her fare and bought two big twopenny blocks of chocolate. And there... ah yes! One of her springs. As she takes it out, the woman opposite suddenly lurches forward and coughs, making Lucy jump. The husband opens his eyes a little.

“All right, dear?” he mumbles.

“Oh! Just a little tickle in my throat! Ah! M’hm! Excuse me,” murmurs the wife, relaxing back into her corner with a contented sigh.

Reassured, the gentleman closes his eyes again.

Lucy pretends not to notice, but tucks her purse away once more and toys with her spring, stretching and compressing it. Gradually her vexation lifts and her mind floats into tranquil mathematical contemplation.

The Duchess looks up. There is a maid in attendance by the door; and Jemmy, the new girl, is by the window, anxiously looking out. She stands with her legs awkwardly crossed, gyrating a little, wringing her hands.

“Hey you!” booms the Duchess, and Jemmy whirls round to face her, suddenly pale. “What are you waiting for?”

“I... I...” Jemmy seems incoherent.

“Is Lady Caroline out riding?”

Jemmy nods. “Yes, your grace,” she stammers.

The Duchess lets out a musical chuckle. “Good. Young ladies of leisure” – here the Duchess gives Jemmy a quizzical look – “need some healthy activity to work off

their surplus energies.” She holds her stare on Jemmy for a moment before returning to the absorbing novel resting upon her knee.

When she is sure that the Duchess is distracted, Jemmy turns again and resumes her vigil. After a few moments, she starts for the door, but then stops in her tracks. “Oh!” she cries. “It’s a carriage.”

“A carriage? We aren’t expecting anyone.” With a sigh, the Duchess puts her book down on the tabouret table beside her and, rising, joins Jemmy by the window. “H’m,” she purrs. “Those arms, if I’m not mistaken... Yes, they are...” She returns to her chair and seats herself slowly, arranging her dress with care. It is relatively plain but made of good, heavy silk, an attractive ivory shade with a discreet blue and gold motif at the waist and hem, and a pleasing effervescence of lace at the throat and cuffs. The Duchess is accustomed to wearing something altogether grander when receiving visitors, but this will have to do. “Well, well...” she murmurs wonderingly, tapping her fingers lightly upon the table beside her. “Well, well...”

Soon the carriage is at the door, the horses snorting and steaming in the cold winter air. In a few moments, a footman enters and bows. He is tall. His immaculate white stockings and breeches, and the splendid gilt frogging on his blue coat, make him appear more imposing than the Duchess.

“Mrs Fearnley, your grace. She begs to inform your grace that she had been out for a ride, just chanced to pass the gate, and begged to pass her compliments to your grace, but on no account to disturb your grace or impose upon your grace’s kind hospitality.”

“But of course she must come in,” responds the Duchess, her voice smooth and glacially polite. And, as the footman disappears, “Well, well...” she drawls, to nobody in particular.

Something in the Duchess's tone makes the hairs on Jemmy's neck stand up, and a shiver passes through her, making her cross her legs more tightly as she watches for Lady Caroline.

And then Mrs Fearnley is introduced. She bustles into the room in a long navy-blue cape, her gloves still in her uplifted hand.

"My dear Aurelia, you must forgive me," she cries, drowning the Duchess's protests, "it is too, too rude of me to call uninvited like this. I merely wished to thank you so much for that wonderful evening —"

"But my dear Kate, they haven't taken your cape – nor your gloves!" the Duchess wrinkles the corner of her eyes in a momentary twitch of displeasure. "What am I to do with them?"

"O now don't be cross!" protests Mrs Fearnley. "I insisted that I would merely pass my greetings and thanks and then be on my way again."

"But that is impossible. You must stay! Jenkins, take Mrs Fearnley's things."

"Oh, but —" Mrs Fearnley protests weakly, but allows the immaculate Jenkins to divest her of her outer garments, revealing a most splendidly ornate blue and white confection beneath.

"And what a simply lovely dress!" the Duchess seems genuinely enthusiastic, walking around her visitor admiringly. "Where on earth did you find something so perfectly delightful?"

"You will not believe this, Aurelia, but I had it made in Hull."

"Hull? There is life in Hull? – How charming! And I would have said it must be French! Truly, you amaze me! – And now, of course you will take some tea?"

"No, no, truly, I promised I would not impose myself... but I thought you might be interested..." and here, Mrs Fearnley looks a little anxiously at the maids.

“Leave us!” commands the Duchess; Jemmy and the other maid withdraw, curtsying and closing the door. After a few moments, during which the Duchess watches the door as if expecting someone to burst in again at any minute, she places her hand lightly on her friend’s shoulder-blade and guides her to the conversation-chair in the bay window. She takes for herself the seat facing into the room, leaving Mrs Fearnley to face the window with its view of the magnificent, sweeping lawn.

When they are seated, “I have persuaded him,” begins Mrs Fearnley. “At first he was a little dismissive, don’t you know, but I think your point about who spends the housekeeping —”

“Well, it is true, is it not? The gentlemen will entertain themselves all they can, but ‘tis we who must decide what we are to eat, what is required in the kitchen, what must hang upon the walls...”

“Just so! And I think it convinced him.”

“Excellent! And his grace is full of enthusiasm. Of course it is now his own idea —”

“But of course —”

“And so zealous is he that he has already sent word to your husband, and written also to one or two others whose experience may prove valuable.”

“I am so very glad! I know that a man like his grace will have the factory set up in next to no time. He is so zealous, as you say, when it comes to a new engagement. No wonder they call him ‘the Man of Affairs’.”

“Yes...” the Duchess looks a little tight-lipped for a moment. And then, with a polite inclination of the head, “But are you sure that I cannot offer you something? A little tea?”

“No, no, truly! I promised myself that I would not even stay this long!” Mrs Fearnley pauses, hesitating. “But...”

“Yes?”

“I have been thinking. That buzzy device is truly wonderful, and no doubt there are other objects of great utility that may be devised and manufactured for the benefit of women. But think, Aurelia... This new enterprise is going to have to persuade women to part with their money. How can they be convinced of the virtues of these wonderful new products? Had I not tried it for myself, I do not know that I would believe what you said about that...”

“Oscillator?”

“Yes, oscillator. When you first told me of it in your letter, I confess that I thought it was — O you must forgive me!”

“No, no...” murmurs the Duchess.

“I thought it was mere flim-flam! But having experienced it for myself, I confess, I... I can scarcely find the words to describe how it made me feel.”

“Really?” The Duchess cannot help observing the rise and fall of her friend's breast. “You seem a little agitated.”

“I must confess that... the very imperfect recollection I have of it...” Mrs Fearnley closes her eyes tight, wrinkles her nose and gives a delightful little shake of her shoulders. “I really cannot find the words... I fear that with the passage of time... My mind is clouded...”

“Why,” the Duchess's voice is mellow, breathy as the lower register of a flute, “perhaps you need to remind yourself.”

“Oh, I did not intend in the least... Oh, that is...”

The Duchess looks at Mrs Fearnley from beneath her near-closed eyelids. Her friend is scarlet now, panting as if she has just been chased by a dog. "It really would be no trouble," drawls the Duchess. "But then, perhaps you have other, pressing demands upon your time..."

"Oh, no, no... That is..."

The Duchess represses her laugh and, rising, strides to the bell-pull. To the maid she says, "Mrs Fearnley is feeling a little weary. Tell her people to wait in the stable-yard. And send word to Mrs Crichton that Mrs Fearnley is to use the red room."

"The red room, your grace."

"Yes. Mrs Crichton will know what to do."

"Very good, your grace."

Five minutes later, the Duke makes his appearance.

"Ah, Aury m'dear: I hope you'll forgive me, but I have ventured to invite Fearnley for dinner. It just so happens that his cousin is there at present, and I recall Fearnley telling me that this cousin is quite a gifted engineer fellah. Useful to have an engineer's advice if one is thinking of going into manufacturing, don't you know. But ah... that wasn't Fearnley's carriage I saw passing my window a few minutes ago, was it?"

"Dear, you are quite right; however, it was not he, but Mrs Fearnley."

"What?"

"Katherine, dear. She had been out for a post-prandial drive and just very civilly called to thank us for our little ladies' evening."

The Duke looks around him, bewildered. "But... where is she?"

"She was feeling a little faint, dear, so I suggested she have a lie down."

“Oh yes,” mumbles the Duke vaguely, “of course. Hmmm. Must be that time of day. Of course if Fearnley can come, she might as well stay and dine with us too.”

“I was just about to suggest it.” The Duchess turns to Jemmy, who is at her vigil by the window once more. “You! Tell Cook to prepare for three dinner guests!” and, more softly to her husband, “We may as well be ready for him, dear. He is a lawyer; and my recollection is that lawyers seldom decline a dinner with their most illustrious clients.”

“No doubt you’re right, dear. I say! What is that clatter? Someone’s in a hurry!”

They turn to the window. Carry is still a good way off, but they can already hear the crescendo of flying hooves on the gravel drive.

“That, dear,” says the Duchess mildly, “is your speed-crazed daughter. I think she is determined to break her neck on that stallion of hers.”

The Duke laughs heartily. “I like a girl with spirit!” he cries, slapping the Duchess playfully on the posterior. He looks about him: just at present, there are no servants within earshot. He leans to his wife’s ear and whispers. “Just like her mother, who is still a damn’ presentable woman, all things considered.”

The Duchess turns in mock outrage, fists upon hips: “Still?” she demands with hauteur – but the play of her lips reveals her inner pleasure at her husband’s remark. “All things considered? And what things, pray?”

Seeing the Duke’s discomfiture, she turns to watch their daughter’s precipitate approach.

“What a girl!” muses his grace, chuckling through his moustache. They hold hands.

“And there goes little Jemmy the new maid, to welcome her mistress,” muses the Duchess. “For young girls such as she, Carry is an ideal of womanhood. Do you know that, Alfred? She is like a goddess to that girl.”

The Duke chuckles. “And we made her. You and I.”

“And look what she has become.”

“Yes. A lusty girl like that will make a fine wife one of these days. I was just thinking of—”

“Now, now, Alfred! I’m not having you selling my daughter to one of your moneybag businessman friends. Carry is a dear, sweet, innocent maid and she’s far too young to be sold into slavery.”

“What? You don’t call marriage slavery, do you?” the Duke is round-eyed in mock astonishment.

His wife sighs and does not answer directly. “Just seeing her makes me feel tired. I think I will go and lie down. It is, as you say, that time of the afternoon.” She does not break from his gentle clasp, but returns the pressure of his hand. “You seem just a little frisky yourself, Alfred. Perhaps after your long Christmas holiday you are missing the attentions of your deeply indebted seamstresses.”

“Oh Aury!” The Duke shudders. “You know I would never dream of doing such a thing!” He crosses the fingers of his free hand behind his back. “Those women are not even hygienic!”

“Oh?” the Duchess feigns wide-eyed horror. “So you have considered it, then?” And, sensing his discomfiture, she laughs indulgently. “You men... you men!”

“Ah... I am perhaps missing the attentions of a certain someone else...” he falters.

The Duchess giggles saucily. “Come up in five minutes, then.”

As she bustles to the stairs, Carry makes her entrance, her cheeks flaming, her eyes brilliant. "Ah, mamma!" she cries, a little breathless. "I met Mr Fearnley's man upon the road, and took this letter from him. It seems papa has invited Mr Fearnley to dinner."

"Yes, Carry, so it seems." The Duchess takes the envelope and, since it is addressed to her, breaks the seal. Having examined the contents briefly at arm's length, she turns to the footman. "Pass word to Mrs Fearnley's people that they are to send back the carriage directly. Mrs Fearnley will stay."

"Very good, your grace."

Meanwhile, Carry has turned an enquiring eye upon Jemmy, who has been standing in a kind of awestruck daze.

Suddenly Jemmy comes to herself and, with a look of panic, turns and rushes to the kitchen to call up the hot water for her ladyship's bath.

Carry turns to her mother. "O mamma, have you noticed?"

"Noticed?"

"That little... Jemmy? I think she..."

"How could one not notice, Caroline?" The Duchess gives her daughter the benefit of her most knowing gaze. "I trust you have not been teasing her."

"Oh no, mamma."

The Duchess maintains her stare for several long seconds, but Carry's countenance is untroubled, her blue eyes dazzlingly honest. "H'm. I am afraid she is going to suffer. She will miss you when you return to Hepplewhite."

"But what can I do?"

"I am afraid these things must run their course. I will suggest your father finds a nice little friend for her."

"You are very thoughtful, mamma."

"It is all part of running a happy household, Carry. You must always notice and take account of people's feelings."

"Of course, mamma." Carry looks down, blushing slightly. Servants swirl around them, carrying the heavy coppers upstairs.

The Duchess regards her daughter intently until, after a few moments, Carry looks up again and meets her eye. "Beauty is dangerous, Carry. You know that."

"Yes, mamma." Carry's voice is a little hoarse. She looks down again.

"Sometimes, Carry, I am afraid that it is necessary to play the cruel, heartless aristocrat."

"O mamma... Sometimes I wish that I could get away from all this... and just be myself... Be who I really am, deep inside."

"I know. I... I want you to be happy, Carry. I only hope that if you do, you will do it far, far away, so that I do not have to explain you to your father. I do not think he would like to know exactly who you are, deep inside."

"No, mamma."

"But there is one who does." The Duchess's tone lightens – questions almost.

"Yes, mamma." Carry blushes. She has a defeated air.

The Duchess's voice sinks to an undertone. "Do not think I do not understand, Carry. I understand more than you know. I do not believe your father would be sympathetic, but..."

"Oh, mamma!" Carry flies into her mother's arms, and they hug for a moment. But then the Duchess pushes her daughter gently away. She is smiling.

“Pooh! I’m sure it’s your horse, not you. But I do think you should lose no time in having your bath. Have Annie wait on you. We will find little Jemmy something else to do.”

“Yes, mamma.”

The Duchess sighs as she watches her daughter bustle upstairs. “Lucky Miss Paulson,” she thinks. And with another little sigh, she follows more sedately, to await his grace.

On the landing, she encounters Mrs Crichton, and a morose Jemmy.

“Jemmy... go to Mrs Crichton’s room.” The Duchess takes Mrs Crichton’s arm. “Clarice, come with me a minute... Close the door. His grace will be here in a minute, and I desire that we shall not be disturbed. But now: you have seen how that little Jemmy looks at Caroline.”

“One could hardly fail to.”

“Quite. And as you know, the gentlemen are going to need to look at the oscillator after dinner.”

“Yes.”

“I had it in mind that once dear Katherine Fearnley has quite exhausted its possibilities...”

“Yes?”

“You might entrust it to little Jemmy for safe-keeping. Then she can bring it down to the dining-room.”

“What?”

“Of course, you will need to instruct her on how it is to be handled.”

“Handled?” Mrs Crichton seems deliberately slow-witted.

“Oh come, now, Clarice! Do you not think that her need is greater than yours? After all, his grace will be off to London tomorrow. And then we shall have more time together.” The Duchess’s voice becomes softer, more insinuating. “Meanwhile, I am sure that you can keep yourself occupied, distracting poor little Jemmy from her tender fixation... H’m?”

Mrs Crichton begins to smile. “Oh Aury... You are such a thoughtful dear!”

The Duchess slaps her confidante playfully. “Now go, quick! Before his grace comes...”

Despite the driver’s protests, Lucy insists on alighting at the top of the school drive. The little path down to Miss Paulson’s cottage is not wide enough even for a pony and trap. Besides, she has only one travelling case, albeit crammed with all her worldly possessions. She is out of breath when she finally reaches the little ivy-clad cottage, barely visible in the early dusk of winter. It is with relief that she puts the case down upon the doorstep, but with a surge of desolation she realizes that she has no key, and her little home is locked and barred against her. “Of course,” she thinks, “Miss Paulson must still be away with her family.” She looks in through that window, not without a little remembered thrill. But all inside is dark: there is no welcoming fire. Lucy shivers. This is what it is to be homeless.

But then, with a spark of courage, she resolves to try the old back door into the primitive kitchen at the rear. It has not been used for years; they had always left the kitchen table up against it. Pushing her way through the dense foliage to the side – for the cottage is surrounded by trees and bushes – Lucy finally reaches the muddy rear threshold. She presses the latch, and the door creaks open – but only an inch or so, before striking against the kitchen table, still in its place. “Why,” thinks Lucy, “I

believe I could push against it and make my way in.” And so, with a few grunts, she pushes the heavy old table across the uneven floor, until she is able to squeeze through into the dark interior.

Once inside, her courage falters. It is deathly cold, and she begins to feel an irrational fear. She needs light, light to combat the terrifying gloom. Stealthily she enters the front room. Upon the table is the oil lamp, and there upon the hearth, the tinder-box in its accustomed place. All is unnaturally quiet, as if there were a dead body in the room. In a panic of terror, she flattens herself against the wall, her hair prickling. But all is still: nothing moves. Eventually, she calms her frenzied breathing, edges round to the hearth, and grasps the tinder-box. Then, moving hurriedly to the table, looking anxiously about her as she goes, she strikes the flint with shaking fingers. She has done this countless times before, but it is once, twice, three times before she can blow the little muslin pad into a feeble flame. She lifts the chimney of the oil-lamp and lights it; and then, at last, gloom dispelled, the room is transformed into its old, homely self, and her terrors abate.

More confident now, she summons the courage to go out and recover her travelling case from where she left it at the front door. Inside at last, she laughs at herself for her nervousness, but nevertheless pushes the kitchen table firmly back against the door. And upstairs, in her own little room, she carefully sets and lights a fire. At first disturbed by the snapping and crackling of the burning wood, she soon allows the grateful warmth to revive her feeble spirit. She did not realize how cold she had become – cold to the bone. After a little while, she unbuttons her coat, opening herself to the reviving warmth.

“Come, Caroline,” urges the Duchess with a trace of irritation. It has been a most congenial dinner: Mrs Fearnley in particular has been unusually charming and her conversation most diverting. Indeed, she has been as voluble as Caroline has been reserved.

But throughout the meal, the Duchess has been covertly scrutinizing this Mr Matson, this engineer friend of Mr Fearnley. Until the main course, he could hardly take his eyes from Carry's bosom; but then, Jemmy had appeared, sprightly as a grasshopper, dancing attendance on everyone – fussing over the Duke, topping up Mrs Fearnley's wine – but clearly reserving her most special attention for Lady Caroline. Carry, poor thing, has taken every care to be as pretty as a picture, and nobly striven to contribute agreeably to the small-talk. But it is little Jemmy, flitting around the table like a beneficent fairy, that Mr Matson's eyes follow wherever she goes. “Come: let us leave the gentlemen to their port.”

Once the ladies have withdrawn and the decanter has been passed, the Duke himself rises and retrieves from a sideboard two boxes, connected by loops of wire. “Here, gentlemen,” he says solemnly, returning to the table, “is the oscillator. What do you think of it, Matson?”

Mr Matson looks knowingly at the boxes for a moment or two through half-closed eyes. Then he reaches for them and draws them to him. The Duke takes a cigar and offers them to his guests with a gesture. Mr Matson turns the generator handle, and the box containing the oscillator buzzes and jitters on the table.

“Remarkable!” murmurs Mr Fearnley, eyeing the strange device with fascination.

“Amazin' what these gals can do, eh, Fearnley?”

“Yes, indeed, your grace. What do you think of it, Charles?”

Matson has opened the boxes now, and is examining their contents with a critical eye. "Not bad, not bad, uncle... Quite nice workmanship. Who did you say made it, your grace?"

"Some fellah called Jepson. A clockmaker, Caroline tells me."

"He could be useful to us."

"I had thought of it. But now: what of the design of the thing?"

"Well... There doesn't appear to be anything particularly novel here," says Matson smoothly. "Ah... were there any drawings?"

"Ah yes, the drawings, the drawings..." The Duke gestures to the butler. "You: pass those papers from over there, would you?"

"Very good, your grace."

Mr Matson is surprised to be presented with a folder adorned with drawings of flowers and ribbons, and at first incredulous to see the neat diagrams within, meticulously documented in round, careful schoolgirl handwriting. But soon his professional interest is aroused, and he begins unconsciously muttering "Yes... interesting... quite ingenious..." He turns back to the front page for a moment. "Shipman and Carter: who would they be?"

"Oh," says the Duke dismissively, "just a couple of the girls from the school, don't you know."

"Hmmm..." Matson continues his scrutiny of the papers. "Interesting, anyhow."

Leaving him to his perusal of the drawings, the Duke turns to Mr Fearnley and addresses him in an undertone. "Your dear wife was looking remarkably well at supper."

"Katherine? She was on uncommonly good form, I thought. She thinks the world of this device here, I don't mind telling you. She can hardly stop talking about

it. Seems to think every woman should have one. As a matter of fact, she's had some quite interesting ideas on how we might go about advertising. She really has a business brain, you know."

"Aha. Tell me more."

"According to her, women prefer to buy things on personal recommendation. So she was suggesting that when we're established, we could employ women to hold social events – tea-parties and the like – at which they could present the company's products in a domestic setting, as it were."

"Hmm. Interesting. We shall have to bear that in mind. Of course, I know where I could find some suitable employees."

"Quite. But principally, I have been devoting my thoughts to the question of subscribers."

"Ah, subscribers, yes." Pensively, the Duke sits back in his chair. "I've met an interesting fellow who might be able to help us. Don't know if you've heard of him. Met him through the Board of Governors at my daughter's school, actually. Henry Carter. Have you heard of him?"

"No, I don't believe so."

"He's at Carragher's."

"Ah! Well I've heard of them, of course. Quite in the ascendant, I'm told."

"Certainly. Hepplewhite's – that's my daughter's school – have managed to get him on to their Finance Committee, and he seems a particularly capable fellow. A bit strait-laced and all that, but that's no bad thing in a finance man. I was wondering if you'd be in London next week, by any chance, to meet him."

“As a matter of fact, I do have a conference in Clerkenwell on Tuesday. – One of these railway cases, you know. Lots of parties involved. – So perhaps on Monday or Wednesday...”

“Excellent. I’ll see what can be arranged.”

Charles Matson puts down the papers, closes the folder and sits back with a thoughtful air.

“Well?” asks the Duke.

“I think it should be reasonably straightforward. Of course wooden boxes like these would be extremely laborious to manufacture in any quantity.”

“Yes,” agrees the Duke at once. “I had thought of that. I was wondering about metal containers of some sort.”

“Very possibly,” nods Matson. “I shall give it some thought. But honestly, gentlemen: do you really believe that this is the sort of thing that a woman would want?”

“Well, apparently,” murmurs the Duke, “when brought into juxtaposition with certain muscles, it has an astonishingly relaxing effect. Apparently women seem to like it. I suppose you wouldn’t know what strange creatures women are...”

“Well, no,” concedes Matson, “not yet, at any rate.”

“His grace is absolutely right,” Fearnley assures him with a rueful smile. “We men just don’t have any understanding of what excites a woman’s fancy.” The gentlemen laugh for a moment at the folly of the weaker sex. “They are a mystery to us at the best of times. But when a woman sees something she wants...”

“...no matter how strange it might be,” interjects the Duke, passing the port.

“...She has to have it. And that is the rationale of his grace’s proposed new enterprise.”

“Well, ours is not to reason why,” Matson chuckles, taking the decanter. “Thanks.”

The Duke narrows his eyes, contemplating his smouldering cigar. “About the container for the oscillator itself, Matson...”

“Yes, your grace?”

“A box seems a damnably awkward shape for something to be placed on the muscles, don't you know. I was wondering if we could think of something more distinctive. Would you see any particular difficulty in putting such a mechanism into a cigar-shaped container?”

“You mean cylindrical?”

“Something like that, yes. No sharp edges, of course. Women don't like 'em.”

“Hmm.” Matson is pensive. “I don't see why not. Actually the mechanism would fit quite well. And I suppose it would be more comfortable to hold if it were cylindrical. I shall have to think about it.”

“Really, your grace,” laughs Fearnley, “isn't that making it all rather difficult? What on earth made you think of a cigar shape? Just staring at your cigar, like Newton with the apple?”

“No, no, old boy,” replies the Duke loftily. “I suppose I just thought that a shape like that might appeal more to women, that's all.”

Once the cheerful fire has warmed her bones, and she has hung up her dresses – all now tight-wedged into the small wardrobe the school has provided her – Lucy Carter remembers that she is hungry. Fortunately, she has had the foresight to pack some emergency supplies of military chocolate, a commodity of which she is inordinately, but secretly, fond. And now, with shivers of relish, she consumes enough

to pacify the aching, hollow emptiness within her, which has gradually been intensifying, unheeded, over the past few hours.

“The trouble with chocolate...” she mumbles, her mouth still full. “I like you, but...” It is true: she feels a kind of warm, dreamy intoxication. She licks the remaining smears from her fingertips with relish.

She crouches in front of the fire, holding out her hands. She would like to lie down, but feels that she will not have the energy to rise. “And I can’t sleep in these clothes,” she thinks. Instead, she sits upon the floor, her back resting against her bed, her legs outstretched toward the fire, and closes her eyes.

Behind her eyelids, confused visions of Miss Paulson, of Elsie, of Victoria Penrose, of Shipman. And after a minute, “Oh, no!” she moans; for suddenly, her breast is all a-tingle, and down below, a return of that raw, aching hunger that demands she cross her legs and squeeze to pacify it. “Oh Elsie, I promised you I wouldn’t do this...” she says out loud. “But now I just have to, all the time. It was Shipman, you know. It was she who started me doing this. And now I keep needing to do it. You don’t know what Shipman is like.” Lucy shudders with a mixture of disgust and lustful fascination, and feels the burning in her crotch intensifying. She squeezes again. “Ah! I just have to, Elsie. Do you understand that? It’s just agony if I don’t... And when I do, why, I... I think I shall faint if I do it again. Oh, just thinking about it... I’m sorry, Elsie, I...” She squeezes again. “Ah! Ah! You don’t know what it’s like for me these days. Every time I do it, it feels nicer and nicer. It’s not my fault, Elsie, really it’s not. It’s that Shipman. It’s she that’s responsible. Oh!”

Suddenly Lucy realizes that she is talking out loud, quite as if her sister were in the room with her, and she feels foolish. “Come, Elsie,” she whispers, “let’s make sure we’re quite alone together. Then I will tell you everything.” She struggles to her

feet, slightly dizzy from the warmth of the fire. After a moment or two, her head clears, and mercifully, her intense arousal seems to have abated. "Oh, that's better! Come! Let's just make quite sure." She takes the lamp and slips out on to the landing, closing the door behind her to conserve the heat. Shading the lamp with her hand, she resolves to check downstairs first. It is startlingly cold. Swiftly she makes her way down to the front room. Everything is just as it was. The two empty armchairs; the cold ash in the fireplace; the front door, locked shut. The little cottage is absolutely silent. Even the clock on the mantel has stopped. Making as little noise as she can, Lucy pads into the little kitchen. There is the table, wedged tight against the back door. No one. No one for miles around. "And if there were, we'd be sure to hear them," she whispers.

Only one more room to check now, and that is Miss Paulson's. "I've never been inside before, you know," Lucy whispers to Elsie. I'm sure she's not in there. But we'd better be extra certain." Up she goes again, and slowly, quietly turns the handle of Miss Paulson's door. Indeed it is empty. Everything is very plain: apart from the fact that there is a double bed, and an extra window at the side, it is not so very different from Lucy's room. The bed is not stripped, but the bedding has been drawn right back to allow the sheets to air. Lucy puts the lamp down on the little cabinet beside the bed. "Wait there a moment, Elsie. I'm just going to steal some logs for my fire." She takes an armful of the larger logs and carries them to her own room, where she stacks them neatly on the hearth. "There. That should keep me warm."

Back again, she looks round Miss Paulson's room. "I wonder what's in here," she says, opening the wardrobe. "Oh! Most of her clothes are here. It looks as though she didn't intend to be away very long." She turns back to the bed. The pillows are slightly disorderly. "I wonder if... Oh!" By some bizarre instinct, Lucy lifts one of the

pillows; and there, beneath it, sinister black against the white linen, an ebony ruler. "Look at that, Elsie! A ruler! What would Miss Paulson want with a ruler – in bed, of all places? You know, she does some most frightfully strenuous exercises in bed. I shall tell you of those another time. But this... I do hope she doesn't hurt herself with it. She's rather strange and strict, you know. Or... I wonder... No, no, that would be ridiculous..." Hurriedly, Lucy replaces the pillow and takes up the lamp. "Come on, Elsie, let's get back into the warm."

After an excellent dinner with some of his colleagues, Dr Paulson enters the sitting-room. "Why, hullo, George. Still up? Mother in bed? And what's that you're reading?"

Georgie snaps the heavy book shut with a barely perceptible blush. "Good evening, father. Yes, mother has retired. I trust you had a good evening?"

"Excellent, I thank 'ee. Think you could join your old father in a wee glass of port?"

"Why, that would be delightful, father, thank you."

The doctor takes down the decanter and two small crystal glasses from the corner cupboard. "So: what's that you've been studying, eh?"

"I have just been filling some gaps in my anatomical knowledge, father."

Dr Paulson takes the book and peers at the spine. "Oh, Frobenius on the maladies of motherhood. I remember it well. Not sure about his theory of the humours, rather dated stuff that, but undoubtedly a keen observer. A very rare book, that." He hands the book back to his daughter, and pours two glasses. "There: a man-sized glass for a wise young lady."

"Thank you, father."

He seats himself in his favourite armchair, in the opposite corner. "You're looking well, George," he observes. "I sometimes feel uneasy, because I've always looked upon you more as a friend, even a disciple, rather than as a daughter. But of course I realize that you're more than a brain, an intellect. You have a heart. We don't find it easy to speak of such things, but... You don't intend to spend the rest of your days as a schoolmistress, surely?" He drinks. "I'm sorry. Bad manners of me."

"No, no, father... I do not mind. But if you mean to ask if I have a young man... Then, no: that is not where my interests lie. No, I have decided to consecrate myself to the cause of science. There is so much to be done..."

"Assuredly. But... forgive me. I have thought that once or twice, over the last two days, I had seen a tear in your eye. I did so hope you had not suffered a disappointment."

For a second, Georgina's heart freezes in terror. "Oh no. Perhaps I need new glasses. I have been reading so much."

"Yes. Perhaps." Dr Paulson clears his throat. "Well, well... We were discussing a most irksome surgeon tonight."

"Oh yes?"

"Ghastly fellow. From what they tell me, he's been operating on young women without their permission. Head full of all sorts of curious ideas."

There is a long silence. Dr Paulson sips his port. Georgie is pensive. "If there were women doctors, such things would not be allowed to happen."

Dr Paulson opens his eyes wide in thought. "You're probably right. No reason why not. You'd make a good doctor, you know, George."

"But that's not possible, father, is it?"

"Maybe one day."

“All we can do is try to prove our worth in the physiological sciences.”

“It would be better if you could work at a university.”

“But father, that’s impossible. Where I am, there may not be much money or equipment, but there are willing minds, and I am able to do so much good...”

“Perhaps. I shall drink to that, yes. Well, my dear...” Dr Paulson rises. “I am tired, so I shall bid you a good night. Don’t stay up too late.”

After his departure, Georgie thinks of university. Should she seek a post as an assistant, perhaps, to some professor – if there is one open-minded enough to employ a woman? Perhaps it would be best. For several days now, Georgie has tortured herself with thoughts of Carry meeting a young man, of Carry being swept into marriage. It is inevitable. And what could be more hopeless, more fraught with danger, than her doomed love? Hepplewhite with Carry means constant temptation, the risk of discovery and disgrace; but Hepplewhite without Carry would be torment indeed. Georgie is sure that she will never be able to look at a class again without searching for that sweet face, those dear eyes. She will have to leave Hepplewhite. She weeps.

It is now beautifully warm in Lucy’s room. In a fit of self-indulgence, she has banked the fire high with logs, and they are burning merrily.

“Now I promised to tell you about Shipman, didn’t I?” she says to Elsie. “What a creature! She does it with other girls, they say. What do you think of that? And I’ve seen her looking at me... Brrr!” Lucy shivers, but not from cold. “She looks at my... at my breast, Elsie. And she’s not the only one, either. There’s Vicky Penrose. She... she undid my dress, and she undid my blouse, and she touched them.” Lucy undoes the buttons down the front of her dress. “I should hang this up. I will in a minute. But

look... look at them. What do you think, Elsie? Do you think they're pretty? Oh, I so like touching them. Just lightly." Lucy groans with mounting lust. "I'm getting all wet again. I can feel it. I must do it! I must! I must!"

Lucy leaps to her feet, tearing at her clothes. Soon she stands naked before the hearth, panting. "Shipman did this to me. Shipman and Penrose." Hurriedly, she hangs her dress and folds her petticoats. "There!" She leaps into bed, submerges herself under the heavy eiderdown, and begins running her hands over her smooth, warm nakedness. "I'm burning, Elsie! I have to do it! Will you forgive me? I know I promised that I wouldn't, because I'm so, so sorry what they did to you. But you do understand, don't you? You shall feel it with me, Elsie. You and I together. You are with me now, and you shall feel everything. But first, I have to tell you a secret..."

Lucy shudders. But she has to tell someone. "Promise, promise you won't tell? Sister's honour? Elsie, Shipman did something naughty. And the prefects tied her up and made me touch her." Lucy begins to pant as she remembers it. "I have tried not to think about it, but... I liked touching her, Elsie. Oh! The feel of her legs! I like the way she looked. And they made me kiss her... even her bottom! Yes, even there! And oh, the smell of her... Elsie... I want to do it again to her... I want to..." Lucy's fingers reach, and find her glorious, silken wetness. "I'm doing it now... Ugh! Can you feel? And Elsie... She did it to me too... And I liked it! And she knows I did! And I want... Ugh! I can't help... I've got to..."

There is no one to hear Lucy's yell of triumphant determination as her body erupts in a blaze of blissful energy to which she gives herself in noisy and wholehearted abandon, and which leaves her panting, gasping and twitching for delicious ages.

“Oh, Elsie,” Lucy breathes eventually, “did you like that too? We’ll have another one tomorrow. I promise... But now...”

“We don’t need them, do we, Elsie?” Lucy grunts as she tugs on her warmest clothes. The firewood has all been burned now, and the chocolate is long gone. “What do we care for Penrose or Shipman? Huh!” Lucy tosses her head contemptuously. “We’ve got one another... Oh look at that bed! What a mess!”

The same thought had struck Lucy the last time she had got up, three hours earlier. But then, Elsie had let her know in no uncertain terms that she wanted more; and after so long an estrangement, who was Lucy to deny her poor, long-dead sister? But now it is noon, and Lucy feels the need to be up and about, before cold and hunger make it a matter of sheer necessity.

Lucy is a little dizzy; but this she explains to herself as no more than the result of having been so long a-bed. The last few days – how many? Two? Three? – have passed in somewhat of a blur: by turns, hours of boiling rage and indignation; then of delightful, wanton thoughts and recollections; then of luminous clarity and soul-searching; and finally, of sweetest communion with dear Elsie, who has made her new home in the wet, slippery heaven between her thighs. It has been like a kind of illness: but now Lucy feels light of heart and limb, clear-headed, and ready to get on with her mathematics. But first, there are certain necessities to attend to.

And as she descends the stairs, Lucy marvels at how light her body feels, how effortlessly she moves. But when she sees the note upon the table, the song dies in her throat. She looks sharply to the door: yes, it has been unlocked. Someone has been. She takes up the paper, and holds it close.

“Mrs Cunningham requests the pleasure of your company as soon as convenient.” Goodness! She flees upstairs to wash in what little water remains, and to make sure she is presentable.

Mrs Cunningham puts the letter down. “‘Grossly impertinent,’ he says. Do you wish to tell me about it?”

Lucy sighs. This is horribly embarrassing. “I merely dared to question a passage in the scriptures, Mrs Cunningham. He flew into a rage at once, before I could explain.”

Mrs Cunningham laughs. “And here you are, feeling as if you have not a friend in the world. You’re not the first to run away from home, you know.”

“I didn’t run. I came by coach.”

Mrs Cunningham laughs again at Lucy’s determination to maintain her dignity. “On foot or by coach, Lucy, you need friends. I am sure you would prefer to have Miss Paulson here, but that is not yet to be. However, if you need the ear of a friend, or the help and advice of one who is concerned for you, then I offer them to you with all my heart.”

Lucy opens her purse. “Well... I really have run out of food, and I do have some money here. I’m sure it’s enough, I...”

Mrs Cunningham lets out a little grunt of disapproval. “Lucy, Lucy, put your money away. Before we go any further, I think I should tell you about the other letter.”

“The other letter?”

“The letter your mother does not wish your father to know about.”

“My mother?”

“Listen!” Mrs Cunningham picks up from her desk another, smaller sheet. “Dear Mrs Cunningham, As my husband may have informed you, our daughter Lucy has left home and we hope and trust that she is safely with you. I must ask you to keep this matter in confidence from my husband. Although he is a dear and loving father, he does not truly understand why Lucy has left us. It is not a matter that I can communicate by letter, but you must know that Lucy is in a state of the greatest conceivable distress. I do not think that it is a thing her father can ever truly be brought to understand, although I have tried. He has, however, agreed to set up an account at Delbridge’s in her name, and has there deposited the sum of five hundred pounds” – here, Lucy gasps – “five hundred pounds, which is hers to support her until she is able to find some suitable means of employment, and which is given on the understanding that she has no further expectations of us whatever. I believe you also have a cheque to cover her more immediate necessities. I confess that I had the greatest difficulty in securing her even this amount, but I hope it goes some way to expressing my deepest sorrow, and my hope that one day she may come to forgive us...”

Mrs Cunningham pauses, and Lucy rises to her feet in a storm of incoherent emotion.

“There is a little more: ‘to forgive us, and realize that we sinned through ignorance.’”

“Oh!” Lucy cries as if she has been struck. “Oh! Oh!” And then she collapses on to her chair in floods of tears. Mrs Cunningham is swift to rise from her desk, to hold and comfort her. “That was the very thing... the very thing...” Lucy sobs.

“Hush! Hush now!” Mrs Cunningham soothes her. “You don’t have to say anything now. When you’re feeling better, my dear...”

Eventually, Lucy calms. "You are very good to me."

"That is why we are sent upon the earth, Lucy. To do good to one another."

And Lucy embraces her Head Mistress, something unthinkable only a short time ago.

"There is something else here for you, Lucy," says Mrs Cunningham, at last.

"Oh?"

"Would you like to open it now?"

"Why... yes. What is it?"

"Open it and see."

It is a small parcel, quite heavy and rectangular, a little narrower than a hymn-book. Carefully, Lucy breaks the seal and peels open the heavy brown paper with its fastidiously-penned address. Inside is a red leather case. And when she opens it – "Oh!" – Lucy begins to weep once more, but this time, for joy. "They're beautiful... and with a chain... of gold!"

The pince-nez have arrived.

"Put them on!" says Mrs Cunningham, delighted. "You'll look just like Miss Paulson."

Lucy does so, laughing and crying at the same time.

"There! Stop crying, you silly girl! They're misting over!"

But Lucy laughs and sobs a while longer, hugging Mrs Cunningham, who does not reject her.

"What shall I do now?" Lucy asks, at length.

"Now? You must go to the kitchen and have a good, hot bath. It will cheer you up. Tell Cook I sent you. The school kitchens are closed until next Monday; but until

then, you may lunch and dine with us. We have dinner at six in winter. I have sent Hanson down to the cottage, to set the clock and light the fire for you.”

And it is Hanson who greets Lucy, fresh and pink from her bath, with a pile of fresh bed-linen. “Well!” she remarks with an impudent smile, “You’ll be needing these, seemingly.”

Lucy blushes as she takes them.

“See how long those last you,” Miss Hanson chuckles.

Lucy curtsies awkwardly and makes to go, but Miss Hanson puts a restraining hand on her shoulder.

“There’s no shame in being a woman, Miss Carter. You’re one of us, now.”

Part VII

“Why, Carter! Back already? I thought you were due tomorrow.”

Lucy stands respectfully as Miss Paulson enters their little cottage. “I came back early, Miss Paulson. I hope you don't mind.”

“No.” Miss Paulson laughs easily. “Why should I mind?”

“I don't know.” Carter looks down at her mathematical notes.

Miss Paulson is at a loss. She bites her lower lip, then says, “Well... I'd better get unpacked.”

“Yes miss.” Carter stands there, as if made of wood.

Miss Paulson lifts her heavy case, and makes for the foot of the stairs. When she is level with Carter, she looks again. She drops her case with a thud. “Why, Miss Lucy Carter, you have your new pince-nez! And they look splendid! Absolutely splendid!”

At this, Carter turns to Miss Paulson with a smile so radiant that Miss Paulson cannot resist hugging her and planting a little kiss upon her cheek. Then she picks up her case and hastens upstairs.

“Hmmm,” sighs Carter, seating herself once more. She does not smile; but her nipples tingle and she feels ripples of pleasure radiating throughout her body from the little place where Miss Paulson kissed her. She crosses her legs and flexes them in mild irritation. She has just seen an inconvenient, but very interesting, flaw in that equation that she had previously considered so beautifully elegant. The professor had warned her that this might happen.

And upstairs, Miss Paulson puts down her case and kneels by her bed, like a little girl at prayers. "Lord! Give me strength! Must I be hankering after every young woman I see? O what is the matter with me?"

Another carriage arrives: it must be the sixth or seventh. Carter has watched each one from her vantage-point, at a window high above the main entrance. Each has disgorged its crowd of chattering schoolgirls, and each so far has proved disappointing. But now, from this carriage, there steps one whose elegant deportment, whose brisk assurance, at once attract her eye. Those sudden, wilful gestures; that way she has of whipping her head around: surely this must be Shipman at last.

The girl on the ground looks up, as if surveying the grand old building; and yes, it is indeed Shipman.

"Here again," Shipman thinks. "This is Hepplewhite. This is to be my home for the next few months." And what is it? A thousand blind, leaded window-panes bezeled in ancient, yellowed stonework. Yet Shipman cannot entirely banish the hope that behind one of those dull, slate-grey panes there might lurk a soft, deep blue eye, almost violet, watching. And perhaps that is what imprints the vision so indelibly upon her memory, that as an old, old woman, if she should ever hear the name of Hepplewhite, she will at once see those grey, blank windows, and remember the thrill of that impossible hope.

As for Carter: as she sees that adorable bonnet tip back, as she sees again that wonderfully precise, clear-cut countenance, luminous with its unique combination of intelligence and mischief, she turns away as if blinded by the direct glare of the sun. Her heart is hammering. And in her breast, an intolerable fluttering lightness, as if of

rising hope, a fluttering that seems to waft her into mid-air. "What is happening to me?" she murmurs. "I must not even look at her, it seems."

Shipman looks round the study-room. As expected, Carter is nowhere to be seen.

"Hello, Ship!" It is Penrose.

"Hello, Vicky."

"Coming to the Assembly?"

"Of course. Do I have any option?"

"I suppose not. Why, there's Clark! Hello, Sarah!"

"Vicky! Ah... hello, Ship. Have you seen Carter yet?"

"No." Shipman is curt.

"I've seen her," Penrose gushes. "Doesn't she look wonderful with those..."

"I know. Just like Miss Paulson. Makes me feel all weak inside. Ha ha! What am I saying?" Clark grins at Penrose, then glances at Shipman. But Shipman is impassive, staring straight ahead. Clark decides that it would be prudent to say no more. "Come along. We'd best be going."

In the assembly, Shipman finds she cannot concentrate. Mrs Cunningham seems to be saying that all sorts of improvements have been put in hand, with financial donations from here, there and everywhere. Everyone seems elated. But just behind Shipman, to her right, stands Carter. Eventually, curiosity impels her to turn and snatch a furtive glimpse.

Although she does not know why, Shipman is shaken. Carter seems taller, more substantial, more upright than she remembers. The others were right: those pince-nez do more than she could have expected. Carter no longer looks the schoolgirl; more

even than a young woman, she now appears as a force to be reckoned with. Shipman feels a heaviness in her heart, as if she has just seen her future. She longs to turn and look again; but she dares not.

It is nearly midnight, and Miss Paulson has just finished preparing tomorrow's lecture, when she hears footsteps, and then a quiet scratching at the door. Alarmed – who would come at so late an hour? – she hurries to the door and opens it but a crack.

“Carry!” She means to close the door a little, but despite herself, opens it wider.

“Oh Georgie! Georgie! I have been longing to talk to you! Where have you been?”

“Why, I have been here. I have had much work to do. But Carry: you should be abed! Why do you come here at this hour?”

“What? Will you keep me shivering upon the doorstep on a January night?”

“Carry – you know why I do not let you in. It is hopeless! We cannot continue like this!”

“Why no! It is not hopeless at all. You must hear me!”

Georgie looks to right and left, as if seeking for excuses. “But Carter is here – and very far from asleep!”

At this, Carry lets out an expression of impatience. “She knows everything!” And as Georgie falls back in astonishment, Carry boldly pushes the door open and makes her way in.

“O Carry, Carry...” Georgie whimpers, as Carry's gentle fingers alight upon her face. Their touch sends shivers of ecstasy radiating all over her body. She is lost already: and when those fingers trace their way over her ears and neck, Georgie can only shudder, turn her head and welcome with her own those lovely, softly supping

lips. "So soon..." – another kiss – "so soon I am undone!" Gasping, Georgie pushes Carry a little from her, but now she cannot let go. Her eyes are molten. With her back, she presses the door shut. "Sweet Carry... You make me so afraid."

"Afraid, Georgie? Why?"

"You say that Carter knows... about us?"

Carry nods. "Since last term. She saw us through the window."

Georgie's eyes widen in terror. "Then we are as good as undone!" She looks to the window. "And for all I know..." But those delicate, intoxicating fingers, those sweet and infinitely gentle lips once again overrule her fears. And then, feeling Carry unbuttoning her dress at the neck, "Oh no! Carry, you must not!" She knows she should resist; but the sweetness of Carry's kisses paralyzes her. "Not here, Carry, not here!"

"Then let us go upstairs."

"But what about Carter?"

"Carter will not tell. She is our friend. Come... Come..."

As softly as they can, Carry and Georgie mount the stairs. Carry, who is leading Georgie by the hand, pauses for a moment beside Carter's door; but there is no sound. "I think she is asleep," she murmurs as she closes Georgie's bedroom door behind them. "No: just stand there, dear Georgie, and I shall do it." Carefully, Carry undresses her beloved, kissing and caressing as she goes, until Georgie is perfectly nude.

"And now you," protests Georgie, but Carry will not stop kissing her. Georgie squeals as Carry patters her fingers around the curves of her waist, and over the smooth firmness of her *derrière*. "No Carry, no Carry," she laughs and whimpers, squealing as Carry rakes her with her fingernails, laughing and shuddering with

delight — and then she is silent, wide-eyed, for Carry is at her breast, licking, sucking, nibbling, moaning in her wantonness. And now Carry's fingers may do what they please — and they do — for Georgie can feel her contractions coming, faster and faster, and after each little nibble, a shudder which makes her moan out loud in exasperated desire, and then a furious beating in her most tender parts as her Number Eighteen cries out for solace. "O Carry, O Carry, no more! I must..." And, bereft of words, Georgie takes Carry's hand and presses it to her most needy place. But Carry only giggles, and gently, tenderly, pushes Georgie back until she falls upon her bed, laughing again as Carry's hands move all over her, draining her of strength, blinding her with passion.

But then Carry falls to her knees, captures Georgie's leg with her arm, and begins kissing the upraised knee. Georgie cannot help giggling.

"O Carry, what are you doing?"

"Georgie, Georgie..." Carry half moans, half whispers between kisses, "I have dreamed of doing this, night after night..." and her fingers trace their way down, deliciously down the inner thigh, until they are resting on that mysterious spot, not quite here, not quite there, where Shipman's naughty fingers taught their spider dance. And that is very well for naughty schoolgirls, licking their lips in masochistic delight, avid to savour a fresh erotic torment; but Carry is too much in love, far too much in love; she kisses, licks and kisses her way down that long, smooth thigh, and her moans of passion drive Georgie to such a state that she can scarcely even feel the delicious, warm, wet strength of Carry's tongue, the gentle touching of her lips, the sweet brush of her golden hair. And in her wildness, Georgie becomes the wanton schoolgirl, moving herself against Carry's naughty fingers, desperate for her most intimate touch. She begins to squeal "O Carry! O Carry!" in a little, high-pitched

voice she did not know she had, a voice wrenched from her by the extremity of passion and emotion.

Carry, maddened by the warm, heady smell of Georgie's arousal, feeling Georgie's nectar at her fingertips, knows that it is time to indulge her dream. But the Georgie of her dream lay sweetly acquiescent, moaning and sighing in ladylike bliss. The real Georgie is a creature possessed, gasping, crying, wildly moving her hips in her desperation. To keep her still, Carry grasps her thighs behind the knee and raises them up and forward, so that Georgie is curled into a ball.

Astonished, "O Carry, what are you doing? Oh no no no..." cries Georgie; but Carry is a strong and determined young woman, and in the next instant Georgie is quite deprived of speech, for those dear lips have applied themselves with the sweetest ardour to the flower of her passion and are now supping upon her nectar with the most torturous gentleness. Beside herself with the exquisiteness of this new and redoubtable sensation, Georgie is suspended between "no no no" and "yes yes yes," and can only murmur "O darling... O darling" as her insides tense and heave with Carry's every gentlest movement.

And as Georgie's passion mounts, so she is filled with invincible strength, so that Carry finds her head tightly trapped between Georgie's thighs; and in the formidable strength of that embrace, Carry's heart leaps with impossible happiness, for she knows that Georgie needs her, Georgie wants her, Georgie will never let her go. Sensing that Georgie is on the point of climax, Carry allows her to rest for a moment. "O Georgie, Georgie, you are so beautiful," she murmurs. And after a few moments, she licks gently once more. Georgie sucks in air through her tightly clenched teeth, and Carry feels the thighs tighten about her ears, and Georgie's sudden, quivering rigidity. "Oh, you are lovely..." she murmurs again; her next lick,

gentler still, sends Georgie into an even more protracted rigor. Again, again she does this, and each time, Georgie seems to be wound tighter and tighter; until, with a groan, Carry falls into a passionate frenzy of licking, and in the violence of Georgie's grip is tossed to and fro by the extremity of her lover's contortions. But at length, it is over, and Georgie is still. Slowly, slowly, Georgie relaxes her grip, until Carry is able to extricate herself and lie at last beside her lover.

Georgie is immobile, as if in a deep swoon, scarcely breathing.

"O my darling, my darling," Carry moans again and again, drawing Georgie to her in a tender embrace. And Georgie buries her face in Carry's breast, and begins to shake with a mixture of weeping and hysterical laughter. Carry strokes Georgie's hair, her neck, her ears, until at last she is still.

And then suddenly, without warning, Georgie is wild again, like a hurricane of passion, kissing, biting, almost tearing off Carry's clothes. Carry is in a whirl, her nipples burning, and then Georgie finds her core, and she is shouting in orgasm at the first touch. But Georgie is like one possessed, and will not stop until Carry has climaxed twice more, in a blind tumult of jubilant delight.

Only then, having exorcised the demons of their long separation, are they able to lie quietly, caressing, whispering endearments, kissing, looking deep into one another's eyes. And suddenly, they hear a groan from next door, and a moment later, the violent shuddering of Lucy's bed. They smile and kiss.

"Well..." murmurs Georgie.

"We must have woken her."

"Did we make that much noise?"

"Of course," Carry breathes. "Of course we did."

Almost at once, there is another sob from next door, and another commotion.

"It seems that Miss Carter has discovered something to her advantage, after all," says Georgie, her eyes sparkling with delight.

"How lovely," breathes Carry, kissing Georgie on the mouth, then drawing back; "how very sweet..." She manoeuvres herself on top of Georgie now, legs intertwined.

"Don't we fit well together?" murmurs Georgie into Carry's ear, reaching down and drawing Carry closer, closer. And then Carry's tongue is filling Georgie's mouth with its sweetness, and Carry's hips begin their slow voluptuous dance, and Georgie's sway in answer, and they begin to glide together into the garden of lovers' delight, their every glance, their every kiss a step toward their union in bliss.

The next morning, Miss Paulson cannot help singing as she revives the embers of last night's fire and makes the morning tea. She twirls her skirts and in her heart, remembers the brush of Carry's hair.

But then Carter's door clicks open, and there is Carter, red-eyed, scowling, her chamber-pot in her hand.

"Why, Carter!" Miss Paulson wants to ask what is the matter, but is suddenly overcome with shame, fully imagining that Carter must look upon her now as a debased and fallen creature.

"I am poorly," says Carter, tonelessly. "It is my time."

"Then I shall get the bath for you, and set it before the fire," responds Miss Paulson. Carter nods, and makes her way outside.

Miss Paulson greets her return with a cup of tea, which Carter accepts with a quick, ungracious curtsey. She does not smile, nor look at Miss Paulson.

“See, I have put on the big kettle. And in the bath I have put some scent of my own,” she says soothingly, “it will ease the pains.”

“You are very kind, Miss Paulson, and I thank you.”

“I will tell your teachers, and you shall stay here and rest.”

Carter nods. There is an awkward silence.

“I... I hope I did not... we did not... disturb you last night, Carter.”

And now Carter meets Miss Paulson's eye, and Miss Paulson is shocked when Carter comes to her and embraces her, hugging tightly. Then, without a word, she draws back, leaving Miss Paulson bemused.

“Don't miss your breakfast, Miss Paulson. I will be perfectly all right here. Thank you.”

Miss Paulson is just pulling on her coat to go to a staff meeting, when she hears a knock at the door. She is a little surprised to find Miller upon the doorstep.

“Good afternoon, Miller. May I help you?”

“Carter was not in school this morning, and I just wished to enquire after her.”

“Well, Miller, that is very kind. But... it is her time of indisposition, I am afraid.”

“Oh. May I see her?”

“She is not feeling very well, Miller. I am sure you understand. But I suppose you may go up and knock. Please excuse me. I have to go out.”

Miller finds Carter in bed. Sheets of paper covered with diagrams and equations have tumbled from the bed on to the floor.

“Oh, Miller. What do you want?” Carter feels a wave of irritation. She half-expected Shipman to come, and then perhaps she would have had an excuse for her irritation; but as it is not Shipman, she feels still more annoyed.

“Why, Carter, I did not want anything, other than to see if you were well.”

“I am sorry, Miller. I am just so irritable.” Carter wriggles down under the bedclothes.

“I know... but everyone has been asking after you.”

Carter's head turns. “Everyone?”

“Yes. Mrs Probert was saying this morning that the future of the Empire depends upon our knowledge of mathematics. And she said... Oh, Carter!” Miller sighs. She kneels beside the fire, which has burned low.

“What did she say?”

“She said that you would be a leading light in mathematics.” Miller puts more logs on the fire.

“Huh!” Not wishing to show how pleased she is, Carter turns over on to her front, her head turned away and so burrowed into the pillow that apart from her tangle of light brown hair, Miller can see only Carter's ear, the tip of her nose, the sweep of her eyelash.

“I asked Shipman if she was coming to see you, but she went all of a bother. I do believe she's a little afraid of you.”

“Huh!” Carter wriggles.

“O Carter! You are so tense!” Miller sits on the edge of the bed. “Would you like me to ease away the strain a little?” Miller begins to pull away the bedclothes.

“No, no, please don't touch me...”

Miller chooses to ignore Carter's protest. "But I am really quite good at this, you know... Oh! You aren't wearing your night-gown!"

Carter blushes. Apart from her bundle of rags, she is quite naked. "Please don't."

But Miller begins to knead at Carter's shoulders.

Carter groans. Yes: Miller is good at this.

"Is that nice?"

As her tension evaporates, Carter sinks down into her mattress. "Mmmm..." Miller's motions become less vigorous, more caressing. Carter is breathing deeply. Miller tugs the bedclothes further down Carter's back, and begins gently drawing her fingers down the ridges of Carter's spine. Carter cannot help worming her hips into the mattress. Elsie is beginning to clamour for attention.

"My sister does this for me," says Miller. "I love it when she does." She strokes the small of Carter's back, and is rewarded with a sensuous writhing motion which clearly betrays Carter's arousal. "It's a pity your sister died," Miller says sympathetically. "It's nice having a sister."

Suddenly, Carter tenses. "Oh, Miller... I don't know whether I should tell you this, but... I've got to tell somebody."

"What?" Miller withdraws her hands, and Carter turns a little to one side, revealing a tantalizing glimpse of delightfully rounded breast.

"Miller... I mean to talk to Miss Paulson about this, but... My sister... do you know, they killed her?"

"What?"

“Well... Not exactly that, but let me explain, and you'll see.” Carter takes a deep breath. “Mother and Father found out that... that she was... you know — rubbing her... her...”

From her very hesitancy, Miller senses what Carter is trying to say. “Her Queensland?”

“Yes.”

“They found out?”

“Yes. And they tried to make her stop.”

“Oh no!”

“But she wouldn't. She kept doing it. So Father sent her to a doctor. And this doctor... Oh, I can't say it...”

“What? What did he do?” Miller is aghast.

“He cut her parts away.”

“Oww!” Miller writhes in sympathetic agony.

“That's why she died. She died in the hospital.”

“Oh no! How monstrously sad!” Miller's distress is all too genuine. “What was her name?”

“Her name? Elsie.” Carter shudders.

“Poor, poor Elsie.”

“Why, why did they do that to her? And why do people think it is such a terrible thing, Miller? My mother said it was a wicked, wicked thing to do. Those were her very words.”

“Do your parents really think that?” Miller's voice betrays her alarm.

“They must do, or they wouldn't have gone to such lengths to stop her, surely?”

“Carter, I just cannot believe it.”

"How I wish it were not true!" Carter turns to Miller now, and fixes her with her good eye. The momentary glimpse of Carter's breast deprives Miller of coherent speech; but then Carter rolls over again. "Do you suppose it can be injurious to health, to do that?"

"Why... I do not think so."

"That doctor... the one they took Elsie to... He said that it was."

"But... Clark has been doing it for ages, or so she says. There's nothing wrong with Clark's health, is there?"

Carter stiffens slightly at the mention of Clark. But then she concedes, "Um... no."

"And they say that Walmsley has been doing it for years."

They are silent for a little while, pondering. Eventually, the sight of Carter's naked back stirs Miller's desire, and she recommences her light stroking.

"Mmmm..." Miller's touches are causing the heavy sense of discomfort to translate into something very different. "Miller?"

"Mm?"

"What you said about Walmsley reminded me of something that she once said. And you know, I think it might have come from Miss Paulson."

"What was that?"

"She said... whenever we find something that makes us happy, someone wants to come and take it away from us."

Miller sighs. "That's true."

Carter tenses her shoulders again. Face down though she is, she cocks her head as if she has had a thought. "Do you suppose that it is men? What was it that Miss Paulson said?"

“Oh, Carter...”

“Yes, Miller, perhaps it is this:” – Carter turns toward Miller again – “if you examine the codes of morality, is it not so that they are always designed to keep the weak in subjection to the strong? And is morality not men’s chiefest instrument for maintaining the subjection of women?”

“Well, yes, Miss Paulson has often said so.”

“So that, for example, when a woman wishes to obtain employment, she will commonly be criticized for depriving a man of his right, and snatching food from the mouths of his children? Is that not so?”

“Why, yes it is.”

“But now, think of this: is it not thought by men extremely pleasant to look upon a woman, and to lie with a woman?”

“Yes, Carter, but what are you saying?”

“Why, only that men want everything for themselves. We are supposed to have no desires, no appetites, that do not serve a man’s interest. We are to be utterly selfless, utterly devoted to their wishes. When we have an idle moment, what are we most praised for thinking of?”

“The wishes of some man or other?”

“Exactly so, Miller. Is it not men who wish us to live in ignorance of pleasure, and without any desire for it, for fear that their own interests will suffer?”

“It could be...” Miller sounds dubious.

“Perhaps.” Carter sighs. “Oh, Miller... Why are we made to think of ourselves as dirty? Why, if we must suffer this every month, must we be made to feel as if it is — oh, I do not know what I am saying. But if we must suffer so much anguish to be women, can there not be some pleasure in it, too, for us?”

Miller is silent for a little while. "The doctor just cut her parts away?"

"Yes."

"So that she could never..."

"Never again."

Miller sighs. "You know, I wonder." She lets the remark trail off, but it is clear that she is thinking hard.

"What?"

"If you were given a present of sweetmeats..."

"Yes?"

"But that is not quite right..."

"What are you saying?"

Miller is silent for a few moments. And then, "Yes! Yes! It is like this —" She bounces on the bed, suddenly attuned to her idea. "It is a box of sweetmeats. But not all are sweet: some are bitter. And we are taught that we may eat only the bitter ones. Now who would give us a box of sweetmeats, in which only the bitter ones were good, and all the pleasant ones poisoned?"

"Why, only one who hates us, and would bring about our destruction."

"Exactly. Don't you see?"

"No."

"Our bodies are the boxes of sweetmeats. Some things about our body are bitter, while others are sweet. But why do we feel it so?"

Carter is puzzled. "Do you mean our feelings of pain and pleasure?"

"Yes. Why are some things painful and others pleasurable? Why do we suffer aches and discomfort, yet pleasures also?"

"Why, the pains are there to make us avoid the things that harm the body."

“And the pleasures?”

“I suppose, to make us seek the things that are good for us.”

“Of course. And who designed the human body thus?”

“Why... God, I suppose. Is that what you mean?”

“And why should God give us the capacity for pleasure, and the ability to discover it, if this should lead to our harm? Would that not mean that he hates us, and wills our destruction?”

“Oh. I see.” Carter is thoughtful.

“And if God hated us, and willed our destruction, then why should we seek to please him?”

“Because we are supposed to please all men?”

“Hah!” Miller almost spits her contempt.

Again, there is a long pause before Carter speaks.

“Do you think it is true, then, that God loves us? Or is that just another lie?”

Miller considers her reply. “I think he does... But it's frightening, isn't it?”

“Yes.” Carter shudders. “Do you think many girls know about... you know...”

“About touching your... about blissing?”

“Blissing?”

“That is what everyone calls it.”

“Everyone?”

“Well... most people.”

“Why do people keep it such a secret?”

“I don't know. How did you find out?”

“Well... You won't tell anyone?”

“Of course not.” Miller sounds almost indignant.

"I suppose it was Miss Paulson... sort of..."

"Really? What did she do?"

"She didn't do anything. She just... told me... more or less. And you?"

"It was Shipman who showed me."

Carter whirls round. "Shipman? Showed you?" Her voice is harsh.

"Yes." Miller pulls back abruptly, somewhat shocked by Carter's sudden anger.

"Shipman. She's done it to just about everyone in our dorm, I should think. Why?"

"What? She touched you?"

Miller is defiant. "Yes. As a matter of fact she did."

"But that's disgusting!" Carter draws up her bedclothes and buries herself beneath them. "That's contemptible!"

"Why, Carter! I cannot understand you saying such a thing!"

"I don't want to hear another word about that horrid creature!"

"Carter, what are you saying? She was only showing me the sweetmeats I had been given..."

"Sweetmeats! Bah! That's poetry, Miller! Poetry has crazed your brain!"

Miller sniffs. She rises to her feet. "You sound just as bad as your parents, Carter. If you mean to say what you seem to be saying, I do believe you'd send Shipman and me to that horrible doctor who killed your sister."

But as she makes to leave, a small voice comes from the bed. "Miller... I'm sorry. I'm just so irritable at the moment. I cannot think properly." Carter huddles into her pillow.

Miller is haughty. "Very well. But that was not a very pleasant thing to say, Carter. I will be charitable and lay the blame upon your parents. I shall talk to you again when you can remove their poison from your thoughts."

Carter half expects Miller to slam the door, but she makes a dignified exit. There is the sound of retreating footsteps, and then for a while all is still. Carter torments herself with the thought of Shipman with Clark, Shipman with Penrose, Shipman with Miller. Warm bodies in a dormitory bed... fingers between legs... breasts softly touching... kisses maybe.

All morning, Elsie has been nagging for attention; but now she is ravenous – perhaps because of Miller's gentle touches. Hitherto, Carter has resisted her, appalled by the sheer ghastly messiness of it. But now, breast heaving with desire, her reluctance is overborne by sheer need. She can feel how engorged she is. With a sigh, she reaches in; and groans in sheer exhilaration as her fingers encounter her beautiful slick wetness. "Oh! Oh!" she groans, dazzled by the delight as her fingers frolic in slippery heaven. Faster, faster come the waves – no longer unwelcome cramps, but each gilded with a more intense thrill of delicious sensation, each bringing greater and greater exaltation, so that even in her frenzy she shakes her head in wondering disbelief. And then it is upon her – a pleasure so intense, so persistent that she must fight and gasp and kick and struggle to endure it, until she cannot do even that, but can only quiver in an agony of delight, her mouth straining open in a silent scream, utterly engulfed by its monstrous, overwhelming force.

And after the plunge to earth, "O my goodness! O Elsie! Oh my!" pants Carter, shuddering. "We did it! We did it! That was... magnificent! Messy but magnificent! And O, how much better I feel now!" She lies in a euphoric doze, glowing in triumph.

"Miller was right, you know, Elsie," she murmurs after a little while. "I've been thinking. I do need to get their poison out of my thoughts. I don't know how I can be so stupid. But really, when I think of... And you should have seen her downstairs, Elsie, tied to that chair. Oh, her skin! It was so — Elsie! Elsie, you naughty girl! You

never have enough, do you?" Her fingers begin to stir. "You are corrupting me, do you know that? All right, then... but this time, we'll not be in such a hurry. We'll take our time, and enjoy it more..."

When, some time later, Miss Paulson returns to retrieve her notes for the next lesson, she feels obliged to move as quiet as a mouse, because it is quite clear that Carter believes herself to be alone.

"Good evening, ladies, and welcome to our first meeting of term."

"Good evening, miss," the girls reply in unison.

"Ah — Carter? I am glad to see you back in our midst so soon. Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, thank you, miss."

There is a little hum of sympathetic sighs. Shipman and Clark exchange a significant glance, and Shipman nods.

"Well now, ladies: thanks in part to Miss Shipman's and Miss Carter's valuable contributions, and in part to our Head Mistress, who has shown the greatest faith in our work here, and in the cause of women in science, we have been able to win extra funds for new equipment." Miss Paulson goes over to the cupboard. "Just see what has been accomplished!" And she opens the door with a flourish.

Inside there are five new generators, a number of oscillators, gleaming new coils of wire and five more voltaic batteries. The girls let out a gasp of awe.

"And that is not all!" Miss Paulson advances to the next cupboard. And here, row upon row of bottles, test-tubes, tripods, spirit-lamps — all new.

"And finally, the best news of all: Science is now officially part of the curriculum! That means that we will be able to begin a methodical course in

chemistry for all the upper school. Of course I am more than happy to continue with these extra-curricular evening sessions, in which we may further develop our electrical studies.

“You have all discovered the beneficial properties of electrical current — with the exception of Miller, of course.” There is a ripple of laughter, which Miss Paulson silences with an outraged stare. “Now at present, we cannot be sure if the beneficial properties flow from the electrical current itself, or from the nervous reactions which it causes. We have discovered that certain nervous reactions may be provoked by other means, notably by the oscillator which Carter and Shipman built last term. As you have seen, several more of these devices have been made. This is so that we may conduct experiments to see if the same reactions and the same benefits flow from using the oscillator. If they do, what may we conclude?”

Shipman's hand is up already, of course. Miss Paulson ignores it.

“Yes, Clark?”

“May we conclude that the benefits are due not to the electricity, but to the nervous and physical reactions it happens to produce, miss?”

“Excellent. Quite right. Does everyone understand?”

“Please, miss?”

“Yes, Shipman?”

“Miss, would it be useful to begin by testing the oscillator upon somebody who has not yet received the electrical current?”

“Well, Shipman, yes,” Miss Paulson admits grudgingly, “that would be a useful beginning. Of course, there is only one person...”

Suddenly, all eyes are on Miller.

“Miller, do you feel that you could help us this time? It is purely voluntary, but it would be such a help to the cause of science. And really, it's only a little oscillating box. There is no physical risk whatsoever.”

“Very well, miss. I'm sure it's nothing to be frightened of really.”

“Well done, Miller! You'll soon feel less nervous,” says Miss Paulson kindly.

“Carter: would you please set up an oscillator and ensure that it is working properly?”

“Yes, miss.” Carter begins fetching equipment from the cupboard and placing it upon the desk where she is accustomed to work.

“Do I have to lie down, miss?” asks Miller in a tremulous little voice.

“No, Miller, with the oscillator it is best to sit upright and hold the device between your legs. — Ah... Shipman: go and help Carter, please.”

“Very good, miss,” says Shipman, with an approving wink at Miller.

“Yes, Shipman?” says Carter, who is connecting one of the new oscillators to a generator.

“Miss Paulson said that I am to help you.” Although Carter must have heard what Miss Paulson said, Shipman speaks timidly.

“Very well. You may turn the generator handle,” responds Carter smoothly. She does not look at Shipman.

“I will do whatever you wish, Lucy.”

Surprised at Shipman's meekness, Carter draws her breath in sharply, but says nothing until the generator is connected.

“Very well, turn the handle.”

Shipman turns it. At first the oscillator does not respond. Carter slowly turns first one of the adjustment screws, then the other. Suddenly, as she turns it, the little machine buzzes into life.

“There!” she says delightedly. “Stop! — Now to get it just... perfect.” She closes the little box and tucks it into the folds of her dress. “Just a few seconds, please, Shipman.” Shipman turns the handle. Carter screws her eyes closed and wrinkles her nose. “Ooh! I think that’s a little bit too quick. Stop!” Again she adjusts the screws and prompts Shipman to turn the handle once more. “Yes,” Carter says after a few moments, “I think that will be better.” Again she tucks the box into her lap, and again directs Shipman to turn the generator handle with a brisk gesture. At once she breaks into a radiant smile. “Oh, that’s ideal! That’s even better than the one we made last term.” Forgetting her froideur, she hands the box to Shipman. “Here, you try it and I shall turn the handle. Let us see whether you agree.”

Willingly, Shipman takes the oscillator and hands the generator to Carter.

“Tuck it in well and hold it tight,” warns Carter. Then she begins to turn the handle.

“Ah! Ah!” moans Shipman. And now Lucy dares to look at her. Shipman’s eyes are already glazed with pleasure.

Lucy stops turning the handle to ask, “What do you think?”

“Why Lucy, it’s... it’s divine!”

“Does it work, Carter?” asks Miss Paulson.

“It seems to, Miss Paulson. I’m just testing it.” Carter turns the handle again, enjoying the way Shipman squirms on her chair. “I’m going to wake you up a little, Shipman!” she thinks to herself, and the corners of her mouth flicker into a perverse little smile.

“Oh, Lucy, Lucy...” gasps Shipman, overwhelmed.

Carter stops the generator. "It seems to work very well, Miss Paulson," she announces, plucking the oscillator from Shipman's lap. "I think we are ready to proceed."

"Perhaps it would be a good idea if you and Shipman were to ensure that the other oscillators and generators are working correctly."

Walmsley interrupts as politely as she can. "Please, miss?"

"Yes, Walmsley?"

"Would it not be best for them to witness the first operation of the oscillator, so that we may... check their reactions?"

"An excellent suggestion, Walmsley. Carter, Shipman: you can help. Are you ready, Miller?"

Carter kneels by Miller. French and Clark already have her hands, and French holds Miss Paulson's watch, monitoring her pulse. Walmsley holds the exercise-book and is already taking notes.

Carter looks up into Miller's eyes. Miller's eyes are wide; she licks her lips apprehensively.

"Very well," says Carter softly, "let's see what you think of this." She tucks the oscillator box deep between Miller's thighs. "Now cross your legs, Miller," she instructs. "I'll hold your knees. Ready?" She nods to Shipman, who begins turning the generator handle.

Smothered as it is by Miller's thighs and skirts, there is only a faint humming sound from the oscillator in Miller's lap. But immediately Miller's squeals fill the air. "Oh! Oh! O let me... Oh!" she screams, attempting to rise up out of the chair. Kershaw, who is behind her, has the presence of mind to hold her down by pressing on her shoulders, while Carter grips tightly at her knees. Startled, Shipman

momentarily stops turning the generator handle. "Oh, don't stop," cries Miller. "I like it. It's just... Ah! Ah! Ahee hee hee!" Gradually, with much biting of her lip and furrowing of her brow, Miller manages to rein in her cries of exhilaration.

"One hundred and ten," says French.

"I see she's flushing already," notes Walmsley. "That's very quick for a first-timer."

"Ah yes, but this is the first time anyone has tried this particular oscillator," Shipman points out. "Carter set it up to her special preference."

Carter flashes Shipman an indignant look.

It is clear from Miller's countenance that great things are happening.

"I can hardly hold her, miss," remarks Clark, panting.

Suddenly, as if she has been holding her breath for a minute, Miller lets out an explosive gust of air. "Ah, ah, ah... uh..." She is going rigid.

"Don't let her go," warns Shipman quietly. "Keep hold of her."

Miller begins to shudder. "Oh... oh... ohh..." she gasps, her face crimson.

"I'm not sure," says Carter critically. "I don't think I have it set quite right. That was only a very little one, don't you think?"

"Maybe..." Shipman sounds unsure, but keeps turning the handle.

"Just have another try, Miller," Carter says encouragingly.

"That's it. You can stop now. Stop! Stop! No no no! I can't bear it any more!" cries the struggling Miller.

"Don't let her go!" Shipman commands sternly. "Hold tight!"

"One hundred and twenty!"

"I can't... I can't... Oh my God! My God!"

"I don't believe it," says Kershaw. "It looks as though..."

"Oh yes," says Shipman calmly. "She can do it, can't you, Miller?"

But Miller is already being forced to revise her opinion. "Oh! Oh!" she begins to moan, suddenly enthusiastic.

"Do you know, one might almost believe she were enjoying it," remarks French.

Miller's enthusiastic moans announce the beginning of a second, less inhibited nervous drama which clearly holds Miller's undivided interest to the end.

"She is just getting used to it, French. we must be patient," cautions Shipman.

Meanwhile, Miss Paulson is overcome. Swaying, she clutches the nearest girl – who just happens to be Walmsley – for support. "Oh my goodness, Walmsley," she pants, "it's... I think I'm..."

But Walmsley can see what is happening. "Oh Georgie!" she laughs, holding Miss Paulson tight until she is able to recover herself. "Was that without touching?"

"Yes, Miss Walmsley. That was without touching. And be careful how you address me! I'm afraid that you might..."

But all the other girls are far too interested in Miller to have noticed Walmsley's indiscretion.

"Now that's enough, Shipman, that's... oh, no! Not again... Oh..."

Shipman continues implacably turning the handle. "You can take it, Miller. You can take it," she says coolly.

"Still a hundred and twenty."

Kershaw is alarmed. "How much more do you think she can take?" she asks Shipman, as Miller writhes in yet another onslaught of ecstasy.

"Oh, I think we'll know," says Shipman mysteriously.

“But surely, miss...” Kershaw appeals to Miss Paulson. But Miss Paulson, still clutching at Walmsley, is watching Miller with evident lack of concern: there is a tight-lipped smile at her mouth and a gleam of fascination in her eye.

“It’s wonderful, Kershaw, what personal sacrifices we women will undertake for the advance of human knowledge,” she breathes.

“Oh,” mutters Kershaw, apparently deflated.

“Hold her! Hold her!” chides Shipman, as Miller erupts in yet another noisy outburst.

“A hundred and... twenty-eight,” grunts French, doing her best to hold on to Miller’s arm.

The crises seem to be coming more and more rapidly now.

“O yes! O yes! Ya-ya-ya-ya Oooh!... Oooh!” screams Miller.

“It seems as if she’s beginning to enter into the spirit of things, doesn’t it, miss?” asks Shipman conversationally.

But now, Miller’s far-away look seems to have lapsed into a kind of slack-jawed imbecility. She closes her eyes, as if summoning a residue of strength. And then suddenly she is like a thing possessed, no longer capable of speech, but only growling deep in her throat like some wild beast.

Again, Kershaw appears most alarmed: “Really, miss, is this not...”

But the next instant, Kershaw needs all her strength, for with a cry Miller kicks out, sending Carter sprawling, and succeeds in wrenching her arms free of French and Clark. Only Kershaw’s strength prevents her from tumbling off the chair, as with a final cry Miller tears the wires from the oscillator and slumps back, utterly drained.

“I say, be careful, you silly idiot,” grumbles Carter, retrieving the oscillator and re-attaching the wires. She is blushing furiously, but this is no doubt due to her recent

tumble, during which she was forced to reveal more than usual of her elegant ankles to Shipman's appreciative gaze.

Meanwhile, the other members of the society stand in silent awe, regarding the form of the stupefied Miller. Once or twice her whole body jerks and she inhales noisily.

"Well, Shipman, what do you think?" asks Miss Paulson.

"I am sorry, miss?"

"What do you think of the oscillator?"

Shipman recovers her alertness. "It's... very quick, isn't it, miss?"

"Yes, Shipman, very quick."

"It does not seem to leave very much room for doubt."

"Little, if any."

Shipman sighs.

Miss Paulson sighs.

At length, Miller comes to herself with a little shiver.

"How are you, Miller?" asks Miss Paulson.

Miller's smile radiates a charming lassitude. "Very well, I think, miss. But after all, maybe I could just..."

"No, Miller, I think that was enough."

Miller sinks back into the chair with a resigned little purr.

"I take it that you liked the oscillator."

"Mmmh!" Miller stretches out her legs luxuriously.

"I am greatly relieved. Some of us were quite anxious about you." Miss Paulson flashes a glance at Kershaw. "Perhaps it would be helpful if, when you are quite recovered, you were to write down as good a description as you can."

Miller looks vague. "Yes, miss."

"Ah... should I take a note of people's reactions, miss?" asks Walmsley.

Miss Paulson regards her young ladies. Without exception, they are flushed, brilliant-eyed, rising on their toes. They are like a stable of young race-horses. "No need, I think, Walmsley," she murmurs. "Just write 'Genesis seven'."

Now Miss Paulson begins assigning tasks. Kershaw will be the next to taste the marvels of Carter's little machine. And Carter herself is to ensure that the remaining oscillators are working properly; Shipman is to assist her. Miss Paulson notes Carter's blush and transitory expression of annoyance at this announcement; but Miss Paulson finds that she derives immense pleasure from watching them working together. "There is something going on between those two," Miss Paulson thinks, "but I am not sure quite what it is."

"Oh! Oh! Stop, Shipman, stop!" Lucy gasps a few minutes later. "I do believe I have set it too fast."

"Why, what makes you say that? It seemed to be working very well! Here, let me try it..." Shipman snatches the oscillator from Carter and hands her the generator.

Somewhat grudgingly, Carter takes the generator and waits until Shipman has the oscillator correctly positioned. Then, abruptly, she begins turning the handle as fast as she can. Shipman cannot suppress a squeal. "Hush!" Quickly, Carter turns to look at the others; but nobody is paying them any attention. "You see? It is oscillating too fast."

"No! Try it again!" Shipman rearranges herself on her chair. "It is very good like that. It is just that you began so suddenly, before I was ready."

For a moment, Carter's mouth twitches into an evanescent smile. Then she bows her head, and begins to turn the handle very gently, so that the oscillator does

not move. Gradually she turns faster and faster, until Shipman suddenly tenses, and a faint buzzing noise can be heard from the direction of her lap.

Miss Paulson momentarily turns from Kershaw's noble struggles – as with Miller, the crises seem to be succeeding one another with ever greater rapidity – to see Shipman bouncing upon her chair, her fists trembling in agitation, her eyes tight closed and mouth pursed as if she were holding her face immersed in cold water. And there is Carter, placidly turning the generator handle, her face betraying no emotion. Only the intensity of her gaze, which never wavers from Shipman, contradicts her air of indifference. Eventually, without warning, she lifts her hand from the generator, her fingers poised in mid-air.

Shipman beats her fists once more, this time in frustration. “O why did you stop?”

“We have five more to do, Shipman. I shall not set the others to run as fast as that one.”

“Why not? Some may prefer them like that.”

“Yes, and some may prefer them slower,” rejoins Carter with indifference.

Carter uncoils lengths of wire and holds them out for Shipman to snip off at the correct length.

“One of them is to go to the infirmary, I think.”

“The infirmary? Why?”

“Miss Paulson has adopted my suggestion.”

Carter's movements stop. She looks at Shipman warily. “Suggestion?”

“Yes.” Shipman preens herself a little. “I thought that the oscillator might offer some relief for certain ailments.” Shipman looks a little more sharply at Carter.

“Don't you think?”

Carter sees the twitch of Shipman's smile and blushes. "Perhaps," she mutters, busying herself with another of the generators.

Shipman giggles knowingly, and is gratified to see Carter's blush intensify.

"Take this," says Carter more brusquely, thrusting the generator towards Shipman. "Help me get this next one working." And while Shipman turns the handle, Carter carefully adjusts the mechanism until it begins to emit a low buzzing sound.

"Do you think that's quite fast enough?" asks Shipman solicitously.

Carter tucks it into her lap, crosses her legs and closes her eyes. She reposes her hands daintily upon her crossed knees, one on top of the other. Watching her, Shipman continues to turn the handle. After a little while, Carter flexes her spine and makes an appreciative little murmur.

At once, Shipman stops the generator. "I think it's too slow."

"This one is for the infirmary. We do not want it to be too rough. Besides, it is soothing. You try it."

They exchange devices and Shipman composes herself. After a few moments, her face relaxes. "Aah," she breathes. "Ah, yes..." Carter continues to turn the handle. Soon it is Shipman's turn to moan her appreciation. But when her hands begin to clench themselves into fists, Carter stops at once.

"Oh you..." Shipman scowls in disappointment. But there is something bewitching in Carter's expression. Her eyes are bright, her mouth struggling to conceal an inner amusement. "Lucy..." growls Shipman, but she cannot suppress her smile either, now.

"We have yet four more, Shipman," Carter says lightly, plucking the little machine from the folds of Shipman's frock and setting it down upon the desk with

exaggerated daintiness. She arranges the wires, flickering her fingers in a mockery of fastidiousness.

Carter is so pale; her movements so quick, the curve of her neck so graceful, that Shipman suddenly wants to... — Shipman gasps. She dares not think what it is she wishes to do, yet she can scarcely refrain from translating thought into action.

“So do you approve, Shipman?” Carter asks with an air of nonchalance, handing her companion the clippers and holding up a length of wire.

“Approve?” Shipman snips the wire next to Carter’s fingers.

Carter’s eyes roll behind her pince-nez. “Of the setting for the oscillator?” Her voice is light, teasing. “Is it not most wonderfully relaxing for the muscles?”

Shipman’s eyes blaze in frustration. Her mouth hardens into a tight line. “Lucy, Lucy...”

Carter can no longer suppress her smile. “Do you not think so? I thought it most delightfully relaxing, most...” And then the intensity of Shipman’s gaze checks her. Her lips part, her breast heaves and she gives a little gasp before turning back to busy herself with connecting the wire to the next generator.

Shipman, who is devouring her with her eyes, cannot ignore the outline of Lucy’s nipples, tense beneath the soft, worn cloth of her blue school dress.

“Are the new machines working correctly?” Miss Paulson is right beside them, and they are suddenly frozen, motionless.

“We have encountered no difficulties so far, miss,” Lucy says eventually, in a strange, toneless voice.

“Good.” Neither Shipman nor Carter react in any way. “Very good.” Miss Paulson turns away. There is definitely something going on between those two.

Miss Paulson claps her hands twice. "Very well, ladies," she calls, "that concludes our work for this evening. Shipman, I think you have tested that oscillator quite sufficiently."

"Yes, miss," Shipman responds meekly, placing the sixth and final oscillator on the desk beside its fellows.

"Miller, I see you have been working hard on your notes."

"Yes, miss." Miller blushes and turns the pages of her exercise-book. "Here they are, miss."

Miss Paulson takes the book and reads silently for a moment. "Goodness, Miller," she says after a little while. "This is very... poetic... but most expressive, nevertheless. Goodness!" As she reads, Miss Paulson seems to be becoming a little agitated.

"Please miss, what does she say, miss?" asks Clark.

"You will have to read it for yourself, Clark. Oh my, this is very well done, Miller."

"Thank you, miss."

With an effort, Miss Paulson closes the book and clasps it to her breast. "As we have seen," she begins bravely, "the new device seems to bring about the same beneficial effects as the electrical current, but more quickly and with greater directness. I was going to say that it worked like clockwork, but soon I expect we shall be saying that it works like electricity!"

There is a ripple of laughter, but Carter suddenly looks thoughtful. Shipman notices at once.

"I am making a quite serious point now, ladies; for we are at the dawn of a new age of mankind, the age of electricity. Electricity will change the way we live, and

even the way we speak. One day people will think of clockwork as primitive and antiquated.

“But let us turn back to what we have learned this evening. We noticed very pronounced sympathetic reactions this evening, but particularly in those who had experienced the oscillator, when they witnessed its application to a new subject — did we not, Miller? Kershaw?”

“Yes, miss.” Both answer demurely, but their blushes attest to the force and liveliness of the reaction.

“We have done well to set down in as much detail as we can the personal experiences of those who have experienced the electrical current, and those who have experienced the effects of the oscillator. However, in order to produce truly scientific results, we shall need to formulate a hypothesis about the effects of these treatments in terms of something that may be measured objectively. Does everyone know what I mean by ‘objective’?”

Many hands shoot up, Shipman's the first by a small margin. It is late, and Miss Paulson decides to ignore them all this time.

“Good. Shipman has suggested one hypothesis. Before our next meeting I should like the rest of you to give the matter your careful thought, and see whether you can think of any other hypotheses which may be conveniently measured.

“We shall be donating two of the new oscillators to the infirmary. I have spoken with Matron about this, and she has agreed to allow us to investigate the effectiveness of these devices in the treatment of certain ailments, particularly muscular strains and... female discomfort.”

There is a little murmur of interest.

“That may give you ideas for suitable hypotheses we might formulate and test.”

Miss Paulson looks around the room, catching the eye of each of her disciples in turn.

“Think hard, ladies, and we will begin our next session by discussing your ideas.

“Very well: our meeting is over. Walmsley will assist me in putting away the equipment.”

At these words, Miss Paulson catches a rather knowing glance from Shipman. She closes her eyes and breathes deeply in her attempt to avoid an unseemly blush. But she is rescued by the sound of the bell for evening assembly.

“Fear not, Walmsley, I’ll conduct the assembly,” says Benson, who secretly believes that she cuts a more imposing figure than the Head Girl.

“Thank you, Benson.”

Carter is one of the first to leave, but Shipman hurries after.

“Oh, Miller!” Miss Paulson calls her back just as she is about to leave the classroom.

“Yes, miss?”

“I have been concerned that some of the younger girls in the infirmary might be a little afraid of using the oscillator. It occurs to me that since you have experienced its effects, and have written about them so beautifully, you might be the best person to introduce them to its use.”

“Yes miss. Very good, miss.”

“Very well. You may go now.”

Miller curtsies submissively. “Thank you, miss.”

Aware of her pursuer, Carter has dodged into a dark stair-well off the main corridor. But Shipman is close on her heels.

“Don't touch me, Shipman!” Carter is panting. She finds it difficult to breathe.
“What do you want? O Ship — Oh no no no no!”

There is the sound of footsteps in the corridor behind them, and then Miller's voice: “Ship? Ship, where are you?”

Taking advantage of Shipman's momentary distraction, Carter breaks away, and quick as a flash, disappears into the throng.

“O Ship, there you are! You'll never guess what!” Miller has blundered into Shipman, hands waving in glee.

Shipman gulps. When she manages to speak, her voice is dull. “Yes?”

“Why, Miss Paulson has said that I should introduce the oscillator to the girls in the infirmary!”

“Oh. Good for you, Miller. Good for you.” Shipman's tone is unenthusiastic, and Miller is momentarily deflated. But then she scampers after Clark, who is a far more gratifying audience.

Meanwhile, in the classroom, “There, that's the last of them put away,” says Miss Paulson, closing the cupboard. “Why, Carry — what are you — Why are you locking the door? O Carry, darling, we can't! Not here! Someone might come!”

“Yes, Georgie,” says Carry, taking Georgie by the waist. “And that someone might be you...”

“O Carry... I cannot...”

“Mmm?”

“I cannot...”

“Mmm?”

“I cannot... resist you...”

“Good afternoon, Shipman. Can I help you?” It has been several days before Shipman has been able to muster the courage to visit Miss Paulson's cottage.

“I beg pardon for intruding, miss,” says Shipman with a gracious curtsy, “but I wondered if Miss Carter would like to join me for a walk.”

Miss Paulson studies Shipman for a moment. She seems anxious, a little drawn. “Very well. She is very busy with her mathematics. But I will go and ask.”

“Thank you, miss.” Shipman drops another curtsy.

Upstairs, there is a whispered conversation.

“I don't wish to see her.”

For a moment, Miss Paulson is tempted to stand on her dignity, and not be used by this impossible pair as their go-between. But clearly emotions are raging on both sides. “Then what am I to say?”

“Say that... that I do not wish to be added to her collection.”

“But what does that mean?”

Carter's eyes are like coals. “Shipman will understand perfectly.”

Miss Paulson sighs. “Very well, Lucy.”

When Shipman sees Miss Paulson return, there is a look of desperation in her face. “What did she say, miss?”

“I do not know what she means. She said that she does not wish to be added to your collection.”

“She said... she said...” Shipman's eyes fill with tears and she turns away.

Miss Paulson's heart melts. And more: it is as if she is abnormally sensitive to Shipman. If her customary impish cheerfulness grates like sand-paper, Shipman's desolation is even more unbearable. It is like a beacon of despair, a sinister omen.

Miss Paulson puts her hands on Shipman's shoulders. "I am sorry, Shipman. I do not know what she means to say, but truly I am sorry."

"No... no..." Shipman's shoulders heave. "It is I who am sorry. Do not tell her, I beg you... Do not say anything to her..." and Shipman scurries off without a backward glance.

That evening, Lucy Carter presses Miss Paulson to write in her fairer hand the completion of the treatise on springs. Miss Paulson is bent over the table, and Lucy stands behind her, directing her in a tense, urgent voice. It is her habit now to wear her eye-patch in the evening, and this gives her a menacing air.

"No, no! Down a little! Yes, just there. Omega-p."

"Lucy, there are times when I wish that I understood what all this means."

"For me, miss? For me, this means the chance of freedom."

Miss Paulson speaks while writing. "You are lucky, Lucy, to be able to hope for freedom."

"Why, miss: why do you say that?"

"I..." Miss Paulson puts her pen down. "I cannot say." She lets out a sob, but then masters herself. "I am sorry, Lucy, I am feeling miserable this evening. Let us not talk about it. Let us get on with our work." She smiles bravely. "It is good for me to distract myself."

Lucy kneels beside her. "No, tell me, tell me, Miss Paulson."

Miss Paulson shakes her head. Despite her resolve, her eyes are welling with tears again. And then she smiles, despite herself. "It is ridiculous," she sighs. And yes, it is: the prospect of losing Carry, of having to leave Hepplewhite, these seem tragic

enough. But if the truth be told, it is the misery, the desolation she glimpsed in Shipman's face that afternoon, which epitomize and give form to her own despair.

"If it upsets you, Miss Paulson, it cannot be ridiculous," demurs Lucy earnestly. "Is it about... is it about Carry?"

Miss Paulson nods.

"But what? But what? Does she not love you?"

"Yes!" Miss Paulson laughs. She looks up at the ceiling and flashes a sudden, radiant smile. "Yes, she loves me, Lucy." But then her expression is grave. "But what can come of it? We cannot resist one another, Lucy. It is a kind of madness. And the longer it persists, the more tragic I fear its effects will be. Whether it will all erupt in scandal, I cannot tell. She is so... so impetuous! And I, who should know better, I cannot deny her!"

Lucy takes Miss Paulson's hand and presses it comfortingly.

"And do you know, Lucy? I am tormented by a vision of the future. It ought to be a thing of beauty, but to me it is a nightmare."

"O what is that?"

"I see Carry, ten years from now, sitting in a garden, on a white chair, in a lovely white dress." Miss Paulson speaks slowly, reflectively. "At her feet, her beautiful children, playing on the grass. And beside her, a great bear of a man – her husband – the man her family ordained her to marry. And he is proud. And she is happy. And she has forgotten, quite forgotten..."

"Oh no, Miss Paulson..."

"Yes... but I shall never forget..." Miss Paulson's voice is weary, resigned.

Lucy shakes her head in distress. "But Miss Paulson – this vision – it need not be!"

Miss Paulson's eyes are huge, her mouth suddenly firm. She takes Lucy's face in her hands. "O Lucy, you are young. You do not know. I have lived with this vision for months now." She shakes her head. "It will be, Lucy."

"But why?"

"Lucy, it is the law of life. I see her children. And they are so beautiful! I cannot – Lucy, I cannot – stand in their way. I think I love them as much as I love Carry."

"Then come away with me. If you cannot stay here – come away with me to Russia!"

Miss Paulson looks piercingly, imploringly into Lucy's eyes. "But what shall I do? How can I live?"

"There is the Smolnyi institute. There they teach English – and French – and you could teach science, and more besides... Really, it is just like Hepplewhite... When I send my monograph... we shall write, to Uncle Fyodor. And we will tell him of all your scientific studies. He will find a place for you."

"O Lucy dear, it is so sweet of you to try to cheer me up." Miss Paulson gently removes Lucy's eye-patch, and tucks a stray lock of hair back behind her ear. "Do you know that you are beautiful?"

"Oh no... no, Miss Paulson." Lucy is aghast.

"Not like dear Carry." Miss Paulson manages a feeble smile. "Not like her. Hers is a beauty anyone can see. But yours is hidden. It is deeper. But it is there, Lucy. I have seen it."

"Oh Miss Paulson!"

"I am not the only one, Lucy." Miss Paulson relinquishes her, and turns back to the papers on the table, pretending to look at them.

“What do you mean?”

“Lucy... I am going to break a promise.”

“I do not understand.”

“When... when Shipman came for you this afternoon...”

“Yes?” Lucy draws back in apprehension.

“And I gave her your message...”

“What? What?”

Suddenly Miss Paulson leaps up from her chair. “O! I cannot bear it! I cannot bear it!” And she scurries up the stairs to her room, slamming the door behind her.

And as Lucy hears Miss Paulson cast herself upon her bed, weeping piteously, she feels a heaviness in her heart, and a sense of unknown destiny pressing upon her. She rises and seats herself in an armchair before the fire, stiffly upright, her hands clasped in her lap. In the ruddy light of the fire, and the yellow glimmer of the table-lamp, her face gleams pale, her eyes dark, staring sightlessly into an unknown future.

“Thank you for coming, gentlemen,” rumbles the Duke as they seat themselves round the table. “Glad you could spare us some time, Carter. And since no doubt you have many pressing matters to attend to, perhaps you’d be so good as to give us the benefit of your consideration first of all.”

Henry Carter hunches his shoulders and wriggles uncomfortably into his chair. His usual decisive, humourless demeanour has been emphasized recently by a haggard, anxious look. Over the last few days he has begun to feel unwell. It gives his words an added urgency, and seems to draw greater respect from his hearers.

“I will speak plainly, your grace. This is an interesting proposition. We may lament it, but in fact your thesis holds true. It is women who direct the spending of a

great deal of our money. This could be the spur to a successful manufacturing enterprise.”

The Duke coughs happily and leans back contentedly in his chair.

“And from what you tell me, you need a mere... what? Three quarters of a million. That is easily come by — for the right proposition. However, it has one problematical aspect: it is new. And as we know, subscribers are creatures of habit.”

“Very true, very true,” murmurs Fearnley. Matson looks up sharply.

“What I would recommend...” Carter speaks slowly and pauses for effect.

“Yes?” His grace is leaning forward now, suddenly alert. This Carter is one of Carraghers’ brightest stars, and his pearls of wisdom are on no account to go unheeded.

“...is that you have a second line of products.”

“A second line?” The Duke tries to say it in a brisk, intelligent voice, but it sounds inept, nonetheless.

“Yes. A manufacturing line that subscribers will see and recognize as good for reliable revenue. It is...” – Carter leans back and looks at the ceiling – “It is always more appetizing to the subscriber if, as well as some innovative aspect to the business, there is some sure-fire, reliable source of the bread and butter.”

“Oh, quite.” The Duke frowns briskly and clasps his hands before him on the desk. “So... what would you suggest?”

“Arms.”

“Arms?”

“Certainly. The market in arms is very brisk at present.”

“Ah, that is good...” Matson is smiling at a corner of the ceiling. “I recently had a rather beautiful idea...”

"Go on," urges the Duke.

"A very simple mechanism that could be fired from cannon..." The engineer holds his long, slim fingers together thoughtfully.

"Yes?"

"For insurrections, and that sort of thing..."

"Yes?"

"Very cheap to manufacture, very elegant... Just take the leg off below the knee..."

"Just the thing!" cries Carter, his grey eyes suddenly focused on some distant point, as if watching a ragged crowd falling in bloody confusion.

The Duke slaps the table and guffaws. "Well I'm damned!"

Carter turns to him. "You are intending to use this young man, your grace?"

"Yes of course. This is Matson."

Carter narrows his eyes and looks at Matson approvingly. "He will be good. With someone like this, I think the company will be most attractive... most attractive."

The Duke sends a significant glance to Fearnley.

"Well... that's really all," says Carter, leaning back again and slipping his thumbs into his waistcoat lapels.

"Well thank you, Carter, much obliged," says the Duke. "We were intending to move on to... I should say, if you're in a hurry..."

"Oh no," replies Carter airily. "I find this interesting. We're always interested in new business. I can spare a few minutes." Carter fastens his gaze on Matson, who seems abstracted once more.

"Aha. Very good of you. Well, Fearnley, what of the incorporation?"

"Ahem. Glad you can stay with us, Carter," says Fearnley deferentially.

"Yes yes. Quite," adds his grace.

"Well now... as to the articles... it will be easy enough to add an article pertaining to the armaments. Would you place that first, Carter?"

"Not necessarily." Carter opens his eyes wide and consults the ceiling again. "It could well come second."

"Yes. Well, it is only for confidence, after all. So I can well insert a new second article. One small matter we need to address is the rights of manufacture."

"Rights?" The Duke is puzzled.

"Yes, your grace. The new company will need to own exclusive rights to the manufacture of these goods. Accordingly, Mr Matson's revised designs should form the basis of an application for letters patent..."

"Ah, yes..."

"...and all rights thereto should vest in the new corporation. It is most important, is it not, that other concerns should not simply copy the designs?"

"Oh, assuredly."

Fearnley turns to the young engineer. "I am afraid, Matson, that you will have to assign all your rights to the new company."

"Really?" Matson is suddenly awake.

"Oh yes. Is that not so, Carter?"

"Absolutely. If they resided with a private individual, why — the subscribers would instantly catch cold."

Matson looks rebellious.

"Of course..." Fearnley turns a keen eye to the Duke. "Of course, Matson, it is customary to reward the inventor with a share of stock..."

"Quite, quite," nods the Duke.

"Oh. Ah. And... how much would that be?"

"Some five per cent is considered generous, I believe," murmurs Carter.

"Only five per cent?" Matson looks outraged.

Carter sits a little more upright and fixes Matson with his coldest, most knowing stare. "Oh yes. Five per cent of a thriving company could easily be a million, you know."

"A million?" Matson's countenance is suddenly transfigured.

"Indeed."

"Oh, very well, then." Matson relapses into pleasurable contemplation.

"Very good," says Fearnley in a professional tone of voice.

"But... I say, don't you know, what about the school?"

Carter and Fearnley turn their eyes to the Duke, expressions of incredulity on their faces.

"The school?" murmurs Fearnley, uncertainly.

"Why, yes. The original idea, you know... Why, it was from the school. Surely they should have something."

"Oh yes, yes..." Fearnley waves his hand dismissively. "The school should have a small grant..."

"But how much?"

"Any more ideas likely from that source?" asks Carter astutely.

"Quite possibly," nods the Duke.

"Four per cent," says Carter. "Important to maintain good will. And all similar ideas to the company."

"I believe I can draw up an agreement to that effect," says Fearnley.

“And then what of the original inventors of the oscillating device? Should they not receive something?”

“Ah yes — what were their names?” Fearnley scratches his head.

Carter leans forward. “Any interests of that sort – buy them out. Most important that the new company owns everything. Otherwise... you know...” He wipes his forehead.

“I mean, they did have some contribution, didn't they, Matson?” his grace presses.

“Well... Yes, there were one or two ideas, certainly,” Matson allows with all the generosity of a millionaire-to-be. “Not that they could have been commercially exploited as they stood, but yes, one or two ideas.”

“Very well. How many of 'em were there?” Carter leans across the table. “Let's get rid of 'em.”

Fearnley takes a folder that is lying on the table in front of Matson. He adjusts his spectacles as he opens the absurd, girlish document. “There are only two. One Shipman and... oh. You'd better have a look, Carter.” He passes the document across the table.

Carter looks at the title page, stiffens, then cursorily glances at one or two of the diagrams before snapping the folder shut. “Ha.” He leans back. He is not feeling very well. “I think one of them is known to me. I can take care of that one. Give the other one – Shipman – one per cent. More than enough.”

Matson's jealousy is piqued. “One per cent? But that could be as much as two hundred thousand, if I'm not mistaken.”

“Yes, yes...” Carter leans back, affecting boredom. “But you seem not to appreciate how important it will be to the subscribers to have these people out of the

way.” Secretly, he delights in the thought that he might instil in his daughter’s heart a bitter, corrosive jealousy. After all: five hundred pounds! He should never have listened to Joanna. Five hundred was far too much. A young minx like that should be properly punished for her impudence. And to think that his own seed, the fruit of his own loins, should be so monstrously disrespectful! “Well... I must be going. Glad to meet you, Matson.” He reaches across the table to shake Matson’s hand. “I foresee a bright future for you. And for this company. I wish you good day, gentlemen...”

After they have seen him out, the gentlemen resume their deliberations.

“He seemed to like it, don’t you think, Fearnley?” asks the Duke anxiously.

“I’ve never seen him so keen, your grace. He doesn’t say much, old Carter, but when he speaks of bright futures... well...” Fearnley purses his lips.

“You think he can do it?”

“If he cannot, no man can. If a man in his position says that a business venture looks bright...” Fearnley extends his arms, as if to encompass the world. “But of course we need to attend to his concerns.”

“Concerns?” The Duke furrows his brow.

“Certainly. And from the first we should be most attentive to the matter of the letters patent.” Fearnley turns to the young engineer. “As a matter of form, it would be a good thing if you were able to adopt his grace’s suggestion of a cigar shape for the... er...”

“The Invigorator,” says the Duke decisively. “The Walmsley Invigorator.”

“Oh yes... Good name,” murmurs Fearnley.

“As a matter of fact, I have,” begins Matson, opening another, bulkier folder. “I had some quite good ideas. For example: the oscillating frequency of the prototype

from the school was clearly far too low, and the amplitude far too great. For proper muscle relaxation, I should have thought that this design..."

"Yes, yes," laughs Fearnley, "it is good to see that proper engineering considerations prevail." He turns to the Duke. "For the sake of the letters patent, your grace," he continues in a more conspiratorial tone, "it is as well to depart from the original design as much as possible, just in the unlikely event of a challenge."

"A challenge?" His grace looks a little apprehensive.

At once, Fearnley assumes an expression of angelic innocence. "Not that there is any great likelihood of one. But without entering into all the technical details" – Fearnley laughs airily – "it is clear that our first product must represent a great advance upon the crude original." He nudges Matson. "Very important, though, old boy, to make a thing of the new ideas, and play down the old ones. Strengthens the position of the company. So: you'll need to make much of the new shape, new amplitude and whatever." Fearnley waves his hand vaguely. "All that is excellent. And – take my advice – once you're sure you can do without them, it would be better to destroy this." He stabs at the schoolgirl folder with a lawyer's finger.

"Destroy it?" Matson picks it up half-regretfully.

"Definitely. We will not want any bones rattling in the vault of our new company."

"It seems sad, somehow."

"I assure you, Matson, in business we have no room for sentiment."

Matson sighs and puts the folder down.

"Well," says the Duke, relaxing, "I'm mighty glad we managed to enlist old Carter. Seems to know his stuff."

“Very true,” agrees Fearnley. “I knew you’d take to him. I say, Matson, do you think you could go and call down for a bottle of champagne? I believe we have a birth to celebrate.”

“A birth?” Matson looks blank.

“The new company, man!”

“Oh... Oh yes.” Matson rises and stumbles out.

When the door closes, Fearnley leans across to the Duke. “Old Carter liked it. I could tell. How much d’you get him for?”

“Fifteen per cent.”

“That’s good. So with my five, and your... what?”

“Twenty-five.”

“That leaves... forty-five per cent for the subscribers. Perfect!”

Shortly afterwards, Matson reappears with the champagne, looking very pleased with himself. Soon, he will be able to look for a wife.

Part VIIIa

At the sound of approaching footsteps, Miss Paulson rises from the table, still absent-mindedly clutching Carter's letter. Her heart is already hammering with excitement: she does not need to look out of the window. The distinctive little scuffle of haste – or is it headstrong desire? – tells her at once whose footsteps these are. And then, without knocking, Carry pushes the door open and stands a moment, golden hair haloed in the outdoor light, a vision of loveliness that makes Miss Paulson's heart lurch in almost painful joy.

“Why, Georgie,” says Carry in an amused voice, slowly closing the door, “you have a letter!”

Carry's smile, the way she stands, the slight movement of her eyebrow, the liveliness and poise of this perfect young woman steals the breath from Georgie's lungs. Unable to turn away, she pushes the letter away into the pile of papers on the table behind her. “Carry, dearest, we must talk.”

Carry's splayed fingers press on the door behind her, thrusting her breast into prominence. She speaks jestingly. “It is from a lover. One of your Parisian admirers.”

“No, no, it is not a letter to me at all.”

“Then to whom?”

“Carry, we must talk.”

“About what?”

“Dear...” Georgie shakes her head. “The more I see you, the more difficult this will be.”

“What will be?”

"I have to leave Hepplewhite, Carry."

Carry stares in disbelief. "Leave? But you cannot!"

"I had already resolved to do so, even before Mrs Cunningham sent for me this morning. O Carry, this has been a day of fateful letters."

"What? She received a letter?"

Georgie nods, and bites her lip. "One of the governors, a very wealthy man, wrote to say that I have been putting poisonous ideas into his daughter's head, and that unless I leave at the end of this term, he will withdraw his financial support. And it appears that without it, the school would be in a very precarious state. There would be no more question of science at Hepplewhite."

Carry's eyes are bright with anger. "Who? Who was this?"

"I should not tell you this. But Carry — it was Carter's father."

"Carter?"

Georgie nods dumbly.

Carry is furious. She shakes her fists. "Then we must get up a petition! We cannot let this man simply take over the school! We must fight with every means at our disposal!" There is a delightful flush now on Carry's cheeks.

But Georgie shakes her head sadly. "No, Carry, we must not. Even before this, I had made up my mind." She smiles bravely. "There are many others who would be able to keep the flame alive. Mrs Cunningham knows of several. She said some very kind things, Carry, but she was quick to put my mind to rest. Miss Paulson may go, but the good work will continue without her."

"But what are you going to do?"

"Carter and I are going to go away together. She has been able to obtain a very satisfactory teaching position, and I am sure I shall be able to do the same."

“Where?”

“I... have promised I will not say, Carry – not to anyone, not even you. She has told me some terrible things about her family, you know. At least for the moment, she does not want anyone to know where we are going, for fear that her father might interfere to prevent it. From what she has told me, he is capable of anything.”

Carry's hands fall to her side. She is pale now. “But Georgie... what about...” Her lips quiver. She cannot trust her voice, but can only whisper. “What about you and me, Georgie?”

Georgie looks aside. She blinks. Her cheeks are glistening. “You know that it is hopeless, Carry. Your father will insist that you marry. You yourself will want to have children one day. It cannot last.”

Carry is beside herself. “You do not know what you are saying!”

Georgie presses on bravely. “The sooner we part, the less painful it will be for both of us. Do not fear: you will soon find someone...”

Carry clasps her hands in supplication. “Georgie! Oh no no no! You do not understand!”

Georgie closes her eyes, swallowing with effort. “Oh yes: I understand, Carry. Do not think this is any less painful for me than it is for you, but —”

“Georgie!” Carry sobs, struggling to regain her self-control. “Georgie! No more of this despairing talk, I beg you! You make me so afraid!” Georgie makes to interrupt, but Carry strides forward and takes Georgie by the shoulders, her eyes suddenly adamant, her breast heaving. “Do you think my father, or anyone, could compel me to marry against my will? Why, my mother would not permit it! I would not permit it! Georgie, I love you.” For a moment, Carry holds Georgie in her defiant

gaze. Then, more softly, "...And anyway, my mother knows." Carry looks into Georgie's shocked eyes. "She understands."

Georgie can only repeat, her voice tremulous with incredulity, "She knows?"

Carry looks down, momentarily shy. "More or less." Then, looking up once more: "And she wants me to be happy. I shall come away with you, Georgie. We will go to a far-off place where nobody shall interfere with our happiness."

And now, laughing and weeping at the same time, Georgie puts her hands upon Carry's shoulders. "Oh my..." She shakes her head in disbelief. "You sweet child... you sweet child. – But don't you see – ?"

"Georgie, Georgie..." Carry draws her lover close, so that each can feel the warm resilience of the other's breast. "I see that we can be happy, if only we allow ourselves to be. Nobody can stop us, Georgie, unless we let them..."

Georgie laughs softly as Carry kisses away her tears; then, when Carry begins kissing her neck, sways and tries to dodge her, squealing softly as she laughs. But there is no dodging Carry, and with a little groan, Georgie ceases to resist, turning instead to return Carry's kiss.

"Oh... Oh..." Carry turns her head and kisses more passionately, now teasing Georgie's mouth open with her tongue; and once admitted, she moves it very slowly, deliciously, until Georgie squeals into her mouth and begins to move her hips insistently against Carry's. At length, Carry draws back. "You want me, Georgie..."

"Oh Carry..." Georgie returns the kiss, their bodies moulding ever closer together.

"Why, Georgie," murmurs Carry eventually, "without me, what would you have done?" Georgie squeezes Carry tighter. "Hmm?"

“Darling... I must confess something...” Georgie draws away. She cannot meet Carry’s eye now. “I do feel... something for Lucy Carter. Nothing like my love for you, but...”

Startled by the sudden thought, Carry looks toward the ceiling. “She is not upstairs, is she?”

“No. She is out walking — with Miller.”

“That is just as well.” Carry pauses and reflects. “Georgie, I understand. There is noble blood in her.”

Georgie shakes her head, striving to find expression for the complexity of her feelings. “She is very strong, very strong... But then, just occasionally, she will look at me, and I see such anguish in her eyes, Carry.”

Their eyes meet, full of sympathetic understanding.

“Dear, compassionate Georgie!”

“I think she has been quite starved of love.”

“I am sure of it!”

“And that is strange, because from what she tells me, her mother sounds rather sweet. But the very thought of her drives Lucy into a fearsome, silent fury. I think perhaps that she cannot forgive her for not standing up to her father.”

“And so” – Carry makes a little moue – “you thought our love was doomed, and that you might... care for Lucy instead?”

“Yes; even though, I confess, she sometimes frightens me so. She is so cold, sometimes, Carry; and at others, so very passionate.”

Carry looks a little displeased. “Oh? Passionate? How so?”

Georgie blushes scarlet. “I mean... when she is alone in her room... the walls are rather thin...”

Carry laughs open-mouthed. Her teeth are perfect. Georgie flies into her arms once more.

“O Carry... I never meant... I never meant that anyone... As if I could ever forget...” And then she draws back a little, looking into Carry’s amused eyes. “You’re not cross with me?”

“Should I be? After all, I will admit... I can see what others might see in her.” Carry’s smile is bewitching.

Georgie answers with a momentary smile of her own, but her eyes are troubled. “She’s nothing like you, Carry, of course she’s not, but... I must confess that sometimes, just when I least expect it... I mean, Carry, you are just beautiful always, from every angle, while she... I don’t know...”

Carry gives a low chuckle. “What are you trying to tell me, Georgie?”

“Sometimes she just does something to me. Just an expression, or a little gesture, and I — I am sorry, dear Carry. I should not be saying this.”

Carry laughs good-naturedly. “Dear, wanton Georgie. I see that I shall have to do something to prevent you straying, shall I not?”

Carry’s words are spoken lightly, but something in her tone, something authoritative, something purposeful, sends a shiver through Georgie. She cannot help asking, “Oh, what, Carry?” But even as she says it, she sees the light in Carry’s eye, and feels the unmistakable stirrings of desire. For a moment she recalls the sight of Carry’s sweet mouth, lips slightly parted, approaching her most sensitive place with such loving tenderness — and the beautiful, beautiful pangs of pleasure that engulfed her thereafter. Georgie cannot conceal her longing: her gaze is beseeching, and Carry smiles in triumph.

“Come, O come upstairs,” she whispers. And with a little giggle, Carry hastens to the haven of delight, determined to inflame Georgie’s passion as never before.

“No!” she cries, when Georgie tries to embrace her. “No!” And then, coolly, “Don’t touch me now; just undress me, without touching. For now, I am not Carry, but Lady Caroline Artemis Gloriana Walmsley, and you...” – Carry clears her throat delicately – “you are merely Georgie, my maidservant.”

“Why, what game is this you are playing with me?” Georgie’s voice is tremulous with desire.

“You shall see... but for the present, you shall not touch,” Carry answers lightly. “There... there... slowly...” And for the next minute, there is no sound but the soft rustle of clothing, the breathing of two very empassioned women, and Georgie’s occasional moan as more is revealed to her worshipping gaze. “And now, dear Georgie... tell me... is it Carter you want now? Is it?”

“O Carry, you are perfect... perfect!”

“Do you think I look perhaps a little better from this angle, h’m?”

“Carry, let me touch you! I beg you!”

But Carry only giggles and spins away from Georgie’s outstretched hands.

“And so I shall have money.” Carter says it in a small voice, not looking at Miller, trying to conceal the joy and pride that leap in her breast.

“Why, Carter, that’s wonderful!” Miller is full of admiration. But then her voice is clouded with foreboding. “But of course, when you marry, all that will go to your husband.”

“Miller, I beg you, do not be so ridiculous.”

“But it’s true, Carter! When you marry —”

“Of course. But what makes you think that I would ever marry? Oh — I know: you mean to say that a man might find my money attractive. Hah!”

For a while, Miller ponders how to respond to Carter's bitter irony. They walk on through the wood. It is still bare of leaves, but the weather has become gentle, and in the air there is the promise of spring.

At length, Miller dares a reply, blushing even as she says the words: “A man might find other things attractive about you, Carter.”

Carter feels a sudden tightness in her breast. She came out without a coat, and hopes that Miller will not notice the tell-tale signs. And despite herself, “What things?” she mutters in a low voice, her entire body tingling with a strange excitement.

“Why...” Miller casts a sidelong glance at her companion's two silent, but eloquent, witnesses – a glance which Carter does not miss. “You have a very pretty shape, Carter. Everyone says so.”

“Everyone?” Carter is scarlet, and somewhat breathless.

“Yes.” Miller stares straight ahead, pretending not to notice Carter's confusion. “Of course, everyone says how pretty Shipman is; but I've heard several people say that in many ways you have the nicer shape.”

“Oh? Who?”

“Oh...” Miller waves a hand vaguely. “Just... people.”

Carter stumbles. Her internal muscles are beginning to misbehave.

Miller notices Carter's unease, her high complexion. “Are you tired? Do you wish to sit down? There's a bench over there.”

“Thank you... yes...”

“Perhaps you are not quite recovered from your... indisposition.”

“Oh I am quite recovered, thank you. Why, that was days ago!”

“Just so, just so...” Miller sits slightly apart, studiously looking into the distance. “Of course... it does help, when one knows how to... relieve the feelings. Do you not think it is a great kindness, when one is taught such an important thing?”

“Perhaps so.” Carter finds that her mouth has become dry.

“I really did wonder at you, when you said what you did about Shipman.” Miller’s voice betrays an edge of disapproval, despite her sympathetic tone. “And really, it is so beautiful to be touched by another... Honestly, Carter, do you not secretly crave another’s touch? Do you not dream of feeling a man’s hands, worshipping your body? Does it not set your heart aflame?”

Slowly, Carter shakes her head. She sees her father’s hands, and they are bloody. “No, Miller, in all honesty I do not. A man would be interested only in getting me with child, and cheerfully disregard the fact that I would risk death in bearing it. No, the thought of a man’s hands just now makes my blood run cold.” She shudders. “Come, let us walk on.”

Together, they rise and rejoin the path, their long blue frocks swishing quietly as they go.

But then, after a while, Miller resumes, quietly beguiling. “But you know, Carter, the touch of another is so much more... oh, wonderful.”

“What do you mean?”

“To touch one’s self is lovely... but the touch of another is... Oh! It is beyond words!” Miller’s face is radiant.

Carter feels the need to quash this line of thinking. “I am quite sure that you are wrong. Why, we know for ourselves just how we wish to be touched. Who is to say better than ourselves? Think, Miller: the world is for ever telling us how we need a

man to help us with this, and to protect us from that. It is just a way of keeping us in servitude to men! You are quite wrong! We need nothing beyond ourselves!”

“Oh Carter... That is admirable, truly it is;” – Impulsively, Miller takes Carter’s hand and squeezes it – “but you do not know... you cannot know...”

Carter remembers Walmsley’s hand upon her breast, Miller’s hand upon her back, and of course Shipman... Blushing again, she is silent for a time. But then, determined to give no quarter to this heresy: “Miller, what you say does not stand to reason. How can another know as well as we ourselves do, what touch will please us most? And is it not most true, that if we are to escape the bonds of enslavement to men – our masters – we must all discover this truth for ourselves: that we, ourselves, can please ourselves the most?”

“But Carter —”

“No, Miller, hear me out, I beg you. You may be right, that there is a certain...” – Carter stumbles again – “intensity of feeling when one is touched by another. But speaking for myself, I see no particular virtue in mere intensity of sensation. With what I have, I am more than content. Moreover, I can enjoy the emotional pleasure of knowing that I am indebted to no one, that I am complete in myself. After centuries of being taught that we are incomplete, and must depend upon men, and of being forced to render a show of gratitude for that protection which they themselves make necessary, do you not think that we should demonstrate to ourselves and to the world that we are not beholden to men for our completion, that we are strong – yes, strong, and in no way weak or defective?”

Miller hangs her head, searching within herself to counter this line of reasoning. “Perhaps...” she murmurs uncertainly. “But do you not think that Donne was right, when he said ‘No man is an island’?”

“Ha!” Carter tosses her head. “Donne was quite right. ‘Tis *they* who need *us*, for without us to wait upon them they would have to become complaisant, and cooperative, and as willing to serve others as to be served — and indeed to acquire all manner of so-called feminine virtues.”

“Well, there may be something in that; but I do not think Donne was speaking only of men, you know. Have you not heard it said that a sorrow shared is a sorrow divided, or that a pleasure shared is a pleasure multiplied?”

Carter nods. “I suppose so.”

“And is it not also true that we are spared much needless pain, and led more quickly to the ideal, when we are able to learn from the experience of others?”

“Yes, Miller, I cannot deny it.”

“And you are to be a teacher.”

“Yes, in a far-off land.”

“O will you not tell me where?”

“No, Miller, I must keep it secret. I so fear that what befell my sister may befall me if I do not seem quite to vanish from the face of the earth.”

“Well... I understand... But you will not deny, that it *is* a pleasure to teach and inform the ignorant.”

“Of course not. It is a wonderful thing to see understanding dawn in the mind of another, and know that one has led another soul into greater knowledge.”

“Exactly! And the more useful the knowledge, and the greater the pleasure of learning, the greater is the pleasure of the teacher.”

“Miller – what are you saying?”

“Only that it is not so very wrong, if someone such as Shipman should help her friends...”

"Oh, that old argument!" Carter's mouth compresses into a thin, tight line.

"Why yes. I was mindful of what you had said the other day. It seemed so unjust. Surely you cannot deny that when someone has the very great kindness to impart such very useful and delightful knowledge, that one cannot reasonably be anything but grateful. Are you not grateful to Miss Paulson for what she told you?"

Carter blushes and nods. "Yes."

"I was thinking about your sister Elsie. I was really sad to hear that about her, Carter. But don't you think — had she lived, and if she had loved you, she would have — you know — told you?"

"What? — About... blissing?"

"Yes."

"I don't know. Perhaps. You're not still arguing about Shipman, are you?"

"Well... only partly..."

"I assure you, you have made your point, Miller, quite sufficiently, I thank you." Carter does not sound grateful.

"There is more to it, Carter. You see — when I am at home, I sleep with my little sister."

Carter looks at Miller. Miller looks a little flushed and anxious. Carter is still feeling an irrational annoyance; but it is clear that Miller is about to confess something. Carter tries to sound sympathetic, but all she can say is, "Well?" It sounds most ungracious, and Carter clears her throat. "What is her name?"

Miller gulps. "Polly." Her voice is a little harsh. She stares straight ahead. Her expression betrays nothing.

"That's a nice name." Carter does her best to be placatory. "Do you love her?"

"Of course I do." Miller's voice is stronger now. "She's a little dear."

"You're lucky. It's lonely, not having a sister."

"It must be."

The woodland floor is carpeted with leaves. Miller kicks them aimlessly as they walk.

"Carter: it was my time just before Christmas."

Carter makes a sympathetic grunt.

"She hasn't begun yet."

"How old is she?"

"Twelve."

"No, of course she wouldn't."

"But I don't think it will be very long now."

"Twelve is quite young."

"She's quite... grown-up for her age, you know, Carter."

"Everybody is different, I suppose." Carter does not wish to say too much, now, because she senses what Miller is trying to say.

"Yes. I... I showed her what was happening. I told her about it."

"I think that's good. At least she won't be so frightened when her time comes."

"Yes." Miller kicks another flurry of leaves. "She touched me. I told you that, did I not?"

"Like you touched me? Yes."

"Not only like that, Carter. I showed her another way."

"Oh." Carter tries to keep the emotion out of her voice.

They walk on, with just the sound of their feet upon the dry leaves, and the swish of their heavy skirts.

“On Friday, I am to show Matron how to use your oscillator machine. Little Parkinson will be there.”

“I see.” Carter does not know what to say.

Miller glances at her companion. “Carter, can you imagine what it is like, to give someone that feeling for the first time?”

They both come to a halt, panting slightly.

“What is it like?”

“It is so beautiful, Carter. I was able to show her everything. She liked it so much!”

“But... only twelve!”

“Do you think... Do you think I did wrong, Carter? I only wanted her to know. But after that...”

Carter gulps. “She... You...”

“She begged me, Carter.”

“I see.”

“Was that... very wrong, do you think? I mean... I only wanted to help her.”

Carter looks up into the sky. “No,” she breathes. “No, I don't think that was wrong.”

Miller lets out her breath in a harsh sigh. “Would you like to come with me, on Friday?”

“Would it... would it help if I did?”

“Yes.” Miller gives Carter a sidelong glance.

“I... Very well.” Carter can scarcely breathe. “What time?”

“In the afternoon recreation.”

“I'll meet you?”

"In the study-room at two o'clock?"

"Very well. Miller, I... I simply must be getting back to the cottage. I have some prep to finish."

"Yes." That strange glance again.

"I'll be going, then."

"Yes." Miller turns to watch as Carter hurries off.

The lovers freeze, their idyll interrupted by the sound of Carter's hurried entrance. Hearing Carter mount the stairs and come almost to the door, Georgie thinks to hide; but Carry's gaze holds her immobile: those blue, blue eyes, looking out from that perfect naked body, so beautifully and comfortably displayed to her adoring gaze, pierce her with their fearless dignity.

Both of them listen, quieting their breath. And in the silence, they hear Carter open and close her bedroom door. Soon they hear little impatient grunts of effort. It is clear that Carter is a young woman in a hurry: hardly is she inside than there is a violent flurry of rustling clothes, and then a heavy thud as she casts herself upon her bed.

Carry's eye is clear and untroubled. "She cannot suspect we are here."

Carter's groaning puts it beyond all doubt.

"Indeed she cannot. I wonder what must have befallen her. I know that she is a passionate creature, but this..."

"Georgie, I..."

"Are you passionate too, my love?"

Carry's eyes plead. Silently, she nods.

“Oh... My beautiful one...” Georgie clambers on to the bed and gently kisses her way along Carry’s satiny, sweetly parted thighs until she encounters a moist and tumultuous welcome. And if Carter hears the passionate cries from next door, she gives no sign of it.

“Ah, Miller...” Shipman greets her in the study-room. “When is it that you are to show Matron the oscillator?”

“This very afternoon. We are to use it on Parkinson.” Miller’s eyes glow with quiet enthusiasm.

Shipman is solemn. “I am concerned about what might happen. We must ensure that we win the sympathy of Matron — and the doctor. It is very important to get these things right, don’t you know.”

“Of course.”

“I suppose it wouldn’t be possible for me to come with you?”

Miller blushes with the realization that she has strayed into a region of particular delicacy. Shipman’s recent mournfulness has been the subject of whispered comment for several days now, and its cause widely understood, if rarely stated outright. “Well... it might have been... but I’m afraid I... You see, I have already asked Carter to come.”

“Carter – oh, yes.” Shipman closes her eyes a moment in silent anguish.

“I... I only thought that should the machine need to be adjusted, Carter would be the best person...”

“Yes, yes, quite true,” says Shipman heavily. “If Carter will be there I shall not be welcome.”

“She seems angry with you for some reason, Ship.”

Shipman seems surprised. "Angry, you say?"

"Yes." Miller is thoughtful. "At any rate, she is not by any means indifferent to you."

"You think not?" Shipman clutches at the ray of hope with an eagerness that is painful to behold.

Miller adopts an encouraging tone. "Certainly. Perhaps, in time..."

Shipman grins shyly, biting her lip. "I will speak with you of her again, Miller. But just now, my concern is pressing. You see, it may be that Doctor Straker will interest himself. And truly, it would be surprising were he not to."

It is Miller's turn to be ruffled. "I hadn't thought of that."

"It's very important that you speak privately with Parkinson before you start."

"Privately? But how am I to do that?"

"Oh, it should not be too difficult. Explain simply that the patient needs to be set at her ease, and Matron will understand. And what are you going to tell Parkinson before you begin?"

"Well, I shall tell her what to expect, of course."

"Yes, certainly. But what else, Miller?"

"I don't know. Tell me, Ship."

Shipman makes a hissing sound. "Really, Miller, you must anticipate. It is most important that we proceed with the greatest circumspection. What do you think Doctor Straker would say if he were to realize that the treatment was intensely enjoyable?"

"Oh..." Miller looks aghast. "I see what you mean."

Shipman nods emphatically. "If a medical treatment is not at least mildly unpleasant, it will not be taken seriously. You must explain to Parkinson that whatever she happens to feel, she must give the correct impression."

"Yes, of course..." Miller's eyebrows arch picturesquely.

"And what if Doctor Straker should ask about the principles of the treatment? What will you say to him?"

"Well, I should say that a number of us have found by experiment that it relieves those unpleasant feelings..."

Shipman closes her eyes and holds up her hand. "Enough! Do not act the simpleton, I beg you. Consider for a moment: whom are you addressing?"

"Why, Doctor Straker, of course."

"Yes, dear. And he is a doctor, is he not? He has treated patients for – what? – fifteen, twenty years? Do you seriously believe that he will be amenable to that sort of argument? Come, let me make you understand. What do doctors call the knee-cap?"

"I... I don't know. The knee-cap?"

Shipman shakes her head contemptuously.

"Er... knee-bone?"

"Miller, I can tell you know nothing of doctors. Have you never been ill?"

"Well... not very..."

"They call the knee-cap the *patella*."

"Oh, Latin."

"Yes, Miller, Latin. Try another one, now. What do they call the shoulder, do you think?"

"The... er... scapula?"

"Good! And the throat?"

Miller shakes her head. She does not know the Latin word.

“Larynx. Greek. Now do you see the principle of their discourse?”

“Why... it seems to be to make everything as obscure as possible.”

“Exactly! That is why it would be such a disastrous mistake to speak in plain language, or ever to appeal to common sense. Why, our whole enterprise might be undone!”

“O Shipman, I am so glad you warned me!”

“Yes, Miller. So am I. Fortunately, I thought to do a little research. Now let me instruct you, dear...”

“O Shipman! Thank goodness!” Carter has been rushing down the corridor to the study-room – skirts gathered about her knees, quite contrary to the school rules – and now finds herself sliding on the smooth, polished floor. Shipman grabs her by the shoulders to steady her.

“You were looking for me, Lucy?” There is something in her intonation, but Carter is in too much of a hurry.

“Yes! We have only five minutes before we have to be at the infirmary! And Miller has forgotten that blessed word! What was it again?”

Shipman looks at Carter. She is pretty when she is out of breath. The little gold chain of her pince-nez is graceful about her slender neck.

“Why did Miller not come, then?” Shipman’s voice is low.

“She said she was tired.” Carter’s blush betrays the lie. In fact, Miller had said, “If I ask her, she won’t come, because whatever I say, she will think you don’t want her.”

Shipman turns away, bemused. “Tired, you say?”

"Well?" Carter is desperate. "It was Anna something, she said."

Slowly, Shipman drops her hands to her sides. "Anatriptic. Tell Miller to write it down."

Carter does not move. "Ah... Ship?"

"Yes?"

"Miller has gone completely to pieces. She can't remember anything of what you told her. I... I think it would be best if you came, too."

"You want me to come?"

"If you don't mind."

Shipman looks at Carter for a moment, as if considering. And then, suddenly urgent, "Come then: there's not a moment to lose!"

And seconds later, two young ladies make their very precipitate and unladylike dash through the school to the infirmary.

At the door, they meet Miller, who is wringing her hands and almost jumping in excitement. "O thank goodness! Thank goodness!" she exclaims. "Now who will knock?"

Shipman, not at all out of breath, puts her back to the wall beside the infirmary door. "Lucy, you will knock. You're the respectable one. Miller is a poet and I'm... well... I'm..." she glances down with a sly smile.

Recovering her breath, Carter knocks. The door opens almost immediately.

"Why, three of you!" Matron is amused. "I was expecting only Miller."

"Well, I..." Miller seems tongue-tied.

"She brought Carter in case the machine needed adjusting, and me to explain how it works," says Shipman matter-of-factly. "How many machines have you?"

"Two."

“And there is a patient?”

“Yes: Parkinson.” Matron makes a grimace.

“Should I go in and see her?” asks Miller.

“She is in room three. I told her to expect you,” Matron answers with a nod.

Carter sees the oscillators upon the side-counter. “Which one shall we take?” She tries each one. They rattle noisily on the counter as she does so, making Matron jump in alarm. “This is the slower, I think.”

“Come, then, Carter.”

When they have departed, Shipman takes up the other oscillator. “Have you observed these machines, matron?”

Matron has indeed been staring at them from time to time, not daring to touch them. She nods.

“Perhaps it would be useful if I were to explain the principles of its application to you while the others assist Parkinson?”

“Thank you.”

“Just hold it in your hand while I operate the generator. You will find that it quivers.”

“It won't hurt me, will it?”

“Not in the least. It will help if you sit down, Matron, and hold it in your lap. Just so...”

After squealing and nervously dropping it a few times, Matron gradually gathers enough confidence to hold the strangely trembling little box. “It's alive! It's like a little fish!” she cries excitedly.

And Matron, somewhat awed now, soon finds herself receiving an enthusiastic lecture from Shipman on the principles of “anatriptic relaxation”, “paradoxical contraction” and “therapeutic paroxysm”.

Miller and Carter are walking down the path to Miss Paulson's cottage. Miller is laughing, and even Carter is chuckling.

“Oh that was so funny! The look on Matron's face when Ship was talking to the doctor – I shall never forget it.” Miller wrinkles her nose as she laughs.

“I'm sure that Shipman was talking complete nonsense.”

“But the doctor seemed to be taking her entirely seriously. Ship always sounds so confident, so very definite!”

“Oh, that's Shipman.”

“And when Ship was talking about how relaxing it was, and the release — what did she call it?”

“Parox —”

“Yes, paroxysmal release, the doctor seemed completely mystified.” Miller puts her hand up to stifle a rather naughty giggle. “Do you suppose men can have them too, Carter?”

“Ah...” Carter's expression takes on a far-away look. “I rather think, Miller, that men prefer not to believe that ladies can have them.”

“Oh.” Miller is thoughtful for a moment. “But that's because...” her voice trails away; and after a few moments, she speaks as if changing the subject. “Carter, have you ever put anything inside yourself? You know... where the man is supposed to put his... thing?”

“No, of course not!” Carter says it crossly, with a hot little flush to her cheeks.

“What? Not even a finger? Not even a little way?” Miller giggles incredulously.

“Well...” Carter takes a deep breath. “Maybe just a very little way.”

“Carter... I tried it with a candle.”

“A candle?”

“I was ever so wet. It went in – well – fairly easily.”

“You didn’t!”

“I wanted to know what it would feel like.”

“And... what was it like?” Until now, they have been staring straight ahead, not daring to look at one another. But now, in her curiosity, Carter turns a shy glance of enquiry toward her companion.

“It felt nice, Carter. I just moved it around a little, and it was... nice. It made me want to...”

“Yes?” Carter is becoming somewhat breathless.

“You know,” murmurs Miller, after a strained pause. “Paroxysmal release.” She waggles her fingers in a suggestive little circle, one which Elsie recognizes immediately.

“Yes, of course.”

“But I didn’t do it.”

“What? You didn’t?”

“No. I thought, ‘Perhaps the man’s thing is supposed to do it.’ So I just kept moving it around. It felt really nice, and I kept wanting to... finish it. I did it for ages and ages, and at last...”

At length, Carter’s curiosity leads her to prompt her companion. “Well? What happened?”

“I began to get tired of it.”

“Oh.”

“So in the end, I... you know...” Miller moves her fingers again.

Carter turns away, her nose in the air. “I don't think I shall trouble with a candle. I can manage perfectly without.”

“It was nice, though, Carter.”

Carter's expression betrays a mixture of curiosity, longing and tight-lipped disapproval. “It's always nice.”

“No, I mean – nicer than usual. When I eventually did it, you know. It's like when someone else does it. It's sort of... stronger, somehow. I think I made rather a noise.” Miller giggles behind her hand.

Carter blushes. “I can't help making a noise. Nor can... Oh!” And now it is Carter whose hand flies to her mouth. “I've just thought of something.”

They have stopped walking, now, and have turned to face one another.

“What?”

But now it is Carter who is giggling, and Miller who is mystified.

“Miller... I don't know whether I ought to tell you this, but...”

“What? Tell me!”

“No, no, I must not!”

“If you tell me, I'll tell you a secret that you'll want to know.”

“No, it would be wrong.”

“You'll always be glad I told you, Carter.”

“What is it about, then?”

“Ha-ha...” Miller laughs mysteriously.

“Oh very well... But you must promise not to tell a soul.”

“Of course I won't.”

Carter crosses her hands over her breast. "God's honour?"

Miller copies the gesture. "God's honour."

"Well..." Carter clears her throat and licks her lips. "When Miss Paulson was away, I went into her room. I... I don't know why, but I looked under her pillow."

"You did?" Miller's eyes gleam.

"You'll never guess what I found there."

"I don't know. A... a candle?"

"A ruler."

"A round one?"

"Of course."

"A ruler! Hee hee!"

For a moment, they stand giggling.

"At the time, I had no idea..."

"But... Oh, Carter, that is wonderful! Do you think she does it... often?"

"Oh, I expect so," Carter says airily, "I wouldn't really know. And what of your secret?" She turns, and they resume their walk.

"Ah. Well..." Miller halts again. Carter is close beside her. They both look straight ahead. "Have you ever used spit?"

Carter shakes her head. "Spit? Ugh! What would you use that for?"

"It works even when you're dry. It's nice and slippery. It feels lovely, Carter."

After a pause, Miller looks shyly at her companion.

Carter is blushing bright red. She exhales noisily, crossing her arms over her breasts. She begins to walk on, and Miller does likewise.

From Carter's rapid breathing and constant blushing, Miller can sense the direction of Carter's thoughts. "Mind you, the oscillator is very nice too – not better,

of course, but just different. And — oh! So quick! Have you ever given it — you know, a proper trial?”

“No,” says Carter wistfully. “I have not had the opportunity.”

“That’s not fair! As soon as you invent something, the prefects and the battledore team take charge, and before you know it, they are having all the fun, while people like us...”

Carter gives a mirthless laugh of agreement.

“Of course, Parkinson is in a very fortunate situation... very fortunate.”

“Not that I should wish to suffer from her complaint.”

“Certainly not. But — Oh!” Miller’s voice becomes dreamy. “She is to have a treatment twice a day from now on. Twice, Carter!”

“That is what Shipman suggested, yes.”

“And how her eyes sparkled at the very thought of it!”

“Whose? Shipman’s?”

“Well, I dare say... But it was Parkinson I meant.”

“Huh! She revised her opinion, then.”

Miller laughs. “Such a fuss she made at first! What was it she said?”

“O Miller, Miller! Just thinking about it makes me...” Carter is gasping.

“I had to put my hand over her mouth, did I not, when she squealed?”

“Miller, please!”

Recalling Parkinson’s excitement is enough to bring a delicious tingling warmth to Miller’s most sensitive parts. But to see Carter so hopelessly excited makes Miller suddenly wet, and she becomes a little forward. Laughing throatily, she goads Carter further. “Something like, ‘It’s tickling my whatsit!’ — Do you remember?”

“Stop it, Miller, stop it!”

“And then, when she came for the first time,” Miller laughs again, “I believe she said something like ‘Woo-ooo-ah!’”

“Ah... ah...” Carter halts in her stride, apparently in the grip of some very powerful emotion.

“Did I make all that fuss when you and Shipman tried it on me?”

Carter manages to regain control of herself. She turns her eye on Miller. Her stare is piercing. “You made at least as much fuss, Miller.”

Miller blushes slightly and, after a moment, laughs. “Wouldn't it be lovely to have one of one's very own, Carter? If I had one, I know what I would want to do. This very moment.”

“Yes.” Carter almost gasps her reply. She is rocking her hips, clenching and unclenching her fingers. She is quite artless, quite incapable of concealing her arousal.

Miller fancies she can almost smell it. “Carter... I think I need to... I feel what I think you feel.”

“What are you saying?” Carter is jiggling uncomfortably on her toes. Her ankles are perfect.

“O Carter, Carter... I begin to see why she wants you so much.”

Carter pales now. “What do you mean?”

Emboldened by her arousal, Miller speaks as plain as she knows how. “Not ‘what’, Carter, but ‘who’. And I think you know perfectly well.”

They stare at one another, each wondering what the other is thinking. They stand thus for a long moment, until they are distracted by the sound of laughter, and approaching voices.

“Speaking of whom,” murmurs Miller; and yes, appearing round a bend in the path, as it skirts a clump of rhododendron bushes, Clark, Penrose and Shipman come into view.

“Ah, Miller!” cries Clark.

Carter makes to turn away, but Miller takes her hand. “Come,” she says. “They will wish to talk with us.”

“How is Parkinson?” cries Shipman, when they are closer. “Did you manage to overcome her fears?”

Miller giggles. “Yes, I think so.”

Clark and Penrose chuckle in delight.

“Did she...” Shipman is about to ask “Did she come?” but she flashes a glance at Carter, who is avoiding her eye, and becomes embarrassed. “Did she appear to benefit from the treatment?”

“Oh yes!” Miller nods emphatically.

“Twice, even?”

Miller giggles and holds up four fingers.

“Four!” cries Penrose in triumph. “Almost as keen as you, Miller!”

Miller giggles and all, save Carter, laugh in good-natured ribaldry.

“But you must hear what Ship said to Matron,” cries Clark gleefully. “Tell her, Ship!”

“Well...” Shipman seems suddenly modest. She glances anxiously at Carter, who seems to be ignoring everyone.

“No, tell her,” Clark insists. “It’s perfectly brilliant, Miller.”

“Well...” Shipman repeats, seeming to gather courage. “I told her that she should be sure to test the oscillator each time before giving Parkinson the treatment, in case it had gone out of adjustment.”

“Did Matron try it?” asks Miller intently.

“Of course.”

“And... she liked it?”

“She seemed to,” admits Shipman with a smile so villainous that even Carter’s lips twitch. “I am sure she will be most punctilious.”

“But that is not the best part, Miller. Truly, Ship was brilliant, absolutely brilliant.”

Carter looks from Clark to Penrose. Both have their eyes fixed adoringly on Shipman, as if she is about to perform some miracle before their eyes. She glances sideways at Miller, who – to her chagrin – seems much the same. “They’re like sheep,” Carter thinks crossly. “They will applaud whatever she says. They will do whatever she tells them.”

Shipman speaks. “It will be tea-time soon. Don’t you think we should turn and make our way back now?”

“Yes,” agrees Clark at once.

“Good idea,” adds Penrose.

Carter purses her lips.

“If you...” Shipman looks at Carter, suddenly hesitant. “If you’d like to come?”

“Oh do come!” pleads Miller, tugging at her sleeve. “Come with us!”

Carter gives a little nod, and so the group follows Shipman’s suggestion. Shipman leads, with Miller beside her and Carter close behind. Penrose and Clark take up the rear. They hold hands.

“Yes, I have thought of a way of disseminating the benefits of the oscillator more widely,” says Shipman, raising her hand in an expansive gesture. “You see, I explained to Matron that the oscillators would need adjustment from time to time, and that therefore we would arrange to bring her a new pair every now and then, and take the old pair away for adjustment.”

“Is that true, Carter?” Miller asks. “Would they need adjustment from time to time?”

“Oh – probably,” comes the murmured reply.

“Of course,” resumes Shipman, “while the oscillators are being adjusted, they are in fact available for others to discover their benefits.”

“What – you mean that we take them and... But where would we keep them?”

“Oh, I know of one or two quite good hiding-places.”

“But that would be marvellous! We could have a sort of secret society, and meet during recreation, and —”

“Yes,” Shipman cuts Miller short. “Something of the sort had occurred to me.”

“Perhaps we could keep one in Carter’s room,” suggests Miller.

“That would certainly be prudent,” nods Shipman. “After all, she’s the principal inventor.”

“Oh? I thought that was you, Ship,” protests Penrose.

“I helped, certainly,” concedes Shipman, “but the real brains behind the oscillator are Lu — are Carter’s.”

“Oh,” says Penrose, her tone a mixture of surprise and admiration.

Miller takes Carter’s hand and squeezes it. Carter feels a strange warmth, almost an elation, as she realizes that part of the flow of adulation has just been diverted from Shipman’s channel to hers.

“Our next step,” proclaims Shipman, “will be to convince Miss Paulson that more equipment will be needed in order to make up for those generators and oscillators that wear out.”

Carter turns her head in surprise. “Wear out?”

“Of course,” says Shipman, her eyes staring straight ahead, “they won’t really have worn out — yet. Although I expect they shall.”

Clark laughs in conspiratorial glee. “‘Tis *we* who shall wear them out — is that not so, Ship?”

“Precisely. Or maybe vice versa. And of course, it would only be right for Carter to have one of her own to keep.”

Miller cannot contain her delight. “Oh, Carter, wasn’t that just what we were saying? How lovely!”

Carter, flushed scarlet, finds it necessary to resist a transitory impulse to force her handkerchief into Miller’s mouth.

Shipman, amused at Carter’s embarrassment, stifles a laugh. But then, seeing how pretty she is when she blushes, she turns away and grits her teeth in silent pain.

“Hello, Ship,” Clark greets her friend in the study-room a few days later. “You look worried. What’s the matter?”

Shipman looks up from her desk, where she has been sitting, staring moodily into space, her chin in her hands. “I have just done something rash, I’m sorry to say.”

“Something rash? That’s not like you, Ship. What have you done?”

“I sent her a note.”

“What — *her*?” Clark’s tone makes it clear that she has at once inferred who the recipient must be.

Shipman nods gloomily.

“Well — that’s good! That’s what I’ve been telling you to do for weeks and weeks.”

Shipman shakes her head. “I’m afraid she will think even worse of me now.”

Part VIIIb

When Carter goes to her pigeon-hole, she is surprised to find a tiny envelope, not much larger than a visiting-card. It is plain, but for her name: *Miss Lucy Carter*, underlined with a flourish. Carefully, she detaches the tiny red seal. Inside is a piece of thin paper, folded in four. She unfolds it, and is surprised to see just eight lines of writing, written so very small that she will have to wear her pince-nez to read them. "That's odd," she thinks. "It seems that whoever sent it did not wish to reveal her name."

She goes to the dayroom window and stands holding the letter in her left hand, supporting her glasses with her right. And whatever it is that is written there, it seems to alarm her. People are passing to and fro, and nobody appears to notice her little cry, or how she wheels round to see if anyone has been watching her. Reassured to find that she is unobserved, she turns away, carefully folds the paper, tucks it back into its envelope and slips it, since it is conveniently small, into her bosom, where she can feel it nestling against her left breast.

She is distracted during the morning's lessons, and it is not until the afternoon that she is able, in the privacy of her room, to hold the strange little letter again in her trembling hand, and read more carefully its cryptic message.

Without your smile

My heart will sink

And death beguile

My lonely fears

My only tie

Without your love

In ocean wide

Of heartbreak tears.

At that moment, Miss Paulson enters the cottage. Over recent weeks, Carter has become increasingly distant and incommunicative, often spending the entire recreation period in her room; and Miss Paulson suspects, from the noises that occasionally emerge, that Carter is devoting much of her time to the appeasement of certain intimate longings. For that reason, feeling that it is her duty to warn Carter of her arrival, she has taken to making as much noise and commotion as she can without making it too obvious that she is doing so on purpose.

But on this occasion, much to Miss Paulson's surprise, Carter emerges from her room and descends the stairs, apparently wishing to talk.

"Miss Paulson, I wonder if I might ask you a question," she says hesitantly.

"Why, of course, Lucy. I'll make us a cup of tea. Come into the kitchen and talk to me."

For a moment Carter watches Miss Paulson's preparations in silence; but then, hesitantly: "At the end of last term, you were kind enough to speak to me of certain... longings that a woman has in her physical nature, and how one may assuage them by certain delicate manipulations."

"That is so. It is as if the body has certain natural appetites, which if they are not checked, may inflame the passions and lead to intemperate or foolish behaviour. By the simple process of assuaging these appetites in privacy and quiet, we render ourselves more temperate, and better able to guide our lives by the light of reason."

“And would it be true to say, Miss Paulson, that in making a practice of assuaging these bodily appetites, we reinforce in our own minds the notion that we do not depend upon others for their satisfaction?”

“Why, yes, that would proceed naturally, I am sure, from the principle of the association of ideas.”

“I had thought so. And now, Miss Paulson, I had always heard it said, and thought it true, that if entertaining thoughts of a certain person was apt to provoke those physical longings of which we speak, then those thoughts were in origin base and physical.”

“That may be true. — There! I think it is ready to pour.”

Carter takes the milk-jug from under its cloth and adds the milk.

“Come, Lucy, let us sit down,” says Miss Paulson, leading Lucy out into the front room once more.

When they are settled, and have taken a sip of the hot, reviving beverage, Lucy frowns and cocks her head to one side. “But if those... thoughts of another person were born of base desire —”

“On the animal level, so to speak —”

“Yes, on the animal level — then would it not follow that the satisfaction of the physical desire would tend to deprive those thoughts of their inflammatory power?”

“Well —”

But Lucy interrupts. “Just as, for example, the thought of a chocolate cake might be very pleasant, and arouse an intense desire to eat, in the mind of one who is hungry; whereas, after a good meal, the idea of the same chocolate cake will be merely indifferent, or even acquire unpleasant connotations of being over-full.”

Miss Paulson nods. “Your reasoning is very sound, Lucy.”

Carter bites her knuckle.

“Don't forget your tea, dear,” says Miss Paulson soothingly.

Carter raises her cup half way, then puts it down again. “But if, over a period of days or weeks, one were most diligently to extinguish all spark of physical longing as soon as it arose, and so trample, as it were, upon the fire of physical passion – if, as I say, one did that, would it not follow that an attraction born of animal instinct would likewise be extinguished?”

“It would seem so.” Miss Paulson stares at Lucy as if a spectre has arisen between them.

“But if, nevertheless, despite satisfying the physical desire again and again, to the point of bodily exhaustion, still the thought of that... person were to recur and recur, and when it does, reawaken the longing, and if possible still more acutely, so that the longing becomes a torment, one that seems to occupy every waking hour and even to haunt one's dreams —” Lucy has become increasingly agitated, until Miss Paulson finds it necessary to interrupt.

“Then, my dear Lucy,” she says, placing her empty cup upon the occasional-table, “it seems to follow that the attraction to that person may not be born of base physical desire, but rather be the cause of it.”

“But then, whence does the attraction arise, if not from our physical nature?”

“If it is not from base desire, then does it not follow that it must derive instead from some higher faculty?”

“A higher faculty?”

“Lucy: do you know what day it is?”

“No, Miss Paulson. What day is it?”

“It is the fourteenth day of February.”

“Is that a special day?”

“Look, Lucy. I will show you something.” Miss Paulson goes to the table and returns with a small pile of folded letters, which she hands to Lucy.

Lucy turns them over in wonderment. Each bears a heart or a bluebird or other tender motif, each lovingly executed by a different hand. And, unfolded, each contains a little verse or motto professing undying love or admiration. Eventually, she looks up enquiringly at Miss Paulson.

“It is Valentine’s day, Lucy. Most teachers get a few Valentines from their pupils — especially the younger teachers. I’m told that one may reasonably expect to receive half a dozen. I seem to have fared better than most.” Miss Paulson’s tone is one of tolerant amusement, but Lucy does not return her smile. Instead, she jumps up, shedding the pile of little notes topsy-turvy on to the floor, and stands trembling, her hands curled at her mouth, her eyes glazed with sudden tears. Miss Paulson takes her into her arms, feels her quivering, and then the sudden softening as she dissolves into passionate sobbing. Staring over Lucy’s shoulder, she sees the disarray of little folded notes upon the floor. One, upside-down, depicts two bleeding hearts transfixed by an arrow. “Poor child,” whispers Miss Paulson, stroking Lucy’s hair, “my poor, poor child...”

“Good evening, ladies,” Miss Paulson greets the members of the Scientific Society. She looks about her, delighted to see such intelligence and enthusiasm sparkling at her from so many pairs of young eyes. “Miss Carter, I am afraid we shall be keeping you busy this evening. We have here the two machines from the infirmary. One is not working very well, and the other has stopped working altogether. You must

see if you can readjust them, or whether any improvements should be made to the design.”

Carter acknowledges the request with a meek curtsy, and turns to the table where the faulty machines have been placed.

“Would you like an assistant?” prompts Miss Paulson.

“Yes, miss. Thank you, miss.” Carter whispers it, with downcast eyes.

“Would you like Shipman as usual, or someone else?”

Carter closes her eyes and nods. “Shipman would be best.”

“Very well. Shipman, will you help Carter, please?”

Shipman, too, is uncharacteristically meek. “Very good, miss,” she says with a curtsy. She sits beside Carter, who is opening the lid of one of the oscillators with a sigh.

“Everything is loose,” says Carter. “Just look at it! Everything! No wonder it won't work.”

“I'm sorry, Carter,” mutters Shipman.

“What did you say?” Carter stiffens.

“I just wanted to say that I'm sorry. I shouldn't have sent it.”

“Oh.” Carter sounds a little hurt; but then, after a pause, “Could we talk about it afterwards?”

“Afterwards?”

“Yes. I think we should talk about it.” Carter's voice is a little higher than normal.

Shipman is afraid that Carter is very angry. Her stomach becomes heavy with fear. “Very well. Afterwards.”

“Now what do you suppose has happened to this?” Carter jabs at the oscillator box with her finger.

“Why, Matron has worn it out, of course.” Despite her anxiety, Shipman cannot repress a lubricious chuckle.

“Matron?” Carter’s voice is cool. “Not Parkinson, you think?”

“Why, no. Haven’t you heard?”

“Heard? What?”

Shipman steals a glance over her shoulder to ensure that they are not being overheard. But at present, Clark is experiencing the benefits of one of the oscillators, and the others are entirely focused upon her virtuoso performance. “Miller says that Matron has been using the oscillator all the time. All the time, Carter!”

“Perhaps she is nobly testing it, to ensure that she will learn of any ill effects before they might affect one of her patients.” Carter’s lips twitch.

“No doubt.” Shipman grins and begins to relax. “Now what of this one? Should we mend it, do you think?”

“What if we didn’t?”

“It might disappear.”

“And where might it disappear to?”

“I’m sure you can think of somewhere.”

“Maybe I can.” Carter cocks her head from side to side, as if considering.

“We could say that we need to take it to Mr Jepson – to improve the design.”

“Yes.” Carter’s eyes begin to gleam behind her pince-nez.

“But you could mend it easily, as soon as you got it back to your room.”

“I *could*,” says Carter, but with a peculiar emphasis that suggests that she has other thoughts.

“And then... only you and I would know —”

“Ship,” Carter interrupts her, “could we talk about this later? Afterwards?”

Shipman looks quizzically at her. “Very well.” Carter still seems rather stiff. Her manner is not unfriendly, but Shipman cannot dismiss the possibility that Carter is boiling with anger, and her politeness the fruit of restraint.

“Let’s have a look at this one,” says Lucy, opening the box containing the other oscillator. “Hmmm... do we have a screwdriver anywhere?”

Anxiously, Shipman waits in the stair-well. She clasps and unclasps her hands in nervous agitation. What does Lucy wish to say to her? From her dark corner, she watches the other members of the Scientific Society file down the corridor past her, discussing the evening’s events as they go.

Eventually, it is quiet; but Lucy has not yet emerged. Shipman hunches her shoulders up and down, trying to relax. She takes deep breaths. In her mind, she rehearses the apologies that she hopes will prevent Lucy from utterly despising her – if, that is, she will even listen to them.

At the click of the classroom door, Shipman’s heart jumps. Despite her deep breathing, her heart is hammering in her breast. She hears Lucy and Miss Paulson speaking in an undertone. As they pass the stair-well, Lucy speaks a little louder:

“Oh! I forgot the oscillator. I’ll just go back and fetch it. I will be home in five minutes.”

“Of course,” comes Miss Paulson’s response. Shipman hears her footsteps disappearing down the corridor, and sees Lucy flit back towards the classroom. Cautiously, Shipman begins to emerge from the shadows. But then, Lucy is standing before her.

“Hello, Ship.”

“Carter, I...”

“Don't call me 'Carter.’” Lucy's voice is incisive, dangerously quiet.

“Lucy, I...”

“Ship!” Lucy raises her hand. “Say nothing. Not one word, I pray you.”

Puzzled, Shipman watches as Lucy approaches her, closer and closer. She begins to feel a little afraid; she braces herself, half expecting Lucy to strike her.

A little closer than arm's length, Lucy pauses. “Why,” she thinks, “Shipman's just a girl like me. Just another girl.” One step further forward, and with a little sigh, Lucy plants a kiss upon Shipman's mouth. Then she draws back. Shipman is motionless, apparently thunderstruck. In the gloom, her eyes are dark, beautiful. Her lips were soft. Her mouth... Lucy reaches out, takes Shipman by the waist, draws her close. She is warm, alive. Lucy turns her head and kisses again, harder, urgently, passionately. And now Shipman responds, and their bodies are warm together, bending together, alive together. And as their lips part, Lucy feels Shipman's tongue with her own. It is more thrilling than the electricity – more thrilling than anything – and Lucy kisses once more, until the tension in her loins makes her want to scream. She draws away, panting. Far away, the bell rings for the evening assembly. “I must go,” she whispers.

“But Lucy... What about the oscillator?”

Lucy gathers up her skirts. “You bring it,” she says, and rushes away.

For a time, Shipman does not move. She stands, looking at the place where Lucy had appeared, remembering how she looked; the hair drawn back into its tight bun; the fine golden chain about that lovely, graceful neck; the slim, pale fingers, reaching; the breast, warm, resilient, pressed so ardently to her own. Eventually, she

steps out of the shadows into the corridor, then turns and looks back. "It was there," she thinks, looking upward. "Under those winding stairs. That is where it happened."

"Good afternoon, Shipman," says Miss Paulson, surprised to find her at the door. "Was it me you wanted, or —?"

"Please, miss, I have something here for Miss Carter, and I wished to ask if she would like to come a-walking with me."

Miss Paulson shakes her head sadly. "I will go and ask. Shall I take it up to her?"

Shipman nods dumbly and passes the bag to Miss Paulson, who disappears inside.

A few moments later, Lucy is at the door, pale and unsmiling, her shawl about her shoulders. "Come, Ship. Let us go somewhere quiet where we can talk."

"Not the rose-garden, then."

"Too busy."

"The woods?"

"Yes." Carter lifts her skirts a little. "See: I have my boots on already." They both laugh.

For a little while, they walk side by side in silence. Occasionally, Shipman steals a glance at Lucy. And when she is sure that it is safe to do so, she takes Lucy's hand, draws her closer.

"Lucy..."

"Yes?"

"Just having you beside me, I... I'm so happy, I think I shall die."

Lucy tugs gently at Shipman's hand. They stop and turn to face one another.

“Ship, I know, but before you say any more, I... You’ve heard, haven’t you, that Miss Paulson is to leave at the end of this term?”

Shipman is aghast. “No! But Lucy, that is terrible! Why?”

“An influential parent has said that she is corrupting his daughter. It’s a question of money. Mrs Cunningham had no choice.”

“Oh Lord!”

“This is secret, Ship. Really secret.”

Shipman nods. “Of course, Lucy.”

“But that is not the only reason.”

“Why, what else?”

“You know about Carry...”

“Oh, Carry is madly in love with her, of course...”

“Ship, they are lovers. Real lovers.”

“What... you mean — ?”

“Yes, Ship. They get naked together. They do the things lovers do. And if word gets out, there will be a scandal. They are going away together, Ship — away from here; away from England.”

Shipman is astonished. “I had no idea.”

Lucy turns away. “So am I, Ship. I’m going away too.”

For a moment, Shipman is silent. “What?” she asks in a small voice.

“I’m leaving England, and I’m never coming back. Never.”

Roughly, Shipman pulls Lucy round to face her. There is a tear on Lucy’s cheek.

“But that’s not possible. That’s just not possible.”

“I’m sorry, Ship. I must go. I really must go.”

“But Lucy, you cannot go! What shall I do? Lucy, I...” Shipman shakes her head, blinks away the tears, waves her hand. “Look around you! Look at the trees! Do you not see the buds appearing? Do you think that I could endure to see the green leaves without you beside me?” She cannot suppress a sob. “Don’t you understand?”

Lucy’s face is wet with tears. “It will be hard for me, too, Ship – terribly hard. But I have a job. A teaching job. It’s money, you see, Ship. I have found a proper job with proper money. I shall be able to have my own house, my own clothes. And I shall be able to live how I please. It’s my only chance. It’s all I’ve ever hoped for. Don’t you see? I must do it.”

Shipman looks down solemnly. Shuddering, Lucy struggles to suppress further tears, steels herself to endure her despair. Shipman is breathing deeply, her eyes closed, her fists clenched as if summoning strength. But when she looks up at Lucy once more, her eye is clear, brilliant. She beckons. “Come, Lucy. Just a short way.”

“Why? Where?”

“Just over here. Come.” Shipman leads her to a great beech tree, no great distance off. “Turn,” she says, pressing Lucy’s back to the smooth trunk. “Lucy, I love you.”

And then Lucy finds herself showered with passionate kisses, a most gentle, loving hand upon her breast. “Oh no, oh no,” she protests after a while, “Ship, you’re making me want you. I don’t... O Lord! I don’t want...”

“You shall be a teacher, Lucy,” murmurs Shipman between kisses, “and you shall have your job. I shall come too. I shall be with you. I shall help you.”

“O Ship, Ship!” Lucy cannot help laughing through her tears. “Stop those naughty hands!” She slaps them away. Then, becoming more serious, she turns aside. “Why should you leave everything? Here, I have nothing. When we are gone, there

will be no one in England who cares for me — save you. But you: you have your family. You are surrounded by those who love you. You cannot give all this up, just for me. If you came away, you would soon be miserable. I know it.”

Shipman embraces Lucy from behind. “Lucy, you don’t understand. I love you. You are all I want. And now I’ve got you, I shall never let you go. Let me show you, Lucy.”

Feeling Shipman’s hand teasing her breast, Lucy begins to struggle. “No Ship! No! Aha!”

“Let me show you, dear Lucy, how much I love you.”

“Ship...” Lucy breaks away, and turns to face her. “Ship, if I were to let you, and you ever, ever left me, you know you would break my heart.”

“Dear, I will never leave you. Never!” Shipman is all eagerness; but slowly, sadly, Lucy shakes her head.

“O Ship! Dear Ship! I don’t believe you know what you are saying.”

“And I don’t believe you know how much I love you, Lucy. Let me show you.”

“Not now! Not here! No!” Laughing, Lucy jumps away from Shipman’s marauding fingers.

“When? Where?” Shipman chases her, catching her by the shoulders.

“O Ship, stop it! Haha! Stop it, you crazy thing!” Shipman’s lips are on her neck, nibbling at her ears – and Lucy’s desire is beginning to overwhelm her judgment.

“Let me, darling Lucy! Just tell me when I may show you...”

“No... Stop it... No!” Lucy squeals the last word, and again jumps away, laughing. But then she is solemn once more. “I am afraid, Ship. I’m afraid you’ll drop me, or toy with me, just as you toy with all the other girls.”

Shipman presents a picture of outraged innocence. "The other girls? Why Lucy, you make it sound as if there were hundreds. I've only toyed with... well..."

"O Ship, be serious! – I need to think." Lucy shakes her head slowly, as if to clear it. "I need more time, Ship. And so, I think, do you."

"Very well. I shall consider. But really, Lucy, you are scarcely fair to me."

"Why? How so?"

"I do not even know where you are going. To Paris? Rome? Timbuctoo? I have no idea. You have told me nothing."

"Why, then I shall tell you." Lucy takes both Shipman's hands in hers. "But it is to be a secret, Ship. I do not want my parents ever to find out."

"Very well. But you can tell me, surely?"

"I am going to Russia, Ship. To Saint Petersburg. I shall be teaching mechanics and mathematics. And I am to receive two hundred roubles – in silver."

"In silver?" Shipman's eyes are wide in astonishment. "That sounds as if it might be a very great deal of money. Why – two hundred a year!"

"Oh no, Ship. Two hundred per month."

Shipman's mouth falls open in amazement. "Per month?"

Lucy looks away, afraid to see the beauty in Shipman's startled eyes. "It is a professor's salary, Ship. I'm going to be a professor."

Shipman beams at her. "Lucy... You are not only clever and rich: you are also beautiful, and I want to kiss you."

"No!" Lucy begins to run, but Shipman is upon her in an instant.

It is perhaps an hour later that Miss Paulson looks up from her work at the sound of voices, raised in altercation. At first it is difficult to catch the words, but

terms such as “governor” and “escapement” seem to feature large in the debate. It is with a half-smile that Miss Paulson hears the scuffle on the doorstep, and sees the door judder open.

“No of course not, you idiot — Oh. Hello, Miss Paulson.”

“Hello, Lucy.” Lucy turns away. “Till later, then, Miss Shipman.”

“Thank you for your company, Miss Carter.”

Lucy closes the door, and stands leaning against it, as if to hold it closed. She is panting slightly.

“Well! It is nice to see you with some colour in your cheeks, Lucy. Whatever have you been doing?”

“Oh,” Lucy blushes and studies the toe of her boot. “We were just discussing the means of regulating clockwork.”

“Clockwork?”

“Yes.”

“Is that... quite all you have been doing, Lucy?”

Lucy blushes and waggles her toe. Miss Paulson fancies that she can just see the outline of a nipple pointing the blue cloth at Lucy's breast. “No,” she admits huskily.

“Look at yourself in the glass, child.”

“I... I don't like to.”

Miss Paulson uses her classroom voice. “Lucy, do as I say.”

Obediently, Lucy goes to the mantel and tilts the looking-glass in its stand. “Is that really me?”

Miss Paulson rises and stands behind her. “Yes, child.”

Lucy makes an ugly grimace at herself. Then she smiles, turning a little to left and right. "Oh!" she says, and blushes.

"You see?"

Lucy turns to her, her palms pressed to her flaming cheeks. "Miss Paulson?"

"Yes, dear?"

"I do not know if I may allow myself to hope." She shakes her head. "I think I dare not. But there might... possibly... be one more coming with us to Russia."

Miss Paulson's face is a picture of delighted shock. Holding out her arms, "O Lucy, I am so overjoyed, truly, so overjoyed..." she cries, and soon finds herself enfolding a weeping Lucy in her arms yet again. But this time, the tears are tears of joy.

"Look! See what I have written!" Shipman greets Lucy Carter in the study-room.

"What is it? – Oh! 'Tis in French!"

"You must address it and send it to your uncle. I have written of Miss Paulson's work with electricity, do you see?"

"Yes, but why?"

"Dear, of course Miss Paulson may find a situation as a teacher of English. Why, so might I. But just think of what great interest her expertise with electricity might be to a foreign power. Who knows what advantages might spring from it? Here in England, or in France, there might be a hundred or more with Miss Paulson's knowledge; but not there, surely."

"I suppose you are right."

“Would not their academies vie with one another to attract a scientist of her experience? This is what I have written, and this you must send at once.”

“Then... Miss Paulson might be a professor, too?”

“Of course!”

“Why did I not think of it?”

Shipman straightens up and looks fondly on her friend. “Lucy... Your imagination works in certain very special spheres. I, on the other hand, am an all-round genius.”

Lucy laughs. “Ship, I must go. Miss Paulson wishes me to pay a visit to Mr Jepson.”

“Oh?”

“It seems that very many of the oscillators are not working properly, and in consequence, have, ah...”

“Mysteriously disappeared?”

Lucy nods. “So Miss Paulson intimates. We are to see if Mr Jepson can make one or two more, with certain improvements.”

“And what of... what of your other idea? I mean the clockwork generator?”

“Ah yes! I should have forgotten the drawings! Look here!” Lucy hurries to her desk, and withdraws a sheaf of papers on which numerous diagrams have been painstakingly executed. “Don't you see, Ship? The faster it turns, the greater the current in the rotor. But if we time it correctly, then as the current grows, the magnetic field will repel against these magnets, here and here.”

“But that will slow the movement of the rotor.”

“It will. And thus it will regulate the speed, do you not see? And it will be without friction, and so entirely silent, and without heat!”

“Why, Lucy, that is most ingenious. But what will you do with it?”

“Aha!” Lucy’s eyes are shining, and she clasps the sheaf of papers to her breast. “I wish to see, first, if my suspicions are correct.”

“What suspicions?”

“Ship, I really must go.”

“Lucy...”

“Mm?”

“May I come too, do you think?”

“I do not see why Miss Paulson would object.”

Shipman looks into Lucy’s eyes. “And what of you, Lucy? Would you object?”

“Will you be good, Ship?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Do you promise not to keep touching me, and making me want you?”

Shipman feigns indignation. “I? Would I ever do such a thing?”

Lucy looks at the clock. “Heavens! She will be waiting. We must hurry!”

Miss Paulson can scarcely conceal her amusement as she accedes to Carter’s blushing request, and moments later, the trap makes its way out of the school yard with two very prim, but bright-eyed, young ladies upon the seat. It is a pleasant day, almost warm: spring is not far off, and the trees are loud with birds. Once she is out upon the road, Miss Paulson turns briefly to look at her two passengers, who are deep in conversation about generators. Both have their hands upon the seat, their fingers almost touching. Miss Paulson smiles as she drives. When Lucy returns from her afternoon walks with Shipman – every afternoon these past few days – her hair often seems somewhat dishevelled, and though the pair seem to talk of nothing but mechanical and electrical design, she suspects that in the woods, a certain amount of

kissing may be going on. This suspicion seems well-founded, for Lucy's nightly exercises have lately become remarkably vigorous and protracted. "Ah!" thinks Miss Paulson to herself, "the sweet exuberance of youth!" And with a self-indulgent sigh, she gives herself up to thoughts of Carry.

It is perhaps fortunate that, as they approach the town, Miss Paulson notices that the conversation behind her has dwindled into silence. "Ahem!" she coughs unnecessarily loud, "I see we are approaching the town at last." She turns just in time to see Shipman and Carter spring apart. Shipman is ramrod-straight, all innocence. But Lucy is blushing, flustered and quite obviously a young lady who has been kissed.

At the clockmaker's, as Miss Paulson explains what is needed, Mr Jepson has an almost disobliging air. He says "Well, hum..." and "Maybe," until Miss Paulson is forced to ask, "Are you able to undertake this work for us, Mr Jepson? Or are you trying to tell me something?"

"Well, miss, as a matter of fact... You see, I have been approached."

"Approached?"

"By a company, miss. They want me to do some work for them – something to do with a manufactory. It's a lot of money, miss. It seems I'm a made man. But... they said as I would not be doing more work for the school, miss – not directly. That was what they said. Not directly."

"But this is terrible! What are we to do?"

"They said the work would have to be done by the company from now on."

Miss Paulson turns away. "I see. Then you must tell me how I am to proceed."

"Just a moment, Miss Paulson," Shipman interrupts. "Mr Jepson, would there be any obstacle to your undertaking other private work?"

"Well... I'm not sure."

Carter opens her bag. "If I were able to pay directly, in advance, this very moment?"

"Very well... Put like that, miss... I suppose, if we were to keep it confidential..."

Carter looks up. "If you won't tell anyone, Mr Jepson, we shall not."

He nods. "Very well."

"I have a new design. Kindly take a look at it."

Mr Jepson takes the sheaf of papers with their neat diagrams and lays them out upon the counter. "I see. And... that goes there. I see. And this would be — ?"

"You will see that I have written the gauges here," replies Carter, pointing with a finger. "You must remember that this should run for at least ten minutes between windings."

"Interesting. Interesting. Yes, I believe I could do this for you," says Mr Jepson, looking up.

"How much?" asks Shipman.

"Five pounds," comes the response.

"Five pounds?" Shipman looks at him imploringly, working her eyelashes in such a way that the stoniest of hearts would surely melt.

"Well... maybe four pounds ten," Mr Jepson growls, looking away.

"O thank you! Thank you!" Shipman jumps and claps her hands. "Do you have that much, Lucy?"

"I have it... here," and she puts down four bright sovereigns upon the counter, and four silver half-crowns.

"Now perhaps you could write down for me the address of this company with which it seems we must do business," Miss Paulson reminds him; and when this is

done, she reads it again and again, seemingly at a loss for words. And even as they leave the shop, and return to their trap, she looks at it continually, as if in disbelief.

“What does it say, miss?” asks Shipman, goaded by curiosity.

“The Walmsley Manufacturing Company, of Clerkenwell.”

“Did you say ‘Walmsley,’ miss?”

“Yes, Shipman.”

“Why, what skullduggery is this?”

“I should like to know myself. I wonder if Carry knows anything about it.”

“It would be interesting to find out, miss.”

Little more is said on the return journey, until Miss Paulson finds herself obliged to cough, and to make the quite unnecessary comment, “We appear to be approaching the school now – Shipman.” She is gratified to see that this time, even Shipman is blushing.

When, next afternoon, Shipman pays her customary visit to Miss Paulson's cottage, Miss Paulson greets her with every appearance of uncontainable anger.

“Why, Miss Paulson – what is the matter?” Shipman pales, remembering that her feelings had perhaps carried her a little too far the previous afternoon. “Oh – is it about — ?”

Miss Paulson's expression is grim. “You'd better come in, Shipman.”

Miss Paulson seats herself at the table, and takes up the letter again. Shipman stands, waiting respectfully. When Miss Paulson does not speak, Shipman feels obliged to.

“Is Miss Carter — ?” she falters.

Miss Paulson looks up at her, and removes her pince-nez. She sighs. "I am sorry, Shipman. I am somewhat distracted at the moment. Miss Carter is in her room, and she is almost as angry as I am, though I suspect for a different reason."

"Why? What is it?" Shipman has been expecting to receive a reproach, but none seems forthcoming.

"She has found a mistake in her design, Shipman. Something that means that the machine Mr Jepson is making will be quite useless. Unfortunately, we cannot have the trap this afternoon, and so it will not be until tomorrow that we can attempt to put things right. We will call her down in a moment. There is a matter that I suppose I must discuss with you both. However, I wanted to speak to you alone."

"Yes, miss."

Miss Paulson's voice sinks to an undertone. "I... have become aware, Shipman, of a certain... tenderness between you and Miss Carter."

"Yes, miss."

"I suppose I may as well call her Lucy, may I not?"

Shipman nods.

"Shipman... I care about Lucy. I cannot bear to see her trifled with."

Shipman nods once more.

"You know, I believe, that she is to leave England at the end of term?"

"Yes, miss. She told me so."

"This emotional attachment is making things very difficult for her."

Shipman's eyes are downcast. "And also for me, miss."

"I wonder if you know how much you seem to mean to her. What do you intend to do?"

Shipman looks up, suddenly determined. "I have a letter already written, miss. I have not sent it yet. It is not very easy..." – she swallows painfully – "to say goodbye to those you love. My little brothers... mamma... papa..." she begins to weep. "I have told them that I shall be devoting my life to good works among the poor." She smiles through her tears. "I know that it will console them to believe that."

Despite herself, Miss Paulson cannot suppress her laugh. "Shipman, Shipman..." She shakes her head.

"I cannot bear to lose her, Miss Paulson. My mind is quite made up. When you sail for Russia, I will be on board."

"Have you told her this?"

"Yes, of course. But I do not think she believes me."

Miss Paulson looks anxiously toward the door. "Walmsley will be here in a moment. And when she comes, there is another matter which we must discuss. But first: Lucy is a very brave young woman." Shipman nods. "You will have to be very brave too, Ship."

"I know."

"I confess that I myself am frightened. I do not know what the future holds for me — for all of us. There are some in this world who do not approve of women like me." She looks into Shipman's eyes. Shipman does not look away. "— Of women like us, Ship. I shall be going with Walmsley — with Carry. There may be scandal, which is why we, like Lucy, are resolved to leave in secrecy. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Miss Paulson."

"No, Ship – I'm Georgie, now. And Walmsley is Carry. We are all saying goodbye to our old families." Georgie shrugs, holding out her open palms. "We must

all be brave. Together, it will be easier. We must be a new family to one another. A family of sisters." She opens her arms, and Shipman embraces her.

"Georgie."

"I will go up and see her. I will tell her you're here. And Ship — ?"

"Yes?"

"She needs you, Ship. Without being indelicate, I... The walls are thin. Ours is not an easy life, you know. There are not very many joys. Perhaps we should take them while we can."

"You mean..."

"Sometimes, Carry visits me here. Being Head Girl, she can do things most cannot."

"Of course."

"She may be able to help. We shall see."

"That would be very kind. If... If Lucy should wish it. But I do not see how..."

"Sometimes you just have to be brave, Ship. You just have to do it, and risk rejection. Somehow I doubt that she will reject you."

Shipman nods soberly.

"I will go up to her now."

Georgie finds Lucy working on the floor, diagrams scattered about her.

"How does it go?"

"Huh! I think I've seen a way. I think so."

"Perhaps Ship can help."

"Ship?" Lucy scrambles to her feet, brushing off her dress.

"She is downstairs. She has come to see you. But first..."

"Yes, Miss Pau... — ah, Georgie?"

“I’ve spoken to her. She has said yes, and I believe she means it. She is coming with us, Lucy.”

“Oh!”

Georgie steps aside so that Lucy may fly past, and descends the stairs at a very much more leisurely pace.

But when, a few moments later, Carry makes her breathless entry, she scarcely notices that Shipman and Carter are hand-in-hand.

“You wished to see me, Georgie — er, Miss...” she glances anxiously in Shipman’s direction.

“Georgie,” says Georgie firmly, taking the letter from the table. “We are among friends. Now Carry, I have had some strange and rather unpleasant news, and I regret to say that it appears to be connected with the name of Walmsley.”

“Why? What has happened?” Carry is wide-eyed.

“I take it, then, you are not aware of this?”

“Why no.”

“I received this letter today from the Walmsley Manufacturing Company. It is of interest to all our scientists, but particularly, I fear, to Lucy and to Ship. Let me tell you what it says.”

Part IX

“Let me give my understanding,” says Carry after Georgie has finished reading.

“This letter says, first, that we may not make any more oscillators.”

“Nor generators,” adds Shipman.

“Nor generators. And, in second place, that any design we – the Scientific Society – may conceive, must be yielded up to my father’s company.”

“That is, any electrical design,” Shipman corrects her. “I believe that may be important.”

“But why? Why should we do this?” Lucy is utterly bewildered.

“It seems that now it is a matter of law, Lucy.” Georgie turns the letter over in her hand. “They have obtained letters patent, which by law prevents anyone but themselves from making such devices.”

“But it was *our* idea!” Lucy is indignant.

Georgie nods in sympathy. “But you see, Lucy, the company is repaying the school. In return, they will provide all necessary equipment, and will also endow the study of science at Hepplewhite in perpetuity.”

“Well! I still think that is most unfair,” pronounces Shipman.

“I know what my father would say,” says Lucy grimly. “I have heard of this before, when he was talking with his colleagues. I think we have been fucked, good and proper.”

Shipman is entranced. “Oh! That’s a nice word. I don’t believe I’ve heard that before. It sounds so... so *violent*.”

Georgie is blushing. “Ah — I don’t think that is quite right, Lucy.”

"Why, what does it mean?" asks Shipman, ever curious.

"I think the word refers to something that a man does to a woman – something indelicate, that puts her into, ah, difficulty."

"Well, that is precisely what has happened to us," says Carry.

"And I, for one," adds Lucy, "do not like it one little bit."

"I'll say this for Jepson," says the Duke, striding up and down in his study, "the man is quick and efficient. How long did it take him?"

"Four days, I believe," says Matson, crossing his legs negligently in the armchair. "And I understand that our... little offer was enough to persuade him to move to Askerley."

"Excellent. And he has made how many in all?"

"Twenty, your grace. We judged that twenty should suffice for durability tests."

"Durability?"

"Why yes. The original machines were stoutly made, but by using a lower grade of steel, machined to a lighter, more ethereal design, we can save some thirty per cent of manufacturing costs. If the machines prove popular, this could have a significant effect on our profits."

"Good thinking, Matson!" The Duke is impressed. "And so: to whom do we send them?"

"A half-dozen to the school, in the first place —"

"Quite so. Quite so."

"And then, to the wives of those board members – ahem – fortunate enough to be married. Her grace was kind enough to intimate that Mrs Fearnley had a

particularly wide acquaintance, and had even been kind enough to consider a quite novel method for drumming up customers.”

“What, advertising?”

“No, your grace. Private parties for women.”

“Parties?”

“Just so. Parties in which the women, *tête-à-tête*, as it were, would demonstrate the prototypes and recommend a purchase to their friends by word of mouth, d’you see?”

The Duke shakes his head doubtfully. “Damn strange ideas these women have, Matson.”

“But I think it might work, your grace. As a matter of fact, it was her grace who was kind enough to write and explain it to me. If each woman has, say, twenty friends in her female circle, and each of those has, say, another five, not in the original circle...”

“Ah, yes, I see...” The Duke stops his pacing, purses his lips and looks at the ceiling. Considering, he untwines his fingers, which have been interlocked behind his back, and rubs his chin. Matson can hear the rasping sound as he does so. “That’s quite good. Could be some interesting developments, Matson, having women involved.”

“Indeed, your grace. So, if we send one to Mrs Carter – who I am given to understand does not have a very wide acquaintance – and then, say, two to her grace, then we could send half a dozen to Mrs Fearnley, and retain three for patterns.”

“Excellent.”

“Speaking of wives, your grace – and I do not wish to speak out of turn – it occurred to me that perhaps I...”

“Ah, yes...” The Duke gathers his eyebrows into a frown, clasps his hands behind his back once more and resumes his pacing. “Unfortunately, Matson, our Carry is a dashed independent sort of filly, don’t you know.” He shakes his head. “Gals like that are a headache, I don’t mind telling you. And if that weren’t bad enough, the gal is in league with her mother. Take it from one man to another, Matson, a man doesn’t want a wife like that. Too dashed spirited, I don’t mind telling you. A hard-working man needs someone complaisant, someone who —”

“Ah, actually, your grace, I was not dreaming of making so impudent a suggestion.”

“Oh?” The Duke’s bushy eyebrow forms a caterpillar-like arch.

“No, I was thinking... the other night at dinner... there was this dashed pretty young thing waiting on us, and I thought...”

“Ah,” murmurs the Duke, holding up his hand and shaking his head, “again I must disappoint you, Matson. When you have a wife of your own, you will know what it is to interfere with domestic arrangements. Take it from me... to interfere with her grace’s staff would bring her wrath down upon my shoulders like a ton of bricks. No... but I tell you what, Matson.”

“Yes?”

“There are some dashed pretty young fillies in Askerley. And dashed complaisant, some of ‘em.” His grace’s eyes focus for a moment on a point somewhere in the middle distance. “Dashed complaisant. We could even employ a few in the manufactory. Why, good God man, you could walk up and down the lines and take your pick!”

Matson finds it necessary to adjust his trousers. “That is an exceedingly pleasant prospect, your grace. I thank you for suggesting it.”

“Humph. Don’t mention it. And now, I think we should turn to the important business. I mean, of course, where the real money awaits.”

“Ah yes, your grace. The armaments. Well, I have excellent news to give you.”

Shipman, who has been poring over an imposing foolscap document, jumps in her seat when she feels two hands descend upon her shoulders. But the little sigh behind her tells her at once whose hands they are.

“Look here, Lucy! Look at this!”

“What is it?” Lucy struggles with her pince-nez.

“I can scarcely believe it.” She tries to turn, but Lucy is so close behind her that Shipman finds her head nestled in Lucy’s delightfully warm, vibrant bosom.

But Lucy is all curiosity. “Explain!”

Reluctantly, Shipman looks down again. “This letter is from the Walmsley Company. It says that because I contributed to the design of one of the company’s products, I am to receive ten thousand shares, in trust until I am twenty-one.”

“Ten thousand!”

Shipman laughs ironically. “Of course there is a little catch.”

“A catch?”

Shipman sighs. “Is there not always? It says I must sign this declaration, to say that all my ideas belong to the company. But of course I shall sign. After all, the letter says that those shares currently have a value of approximately sixteen thousand pounds —”

Lucy claps her hands in delight. “Sixteen thousand? Why, you’re rich, Ship! Incredibly rich! Oh, how wonderful!”

“— But there's more, Lucy... It says that in a few years, if the company is successful, they may be worth ten times as much. The letter is from a Mr Fearnley. I wonder who he is.”

“O Ship, I'm so delighted!” Lucy is almost jumping up and down in her exhilaration. Shipman rises from her desk, and they stand, laughing in shared delight at this incredible stroke of good fortune.

“But Lucy,” says Shipman at length, “It was really your idea, not mine. Surely you must have had a letter, too.”

“I haven't looked. Wait a moment.” In a frenzy of excitement, Lucy hurries to her pigeon-hole to see if she, too, has received a letter; but soon returns, her face clouded. “No, I have nothing yet. Perhaps it will come in the lunch-time post.”

“Of course it will, Lucy. Of course it will.”

“Perhaps. — Ship, I am to go into town with Miss Paulson this afternoon. Would you care to accompany me?”

“Why, Lucy, you wouldn't leave me behind, would you?”

But when the friends meet in the courtyard that afternoon, still Lucy has received no letter.

“Perhaps it will come tomorrow, Lucy,” says Georgie encouragingly.

But Lucy is tight-lipped. “Perhaps,” she says in a small voice.

It is a pleasant journey for Georgie, since all around her are the first signs of spring; and when, at length, they alight outside Mr Jepson's establishment, Georgie cannot resist laughing at the two pink-cheeked, bright-eyed youngsters. “You must be careful! If you two keep staring at one another like that, everyone will jump to conclusions. Remember decorum!”

Shipman and Lucy turn apart, noses in the air, suddenly the picture of maidenly innocence. Miss Paulson gives a grunt of approval.

Mr Jepson greets them with a conspiratorial air. "I have the machine for you, Miss Carter. I've not put my mark on it, and I trust that no word of this will ever get about."

"I can assure you of my complete discretion," replies Lucy with an air of pious incorruptibility.

"Since you are here, ladies, I wonder if I might ask a favour."

"Certainly, sir, you may ask," replies Miss Paulson. "What is it?"

"You will see over there a number of devices which I have made for the company I spoke of."

"The Walmsley Manufacturing Company?"

"The same. I have been asked to send half a dozen to the school. Could I prevail upon you to take them for me?"

"That will be perfectly convenient," responds Miss Paulson. "But I see you have made a considerable number."

"I have had to work late four evenings this last week," Mr Jepson replies. "You see there twenty in all."

"And the other fourteen?"

"They are to go to the members of the board. Or rather, to their wives, as I have been told. These things are of interest to women, seemingly. I don't see the point of 'em myself."

"Ah, quite," agrees Miss Paulson.

“Excuse me, sir,” Lucy interrupts timidly, holding up the box containing her new device. “I fear that I made one tiny omission in the design. I wonder if I could ask you to drill and fix a heavy brass screw in the rotor periphery – just here.”

“A brass screw? But that would upset the balance, miss. Are you sure about this?”

“The bearings are jewelled, are they not?”

“Well, yes, but —”

“Then do it, please.”

“Very well.” Mr Jepson disappears into his workshop.

While Miss Paulson is preoccupied with the examination of a particularly handsome clock, Shipman leans over the glass counter, examining the array of new devices that Mr Jepson has made. “The Walmsley Invigorator,” she reads out loud, bemused. “Why, there is a name and address beside each box. — And, dear me, that’s curious... Lucy... would you happen to know a Mr Henry Carter?”

“That is my father’s name,” says Lucy, astonished. “What does this mean?”

“Never mind that now. Have you any paper in your bag? I did not bring mine.”

“Yes, I have some, why?”

“I’m going to write a note. Quick! Quick!”

“What are you proposing to do? I don’t understand,” says Lucy, tearing a sheet from her notebook.

“I’ll explain later. There’s no time!”

Hurriedly, Shipman scribbles a note and slips it into the box earmarked for Mrs Carter.

“What did you put?” asks Lucy; but at that moment, Mr Jepson reappears, scratching his head and carrying Lucy’s device, the mysterious alteration completed.

Only when they have carefully stowed the six oscillators, with their generators, in the trap, and are trotting schoolward once more, does Lucy press Shipman into explaining the note.

“Well, dear, after everything you told me about your parents and your sister, I thought that it would be fitting to remedy your mother’s ignorance.”

“Why – what did you write?”

“I just wrote, ‘Directions for use: for maximum invigoration, hold the cylindrical part firmly between the upper legs and turn handle briskly.’”

Lucy howls with laughter, her eyes, like Shipman’s, alight with mischief. “Ship, you bad, bad girl!”

Shipman is gloating. “I am sure that after a few little sessions, she will never wish to be parted from it! She will be as bad as Matron!”

“Ship, you are a monster!”

Seeing that a play-fight is about to break out, Miss Paulson reprimands them. “Lucy! Shipman! For shame, you two!” And then, in a quieter tone, “We are not out of the town yet.”

Shipman casts a saucy look over her shoulder. “And when we are, Miss Carter, look out for yourself,” she says in a coolly menacing tone.

“No, Ship, no!” Lucy shudders, her spine tingling. But after a few moments, she half-turns to Georgie. “There is one thing I do not understand. Why should one of those new oscillators be sent to my mother? What connexion can she possibly have with the Walmsley Manufacturing Company?”

“Surely it is obvious,” Georgie observes. “Mr Jepson said that the devices were to be sent to the wives of the directors, did he not?”

“Then that would mean... that my father is a director.” Lucy broods on the implications of this. “But if he is a director, why have I not received any shares? O Ship – Georgie – you do not think that he would do such a thing out of spite, do you? – Reward you, Ship, and not me?”

“Who can say?” Shipman shrugs. “Perhaps he holds shares which you are to inherit, Lucy.”

“Perhaps he means to make me jealous. Perhaps he wants to wound me, because he knows that I hate him. But I don't care about his money! I shall have money of my own, that I have earned through my own work.”

“And there is something else, Lucy,” says Shipman thoughtfully. “You have not signed a document, as I have, granting all your rights to the Company. Surely that means that you are free to do whatever you wish with your ideas.”

“Why yes, that is so.” Lucy ponders, and gradually her face relaxes into a thoughtful smile.

“And when I'm twenty-one, Lucy,” murmurs Shipman quietly, so that only Lucy can hear, “and my shares come to me — why, they will be yours, too.”

“Why do you say that, Ship?”

“Because we're going to be together, Lucy. We will have been together for more than three years. And we will share everything.”

Lucy's eyes are violet pools of tenderness. Fortunately, they are out of the town now, and none to see their embrace. Lucy's bag tumbles unheeded from her grasp.

“Do you think it is damaged?” Shipman asks a few minutes later.

“What?” breathes Lucy.

“Your new generator. It fell.”

“I don't care, Ship. Kiss me again.”

Soon, Shipman's hand is doing wonderful things at Lucy's breast.

"O Ship... O don't, I beg you..." Lucy closes her eyes and gulps involuntarily. Something strange is happening down below. She wriggles her hips in anguish. "Ship, I don't think I can bear this any more." She crosses her legs.

Shipman watches her fondly.

Lucy's face is wrinkled in anguish. "Ship, I want you to... O Ship, I can't... Hold me, Ship. Hold me." The trap passes over a patch of rough road; and Lucy holds Shipman very, very tight.

Shipman's smile radiates tenderness. "O my darling Lucy," she murmurs. "O my darling."

"Ahem!" coughs Georgie; and soon they are rattling into the school courtyard. Georgie smiles at the solicitude with which Shipman helps Lucy down from the trap.

After they have carried the new oscillators to the laboratory, Shipman draws Lucy aside. "Can you leave the front door unfastened tonight?"

Lucy blushes. "Why, Ship?"

"Benson is in charge of our dorm tonight. She will not make trouble for me, I think. I shall try to slip out."

"O Ship, be careful! I'd be mortified if you should get into trouble."

"Don't worry about me, Lucy," comes the airy reply.

In the cottage after dinner, Lucy clears her throat and makes a timid request.

"Georgie? Would it inconvenience you if... I were to take a bath?"

Georgie can scarcely conceal her amusement. "But it's Thursday!"

"Yes, I know," Lucy admits shyly, "but all the same..."

“Why no, child, it would not inconvenience me at all. There’s plenty enough in the copper, I think. Let me help you with the tub.”

And when, a quarter of an hour later, Lucy is finally huddled in the tub before the fire, Georgie can hardly contain her delight – for there is little doubt in her mind what this sudden desire for cleanliness might portend. “Like a child bride on her wedding night,” she thinks, blinking back sentimental tears. “Lucy, dear,” she says, “let me help you, just this once.” And when, with a thankful little sigh, Lucy relinquishes the sponge, “Lord! What a little vixen!” Georgie thinks, her eyes momentarily arrested by the state of Lucy’s nipples. “Come, darling. Stand up. Let me do you properly.” Georgie is a little rough, like a tigress licking her cub. “Bend over, dear. Right over. That’s it.”

“O Georgie!”

“You have to be properly clean everywhere, dear. We don’t talk about it, we just do it.” And Georgie makes sure that Lucy is quite, quite clean.

Later, distracted from her papers, Georgie looks up to see Lucy in her night-gown, dusting, arranging things neatly on the mantel-piece, straightening the covers of the chairs – and humming a tune as she does so. “Why Lucy, what are you doing?” she laughs.

“Oh — just tidying...”

“How thoughtful.” Georgie yawns and stretches. “I do believe I shall retire early. I’m feeling remarkably tired.” She stands and pushes her chair neatly against the table. “I’ll leave you to fasten the door, Lucy.”

Despite her efforts to stay awake, Georgie is half asleep when her door begins to open; but at once she raises herself, suddenly alert.

“Carry! What on earth are you doing here?”

“Aren't you pleased to see me?”

“Why, yes, but —”

Carry turns away and begins shedding her clothing. “I want you, Georgie. I need you.”

“Hush! Be quiet, my darling! Be especially quiet!” Georgie draws back the bedclothes.

“I shall be especially quiet in just a few minutes. But first...” Carry pounces on to the bed with a determined thump. “First, I want to...”

“O Carry, my darling, my poor darling...”

And, perhaps fortunately, it is ten minutes later – ten very full minutes, in which tongues and teeth and fingers have known no law – when both are lying still, heads spinning, that they hear the cautious click of the downstairs latch.

“Hush!” whispers Georgie.

“Who is it?” breathes Carry.

“I think this is Shipman.”

“Ship!” Lucy sits upright in bed, utterly astonished. “For one moment, I thought you were a boy.”

“Ha!” Shipman sets down the candle she had lit downstairs; and then, by its light, she twirls round, holding out her hands at shoulder height.

“You do look like a boy! O my goodness, Ship, where did you get them?”

“I made them. I made them at home at Christmas. And while I was making them, I was dreaming of this moment.”

“But they're... they're trousers!”

Shipman looks down in mock incredulity. "Why, so they are. Who would have thought it?"

Carter swings her legs out of the bed and puts her feet on the floor. "They're so... so beautifully tight! What fabric is that? I cannot see."

"I made them of velvet, Lucy. Black velvet. Feel them."

Cautiously, Lucy reaches out her hand and gives them an experimental stroke. "O Ship, that's lovely!" She strokes more. "Why, I don't believe you are like a boy – not quite."

"Do you like them, Lucy?"

"They're lovely! And beautifully warm!" Lucy's hands roam freely, much to Shipman's delight; but suddenly she draws back. "Ship... Does this mean — ?"

"Yes, Lucy. My mind is quite made up. I have already written to my parents, and will post it just before we sail."

"What explanation did you give?"

"I told them that I was devoting myself to a worthy charitable endeavour in the east, for the betterment of the daughters of impoverished gentlewomen."

Lucy splutters into laughter. "And whom did you have in mind?"

"The lovely daughter who is currently touching my... Lucy, Lucy, I must take them off at once."

"But why?"

"They will get into a terrible mess if I do not. The velvet will be ruined! Help me! Quick!"

Lucy unpicks the buttons at the front, and parts the flaps to reveal Shipman's lower belly, smooth, flawless, the lustrous skin reflecting the dull glow of the embers in the grate. And there, sure enough, the dark tangle, the topmost part of the enchanted

forest. Lucy bends to kiss, and fills her nostrils with the heady fragrance. "O Ship, Ship, so lovely..." Lucy claws the magnificent trousers over Shipman's hips and down her legs, until Shipman can step out of them. "Turn away. Let me just look," she says, her eyes never leaving the delectable curves of Shipman's posterior, of which she has dreamed for so many nights past. Obediently, Shipman turns to face the wall. Lucy stands and tugs her night-gown over her head.

"Lucy... What are you doing?"

"Do you... do you want to be naked with me, Ship?" The bed creaks.

Shipman's breath catches. For a moment, she can only nod. "More than anything."

Sweetly, Lucy lets out a sigh. "Come, then."

With an answering sigh, Shipman unbuttons her blouse, shrugs it from her shoulders and sets it down on the table. Then she unlaces the fleeced under-vest and discards it in turn.

"Oh..." gasps Lucy. For a long time, Shipman stands immobile, feeling Lucy's entranced gaze like a thousand fingers upon her nakedness. "O Ship, you're lovely."

Shipman turns, her eyes pools of soft darkness, her long raven-black tresses doing little to conceal the jaunty, shocking tenderness of her sweetly jutting breasts.

"Do you like me, then?" Shipman asks it modestly, but the hunger in Lucy's deep violet eyes is answer enough.

"O Ship... please..." whimpers Lucy, drawing back the bedclothes. And now it is Shipman's turn to be entranced.

"O my sweet love! Lucy, Lucy, let me look at you..." Shipman tears back the covers, and is amazed at the jewels that are revealed. "Why, they're beautiful!" She springs on to the bed with such cat-like poise that it scarcely creaks. "There..." she

grunts as she captures one of Lucy's legs between her own, "Now I'm going to show you... just how much... I love you."

"O you feel so nice! O Ship, darling!" Lucy's fingers explore the smoothness of Shipman's cheek, her neck, her shoulder, her back. "I don't want to lie in bed alone ever again!"

"Hush! Just tell me again how much money you will be paid when we go to Russia."

Lucy inhales sharply, surprised. "Why do you ask that?"

Shipman gives a low, soft laugh and kisses her. She places her finger between Lucy's breasts and draws it slowly downwards. "Just tell me... how much?" Her voice is warm with suppressed amusement.

Sensing that Shipman is joking, Lucy gives a timid smile. "Two hundred roubles."

"In silver?"

Lucy nods, squirming at the delicious sensation of Shipman's slowly descending finger.

"Every month?"

"Mmh." Lucy nods again.

"I shall get more, Lucy." Shipman's voice is teasingly mysterious; her finger begins to circle Lucy's navel.

"Uh... O Ship, you're..." Lucy grasps Shipman's naughty hand and holds it still. "You will get more? What do you mean?"

"My roubles will not be silver. They will be... pink." Shipman's finger wriggles in Lucy's grasp.

Lucy giggles. "Pink? What do you mean?"

"I shall receive two pink roubles every day — at least once a day. Perhaps twice or three times, or even —"

Lucy laughs again. "Ship, you're crazy. There's no such thing."

"Oh yes there are, my sweet darling Lucy, and they're right before my eyes: two pink roubles – my advance payment."

"Where?"

"Here..."

"O Ship! O Lor!" And with many such high-pitched exclamations, Lucy softly proclaims her surprise as Shipman's very proficient suckling fills her entire body with a host of wholly unexpected pleasures.

"Just listen to her, Carry," whispers Georgie next door. "Poor lamb. I don't think she has ever been loved before. Not truly."

"What do you think Shipman is doing to her?"

"Whatever it is, Carry... O darling... Do it to me!"

Shipman has quietened her lover by slipping a finger into her mouth, which Lucy has been sucking instinctively with all the fervour that Shipman has lavished upon her breast. But now, Shipman begins to explore Lucy's mouth, until the surfeit of pleasure obliges Lucy to squeal in her throat, and struggle to agitate her hips. In her desperation, Lucy reaches down to pacify Elsie, who for want of attention has begun to clamour as importunately as Lucy herself from its abundance. Shipman anticipates her move, however, and imprisons her arm:

"No, darling, no."

"Ship, I want to..."

"I know, love. You want to come. And now you shall. Just close your eyes and feel how much I love you... Dear Lord in heaven, you're wet!"

Lucy whips her head from side to side, maddened by the gentle sliding of Shipman's fingers.

"Hey, hey!" Shipman stills her hand for a moment. "Calm down, love. I'm being gentle. Just feel how gentle I am."

"O Ship!" Lucy is beginning to shudder.

Shipman stills her hand once more. "You're so beautiful down there, Lucy. I can't believe it. I just can't believe it." She shakes her head. "I don't know how many quims I've felt – it must be thousands and thousands – but none, not one as luscious as yours." She moves her hand again, and Lucy lets out a tortured gasp. She needs more, much more of this wonderful pleasure, but Shipman has her so firmly that she can scarcely move her hips. "We're going to go now, Lucy," Shipman whispers. "Smoothly, just like this..."

Lucy becomes rigid now; her tremor tells Shipman that, no matter how gentle she is, the end is near. Unhurried, and with infinite tenderness, Shipman smooths the slippery wetness on to Lucy's wonderfully engorged prominence, delighting in its cushiony resilience. Lucy's breath grates; she struggles not to cry out in joyous exhilaration as wave after wave of intoxicating delight vibrates throughout her body, each more tantalizingly beautiful than the last. Just a momentary increase in pressure, and Lucy's face crumples into the agonized frown that betokens the very extremity, the almost-pain of intolerable pleasure. Shipman begins to shower her with kisses. "O yes, my sweet darling, my lovely darling," she croons, beside herself with delight; and then, when Lucy lets out a great gust of breath, and a shudder that arouses a storm of protest from the bed-frame, "O, my beautiful, beautiful darling."

"Oh!" moans Lucy, transported, "Oh!" as her womb heaves its rapturous, ever-slowing sarabande of deep-departing ecstasy. And then, with a little hiss, she casts

herself on to her side and curls against Shipman, holding her as tight as her strength allows. Shipman caresses Lucy's hair, her ears, her neck, as she baptizes Shipman's breasts with hot tears.

"Why, darling, you are wet at both ends! What's the matter?"

"Don't leave me, Ship," Lucy quavers in a tiny voice. "Don't leave me."

At first light, Carry knocks on Lucy's door. "Shipman?" she calls softly. There is no response. "Shipman, are you asleep?" She opens the door. The candle has burned out; by the dull glow of the fire she can just discern the two heads, face to face upon the pillow.

"Wake up! Wake up, Shipman, you ass!"

"She's awake, and she's not an ass. She's lovely," comes Lucy's soft reply. Her tone is so reproachful that Carry feels herself blushing.

Shipman whimpers.

"Do you want to go, Ship?" Lucy's voice is almost inaudible. "Mmm?"

Shipman writhes. Her voice is high and quieter still, and Carry cannot make out the words.

"Just five minutes, Carry, please."

"All right, but hurry! She'll get us both into trouble!" hisses Carry, closing the door. Downstairs, she paces up and down fretfully. After a few minutes, she hears a sequence of quiet, high-pitched moans from upstairs. She shivers.

Eventually, Shipman emerges and stumbles downstairs, bleary-eyed.

"Merciful heaven, Ship – what on earth are those?"

"What?"

"They're trousers! What on earth are you thinking of?"

“What’s the matter? Don’t you like them?”

Carry is wide-eyed with astonishment. “I’ve never...” she gulps. “My goodness.”

Shipman stares at her in silence.

But Carry recovers her presence of mind. “Come on – we must hurry.” She hastens Shipman out of the cottage. A short distance down the path, she feels the tug of Shipman’s hand, as if Shipman would turn and go back. “We can’t, Ship, we’ve got to get on.”

But she turns and sees why Shipman has stopped: a pale face at Lucy’s window, waving sadly. Shipman waves back, then turns with a sigh. Carry puts her arm round her shoulder.

“There will be another time, Ship,” she says consolingly.

Shipman remains silent until, at length, they come in sight of the main school building. Only then, she speaks. “Rules! Stupid rules! Why should we creep around like criminals, Carry? I long to be free of them!”

“Good evening, ladies,” Miss Paulson addresses her eager scientists. “As you will see, we have six new devices, courtesy of the Walmsley Manufacturing Company. This company has agreed to provide funds in perpetuity for the study of science here at Hepplewhite, and also to supply all necessary equipment. In return, we are to test the new devices and make suggestions for their improvement.”

There is a murmur of excitement. The new oscillators look very smart in their mahogany boxes. With a flourish, Miss Paulson opens the lid of one of them. “Ladies, gather round and see,” she says grandly. “Here is the generator, and here the oscillator, in this long cylinder.”

Fascinated, the young ladies point and murmur in astonishment. The generator is very small, its handle slender. And although more than one of the young ladies comment on how graceful it looks, the majority are more interested in the oscillator, with its extraordinary cylindrical shape. There are a number of nervous titters. Eventually, French plucks up the courage to ask a question.

“Please, miss, why is the oscillator made in that funny shape?”

“To be honest, French, I do not know.”

There are more titters.

“It’s not very... discreet, is it, miss?” asks Smythe.

“Discreet? Why, whatever do you mean?”

“Oh — only that...” Smythe pauses to marshal her thoughts. “Something like that would be very... conspicuous about one’s person.”

“It would not fit neatly into a ladies’ bag,” adds French.

“Perhaps not,” concedes Miss Paulson. “Nevertheless, we shall test it. We are asked to test both its efficacy and its durability.”

“Durability, miss?” asks Carry.

“Yes, Miss Walmsley. We have found that Shipman and Carter’s original designs, although effective, did have the fault that certain components worked themselves loose after a time.”

“Yes, miss, please miss,” says Shipman, “but only, I think, after a very considerable amount of use.” She puts great stress on the words “very considerable”.

“Perhaps so, Shipman,” concedes Miss Paulson, struggling to suppress a smile.

“But miss, excuse me, miss, I thought that Carter’s oscillators were coming back from the infirmary for adjustment after only one or two days.” Clark’s observation elicits general chuckling, and Miss Paulson is swift to restore order.

"I do not know where you heard that, Clark, and I do not see what business it would be of yours, even if it were true."

"I'm sorry, miss," says Clark, abashed.

"And now I think we should test the new device," says Miss Paulson briskly. "And since Miller demonstrated the effectiveness of the Carter model so beautifully for us at the meeting before last, perhaps she would be the best person to evaluate the new model."

Accordingly, Miller is positioned in a chair, holding the unwieldy cylinder to her most sensitive place. Kershaw holds her steady from behind and Benson from in front; and while Clark monitors her pulse, French takes charge of the generator. She begins to turn the handle gently, and almost at once the cylinder begins to emit its curious buzz, rather quieter and more high-pitched than the Carter model. Everyone notices the difference at once, and none more than Miller.

"Hee hee hee! Tee hee hee hee!" she giggles, writhing in her seat. "O hee hee hee! It's tickling my... ah... ha-ha-ha..."

"Try turning the handle a little faster, French," suggests Miss Paulson.

This seems effective: Miller's hilarity subsides and soon she begins to assume the look of glazed concentration that portends the onset of the anatriptic paroxysm. However, complications ensue.

"Oh..." murmurs French anxiously. "The handle... it's bending."

"Keep going, French," Carry urges quietly.

"Oh dear," says French lamely. "It came off in my hand." She holds the broken handle up for all to see.

"Unlike Miller, it would seem," says Shipman from the rear.

Above the sound of lubricious chuckling, "I beg your pardon, Shipman. I don't believe I heard that," says Miss Paulson in an ominous tone.

"I'm sorry, miss, it was nothing," says Shipman shamefacedly.

"I should think not, indeed! Why now, French, that is curious, is it not? Had the machine been already much used, I might almost have expected it to break. But since it is quite new, I can only imagine that the handle must have been faulty. You did not seem to be using excessive force. Perhaps we should try another."

While Miss Paulson arranges to replace the oscillator, Shipman notices Benson's crimson blush. "Aha, Benson," she thinks to herself.

Fortunately, the replacement proves more durable, to the great relief of Miss Paulson and the still greater relief of Miller, whose enthusiastic whoops unmistakably proclaim the first success of the Walmsley Invigorator.

Meanwhile, working at her little desk at the back, Lucy has been testing her clockwork generator. Eventually, she sidles up to Shipman, who is watching the final stages of Miller's invigoration.

"Psst... Shipman?"

"Hello? Yes, Lucy?"

"I've tested my generator, and it's exactly what I suspected."

"What's that? Why, you're panting, Lucy. Is something the matter?"

"Not exactly. You see, it generates only a very tiny amount of current. I think that the stabilizing effect somehow drains away the power." Shipman nods. "But... there is some good news, too, Ship. I don't think it even needed that extra brass screw I had fitted."

"No?"

"Just try it, Ship. It's wonderful. Wind it up and try it."

Without drawing attention to herself, Shipman glides away with the generator and seats herself at Lucy's desk. Carefully, she winds the mechanism until she encounters the resistance. Then she moves the brake lever; and at once the little box begins to quiver. It is almost perfectly silent – there is a barely perceptible whirr – and yet it quivers and shivers in Shipman's hand. "Oh Lucy," breathes Shipman, "how delightful!" And with a cautious glance behind her, to confirm that only Lucy is observing her, she tucks the little device into her lap. "Oh... Oh Lucy! That is just beautiful!" she gasps. "It's not too quick, it's not too slow... It's... ah..."

"It's just right, isn't it, Ship?"

"Lucy, hold my hand! I think I'm going to..." And she does: once, and then almost immediately again.

"What a shame," murmurs Lucy once Shipman has recovered, "I seem to have mislaid all my drawings."

"And Mr Jepson has absolutely no recollection of making such a device."

"And the only prototype, which sadly doesn't work at all, was given by the inventor to her friend, Miss Felicity Shipman."

"With all her love?"

"Hush! — But yes, of course."

"Very well, ladies," says Miss Paulson eventually, calling the meeting to order. "Three of you have now had the opportunity to test the new device. I have been asked to report to the Walmsley Manufacturing Company, and so now I need to take note of your reactions. You first, Miller: how would you describe the Walmsley Invigorator, and how would you compare it with Carter's design?"

"Well, miss..." Miller seems to introspect for several moments, her eyes wide and unfocused. "I don't know whether it was quicker, but —"

"It was quicker, miss," interjects Carry, consulting her notes. "Only four minutes the first time – allowing for the machine breaking – and then only about... a minute between the other eight... or was it..."

"Thank you, Walmsley," says Miss Paulson, smoothly. "Do continue, Miller."

"Well... The new oscillator... I don't know... It tickled more, but somehow it didn't let me settle down," says Miller vaguely. "If you hadn't said 'enough,' I think I could have gone on all night. I just kept wanting more. And afterwards..."

"Yes?"

"Well, I just think Carter's one finished me off better."

"Thank you, Miller, I quite understand. Are you writing this down, Walmsley?"

"Ah... Yes, miss," says Carry, hurriedly making notes.

"And what about you, Kershaw?"

"I think the same. It's not so good as Carter's, miss."

"Smythe?"

"I agree."

"And the handle is too flimsy, and it's a stupid shape, miss," adds French, to general laughter.

"O Lucy," whispers Shipman, "I think I want to try it. Just imagine: coming again and again and again, and always wanting more. Isn't that a lovely thought?"

"I don't need a machine to do that to me, Ship." Lucy's face is burning, but her eye is bold. "I'll never stop wanting you, you know."

"Lucy, when can we — ?"

"Tomorrow. There's a staff meeting during recreation. We will be all by ourselves."

"O Lucy, I won't be able to sleep tonight, for longing..."

"Nor I," Lucy breathes.

"Morning, m'dear," says Henry Carter, handing Joanna a package. He coughs into his handkerchief. "Little present for you — just arrived in the post." He coughs again. "It's supposed to relieve aches and pains. Don't know if it works. Try it, and see."

"Henry, I'm worried about that cough," protests Joanna. "You ought to see the doctor, dear."

Henry nods and coughs again. He folds his handkerchief so that Joanna will not see the blood. "I have an appointment this morning."

"I am so afraid that it may be the consumption."

Henry shakes his head. "It's nothing. Only a cough." He coughs again. "I must go, or I shall be late. Don't worry, dear." He blows her a kiss and strides out.

Soon, however, Joanna's fears are forgotten as she unpacks the Walmsley Invigorator from its handsome, baize-lined mahogany box. And then, with a little cry, she finds Shipman's note. She reads it. "Ooh," she says, wonderingly. She has been feeling listless recently. Perhaps this is what she needs. But if she is to hold it between her upper legs, then...

"Simpson, I shall retire to my room," she announces.

"Very good, ma'am."

Once inside, the door fast closed, Joanna seats herself in the easy-chair and draws her skirts up to her waist. The cylinder is almost as long as her thigh. Clearly, it will be best if the end with the wires should be by her knee, and then the rounded end will go up and rest against her... place. Gingerly, she takes the generator and turns the handle. At first, nothing happens. She turns the handle a little faster, and the device

begins to make its high-pitched buzz. "Ooh!" At once she stops, momentarily terrified. It has caused a quite extraordinary tingling sensation. She closes her eyes and waits for it to pass. Then she opens her eyes again.

"How do I feel?" she asks herself. She turns her head, looking around her. Everything seems normal. "Am I reinvigorated?" she wonders. But that would be ridiculous: she operated it for only a split second. It could not possibly work so quickly.

She turns the handle again. It is such an extraordinary feeling: it is like nothing she has ever experienced before. After a second or two, she stops again, and removes the cylindrical object, looking at it suspiciously. She rises, and lays it on the bed. She can feel something different inside, now. It is a sort of weakness. Is this relaxation? She walks to and fro. She does not feel any pain, but rather a kind of lightness. She gazes at the machine for some moments. "I'm just scared, that's what I am," she thinks. "I should try it properly." Carefully, she seats herself as before and nestles the cylinder comfortably between her thighs. This time, it feels less strange, and the extraordinary tingling seems to flood throughout her thighs and belly, radiating a kind of warmth as it does so. "Mmm," she thinks, closing her eyes, continuing to turn the handle. It is curious: the warmth seems to grow and grow, now pervading her entire body. Again, she stops turning the handle. She can feel it everywhere, even in her toes. "It seems to work," she murmurs wonderingly. "I do feel invigorated. Most definitely."

She goes to her door and opens it. "Simpson!" she calls. "Simpson?"

"Yes, ma'am?" Simpson emerges from her own room and curtsseys, attentive to madam's wish.

"I have received an invigorating machine. It is for invigorating ladies. I want you to see what you think of it." She shivers. She can still feel the tingling. Really, it is not unpleasant.

"Very good, ma'am."

"Come into my room and sit yourself down."

"What is it now?" The Duchess turns from her accounts with an expression of annoyance.

"'Tis young Jemmy, your grace," Mrs Crichton says in an ominous tone. "Jemmy, tell her grace what you have done."

"I'm really, really sorry, your grace," protests Jemmy, crimson with shame. "I didn't mean to, honestly. It just came away in my hand."

"It came away?" The Duchess's voice is sweet, low and dangerous. "You've broken it already? Why, the handle has snapped off completely. What on earth were you doing?"

"Please, your grace, I was just trying it on Hilda, like you said, an'..."

"Hilda's the new one, your grace," explains Mrs Crichton helpfully. "The one that's roomed with her."

"...An' she kept saying 'more, more, faster, faster', an' —"

"So," coos the Duchess. "Do you think Hilda liked it, Jemmy?"

"Oh yes, your grace. She couldn't get enough of it, Hilda couldn't."

"So are you saying that it was her fault?"

"Well... not really, your grace. I wasn't being rough with it, or anything..."

The Duchess sighs. "I am sorry, Jemmy, but you know that we do have rules about breakages in my house. I am sure you didn't mean it. People very seldom do. But the rules must be upheld."

Jemmy gulps. "Yes, your grace," she quavers.

"Bend over the table, Jemmy. Hold her down, Clarice."

Mrs Crichton obliges.

"Skirts up!"

Mrs Crichton reaches and hitches Jemmy's skirts up to her waist, revealing a charming, naked posterior. Gently, the Duchess strokes it with her hand.

"If you had done it on purpose, Jemmy," she says, in a tone almost of commiseration, "I would of course have to spank you." Jemmy quivers in fear. "But since it was an accident..." Her voice lingers on the last word, savouring Jemmy's consternation. "Clarice, the feather duster is behind you, I think. Thank you."

"O hee hee hee! No no no! Your grace, no! Hee hee hee!"

"Hush, dear. You must try to be brave. — Just look, Clarice. What a pretty little rump! How charmingly she shivers it! — Now, Jemmy, try to be quiet and keep those lovely legs straight."

"Mmmmmhh! Ggggah!" Jemmy struggles to contain her reaction to the torture, but it is well nigh impossible. "Oooh! Eeek! Oooh!"

"Hold her, Clarice! What a lively little chick!"

Jemmy squeals again.

"Why, look at those fingers! They're scurrying like little rabbits!" murmurs her grace. "Get her hands, Clarice! That's right... There, Jemmy, shiver that pretty little rump for me... O what a little sweetheart!"

"O your grace! Oh oh oh... Hahaha... Eeeek!"

And, a minute or so later, "My goodness, Clarice, I do believe she's... No, I must be mistaken. Take a look for yourself."

"Why, your grace, she seems to be gaping."

"That is what I thought. Well I never! We had better let you go, Jemmy. Your punishment is over."

Jemmy straightens herself. Her earlier blush would be pallor compared with this.

"What do you say, Jemmy, dear?" prompts Mrs Crichton.

"Thank you, your grace. I'm sorry, your grace." Jemmy curtseys awkwardly.

"Very well, Jemmy. You are forgiven. Run along, now."

Jemmy curtseys again, hurriedly, and scurries out.

The Duchess turns her eye to her devoted personal companion. "Do you think she was truly using the machine on her little friend? Or do you suppose that she was trying it out for herself?"

"Hard to say," shrugs Clarice. "They were both in there together. That's all I know."

"I think perhaps I should take a little break from my accounts," sighs the Duchess. "I am all a-tremble. These punishment sessions are so... enervating."

"Time for a little... respite?" suggests Clarice.

"I think so. Don't you, dear?"

"Oh, I think so."

"Simpson?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Might I speak to you for a moment just as one woman to another?"

“Certainly, ma’am.”

“Sit down, Simpson.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Joanna Carter puts down the novel she has been pretending to read for the last hour. She closes her eyes and presses her fingers to her temples. “Henry has been asking me to call Lucy back from school to see him at the hospital. I believe he wishes to make his peace with her.”

“You mentioned it before, ma’am.”

Joanna is silent for a moment. She rocks to and fro, her eyes still closed. “Simpson, the truth is that Lucy fears and detests him.”

“Oh no, ma’am – surely not!” Simpson’s manner is deferential: she expresses only the shock that propriety demands. In her heart, Simpson does not see why Lucy should feel any differently towards Mr Henry Carter than she does herself.

“I am afraid it is true, Simpson. And I begin to see that, although we have had the best of intentions, we have failed both our daughters.”

“Surely not, ma’am.”

“I think so. We loved them, of course. But we were never close to them, Simpson. We acted like schoolteachers. We were cold and aloof, trying to be perfect examples.” She laughs mirthlessly. “We were trying to be like gods. We never gave them any affection. We never patted them, nor cuddled them. We tried to pretend that we were not human. Why, I was not allowed even to suckle them as babies. They were passed immediately to the wet-nurse. I had great hopes for them, of course – great hopes – as did Henry.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

"I so wanted to hold them, Simpson, when they were little. But that is not our way, is it? If I had been a countrywoman, or a tradesman's wife, I could have held them in my arms, sung them to sleep." Joanna opens her eyes, staring sightlessly into an impossible past. "But if you have money, it seems you must pay someone else to do that. Instead, you must inculcate virtue. Cold, hard virtue."

"It never seemed quite right to me, ma'am."

Joanna turns her gaze to Simpson for the first time, a little surprised. "No?"

"No, ma'am. I could never see how love could be cold." Simpson blushes a little under Mrs Carter's gaze. She looks down, ashamed at having been so forthright.

But, "Neither could I," confesses Joanna, abashed herself. Simpson looks up, then, and sees her mistress's confusion. "You know," Joanna continues after a few moments, "I believe that at heart, we all desire a little warmth – a little tenderness."

"Very true."

"And yet, why is it that we may show it only in the most exceptional circumstances, or in those few ways that society deems acceptable?"

Simpson shakes her head. "I'm sure I don't know, ma'am."

"Take one example, Simpson." Joanna becomes more excited, now. "Wives are allowed to show affection to their husbands."

"Of course."

"The wife giving warmth and affection to the husband – this is perhaps the only circumstance in which society – my society – withholds its almost universal disapproval."

"It doesn't seem right, does it, really?"

“No, Simpson.” Joanna stares into the fire. “Everybody desires tenderness, but only men may receive it. As women, it is our lot only to give it, no matter how much we may desire it for ourselves.”

“Perhaps that’s because the men are in charge, ma’am.”

Joanna sighs. “I think you are right.” Joanna’s voice becomes husky. “But it is not considered manly to show affection, Simpson. It is manly only to receive it, and then only in secret, furtively, always with a frisson of embarrassment. But why should women not receive affection?”

Simpson thinks of her parents. “I think that among people of my class, a husband may show affection to his wife.”

“Perhaps.” Joanna sighs. “Money is not always a blessing, Simpson. In our class, a husband shows only the formal appearance of tenderness.”

For a while, both women sit silent, reflecting. Eventually, Joanna speaks again.

“I do not mean to be impertinent, Simpson, but... You have not been with a man, I take it.”

“Of course not, ma’am.”

Joanna looks at Simpson. “Why do you say ‘of course’?”

“I am in service, ma’am.” Simpson’s voice is even, colourless.

“Yes.” Joanna feels momentarily uncomfortable. “Simpson... when a man is with a woman, it is for him a very pleasant thing.”

Simpson blushes, but says nothing.

“For us, it is not unpleasant, but... for men, it is I think perhaps the greatest pleasure of life. For them, that is the prize, the very pearl of tenderness – to take their pleasure from a woman. Do you understand me?”

“I... I think so, ma’am.”

"I am glad, because something you said made me think of it. You recall that I asked you to try the invigorator machine."

"Yes, ma'am." Simpson blushes scarlet at the memory.

"What you said has lodged in my mind, Simpson. You said 'It feels lovely.' You see, I begin to think that feeling is akin to the pleasure a man feels when he lies with a woman. It is the tenderness our bodies desire."

"Maybe so, ma'am."

"I think it is. But women do not receive it from men. We are doomed to be only the providers of tenderness." Joanna reflects. "The fact is, Simpson, that we have to find tenderness for ourselves."

"Very true."

"Do you know how old I am, Simpson?"

"No, ma'am."

"I am just forty years of age."

"And very well you look ma'am, if you don't mind me saying."

"I have had an easy life, Simpson. But I thank you for saying it. I was not fishing for compliments. I was only thinking..." she bites her lip. "I was thinking, that for forty years I did not know... It was that machine that taught me, Simpson. And now I know, I feel such peace. I do not know why I have had to wait so long. Can you understand this?"

"Why yes, ma'am. It is common knowledge in service, that a woman must find her own comfort as she can."

Joanna smiles. "And you thought that I was the more fortunate. Now that I know, why, I would rather have had that knowledge when I was a girl than all the

money in the world. If I had known then what I do now, I dare say I would never have sought tenderness at a man's hands."

Simpson sits impassive, digesting the implications of this statement.

"And to think that it is common knowledge among those in service." Joanna smiles and shakes her head.

"Why, yes ma'am. 'Twould not do if maids were forever looking out for young men."

"I suppose you are right."

"And besides, when you're sharing a room, or maybe a bed... At the end of a hard day... You find these things out. They say we'd go mad if we couldn't comfort ourselves..."

Joanna laughs.

Simpson is reflective, as if reminiscing. "...And sometimes, comfort one another."

"Well, why not?" Joanna appears to find the thought surprising. "Why not, indeed? Why should not we women, the providers of comfort to men, also provide it to one another? — Why, Simpson, that might be very pleasant."

Simpson turns a solemn gaze on Joanna. "It is, ma'am. It is."

"Why, then, do people of my class make such a secret of it?" Joanna gives a snort of disgust. "Why do we pretend that it is wrong? — Why, in my ignorance, I confess I..." Her hand flies to her mouth, remembering Lucy. "Oh, God forgive me! What have I done? O God!"

Simpson is bewildered, but stammers out words of consolation. "Don't fret, ma'am! What's done is done. You weren't to know, I'm sure."

“No, Simpson,” Joanna sobs, recovering herself; and as she speaks, her sorrow transforms into anger. “You are right. I did not. But he did! He knew perfectly well. That is what all men do to all women, Simpson. By depriving them of tenderness, and teaching them that it is wrong to comfort themselves – or one another – they drive us into the arms of men. They force us always to depend on them! They even make us do their work for them!”

“One might say, ‘their dirty work,’ ma’am.”

Joanna looks at Simpson, the trace of a bitter smile at her lips. “One might indeed. And now Henry would like Lucy to come to the hospital, and weep upon his breast, and succumb once more to his despotism. I confess, Simpson, I do not see why I should grant him this luxury. Does that seem unfair? — Lucy has cast us both aside, and he has said ‘Good riddance’ to me on more than one occasion. When I consider all that has happened, I think that it is better to let the bird fly free, out of the cage.”

“I don’t know, ma’am. That seems rather sad, to me.”

“Maybe, Simpson. But Lucy has learned to despise us, and I understand why. In her position, I should have done just the same. She is free of us now. If she should ever come back to me, I suppose that I would weep upon her neck. But we were separated – not at Christmas, when she fled our house for ever – but at her birth, when she was given to the wet-nurse.”

“O ma’am, that is a terrible thing.”

“Yes, Simpson, but ‘tis all in the past now, I fear. To Lucy, I am a malevolent, meddling stranger. I deserve nothing from her, and I do not see why I should act as Henry does, and pretend to revive a bond which, in truth, has never been allowed to form.”

“He has been particularly demanding, ma’am, has he not?”

“O Simpson, yes. Every day there is some fresh urgent reason for me to visit the hospital. Messages to friends, to business associates. Never to me. I might be his secretary.” Joanna’s eye is bright with anger.

“Forgive me, but the same thought had occurred to me, ma’am.”

Joanna nods. “And now he tries to manipulate me, even from his sick-bed. You realize, do you not, that this illness might prove fatal?” Her voice is cold.

“Oh, surely not, ma’am!” Simpson’s alarm is, as before, perfunctory.

“We can never tell, Simpson.” Joanna turns to her servant, now. “How old are you, Simpson?”

“Twenty-nine, ma’am.”

“H’m. I have been thinking of what might happen, if I were to be widowed.” She holds up her hand to forestall Simpson’s objections. “It is always well to plan for every eventuality. And should I become a widow, I should have a very great deal of money.”

Simpson can only nod silently.

“I had thought that it might be pleasant to travel. Rome – Florence – Venice. Of course I should need a companion. A lady must always travel with a companion. Do you think you would find such a thing congenial, Simpson?”

“O ma’am...” Simpson’s face is aglow. “Travel! — I should love... that is...”

It is a Friday afternoon in early spring. In the little gamekeeper’s cottage, in Lucy’s little upstairs room, stand two young ladies, naked as Eve in the Garden of Eden, all shame forgotten in the ardour of their embrace.

“O Ship, no, no,” cries Lucy, pulling back, her hips writhing, “My waist is so sensitive... Aha! Aha! No, stop it!”

Shipman laughs lazily, stilling her hands for a moment. "I just cannot help it, Lucy. You're such a lovely shape; your skin is so beautifully smooth. I love you too much, dear. You will just have to get used to it."

"Oh... O Ship..."

"Come, darling. I know what you like." Shipman takes Lucy by her shoulders and draws her closer, until their breasts touch. "Let our breasts kiss one another."

Lucy begins to pant. "I love this, Ship. Oh! Oh you are so beautiful." Shipman sways gently from side to side. "Ship, this is driving me mad..."

Shipman's breasts quiver deliciously as their nipples graze.

"Just look at them, Lucy. Like little soft animals, just gently touching. Titties... Nipples... Touching..."

"Ship... Ship... I'm going mad, Ship. O please, your leg... I need to..."

"There, dear, I'll hold you... You lovely wet thing. I can feel you."

"Oh Ship... Oh... Oh... Oh..." Helplessly, Lucy sobs her passion into Shipman's shoulder.

"There... There... Lie down and rest, dear..." Shipman helps her, still shuddering, to the bed.

And when at last Lucy opens her eyes, they encounter the infinite tenderness of Shipman's gaze. For a long while, they just look into one another's eyes, each little motion of the other's eye a whisper of love.

"It's just a week now, Ship," says Lucy at last. "And we shall be in our little cabin. Two little cots..."

"And we shall use only one, for the entire voyage."

"And a little port-hole beside our heads, so that we can look out together."

"And your arms around me."

“Darling...” They kiss, and Lucy’s hands begin to rove.

“O Lucy, Uhh...” Shipman parts her thighs more widely, offering herself.

“Oh... You feel so lovely...” Lucy giggles as her fingers slide, giggles with the exhilaration of Shipman’s pleasure, which she can feel as surely as if it were herself she was touching. “Slippy Shippy,” she whispers teasingly.

“Lucy, O my God...” Shipman looks into those loving, deep violet eyes, and the sweet madness rushes upon her, overcomes her again and again, on and on, until she shudders in delicious exhaustion. “Come to me,” she gasps, crushing Lucy to her. As the sweet contractions die away, she begins to flick her tongue at the breast which nuzzles her mouth. Shipman’s voice is suddenly gruff and fierce. “What was that you called me?” She flicks her tongue again, and Lucy moans. “What was that? Slippy Shippy? Is that what you called me?”

Lucy laughs naughtily. She laughs again as Shipman’s tongue tickles her nipple.

“May I remind you, sweet love,” – another lick – “that your name is Lucy? If we are going to make little jokes, little rhymes...” – Lucy squeals and laughs again as Shipman nibbles her.

When, a few minutes later, Georgie returns with Carry from the staff meeting, she hears shrieks of merriment from upstairs. They stand together, looking up at the ceiling. There is a temporary lull, and then,

“Juicy Lucy!” roars Shipman, loud enough for them to hear.

Carry’s eyes sparkle as she laughs, hand to mouth.

“Slippy Shippy!” comes the raucous response, and then a chorus of screams and squeals.

Helpless with laughter, Carry and Georgie clutch one another. Gradually, the tumult upstairs subsides, the giggles become fewer; and then, the deeper sounds of unmistakable passion take their place. Carry and Georgie kiss, laugh and kiss again.

"That Shipman is a naughty minx," chuckles Carry.

"Oh, they are so sweet, those two," sighs Georgie.

"I know. But all the same, I cannot quite get accustomed to her sheer effrontery. To say what she did in that letter!"

"But you know, it was very kind of her. And it does seem to have worked. She is brave, you know, Carry."

"Yes," Carry sighs, "you are right. She is brave. Annoying though she is, I really do admire her."

"And thanks to her, it seems that I might be a professor too. We shall not want for money."

Carry hugs Georgie. "No. It's wonderful."

"Just a week, now."

"O Georgie, I am so looking forward to it."

"The vessel is chartered."

"False names?"

"Yes, of course. We don't want the company to find us..."

"Nor anyone else, Georgie."

"No. We shall be free. Free at last."

"Free to be ourselves."

"Yes?" Simpson greets the stranger on the doorstep of the Carter household.

There is a cab waiting.

"I've come from the hospital." The stranger's face is grave. "I'm afraid there have been ...developments. Mrs Carter should come as soon as possible."

Simpson pales. "I see."

"Better not to say anything yet. Kinder, you know."

"Quite." Simpson is shocked. "Well... Thank you. I will tell her, then."

"Have you a boy? You will need another cab. I must get back."

"Of course. I'll see to it." Having instructed the boy to call a cab, she bustles upstairs and knocks on Mrs Carter's door. "Mrs Carter? Mrs Carter?" From inside, she can hear the buzzing of the invigorator. "Mrs Carter?"

The buzzing stops. "What is it?"

"We have been called to the hospital."

"Just five more minutes, Simpson. Then I'll be ready."

"Very good, ma'am."

The buzzing starts again. Simpson can hear her mistress's moans. Minutes pass. And then, abruptly, there is silence. A few more seconds, and Simpson distinctly hears from within a word she does not often hear from female lips.

"Damn! Damn damn damn!"

And inside the room, Joanna Carter beats her fists in fury. "It just came away in my hand. The stupid thing!"

Eventually, quivering with annoyance, Mrs Carter emerges, and they make their way to the hospital in silence.

Their visitor is there to meet them, upon the front steps of the hospital.

"I'm very sorry, Mrs Carter," he says, taking her hand. "I'm really very sorry."

Jepson rises from his desk in the new manufactory. "Good morning, sir," he greets Matson.

"Morning, Jepson. How are things?"

"More breakages, sir. Really, I do not know why we do not make them stronger. I always thought they would not be strong enough for the job."

"Jepson, Jepson, you are a good craftsman. But this is business." Matson sits in the chair, taking a paper from his coat pocket. "Look at this, and perhaps you will understand."

Jepson reads. "Replacement handles... one for half a crown... ten for a guinea!" He looks up.

"Any idea how much they cost to make?"

"I don't know... fourpence?"

Matson smiles as Jepson's expression turns to one of understanding.

"Ah, you see I am new at business. Very clever, sir... very clever!"

"It just so happens that one Mrs Carter has placed an order for twenty this very morning."

"Twenty!"

"She's made of money, of course. But just imagine, when they go into full production... Well, if there's nothing else — ?"

Jepson shakes his head. "No, all is well."

Matson rises from the chair and makes to go. "I can't stay, as we have an emergency board meeting this morning. We'll need to make a new appointment, of course." He adopts a sombre expression and coughs respectfully.

"Yes, sir, very sad that was."

It is the last day of term. Bags are packed, hotel bookings made, and tomorrow they will be buying clothes in London for the voyage. Georgie, Carry and Lucy stand in the front room of the little cottage.

"...All the same, I shall be sad to say good-bye to this little place," says Georgie wistfully.

"I wish Shipman would hurry," murmurs Lucy. "I hope there's nothing wrong."

A few minutes later, Shipman stumbles in through the front door with her two heavy bags. She sets them down with a thump. She is pale and unsmiling. They can all see that something is wrong.

"What's the matter, Ship?" Carry asks.

"They received my letter," comes the answer.

"Your family?" Anxious, Lucy clasps her hands.

Shipman nods and closes her eyes. "Oh, how hard this is! Mother wrote to say how sad they all are. She and little George have been crying and crying..." A tear rolls down her cheek, and she sniffs. "Frederick has had the mumps... I had to write back, of course."

Lucy is agitated. "What did you say?"

"I shall miss them. I shall always love them. I shall write again, one day. But... it is a question of my calling. A question of duty, don't you know?"

Carry half-smiles, but Lucy's brow is clouded.

"Duty, Ship? Whatever do you mean?" She seems hurt and bewildered.

"No, silly, that's what I told *them*. Don't you remember? – I said I was going to devote my life to good works. I didn't tell them who the beneficiary would be."

Carry laughs, but Shipman, for once, does not share in the amusement.

“The real reason, Lucy... is that although I love them very, very much... and of course I'm sad not to see them any more... I just love you more. That's all.”

Lucy holds out her arms, then, and they fly, softly moaning, into an embrace at once so passionate and so desperate that Shipman's bonnet, hitherto perched at a jaunty angle, tumbles to the floor.

Carry retrieves it, for it is clear that to its owner, its existence has ceased to matter.

“O Ship, O Ship,” cries Lucy, eventually. “I want you so much...”

“We do not have very long...” murmurs Georgie, looking at her watch.

“But perhaps, just one last time,” murmurs Lucy, looking out through the open door. “See, it's spring. How beautiful everything is!”

Shipman turns. “Yes,” she sighs.

“Do you think, for just a few minutes, we could go out, you and I, one last time, where we have so often walked together?”

“What? You want to go for a walk, Lucy?” Shipman is astonished.

“No, Ship. No.” Lucy picks up her skirts. “I don't want to walk. Not any more. Come with me, Ship. I want to run.”

And in a moment, Shipman has gathered up her skirts, and dashed after her.

Georgie stands by the door and watches them as they run into the woods. She hears their laughter and their cries, growing fainter: two long blue coats, two little patches of blue in a sea of spring green. Georgie's lip trembles. “Oh Carry, aren't they sweet?”

Carry embraces Georgie from behind, and looks over her shoulder.

“Do you think they will be happy together, Carry? Happiness seems such a fragile thing. Will someone – or something – come to spoil it, and turn their laughter into tears?”

They can still hear the distant laughter, still see Ship and Lucy, hand in hand now, as they nimbly leap over the green grass, the brown drifts of last year's fallen leaves. And then — “Oh!” cries Georgie. “They seem to have stumbled... They've fallen on the ground.” Her voice is full of concern. “Are they all right?”

“I can't believe they stumbled by accident,” murmurs Carry, brushing Georgie's ear with her lips. “You worry too much. I'm sure they are perfectly all right.”

“Perhaps,” quavers Georgie, her eyes full of tears. “It's all blurred. I cannot see.”

And as I walk along the grassy alley, tall trees on either side, towards the blurred little patch of blue, I cannot see clearly, either. It is not until I am right up close that through my tears I see: it is only a patch of bluebells, nodding in the silent wind.

Epilogue

I have searched the shipping records of all the London companies for the year 186—, but have found no record of their voyage. It seems that they maintained their secrecy, and I suppose they reached their destination safely, for surely if their ship had been lost, some record would have been made of it.

They must have lived quietly, as women like us must always live quietly. Of their life in Russia, I have only two clues, and those at best ambiguous.

I refer, first, to the curious reference in Pavlov's memoirs to the "red professor". Many commentators have understood this to refer to a later, post-revolutionary era, when the term of course acquired a quite different significance. But perhaps Pavlov was not confused. Perhaps, long before the bloody events of 1917, the *Krasnyi Professor* was not a Communist sympathizer, but someone with red hair. I have also learned that in some Russian expressions, *krasnyi* can mean not "red", but "beautiful". Perhaps, then, this is a play on words, and the term may also mean "beautiful professor". This may be so, or it may only be my own wishful thinking.

But there is one other, stronger piece of evidence. I refer, of course, to the establishment in Saint Petersburg of the Imperial Institute of Experimental Medicine. That such an institute should have been established at just that time does seem more than coincidence. And I confess that I sometimes wonder whether, in conceiving his world-famous experiments at that same Institute some forty years later, the great Pavlov did not perhaps owe some small inspiration to a sheaf of notes found in the archives; a sheaf of notes that subsequently went missing; the careful, painstaking notes, in fading ink, on yellowing paper, of a schoolgirl from Hepplewhite.

Finis

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Fifth, I thank those at ASSTR who make it possible for my works to reach their audience. If you have enjoyed *Pavlova*, I beseech you to make a donation to this worthy (and entirely voluntary) organization. Without it, writers like myself would have no hope of publication.

Sixth, I thank **Sharleen** for the wonderful cover picture that now graces the title page. As well as by the wonderful words of tribute that accompanied it, I was delighted at how her lovely drawing has captured the essential irony of the story.

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Finally, I condemn with all my heart that nameless corruption within our human kind, which saddles us with fears, the fears that surround us all, and lying, names them guilt.

O.

16 May 2001