

KAGE BAKER

The
WOMEN *of*
NELL GWYNNE'S

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ONE:

In which it is established that:

IN THE CITY of Westminster, in the vicinity of Birdcage Walk, in the year of our Lord 1844... There was once a private residence with a view of St. James' park. It was generally known, among the London tradesmen, that a respectable widow resided there, upon whom it was never necessary to call for overdue payment. Beggars knew she could be relied upon for charity, if they weren't too importunate, and they were careful never to be so; for she was one of their own, in a manner of speaking, being as she was blind.

Now and again Mrs. Corvey could be observed, with her smoked goggles and walking-stick, on the arm of her adolescent son Herbert, taking the pleasant air in the park. It was known that she had several daughters also, though the precise number was unclear, and that her younger sister was in residence there as well. There may even have been a pair of younger sisters, or perhaps there was an unmarried sister-in-law, and though the daughters had certainly left the schoolroom their governess seemed to have been retained.

In any other neighborhood, perhaps, there would have been some uncouth speculation about the inordinate number of females under one roof. The lady of the house by Birdcage Walk, however, retained her reputation for spotless respectability, largely because no gentlemen visitors were ever seen arriving or departing the premises, at any hour of the day or night whatsoever.

Gentlemen were unseen because they never went to the house near Birdcage Walk. They went instead to a certain private establishment known as Nell Gwynne's, two streets away, which connected to Mrs. Corvey's cellar by an underground passage and which was in the basement of a fairly exclusive dining establishment. The tradesmen never came near *that* place, needless to say. Had any one of them ever done so, he'd have been astonished to meet there Mrs. Corvey and her entire household, including Herbert, who under this separate roof was transformed, Harlequin-like, into Herbertina. The other ladies resident were likewise transformed from Ladies into Women, brandishing riding crops, birch rods and other instruments of their profession.

Nell Gwynne's clientele were often statesmen, who found the place convenient to Whitehall. They were not infrequently members of other exclusive clubs. Some were journalists. Some were notable persons in the sciences or the arts. All were desperately grateful to have been accorded membership at Nell Gwynne's, for it was known—among the sort of gentlemen who know such things—that there was no use whining for a sponsor. Membership was by invitation only, and entirely at the discretion of the lady whose establishment it was.

Now and again, in the hushed and circumspect atmosphere of the Athenaeum (or the Carlton Club, or the Traveller's Club) someone might imbibe enough port to wonder aloud just what it took to get an invitation from Mrs. Corvey.

The answer, though quite simple, was never guessed.

One had to know secrets.



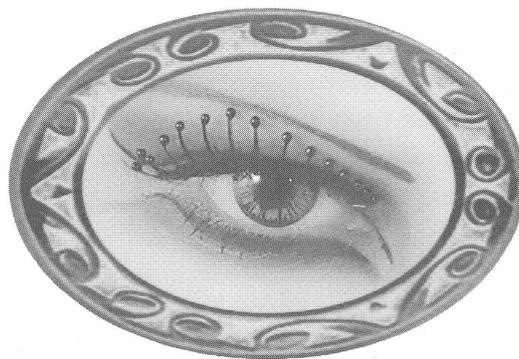
SECRETS WERE, IN fact, the principal item retailed at Nell Gwynne's, with entertainments of the flesh coming in a distant second. Secrets were teased out of sodden members of Parliament, coaxed from lustful cabinet ministers, extracted from talkative industrialists, and finessed from members of the Royal Society as well as the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

Information so acquired was not, as you might expect, sold to the highest bidder. It went directly across Whitehall and up past Scotland Yard, to an unimposing-looking brick edifice in Craig's Court, wherein was housed Redking's Club. Membership at Redking's was composed equally of other MPs, ministers, industrialists and Royal Society members, and a great many other clever fellows beside. However, there were many more clever fellows beneath Redking's, for *its* secret cellars went down several storeys, and housed an organization known publicly—but to very few—as the Gentlemen's Speculative Society.

In return for the secrets sent their way by Mrs. Corvey, the GSS underwrote her establishment, enabling all ladies present to live pleasantly when they were not engaged in the business of gathering intelligence. Indeed, once a year Nell Gwynne's closed its premises when its residents went on holiday. The more poetical of the ladies preferred the Lake District, but Mrs. Corvey liked nothing better than a month at the seaside, so they generally ended up going to Torbay.

Life for the ladies of Nell Gwynne's was, placed in the proper historical, societal and economic context, quite tolerably nice.

Now and then it did have its challenges, however.



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TWO:

In which our Heroine is a Witness to History

WE WILL CALL, her Lady Beatrice, since that was the name she chose for herself later.



LADY BEATRICE'S PAPA was a military man, shrewd and sober. Lady Beatrice's Mamma was a gently-bred primrose of a woman, demure, proper, perfectly genteel. She was somewhat pained to discover that the daughter she bore was rather more bold and direct than became a little girl.

Lady Beatrice, encountering a horrid great spider in the garden, would not scream and run. She would stamp on it. Lady Beatrice, on having her doll snatched away by a bullying cousin, would not weep and plead; she would take back her doll, even at the cost of pulled hair and torn lace. Lady Beatrice, upon falling down, would never lie there sobbing, waiting for an adult to comfort her. She would pick herself up and inspect her knees for damage. Only when the damage amounted to bloody painful scrapes would she perhaps cry, as she limped off to the ayah to be scolded and bandaged.

Lady Beatrice's Mamma fretted, saying such brashness ill became a little lady. Lady Beatrice's Papa said he was damned glad to have a child who never wept unless she was really hurt.

"My girl's true as steel, ain't she?" he said fondly. Whereupon Lady Beatrice's Mamma would purse her lips and narrow her eyes.

Presently Lady Beatrice's Mamma had another focus for her attention, however, for walking out in the cabbage patch one day she found a pair of twin baby girls, as like her and each other as it was possible to be. Lady Beatrice hadn't thought there was a cabbage patch in the garden. She went out and searched diligently, and found not so much as a Brussels sprout, which fact she announced loudly at dinner that evening. Lady Beatrice's Mamma turned scarlet. Lady Beatrice's Papa roared with laughter.

Thereafter Lady Beatrice was allowed a most agreeable childhood, by her standards, Mamma being preoccupied with little Charlotte and Louise. She was given a pony, and was taught to ride by their Punjabi groom. She was given a bow and arrows and taught

archery. She was taught her letters, and read as many books as she liked. When she asked for her own regimental uniform, Mamma told her such a thing was wicked, and retired with a fainting fit, but Papa gave her a little red coat on her next birthday.

The birthdays came and went. Just after Lady Beatrice turned seventeen, Lady Beatrice's Grandmamma was taken ill, and so Lady Beatrice's Mamma took the twins and went back to England for a visit. Lady Beatrice was uninterested in going, having several handsome young officers swooning for her at the time, and Mamma was quite content to leave her in India with Papa.

Grandmamma had been expected to die rather soon, but for some reason lingered, and Lady Beatrice's Mamma found one reason after another to postpone returning. Lady Beatrice relished running Papa's house by herself, especially presiding over dinners, where she bantered with all the handsome young officers and not a few of the old ones. One of them wrote poetry in praise of her gray eyes. Two others dueled on her account.

Then Papa's regiment was ordered to Kabul.

Lady Beatrice was left alone with the servants for some months, bored beyond anything she had believed possible. One day word came that all the wives and children of the married officers were to be allowed to go to Kabul as well, as a way to keep up the troops' morale. Lady Beatrice heard nothing directly from Papa, as it happened, but she went with all the other families. After two months of miserably difficult travel through all the red dust in the world, Lady Beatrice arrived in Kabul.

Papa was not pleased to see her. Papa was horrified. He sat her down and in few words explained how dangerous their situation was, how unlikely it was that the Afghans would accept the British-backed ruler. He told her that rebellion was likely to break out any moment, and that the order to send for wives and children had been perfectly insane folly.

Lady Beatrice had proudly told Papa that she wasn't afraid to stay in Kabul; after all, all her handsome suitors were there! Papa had given a bitter laugh and replied that he didn't think it was safe now to send her home alone in any case.

So Lady Beatrice had stayed in Kabul, hosting Papa's dinners for increasingly glum and uninterested young suitors. She remained there until the end, when Elphinstone negotiated the retreat of the British garrison, and was one of the doomed sixteen thousand who set off from Kabul for the Khyber Pass.

Lady Beatrice watched them die, one after another after another. They died of the January cold; they died when Ghilzai snipers picked them off, or rode down in bands and skirmished with the increasingly desperate army. Papa died in the Khoord Kabul gorge, during one such skirmish, and Lady Beatrice was carried away screaming by a Ghilzai tribesman.

Lady Beatrice was beaten and raped. She was left tied among the horses. In the night she tore through the rope with her teeth and crawled into the shelter where her captors slept. She took a knife and cut their throats, and did worse to the last one, because he woke and attempted to break her wrist. She swathed herself in their garments, stole a pair of their boots. She stole their food. She took their horses, riding one and leading the others, and went down to find Papa's body.

He was frozen stiff when she found him, so she had to give up any idea of tying him across the saddle and taking him away. Instead she buried him under a cairn of stones, and scratched his name and regiment on the topmost rock with the knife with which she had killed her rapists. Then Lady Beatrice rode away, weeping; but she felt no shame weeping, because she was really hurt.

All along the Khyber Pass she counted the British and Indian dead. On three separate occasions she rode across the body of one and then another and another of her handsome young suitors. Lady Beatrice looked like a gray-eyed specter, all her tears wept out, by the time she rode into Jellalabad.

No one quite knew what to do with her there. No one wanted to speak of what had happened, for, as one of the officers who had known her family explained, her father's good name was at stake. Lady Beatrice remained with the garrison all through the siege of Jellalabad that followed, cooking for them and washing clothes. In April, just after the siege had been raised, she miscarried.



HER FATHER'S FRIENDS saw to it that Lady Beatrice was escorted back to India. There she sold off the furniture, dismissed the servants, closed up the house and bought herself passage to England.



ONCE SHE HAD arrived, it took Lady Beatrice several weeks to find Mamma and the twins. Grandmamma had died at last, and upon receiving word of the massacre in Afghanistan, Mamma had bought mourning and thrown herself upon the mercy of her older brother, a successful merchant. She and the twins were now living as dependents in his household.

Lady Beatrice arrived on their doorstep and was greeted by shrieks of horror. Apparently Lady Beatrice's letters had gone astray in the mail. Her mother fainted dead away. Uncle Frederick's wife came in and fainted dead away as well. Charlotte and Louise came running down to see what had happened and, while they did not faint, they screamed shrilly. Uncle Frederick came in and stared at her as though his eyes would burst from his face.

Once Mamma and Aunt Harriet had been revived, to cling to each other weeping on

the settee, Lady Beatrice explained what had happened to her.

A lengthy and painful discussion followed. It lasted through tea and dinner. It was revealed to Lady Beatrice that, though she had been sincerely mourned when Mamma had been under the impression she was dead, her unexpected return to life was something more than inconvenient. Had she never considered the disgrace she would inflict upon her family by returning, after all that had happened to her? What were all Aunt Harriet's neighbors to think?

Uncle Frederick as good as told her to her face that she must have whored herself to the men of the 13th Foot, during all those months in Jellalabad; and if she hadn't, she might just as well have, for all that anyone would believe otherwise.

At this point Mamma fainted again. While they were attempting to revive her, Charlotte and Louise reproached Lady Beatrice in bluntest terms for her selfishness. Had she never thought for a moment of what the scandalous news would do to *their* marriage prospects? Mamma, sitting up at this point, tearfully begged Lady Beatrice to enter a convent. Lady Beatrice replied that she no longer believed in God.

Whereupon Uncle Frederick, his face black with rage, rose from the table (the servants were in the act of serving the fish course) and told Lady Beatrice that she would be permitted to spend the night under his roof, for her Mamma's sake, but in the morning he was personally taking her to the nearest convent.

At this point Aunt Harriet pointed out that the nearest convent was in France, and he would be obliged to drive all day and hire passage on a boat, which hardly seemed respectable. Uncle Frederick shouted that he didn't give a damn. Mamma fainted once more.

Lady Beatrice excused herself and rose from the table. She went upstairs, found her mother's room, ransacked her jewel box, and left the house by the back door.

She caught the night coach in the village and went to London, where she pawned a necklace of her mother's and paid a quarter's rent on a small room in the Marylebone Road. Having done that, Lady Beatrice went to a dressmaker's and had an ensemble made in the most lurid scarlet silk the seamstress could find on her shelves. Afterward she went to a milliner's and had a hat made up to match.

The next day she went shopping for shoes and found a pair of ready-mades in her size that looked as though they would bear well with prolonged walking. Lady Beatrice purchased cosmetics also.

When her scarlet raiment was ready Lady Beatrice collected it. She took it back to her room, put it on, and stood before the cracked glass above her washstand. Holding her head high, she rimmed her gray eyes with blackest kohl.

What else was there to do, but die?



THREE:

In which she Gets On with Her Life

THE WORK SEEMED by no means as dreadful as Lady Beatrice had heard tell. She realized, however, that her point of view was somewhat unusual. The act was never pleasurable for her but it was at least not painful, as it had been in the Khyber Pass. She took care to carry plenty of lambskin sheaths in her reticule. She worked her body like a draft horse. It obeyed her patiently and earned her decent meals and a clean place in which to sleep, and books. Lady Beatrice found that she still enjoyed books.

She felt nothing, neither for nor against, regarding the men who lay with her.

Lady Beatrice learned quickly where the best locations were for plying one's trade, if one didn't wish to be brutalized by drunken laborers: outside theaters, outside the better restaurants and wine bars. She discovered that her looks and her voice gave her an advantage over the other working women, who were for the most part desperate country girls or Cockneys. She watched them straggle through their nights, growing steadily drunker and more hoarse, sporting upper-arm bruises ever more purple.

They regarded her with disbelief and anger, especially when an old cove with a diamond stickpin could walk their importuning gauntlet unmoved, shaking off their hands, deaf to their filthiest enticements, but stop in his tracks when Lady Beatrice stepped out in front of him. "Oi! Milady's stole another one!" someone would cry. She liked the name.

One night three whores lay for her with clubs in an alley off the Strand. She pulled a knife—for she carried one—and held them at bay, and told them what she'd done to the Ghilzai tribesmen. They backed away, and fled. They spread the word that Milady was barking mad.

Lady Beatrice wasn't at all mad. It was true that the snows of the Khyber Pass seemed to have settled around her heart and left it incapable of much emotion, but her mind was sharp and clear as ice. It was difficult even to feel contempt for her fellow whores, though she saw plainly enough that many were ignorant, that they drank too much,

that they habitually fell in love with men who beat them, that they wallowed in self-pity and festering resentments.

Lady Beatrice never drank. She lived thriftily. She opened a bank account and saved the money she made, reserving out enough to remain well-dressed and buy a novel now and again. She calculated how much she would need to save in order to retire and live quietly, and she worked toward that goal. She kept a resolute barrier between her body and her mind, only nominally resident in the one, only truly living in the other.

One evening she was strolling the pavement outside the British Museum (an excellent place to do business, judging from all the wealthy clientele she picked up there) when a previous customer recognized her and engaged her services for a gentlemen's party on the following night. Lady Beatrice dressed in her best evening scarlets for the occasion, and paid for a cab.

She recognized some of her better-dressed rivals at the party, at which some sporting victory was being celebrated, and they nodded to one another graciously. One by one, each portly financier or baronet paired off with a courtesan, and Lady Beatrice was just thinking that she could do with more of this sort of engagement when she heard her name called, in a low voice.

She turned and beheld an old friend of her father's, whom she had once charmed with an hour's sprightly conversation. Lady Beatrice stepped close to him, quickly.

"That is not the name I use now," she said.

"But—my dear child—how could you come to this?"

"Do you truly wish to hear the answer?"

He cast a furtive look around and, taking her by the wrist, led her into an antechamber and shut the door after them, to general laughter from those not too preoccupied to notice.

Lady Beatrice told him her story, in a matter-of-fact way, seated on a divan as he paced and smoked. When she had finished he sank into a chair opposite, shaking his head.

"You deserved better in life, my dear."

"No one deserves good or evil fortune," said Lady Beatrice. "Things simply happen, and one survives them the best one can."

"God! That's true; your father used to say that. He never flinched at unpleasantness. You are very like him, in that sense. He always said you were as true as steel."

Lady Beatrice heard the phrase with a sense of wonder, remembering that long-ago life. It seemed to her, now, as though it had happened to some other girl.

The old friend was regarding her with a strange mixture of compassion and a certain calculation. "For your father's sake, and for your own, I should like to assist you. May I know where you live?"

Lady Beatrice gave him her address readily enough. "Though I do not advise you to visit," she said. "And if you have any gallant ideas about rescuing me, think again. No lady in London would receive me, after what I endured, and you know that as well as I do."

"I know, my dear." He stood and bowed to her. "But women true as steel are found very rarely, after all. It would be shameful to waste your excellent qualities."

"How kind," said Lady Beatrice.



SHE EXPECTED NOTHING from the encounter, and so Lady Beatrice was rather surprised when someone knocked at the door of her lodging three days thereafter.

She was rather more surprised when, upon opening the door, she beheld a blind woman, who asked for her by her name.

"I am she," admitted Lady Beatrice.

"May I come in for a moment, miss, and have a few words with you?"

"As many as you wish," said Lady Beatrice. Swinging her cane before her, the blind woman entered the room. Seemingly quite by chance she encountered a chair and lowered herself into it. Despite her infirmity, she was not a beggar; indeed, she was well-dressed and well-groomed, resembling, if not a lady, certainly someone's respectable mother. Her accents indicated that she had come from the lower classes, but she spoke quietly, with precise diction. She drew off her gloves and bonnet, and held them in her lap, with her cane crooked over one arm.

"Thank you. I'll introduce myself, if I may: Mrs. Elizabeth Corvey. We have a friend in common." She uttered the name of the gentleman who had known Lady Beatrice in her former life.

"Ah," said Lady Beatrice. "And I expect you administer some sort of charity for fallen women?"

Mrs. Corvey chuckled. "I wouldn't say that, miss, no." She turned her goggled face toward Lady Beatrice. The smoked goggles were very black, and quite prominent. "None of the ladies in my establishment require charity. They're quite able to get on in the world. As you seem to be. Your friend told me the sort of things you've seen and done. What's done can't be undone, more's the pity, but there it is."

"That being the case, may I ask you whether you'd consider putting your charms to better use than streetwalking?"

"Do you keep a house of prostitution, madam?"

"I do and I don't," said Mrs. Corvey. "If it was a house of prostitution, you may be sure it would be of the very best sort, with girls as beautiful and clever as you, and some of them as well bred. I am not, myself; I was born in the workhouse.

"When I was five years old they sold me to a pin factory. Little hands are needed for the making of pins, you see, and little keen eyes. Little girls are preferred for the work; so much more painstaking than little boys, you know. We worked at a long table, cutting up the lengths of wire and filing the points, and hammering the heads flat. We worked by candlelight when it grew dark, and the shop-mistress read to us from the Bible as we worked. I was blind by the age of twelve, but I knew my Scripture, I can tell you.

"And then, of course, there was only one work I was fit for, wasn't there? So I was sold off into a sort of specialty house.

"You meet all kinds of odd ducks in a place like that. Sick fellows, and ugly fellows, and shy fellows. I was got with child twice, and poxed too. I do hope I'm not shocking you, am I? Both of us being women of the world, you see. I lost track of the years, but I think I was seventeen when I got out of there. Should you like to know how I got out?"

"Yes, madam, I should."

"There was this fellow came to see me. He paid specially to have me to himself a whole evening and I thought, *oh, Lord, no*, because you get so weary of it, and the gentlemen don't generally like it if you seem as though you're not paying proper attention, do they? But all this fellow wanted to do was talk.

"He asked me all sorts of questions about myself—how old I was, where had I come from, did I have any family, how did I come to be blind. He told me he belonged to a club of scientific gentlemen. He said they thought they might have a way to cure blindness. If I was willing to let this Gentlemen's Speculative Society try it out on me, he'd buy me out of the house I was in and see that I was physicked for the pox as well, and found an honest living.

"He did warn me I'd lose my eyes. I said I didn't care— they weren't any use anyhow, were they? And he said I might find myself disfigured, and I said I didn't mind that— what had my looks ever gotten me?"

"To be brief, I went with him and had it done. And I did lose my eyes, and I was disfigured, but I haven't regretted it a day since."

"You don't appear to be disfigured," said Lady Beatrice. "And clearly they were unable to cure your blindness."

Mrs. Corvey smiled. "Oh, no? The clock says half-past-twelve, and you're wearing such a lovely scarlet dressing-gown, miss, and you have such striking gray eyes—quite unlike mine. You're made of stern stuff, I know, so you won't scream now." Having said that, she slid her goggles up to reveal her eyes.

Lady Beatrice, who had been standing upright, took a step backward and clutched the edge of the table behind her.

"Dear me, you have gone quite pale," said Mrs. Corvey in amusement. "Sets off that scarlet mouth of yours a treat. House of Rimmel Red No. 3, isn't it? Not so pink as their No. 4. And, let me see, why, what a lot of books you have! *Sartor Resartus*, *Catherine*, *Falkner*—that's her last one, isn't it?— and, what's that on your bedside table?" The brass optics embedded in Mrs. Corvey's face actually protruded forward, with a faint whirring noise, and swiveled in the direction of Lady Beatrice's bed. "*Nicholas Nickleby*. Yes, I enjoyed that one, myself."

"I do hope I have proven my point now, miss."

"What a horror," said Lady Beatrice faintly.

"Oh, I shouldn't say that at all, miss! My condition is so much improved from my former state that I would go down on my knees and thank God morning and night, if I thought He ever took notice of the likes of me. I have my sight back, after all. I have my health—for I may say the Gentlemen's Speculative Society has an excellent remedy for the pox— and agreeable employment. I am here to offer you the same work."

"Would I pay for it with my eyes?" Lady Beatrice inquired.

"Oh, dear me, no. It would be a crime to spoil *your* looks, especially when they might be so useful. You were a soldier's daughter, as I understand it, miss. What would you think of turning your dishonor into a weapon, in a just cause?"

"The Society's very old, you see. In the old days they had to work secretly, or folk would have burnt them for witchcraft, with all the astonishing things they invented. The secrecy was still useful even when times became more enlightened. There are all manner of devices that make our lives less wretched, that first came from the Society. They work to make the world better still."

"Now, it helps them in their work, miss, to have some sway with ministers and members of Parliament. And who better controls a man than a pretty girl, eh? A girl with sufficient charm can unlock a man's tongue and find out all sorts of things the Society needs to know. A girl with sufficient charm can persuade a man to do all sorts of things he'd never dream of doing, if he thought anyone else could see."

"And I can't see, of course, or so he thinks, for I never let my secret slip. When a man is a cabinet minister it reassures him to believe that the lady proprietress of his favorite brothel couldn't identify his face in a court of law. All the easier for us to trap him later. All the easier to persuade him to sign a law into being or vote a certain way, which benefits the Society.

"You and I both know how little it takes to ruin a girl, when a man can make the same mistakes and the world smiles indulgently at him. Wouldn't you like to make the world more just?

"You and I both know how little our bodies matter, for all the fuss men make over them. Wouldn't you like to put yours to good use? There are other girls like you—clever girls, well-bred girls. They did one unwise thing, or perhaps, like you, they were unlucky, and the world sent them down to the pavement. But they found they needn't stay there.

"You needn't stay there either, miss. We can offer you a clean, quiet room of your own, with a view of St. James's Park—I never tire of looking at it, myself—and a quiet life, except when working. We need never fear being beaten, or taking ill. We are paid very well. Shall you join us, miss?"

Lady Beatrice considered it.

"I believe I shall," said she.

And she did, to the great relief of the other streetwalkers.



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FOUR:

In wich she Settles In and learns Useful Things

LADY BEATRICE DISCOVERED that Mrs. Corvey had spoken perfect truth. The house near Birdcage Walk was indeed pleasant, commodious, and adjacent to St. James's Park. Her private room was full of the best air and light to be had in London. It had moreover ample shelves for her books, a capacious wardrobe, and a clean and comfortable bed.

She found her sister residents agreeable as well.

Mrs. Otley was, near Birdcage Walk, a rather studious young lady with fossils she had collected at Lyme Regis and a framed engraving of a scene in Pompeii in her room. At Nell Gwynne's, however, she generally dressed like a jockey, and had moreover a cabinet full of equestrian paraphernalia with which to pander to the tastes of gentlemen who enjoyed being struck with a riding crop while being forced to wear a bit between their teeth.

Miss Rendlesham, though quiet, bespectacled and an enthusiastic gardener, was likewise in the Discipline line, both general and (as needed) specialized. As a rule she dressed in a manner suggesting a schoolmistress, and was an expert at producing the sort of harsh interrogatory tones that made a member of Parliament regress to the age of the schoolroom, where he had been a very naughty boy indeed.

Herbertina Lovelock, on the other hand, was a very good boy, with the appearance of a cupid-faced lad fresh from a public school whereat a number of outre vices were practiced. She wore male attire exclusively, cropped hair pomaded sleek. She also smoked cigars, read the sporting papers with her feet on the fender, and occasionally went to the races. At Nell Gwynne's she had a wardrobe full of military uniforms both Army and Navy, all with very tight trousers with padding sewn into the knees.

The Misses Devere were three sisters, Jane, Dora and Maude, blonde, brunette and auburn-haired respectively. Their work at Nell Gwynne's consisted of unspecialized harlotry and also, when required, group engagements in which they worked as a team.

They alone were forthcoming to Lady Beatrice on the subject of their pasts: it seemed their Papa had been a gentleman, but ruined himself in the customary manner by drinking, gambling and speculating in a joint stock company. Depending on whether one heard the story from Jane, Dora or Maude, their Papa had then either blown his brains out, run away to the Continent with a mistress, or become an opium-smoker in a den in Limehouse and fallen to depths of degradation too appalling to describe. Jane played the pianoforte, Dora played the concertina, and Maude sang. They were equally versatile in other matters.

All ladies resident at the house near Birdcage Walk proved good-natured upon further

acquaintance. Lady Beatrice found it pleasant to sit in the common parlour after dinner on Sundays (for Nell Gwynne's did no business on the Sabbath) and attend to her mending while Herbertina read aloud to them all, or the Misses Devere performed a medley of popular songs, as Miss Rendlesham arranged a vase of flowers from the garden. It was agreed that Lady Beatrice ought not alter her scarlet costume in any respect, since it had such a galvanic effect on customers, but Mrs. Corvey and Herbertina went with her to the shops and the dressmaker's to have a few ensembles made up, in rather more respectable colors, for day wear. Mrs. Otley presented her with a small figure of the goddess Athena from her collection of antiquities, for, as she said, "You are so very like her, my dear, with those remarkable eyes!"

All in all, Lady Beatrice thought her new situation most agreeable.



MAJOR, SIR, you wouldn't cane me, would you?" squeaked Herbertina. "Not for such a minor infraction?"

"I'll do worse than cane you, you young devil," leered the Major, or rather the Member of Parliament wearing a major's uniform. He grabbed Herbertina by the arm and dragged her protesting to a plush-upholstered settee. "Drop those breeches and bend over!"

"Oh, Major, sir, must I?"

"That's an order! By God, sir, I'll teach you what obedience means!"

"Look through this eyepiece and adjust the lens until the image comes into focus," said Mrs. Corvey in a low voice, from the adjacent darkened room. Lady Beatrice peered into the camera and beheld the slightly blurry Major gleefully dropping his own breeches.

"How does one adjust it?" Lady Beatrice inquired.

"This ring turns," explained Mrs. Corvey, pointing. Lady Beatrice turned it and immediately the Major came into focus, very much *in flagrante delicto*, with Herbertina looking rather bored as she cried out in boyish horror.

"Now squeeze the bulb," said Mrs. Corvey. Lady Beatrice did so. The gas-jets flared in the room for a moment, but the Major was far too busy to be distracted by the sudden intense brightness, or the faint *click*.

"Have we produced a daguerreotype?" inquired Lady Beatrice, rather intrigued, for she had just been reading about them in a scientific periodical to which Miss Rendlesham subscribed.

"Oh, no, dear; this is a much more advanced process. Something the Society gave us."

Mrs. Corvey slid out the plate and slipped in another. "It produces an image that can be printed on paper. That shot was simply for our files. We'll have to wait until he's a bit quieter for an image we can really use. Herbertina will give you the signal."

Lady Beatrice watched carefully as the Major rode to his frenzy and at last collapsed over Herbertina. They ended up reclining on the settee, somewhat scantily clad.

"Now," said the Major, wheezing somewhat, "Tell me how enormous I was, and how overpowered you were."

"Oh, Major sir, how could you do such a thing to a young man? I've never felt so helpless," said Herbertina tearfully, making a sign behind her back. Lady Beatrice saw it and squeezed the bulb again. Once more the lamps flared. The Major squinted irritably but paid no further heed, for Herbertina quite held his attention over the next five minutes with her imaginative account of how terrified and submissive the young soldier felt, and how gargantuan were the Major's personal dimensions.

Sadly, neither Mrs. Corvey nor Lady Beatrice heard her inspired improvisations, for they had both retreated to a small room, lit with red de la Rue's lamps and fitted up like a chemist's laboratory. There they had fastened cloth masks over their mouths and noses and were busily developing the plates.

"Oh, these are very good," said Mrs. Corvey approvingly. "Upon my soul, dear, you have a talent for photography."

"Are they to be used for blackmail?"

"Beg pardon? Oh, no; which is to say, only if it should become necessary. And if it should, this one—" she held up the second photograph, with the Major lying on the settee—"can be copied over onto a daguerreotype, and presented as an inducement to cooperate. For the present, the pictures will go into his file. We keep a file, you see, on each of the customers. So useful, when business is brisk, to have a record of each gentleman's likes and dislikes."

"I expect it is indeed. When does it become necessary to blackmail, if I may ask?"

"Why, when the Society requires it. I must say, it isn't necessary often. They're quite persuasive on their own account, and seldom have to resort to such extreme measures. Still, one never knows." Mrs. Corvey hung the prints up to dry. She turned the lever that switched off the de la Rue's lamp and they left the room, carefully shutting the door behind them. The two women walked out into the hidden corridor that ran between the private chambers. From the rooms to either side of the corridor could be heard roars of passion, or pleading cries, and now and again the rhythmic swish and crack of a birch rod over ardent confessions of wickedness.

"Are all of the customers men of rank?" Lady Beatrice inquired, raising her voice slightly to be heard over a baritone bawling *Yes, yes, I did steal the pies!*

"Yes, as a rule; though now and again we treat members of the Society. The fellows whose business it is to go out and manage the Society's affairs, mostly; the rank and file, if you like. They want their pleasures as much as the next man, and most of them have to work a good deal harder to earn them, so we oblige. That is rather a different matter, however, from servicing statesmen and the like.

"In fact, there's rather a charming custom—at least I find it so—of treating the new fellows, before they're first sent on the Society's business. Give them a bit of joy before they go out traveling, poor things, because now and again they do fall in the line of duty. So sad."

"Is it dangerous work?"

"It can be." Mrs. Corvey gave a vague wave of her hand.

They entered the private chamber that served as Mrs. Corvey's office, stepping through the sliding panel and closing it just as Violet, the maid-of-all-work, entered from the reception area beyond.

"If you please, Mrs. Corvey, Mr. Felmouth's just stepped out of the Ascending Room this minute to pay a call. He's got his case with him."

"He'll want his tea, then. How nice! I was hoping we'd be allotted a few new toys." Mrs. Corvey lifted a device from her desk, a sort of speaking-tube of brass and black wax, and after a moment spoke into it: "Tea, please, with a tray of savories. The reception room. Thank you."

She set the device down. Lady Beatrice regarded it with quiet wonder. "And that would be another invention from the Society?"

"Only made by them; it was one of our own ladies invented it. Miss Gleason. Since retired to a nice little cottage in Scotland on the bonus, I am pleased to say. Sends us a dozen grouse every Christmas. Now, come with me, dear, and I'll introduce you to Mr. Felmouth. Such an obliging man!"

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FIVE:

In which Ingenious Devices are introduced

THE RECEPTION ROOM was rather larger than a private parlor, with fine old dark paneling on the walls and a thick carpet. It was lit by more de la Rue's lamps, glowing steadily behind tinted shades of glass. A middle-aged gentleman had already removed his coat and hat and hung them up, and rolled up his shirtsleeves; he was perched on the edge of a divan, leaning down to rummage in an open valise, but he jumped to his feet as they entered.

"Mr. Felmouth," said Mrs. Corvey, extending her hand.

"Mrs. Corvey!" Mr. Felmouth bowed and, taking her hand, kissed it.

"And may I introduce our latest sister? Lady Beatrice. Lady Beatrice, Mr. Felmouth, from the Society. Mr. Felmouth is one of the Society's artificers."

"How do you do, sir?"

"Enchanted to make your acquaintance, Ma'am," Mr. Felmouth said, stammering rather. He coughed, blushed, and tugged self-consciously at his rolled-up sleeves. "I do hope you'll excuse the liberty, my dear—one gets so caught up in one's work."

"Pray, be seated," said Mrs. Corvey, gliding to her own chair. At that moment a chime rang and a hitherto concealed door in the paneling opened. A pair of respectably clad parlormaid bore in the tea things and arranged them on a table by Mrs. Corvey's chair before exiting again through the same door. Tea was served, accompanied by polite conversation on trivial matters, though the whole time Mr. Felmouth's glance kept wandering from Lady Beatrice to the floor, and hence to his open valise, and then on to Mrs. Corvey.

At last he set his cup and saucer to one side. "Delightful refreshment. My compliments to your staff, Ma'am. Now, I must inquire—how are the present optics suiting you, my dear?"

"Very well," said Mrs. Corvey. "I particularly enjoy the telescoping feature. It's quite useful at the seaside, though of course one must take care not to be noticed."

"Of course. And the implant continues comfortable? No irritation?"

"None nowadays, Mr. Felmouth."

"Very good. Happy to hear it." Mr. Felmouth rubbed his hands together. "However, I have been experimenting with an improvement or two...may I demonstrate?"

"By all means, Mr. Felmouth."

At once he delved into his valise and brought up a leather-bound box about the size of