

## A Maid Looks Back, and Laughs · Frederick Busch

*"A Maid Looks Back, and Laughs" is a chapter from The Mutual Friend, a novel about Charles Dickens' final years which Harper & Row will publish in March, 1978. The novel is narrated by George Dolby, Dickens' tour manager for his great public readings. As Dolby speaks, it is the year 1899-1900 and Dolby, destitute, alcoholic, and dying of lung disease, writes his memoirs of his Chief in London's Fulham Infirmary. Just as Dickens acted out his famous characters during his readings—and just as Dickens reveled particularly in imitating the bloody violence of the scene in Oliver Twist where the brigand Sikes murders Nancy, the golden-hearted whore—so Dolby imitates the darker moments (and characters) in Dickens' life. In his reveries and on his heap of pages, Dolby is Dickens; and he is also Ellen Terman, the actress for whom Dickens left Kate, his wife; he is Barbara, the more or less reformed prostitute who works below stairs in Dickens' house (and whose section appears here). The idea, of course, was to make Dolby also always be Dolby, big and bald, stuttering, worshipful and sullen at once, tough and brave and more than a match for his Chief. He has the final revenge, which he learned from Dickens to acquire: he can put his nemesis on paper, and remake him according to his own needs. Dolby's character, Barbara, also has that revenge, and in the chapter below she writes Dickens and he becomes hers.—F. B.*

WHEN I AM DEAD this Book will be found. I've faith, I've always had faith. Not in the God of my father. I take this opportunity to curse him again. Nor faith in much more than the tides. But I do believe in them. I can see them. Under the Embankment everything washes up. The Thames runs on. The earth itself is like a river. Even the tainted ground under Euston Station one day will turn itself up. The bodies of starved children and children dead of disease and whores with their throats squeezed shut by madmen will wash up from the foul ground after the Station itself has crumbled. So will my little Book. You who read this read my life.

Of my early days in the parish house at Canterton Glen in the New Forest there is little to tell. I was taught to read and write. I know the lives of my betters. They began not unlike my own. It was a typical English girlhood and that is that. The days I may have called my own no longer are mine. They have been canceled. I put this down in my Book, that I died when I was aged thirteen years. Father appreciated Mr. Caldecott, and Mother, being dead, had no voice in the matter. My brothers and my sister of whom I intend to never speak again thought of him as I did. That his whiskers were too long for fashion and for comfort. That we were apprised of this quality by virtue of his kissing us with over-much frequency and too great a pressure of the lips. That he often smelled of his own inner workings due to

Copyright © 1975, 1977, 1978 by Frederick Busch.

insufficient bathing. That we thought he carried the cholera and were relieved each summer not to have been given it by him. That he studied us overlong and me in particular. That he drank brandy with Father when Father might have read to us aloud at night. That I understand today precisely what he meant by saying with a snicker sliding off his large upper lip to Father "Oh, Jarrod, I do love you as my own." Father's buggery was his own business. I assume that still it is. The Church will not appreciate a bugger but that is the Church's concern and mine no longer. Mr. Caldecott's hands were furry as a beast's. In winter he perspired as much as in summer. I have concluded that he knew no seasons but his own.

He held my hand in the last August I was alive as we rode a trap to the station and then the train up to London. He told me how Father and he had planned my trip. My day in the capitol of civilization. He cleaned the smuts from my face with a yellowed handkerchief which smelled like his pocket. His pocket smelled like him, a kind of meat or milk no longer fresh. He bought me ices at the railroad hotel. We took tea at an inn where a hosteler smiled to him and nodded his head. Somewhere on the Embankment we watched the River Police carry from their boat a woman who had drowned herself clutching her baby. The baby's eyes were open. They looked surprised. When I wept he comforted me by squeezing under my arm with his long pelted fingers. He spoke little and I spoke less. He seemed expectant and of course he was. He showed me the clock at Parliament and examined some pendulum clocks in a window at Oxford Street. He showed me the time he carried on his chain. Waiting.

So that at half-five he was able to say with a snap of his fingers and shake of his head that we had missed the train. The last train west and south. I was watching a night-man's wagon with its cargo of excrement and trying to breathe through my mouth. He comforted me again with his hand beneath my armpit touching near the breast. He told me of a pleasant night in a pleasant hotel. The Telegraphing home of the news to my concerned Father, and then the morning's first train back. I wept and he kissed me. His hand again. And I henceforth was to call him Uncle, he said. I said nothing more.

We rode a cabriolet to Curzon Street. In the gas lamps there the buildings looked yellow. Like the rotten undersides of logs in the Forest at home. No one attended us at the hotel but he seemed to know his way about and soon he had shown me the room. I asked why there was the single bed only and snapped his fingers and shook his head. He smiled. His amusement seemed to be with himself. I remember his words: "One thinks one thinks of everything and then one doesn't. Ha!" One, one, one. I was to wait while he went down to attend to sending the news home. I sat on the edge of the unkempt bed and waited. The curtains were drawn and little noise came up through the window.

I was thinking about my brother and wishing I had the knife he carried. I had thoughts of killing myself rather than sleep there. For I still thought that life was like a book and in certain books that was what young ladies thought at times of extremity. The book had not yet begun. Then the door opened in and it started.

He was old and kindly-looking, his cheeks very smooth and a pleasant scent of clove hung on his quite nice clothes. I stood. He stood beside me, little more than my own height. He said "It will seem difficult and then awfully nice. It's always that sort of thing."

That sort of thing. For a small man he was strong. His little fingers exerted surprising force. I lay on my back beneath his hands and then his forearms and then all of him. It was like the dream of shrieking and being able to make no sound. I did make a little high-pitched bird's kind of noise but then he pushed the pillow into my face and leaned upon it and I stopped. He was forced to tear my clothes because I still struggled. He later apologized for the damage and offered me a sort of *pourboire*. I am surprised that at thirteen I knew enough to take the coin. But I was a practical country girl.

Of the pain I do not intend to speak. It was the usual pain. And from what I have since learned from others at Urania Cottage and elsewhere, it all was little different from a wedding-night, even the suffocation. There was blood and there were bruises. I had bit my tongue and cheek. My stomach hurt. Always that sort of thing. Later, I wondered what his organ had looked like. Later still I knew.

Of the weeping in the room on Curzon Street I do not intend to speak. Nor of the woman who later knocked, then entered bearing a basin and some balm. Nor of what she called "our arrangements for the future." Nor the knowledge we all of us shared, and none of us spoke, that I could not return to my home forever.

I wept much and spoke little and several days later the woman put me to work. In such circumstances I was lucky. I did not have to go blind in a factory or catch a disease in one. I never walked the street. Two of the women were intelligent and traveled, and they delighted in reading to me aloud and in refining my own skills. It is they who taught me to speak to you like this. One of them was a Jewess of considerable refinement. Her father owned three coal barges and a yard near Greenwich. She had enjoyed many advantages. Including a party at Piccadilly ending in rape and the accidental murder of a well-placed older man, her chaperon. The accident being his failing to lunge when a broken bottle was deposited in his throat and face. The rape being her introduction to Christian hardihood and communal love (there being three of them). It spoke well for them, I thought, that they raped her before the murder. At least she didn't have to use a cadaver for pillow.

No one at Curzon Street went home. I learned then that a woman's body,

once it is opened to the world, is somehow allied to the door which closes on a hearth's bright fire. This lesson has held up well. Ask the Master's wife.

Susan read to me and I read to her and she insisted that I perform writing exercises to improve both my hand and my expression. She told me of her father's rituals and her mother's silences and of how her father was hated for a Jew. I asked her about the Jews' murder of Christ and Susan said, one night, sitting on my bed, her hand on my naked thighs and her finger making small delicate motions on the mound and hair, "Everyone murders Christ, Barbara. Jews and Gentiles alike. He was made to be murdered."

I pulled her wrist harder and rose to meet it, but I bit my lip and rode down again, saying "Do *you* believe in Him too?"

Her fingers followed me down and her lips, then. She whispered into me "No, love, we are alike in that we detest Him, you and I and the Gentiles and Jews. And of course He hates us in return."

I went out little. Sometimes I stayed in for fear of meeting someone from home. Sometimes because I could not imagine what I ought to do in the streets save look at men as customers, women as sisters in the house. Or each as opposites to us and our mistress's clients. And then I would hate them, I grew fat and Susan forced a regimen upon me. I grew lazy and she made me write. One day after shopping she returned to my room and, kissing me on the lips, bathing my lips with her tongue, she offered me a package. In it were three small volumes, *Oliver Twist; or, the Parish Boy's Progress*. At *Parish* I laughed, at *Progress* I howled. Susan said "So you've decided already that you like it?"

I said "No." I stood close to her and spoke onto her mouth, nearly kissing her. "No, I have decided that I am also a Jew." Then I did kiss her. Then the men came and we worked. Then that night I started to read my darling's gift.

It was early in the third year of my employment and the second week of my reading that in *Oliver Twist* Rose Maylie offered Nancy the whore a new life, safe from Sikes and the streets and all of London. Nancy refused. Not loving anyone but Susan, I wondered if I would stay a whore to be with her, or escape from the Life. It wasn't fair, for Susan was no murderer, but my lover and only friend. I felt nothing with the men of course. With Susan I felt everything. Still, I wondered. And although it was only a book it was most powerful and I wept when Sikes dashed her brains out.

I told Susan of the passage. "He knows nothing about women" she said. She looked at me as if to determine what I had learned from the novel by Boz, for that was what they called him when he wrote it.

"If a woman could leave this" she said. And then I knew why she had given me the book. She was weeping. "If a woman could marry a man who knows what she is and leave for America. A farmer's wife—"

I cried too. I left her room and in my own I put the books into the fire. It

smelled as if an animal were burning. When she came that night, after the men had left and the house was silent and the street silent too, I lay on the bed completely naked. My legs were wide apart. I rubbed myself. She stared. Removed her gown. Knelt between my feet, then went to all fours. I said "Come kill Christ."

She said "He was only a man."

As she lowered herself and started to tongue I seized her hair and squeezed my thighs and, holding her hair still, turned myself over upon her so that she was face-down on the sheets and squealing. I took the candle from the table. I held it like a dagger. Its flame sputtered when I drove, behind me, behind her, in, to put it out. She screamed and bucked and threw me off. I lay not laughing. She ran whimpering from the room, crouched over.

I held the candle and bit at it. I lay on the bed and moved the candle in myself. I even fell asleep. And next morning I left as if to shop. I hired a cab and was driven to Shepards Bush, where Susan had told me the author and Miss Coutts maintained the establishment for women like me.

And it was there, after the endless lectures and the bland wholesome food, the drudgery, the stares of the matron, the smirks of the gentlemen who came to inspect as often as they could, the baby's system of merits for resisting temptation and the long parade of bodies I often was hungering for, that the man who had written of whoring came to inquire if there was a girl there who could work in a kitchen and never let on about her past. I heard him say "I'd like a Jewess if there's one." And next morning, when the matter was broached after prayers and before breakfast, close on dawn, I raised my hand and told them I was a Jew.

He had been upbraided for making Fagin a Jew and such an awful one. One of his readers had complained and he could not bear the dissatisfaction of a single reader. And he hired a secret whore, a secret Jew. I lived below stairs at Gad's Hill and was his buried conscience. He was one of those who claimed not to have murdered the Christ. The hair in his nostrils was sometimes unclean. He was old.

Rising early was still difficult but not without its humor, for I rose to clean. Sprinkling dried leaves on the floors before dusting and scrubbing, sweeping up the leaves and laying the carpets again. Dusting the soot from the coal stoves, turning mattresses, changing sheets, emptying slop basins. I was told that the Master used to inspect the drawers of his children's bureaus to see that everything was in its place and lined up straight each to each. He was like that about the house and soon noticed disorder, and so the mistress Miss Hogarth was adamant on tidiness. It all was funny. Who was I to make things clean? But I did, his resident Jewess, and so did the others. We sometimes saw him, often heard him. Telling everyone the news of the world and the truth about living. Complaining about black beetles in the pantry or a hint of mice outside the meat larder. Declaiming on the lunch-

con menu even though, I was told, he rarely was able since his return from America to eat a healthy meal.

Once when I was pouring hot water to carry upstairs, I heard through an open window a woman cry in terror. It reminded me of me. Slowly with the basin in my hands I followed the noise. I saw the Master at the back meadow, his hands curved in the air and his neck shaking. A man's deep noise came and then the high cry. I dropped the basin on the lawn and ran to him. To see as much as to help. He cried again, shrill and high, in his weakest voice, "No, Bill! No!" He struck his fist down and staggered. Then he stood up taller and nodded his head.

In gnat clouds and over a tit's fearful cry from the elder beneath which he stood I said "Pardon, sir, are you well?"

He turned slowly and looked at me. He slapped his small hands against his waistcoat and limped toward me, his foot all wrapped in a black silk bandage. There was red in his eyes and perspiration on his forehead. He looked down to me, for I am a small person, and he said in his softest voice "It's Barbara?"

"Barbara, sir."

"And you wish to know if I'm well?"

"No, sir."

A great smile went over his face and the whole face changed. "And there I thought you worried for me. Ah, well." And then the face changed again, the lines around the eyes disappeared only to reappear around the mouth and he looked bloated with malice as his face widened and his nostrils flared. "Then *why* are you not in my house, where you work? Where it is *said* that you work. Where you are *hired* to work. Where I *require* you to work."

I curtsied like a good girl and laughed like a whore. "I came, sir, because I heard a cry as if in extremity. I had thought that rescue lived neither above nor below stairs. I desist because I recognize the nature of the cry. It's that girl. The whore with the heart of gold. Except she's too much gold and not enough whore, sir. Am I dismissed?" I curtsied again.

"From me or from my service?" he asked, and the lines returned to his eyes.

"From either, sir."

"Yes" he said, and laughed like a boy who'd found a fine joke. "No, I mean. No, you're still in my employ and I do not dismiss you from my meadow." He bowed to me, a mockery of bowing. I inclined my head in parody, but he was looking over the fields toward the school in the distance. "Well-spoken and brazen as a cathedral bell and a reviewer to boot. So you read your master's little books?"

"I read that one before Urania. It was why I begged them to let me in."

"All the better" he said. He smiled on me without meaning it and limped a few paces toward the house. Then he stopped. He said "Do you know,

Barbara, that thousands of people have paid thousands of pounds to hear me read the Sikes-and-Nancy?"

"The mistress and others have told me so, sir."

"Are you impressed?"

"By the money, sir?"

He pointed a finger in the air, then dropped his hand. He nodded his head and his face was solemn. "Why are you so skilled in repartée?" he asked. "Why are you so well-spoken?"

"For a retired whore, sir?"

"You must be careful," he said, "that your wit not overshadow your gratitude. Mustn't you?"

"As you say, sir." I curtsied.

"As I mean, Miss Barbara."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"No you aren't" he said.

"No, sir."

He banged his fist against his thigh and winced. "*Learn* sorrow, then! *Learn* station! *Learn place!*" He limped toward the garden and I waited near the elder. I thought that he soon must die, he looked so feeble as he hobbled home. His strength was in his murders.

I said to myself "*Learn* sorrow." As I watched him scuttle slowly back the gnats settled at my eyes and nose. I followed him.

I have little interest in recounting my odious duties. It was harder than being a whore. Nothing's easier than that, of course. At least on Curzon Street. It wasn't one of those places where they work you until your flesh sags and you're dead of disease. They had us inspected by a doctor whose name you would know if, when you read this, too many hundreds of years haven't passed. Of course there's the necessary rape or theft or drugging to start some of us off. Some volunteered and perhaps I would have been one, though I doubt it. Probably in my case what happened was what should have happened. But in a shorter time than you might like to think, the Life's the only life. We never worked mornings and we had our freedom. They knew, the Mrs. and her man, there was no place to run to. No place except a workhouse and the lashing and gruel. Or the factories. Or Urania Cottage. And he was the only reason I went there.

Not for his famous goodness or mild mercy. I'll talk of that. No. I went there because Susan sent me. If she was telling me goodbye she also was telling me that I must seek a life without her. We loved. She was my teacher. I'm not sad for my manner of saying farewell. For she deserved it. Punishment is what you deserve. It defines itself. You seek it. My punishment was to lose her and hers was to have me as a man since it was a man she sought and found and fled with. Her voyage was to America. Mine was to Gad's Hill Place and the carrying of slops. Once I was in the Life, the rest

of my life was in her hands and she placed it in his. There I was.

Of the other staff and members of the household I shall have something to say. But essentially it was he and I. Trust him to have the cheap edition of his books below stairs. For our enlightenment I suppose. And because he assumed that no one could live without his language. Even the famous false door in the parlor which opened into his study was named, in a manner of speaking. There were leather backs of books which weren't books, all ranged in rows. Until you tried to move them for the dusting. Then you saw that there was nothing behind them except shelving. At a touch, the door swung to. Shelves and leather backs and all. And there was the room he worked in. I wonder why he had to skulk like that. But the artificial books had names. He and his guests used to laugh over them. I could hear him holding forth, saying "I call this one *Drowsy's Recollections of Nothing* and the other *Heaviside's Conversations with Nobody*. Ha. Yes, and this little beauty, in only six volumes, mind you, is *Kant's Eminent Humbugs*, eh? And tell me, Forster, what do you think of *Socrates on Wedlock*? In twenty-one volumes, here, we've *History of a Short Chancery Suit*. This little pamphlet, on which I shall have to have the title printed sideways, is of course *The Virtues of Our Ancestors*. Understand? Virtues. Yes. Awfully good, isn't it?"

They all laughed for him. Mr. Collins and Mr. Forster were much with us in 1869, and Mr. Dolby of course. He was away from home with Dolby often in those days. Giving his Farewell Readings. I don't think anyone has ever taken longer to say goodbye. It was before and after his journeys to Scotland and Wales, Dublin and Belfast, that the talk filtered down below stairs and under the sliding hallway doors. Always talk of trains. This interested me much. But what was important and instrumental was *his* interest. Whatever he thought about seeped down under great pressure like thick Italian coffee. It pooled and then spread to the rest of us. So that whatever was on his mind, be it his son Plorn's departure for Australia or Henry's study at Cambridge, became a weight on the collective mind of the household. In mind as well as act he was a dictator.

Soon I hear of Staplehurst. This was before his journey up to Scotland for Readings. Some of the staff called it his "Holiday." It was four years before I came to his service, and they all spoke of it innocently enough. A trip to Paris. Only late at night, when the mistress was asleep, did they speak of his companion. Ternan the actress. She was the same as me. A whore. I say this with no blame. You who read this by now must understand me. She had her work, which was easy enough. To live in the flat he rented for her and to meet him in Paris on his holidays. They were returning on the tidal train in June, going fast through Headcorn toward Staplehurst. Cuddling in his compartment no doubt. The driver saw torn-up rails, some say. Others say the newspaper reports spoke of a flagman's red banner. Whatever happened to alert him, it happened too late. The train jumped a forty-foot separation



on a dip in the tracks and ran off toward the bank of the river bed. Much screaming of brakes and people I'm sure.

First the engine, then the guards' van, and then the coach with Ternan and the Master. There it was, its rear end on the field, part of it hanging off the bridge. Miss Hogarth has said that the Master said "'Suddenly we were off the rail, and beating the ground as the car of a half-emptied balloon might do.'" Not that he has ever been in a balloon. But he must use his words, mustn't he?

Well, he was a hero to hear it told by those who heard him tell it. Demanding the key of a guard and opening the compartment door. Helping Ternan and some old lady out of the car. Watching as guards ran up and down the train while the injured screamed and those who were trapped screamed louder. Miss Hogarth said he said "'With my brandy flask in hand, I fought my way through shattered carriages and the bodies of the dead and dying. One poor fellow, staggering past, had such a frightful cut across the skull that I could see the grin of bone.'" Twice I've heard her tell it and twice she's said that. Grin of bone. Oh they love his mind. His ceaseless prosing. "I couldn't bear to look at him," she said he said, "'but I did. It was my duty. I poured some water over his face, gave him some brandy and laid him on the grass. A lady had blood streaming over her face which was lead-color.'" Lead-color. He never forgets his language. It was only then, Miss Hogarth said he said, after surveying the crushed and dead and bloody, that he remembered that the manuscript of *Our Mutual Friend*'s next number was in the carriage. Cool as a cucumber, he climbed back in to rescue it.

I wonder. If he was cool as a cucumber, he probably shunted his mistress off beneath a tree where no one would notice her. Then with the manuscript under his arm from the start he probably strode about. Examining the corpses. Encouraging the employees. However. Everyone agrees that he was shaken when he returned to Gad's Hill. That his hand shook so, he had to dictate replies to queries about his health. That he told Forster, there on a visit soon after, "I am curiously weak, as if I were recovering from a long illness. I begin to feel it in my head, you know. I sleep well and eat well, but then I write half a dozen notes, and turn faint and sick. Drove into Rochester yesterday and bless me if I didn't feel more shaken than I have since the accident. A curious turn for a veteran traveler, don't you think? Is the Inimitable aging, old friend? Do say he isn't, I pray you. Ha! Warn you. Ha!"

They say he sent a pair of pigeons and some clotted cream to Ternan on the next morning. And I heard him speaking with Dolby, whining about his fears. "I cannot bear railway travel, I fear, Dolby. No, that is not true. I bore it through America and I *can* bear it now. But I am not always certain that I want to bear it. You know, I have, always, a perfect conviction,

against the senses, that the carriage is down on the left side. Curious, isn't it? For at Staplehurst, it was the right side which sank. And anything like speed, as ever, is inexpressibly distressing. I must confess that now it is less tolerable than in the years intervening. Could you say your Chief is doddering off into his senility?"

Good Dolby said no. The Master knew he would. Good Dolby worried about the railroad rides as he worried about his Chief's poor health and good crowds for the Readings. Sometimes he looked as if he wished to lay his head on the Master's breast. Sometimes he looked as if he wished to bite him.

I do not read his travel books. They are as pompous as the response of bully Englishman to a world he cannot own or hasn't invented. But I have read his books. They were there in the downstairs kitchen. I know they were there for me to read. Not all of them, but most. For in his life and ceaseless language were the clues to where my own road led. I knew that. A precocious sixteen-year-old, and schooled by a teacher he couldn't hold a candle to, I read him. I liked his *Dombey and Son* because a father gets his due in that. Although he isn't punished nearly enough. That's because the Master deserved his daughters' punishment and knew it. He tried to forestall it with his books. And he saw his death coming and knew how it would travel to him. Listen: "The very speed at which the train was whirled along mocked the swift course of the young life that had been borne away so steadily and inexorably to its foredoomed end. The power that forced itself upon its iron way—its own—defiant of all paths and roads, piercing through the heart of every obstacle, and dragging living creatures of all classes, ages, and degrees behind it, was a type of triumphant monster, Death." He wrote that book eight or nine years before Staplehurst. He knew.

Once, after the early trip to Scotland, he had Miss Hogarth send for me. Collins was in the sitting room with him, all tiny arms and hands and legs and feet and a giant round head. His spectacles glittered. He looked like a monstrous bee. He studied my body as I studied his. I was good to survey. He was not. He knew it. His ugliness and need excited me. The Master said "Mr. Wilkie Collins, this is Barbara, the girl I have spoken of."

I curtsied and Collins moved his enormous head. "You show no signs of your former life" Collins said. His voice was soft, like a tongue.

I said "I have but the one life, sir, and am still in the midst of living it."

Collins smiled like an animal, all tongue and teeth. The Master first smiled, then his nostrils widened and he looked grim. He tried to. "You see, Collins, what I refer to? A wit far in excess of what you would expect."

Collins replied "No, not necessarily, sir. Women, even girls—few of them live to be women in fact. Girls who follow the Life must sharpen their wits to survive. That is why I maintain they are a proper study and subject

fit for art of the highest order. Barbara, I am told your persuasion is Jewish."

I nodded. The Master said "Ma'am!" I curtsied and said "Yes, sir, you are correct."

"Was your father a money-lender?"

I smiled, for I had been waiting. "No, sir," I said, "he is a minister in the South."

"You are a *convert*?" the Master said.

Collins said "You choose hardship and separation from the mass of your fellow beings. But why?"

"I was chosen first by a Life which is as far separated as any religion, sir. Once there, other choices are secondary."

"You call being a Jewess secondary?" Collins said.

The Master said "Is not salvation by your Lord of high concern?"

I said "Sir, I have been told that all men daily kill Christ. And women too, I suppose. What difference, then, under what name we do the murder?"

The Master's eyes were wide, Collins' narrow. Collins finally said, rubbing a carved lion's head on the arm of his chair, "Why, none. Given your supposition. We must speak at some length, my dear. With your master's permission."

The Master nodded wearily, as if he had predicted the invitation. What it might lead to. I of course was certain where it could lead. I curtsied. My nipples stung as they rubbed my clothes. And then the Master shouted "By damme, Collins, it *does* make a difference. Why change if we all do it. It isn't logical, by God. What is your *honest* reason, ma'am?"

I curtsied and said "I do not know which of my reasons is honest, sir. How do we recognize the honesty of our reasons?"

I was dismissed. Collins grinned wide. The Master frowned. His son Plorn had told me he would.

The more his life pressed in upon him the more the pressure seemed to reside in his foot. The more he limped upon it the paler he grew. The paler he grew the less he ate. As he ate the less he spoke of his Nelly more. No one else spoke of Ternan unless he did. And then it was with the disinterest you feign as you look into the noseless face of a syphilitic and pretend it is only another face. When a certain Bealpost was mentioned his face became a mask.

Charley his son at thirty-one with four daughters and a son to support was nursing a paper mill going bankrupt. Wills at *All the Year Round* was ill and the Master had to do his work too. Later he let Charley do it. Alfred was in Australia. Mary was as old as his mistress and neither she nor her father were comfortable with the fact. And Plorn was shortly to leave for Australia. He was almost seventeen. He learned.

Plorn was in bed one morning in October. The Master was in his study practicing his Murder. We heard the shrieks. I came in with linen to change the bed and saw him, but closed the door behind me anyway. I could see how under the comforter his feet were pressed together at the heels, his knees spread wide and flat against the sheets. His hand was at his groin. The other with white knuckles held the bars at the head of the bed.

"Oh Christ" he said. His little face was white and thin. His legs were thin. He was smaller than his father. He turned red and looked at the ceiling. His eyes were brilliant. His father's eyes.

I said "Am I disturbing you, sir?"

"I'll be up in a minute, Barbara."

I held the linen against me and said "You seem already to be up, sir. Shall I leave?"

He closed his eyes. He said "No."

"What shall I do, sir?"

He looked at me as if he were praying. His hand beneath the covers moved and then he stopped it. He looked away toward the ceiling again.

I said "Perhaps I can help, sir." I set the linen on a corner-chair and walked to the side of the bed. "It doesn't make you weak for long, you know. It may *be* as it's the life's precious fluid of a man. But it seems to regenerate, if you know what I mean."

With his eyes closed he nodded. His face was crimson and hot looking. I touched the covers. He hissed as if I'd stung him. But his hips moved up. He was a sweet young boy. I moved the covers away and saw him. Innocent and small for all his excitement. Defenseless. It looked like a baby animal.

"Let me do it for you" I said.

"Whore" he whispered.

"That's right" I said. "Whore and Jewess from under the stairs."

"You shit-smeared kitchen-maid whore" he said.

"That makes it better, doesn't it?"

He called me all the names they like to use. Telling me how low I was. At the final instant I lowered my head like a bird of prey and sucked him. He whimpered like a child and tried to move away. I held him by his little thin buttocks and pulled him in. Like a bird again I fell upon his torso and pulled myself up him and seized either side of his face and plunged my tongue between his lips. He gagged.

He had nothing to say. I stood beside the bed again and licked my lips until he had to look away. I said "I'll come back later, sir, to change the bed."

I came in early the next morning again. He wanted me to do it the same way. I told him he must learn to be a man. He locked the door and I showed him. Like all young men he was quite unoriginal. Not very good. I told him I hoped in Australia he would learn a bit of enterprise. He bit my throat and

cursed me for a serving-wench whore. I told him he sounded like his father's books. I tutored him for a week. It was good to have some pleasure again though soon I saw myself as if from a point on the ceiling. I was cold and clever. Businesslike, in all. One morning he said "Where are you? When we—"

"You must read more of your father's writings" I said. And next day I read him what I'd copied: "Oh for a good spirit who would take the house-tops off, with a more potent and benignant hand than the lame demon in the tale, and show a Christian people what dark shapes issue from amidst their homes, to swell the retinue of the Destroying Angel when he moves forth among them!"

"You think your are *above* . . . it?" he said.

"Like your father, sir."

"Don't call me sir like that, you bitch whore."

"Very well."

"No. *Do* say sir."

"Ah. You mean: Sir, my lord, may I rub your organ on my cheeks and lips. Like this. Oh sir, may I kiss it. So. Sir—"

"Get off me! Get out! Whore! *Whore!* And never dare to think of yourself and my father in the same thought. Out! Away from me!"

They said his father's voice broke often as he spoke to Plorn of the coming voyage out. Miss Hogarth said that the Master had quite broken down when he said the final farewell. He gave his son a box of cigars. Cigars! And standing at the top of the stairs one afternoon two of us heard the Master declaiming to Dolby from the hall "Oh if you ever do come, Dolby, to send your youngest child thousands of miles away for an indefinite time, and have a rush into your soul of all the many fascinations of the last little child you can ever dearly love, you will have a hard experience of this wrenching life."

Dolby replied that he understood. His Chief hastened to say "No, you do not, dear Dolby. You cannot."

Dolby replied that he supposed, after all, he could not.

I whispered "He cannot let it go at that."

With surprise and pain in his voice, his Chief said "But you must, Dolby. You must *try*."

Dolby, lost in either the coming at or going from the issue, finally said just "Yes."

So he was alone.

Miss Hogarth was a solid slow woman. She had no wit. From what they said she was like the wife he'd driven out. A stolid steady performer of necessary chores. Her teeth were stained, her throat sagged. She loved him and his needs. She didn't respond to his needs: she worshipped them. I waited to hear they'd been lovers but everyone swore not. He was a moving statue of something sacred which she adored. She loved him only as a virgin

can. Purely because from a distance. She spoke only when she had to. She always was clean because he demanded a world without pollution. I think he demanded too that she instruct me so as to save me from a false god or my own false self. For every time she spoke with me she made a lesson out of something as simple as putting up pears or sweeping carpets. I didn't mind. I assumed that having a mother was like being preached at by Miss Hogarth. A little wordy, but not too uncomfortable. She always saw that our meals were good though she didn't permit us much ale except on holidays. She spoke of the many famous people who adored him. She spoke of the masses of the poor who felt the same. She spoke of how hard he worked at his Readings so as to earn an estate he could leave to his children. When I asked her if he might not also perform for the pleasure, she said "Pleasure?"

I said "The thrill of all those people gasping?"

"Your master does not threaten his health for the sake of a gasping crowd" she answered. Her thick lips tightened.

I said "Oh."

But he went on. His leg dragged, he panted when he walked. Sometimes he fluttered his eyes like a fainting girl. And always there was someone to hold to his arm and whimper on his behalf. St. James Hall, and the spectators, the friends at home who told him what he wished to hear. One, a critic, although I do not know of what, told the Master that when Bill struck Nancy he had an irresistible desire to scream. The Master said "You need not stifle the impulse on my account, you know." Another, a physician, said "If only one woman cries out when you murder the girl, there will be a contagion of hysteria all over the place." The Master did not correct the surgeon to the effect that it was Sikes who did the Murder and the Master who read it aloud.

And then Dolby was returned from his home at Ross again and they were to set off for Edinburgh. I brought in tea and heard Dolby say "Your mind is on Staplehurst again, sir."

"You do know me, Dolby" the Master said.

"And it is worse than in America?"

"Dolby, when I am on board of a train, I see the car leaning to the left. Always to the left!" His face was white and he pointed in the air.

Dolby, eager and awkward and large, said "And yet the car went down to the right at Staplehurst, did it not?"

The Master closed his eyes and nodded slowly, as if Dolby had disclosed a great sorrow. "Dolby," he said, "you know. You always know."

Dolby bit his lip. His teeth were close together. "I do my best, sir."

The Master said "Yes you do." He asked me to pour out tea and leave them. I curtsied. "Do you know, Dolby, how many shocks the nerves receive on a long excursion by train?" I stopped pouring. He motioned me to go on, then closed his eyes again.

Dolby said "No, sir. It hadn't occurred to me."

"No," the Master said, "you were not at Staplehurst."

Dolby said "Ah."

"Thirty thousand" the Master said. "I have calculated it. Thirty thousand nerve jolts."

I began to giggle but stopped. "You will suffer, sir" Dolby said.

"But I will go on."

They left, with enough portmanteaux and apparatus to equip a traveling troupe. When they were gone, the house, as always, became silent and the work less arduous. But not for long. Some days later Miss Hogarth received a letter in which Dolby told her of the Edinburgh Reading. We were assembled below stairs in a smell of earth and leeks to hear of the Murder. "'The horrible perfection,'" Dolby wrote, "'to which he brought it, and its novelty, acted as a charm to him and made him the more determined to go on with it elsewhere, come what might. He ignores his health so bravely! The terrible force with which the actual perpetration of this most foul murder was described was of such a kind as to render him utterly prostrate for some moments after its delivery, and it was not until he had vanished from the platform, my dear Miss Hogarth, that the public had sufficiently recovered their sense of composure to appreciate the circumstance that all the horrors to which they had been listening were but a story and not a reality. And I must report that it was painfully apparent to his most intimate friends, and those who know his state of health the best, that a too-frequent repetition of the Murder will seriously and permanently affect his constitution.'"

She shook the letter at us and then let her hands drop to her ample sides. She sighed and nodded her head. "Why does he go on?" she asked us.

I opened my mouth to reply but she looked at me with such strength that I said nothing. To myself I said I have done much for the sake of a caress. Why should he do less?

And then, a week more into January of 1869, we received another letter describing the events which followed the Belfast Reading. They were on a mail train to Kingstown, where they were to catch the mail boat. There were but two carriages for passengers, the rest being guards' vans and post-office carriages. Dolby and the Master rode in a *coupé* composed almost entirely of plate glass. He had, Dolby wrote (and Miss Hogarth loudly read), arranged for the *coupé* in order to assure privacy for his Chief. As if she were reading of Arthur going to battle, she declaimed "'Whilst running along at a rapid speed, about forty miles from Belfast, we received a severe jolt which threw us all forward in the carriage. Looking out we observed an enormous piece of iron flying along a side line, tearing up the ground and carrying some telegraph posts along with it. Possibly having the recollection of the dreadful Staplehurst accident in his mind, my Chief threw himself to the bottom of the carriage, and we all followed his example. Later, taking stock, once the brakes had been applied and the train safely halted,

we found that the great tire of the driving-wheel had broken, and that the piece of iron we had seen traveling with such destructive force was a portion of the tire, and that the noise we had heard on the roof of the carriage as we stopped was caused by another enormous piece of iron falling on it. Had this piece of iron struck the glass instead of the framework of the carriage, it would have been impossible for us to escape, and in all probability there would have been a repetition of the Staplehurst catastrophe.

“Need I tell you, dear Miss Hogarth, that my Chief is an iron man? Two minutes later, he bounced onto his feet and was telling the driver that he was a good man.”

Miss Hogarth held the letter to her starched bosom. We all sighed, as that was what she wished us to do. I would have given much could I but once have found her flesh-to-flesh with the Master. His buttocks jiggling. Cries belching from her wonderful girth. Our iron man. Steel seed.

We heard more. As if the saga of England's hero were published in parts, like the Master's books. Miss Hogarth would call us from the corners of the house and grounds and in the kitchen we would assemble. Standing at the metal-topped service table. Listening through Dolby and then Miss Hogarth to the Master's voice whose timbre and histrionics somehow animated Dolby's words and Miss Hogarth's tongue and rounded mouth. We learned of “his own good nature” and “affectionate disposition, sense of justice,” and we were told of “his determination to go on which I cannot and dare not shake.” We learned of pain. “The awful swelling of his foot, and inclination when under duress to sometimes stagger as if wounded.” He was at the same time “graceful as a dancer despite his malaise.”

When a letter in the Master's own hand first arrived, Miss Hogarth would compose herself on the sitting room settee and read the letter aloud to herself, washing it down with green and yellow herbal tea. I remember her saying, as I poured for her, “Listen, Miss Barbara. *This* is what courage speaks. He writes: ‘After the Reading some friends came to me in the dressing room, but kept a good distance away. Not so much from respect or decorum, I fear, as from a subterranean, almost animal, intimation of the murderous instincts I had displayed at the lectern. My Murder, you understand, had gone off rather well. I did my best not to display my teeth in a frightening fashion, as I suspected that any sudden motion on my part might set them to fainting and chattering like goslings before the wolf. I was most mild, dear spirit of my household—’” She nodded at me as if to remind me of the esteem in which he held her. Then she said “And so forth, yes, yes, and so forth and—ah! Now attend! ‘Having some vacant days before the Lancashire Readings, I concurred with good Dolby—he is as watchful as ever, my brother and my son—that a change of air would prove beneficial to what I fear is a further weakening of the Inimitable's constitution. We went, then, to Chester with its old walls and small crawling streets, and Dolby expressed satisfaction at the good Saturday night I



passed. How he dotes! But on the Sunday, there was a reoccurrence of the symptoms and I was, I must confess, most disturbed. More disturbed, if that is possible, than my friend and all-round Arranger. We went up to Mold, then, thinking that the softnesses of tone in the old Welsh market-town would prove restorative. My night there, alas, was a most miserable one.

“Dolby understood that I would have willingly bitten at his throat, poor fellow, had he remonstrated again as to my health. So we drove, the following day, in silence. I had sense, then, at one point, when a small boy waved to us from the side of the inferior carriage-road, that my traveling days were drawing to a close. Insupportable! And finally, when we were to walk about, and when my walking was most unsatisfactory to both my body and my Dolby, we broached the subject again as if by agreement that now I would not bite.

“My primary concern, of course, was not for myself. I feared for the disappointment of my Lancashire audiences, and for the losses that would be incurred by Messrs. Chappell who had invested so heavily in the Readings. One has one’s obligations. Dolby assuring me that my audiences would understand, and that Messrs. Chappell would do all in their power to adapt their arrangements to the altered condition of my health, I agreed that we should go to London and consult with Mr. Beard. But we were unable to return to Chester in time to catch the only train to London on that day and so I wrote at once to Mr. Beard, asking his advice, and we set out for Chester, and a rest.

“I owed two Readings, and I gave them. The one at Blackburn I found most difficult, and Dolby was almost in tears. I did not complain. Thereafter, I owed Readings at Preston and Warrington. Dolby arranged apartments in the Imperial Hotel, and I found the sea breeze most invigorating. I told Dolby that I guessed, with luck, that I would get through the week’s obligations. I wrote again to Beard, expressing the revivifying effect of the cool wet breeze, but also confessing to a certain deadness on the left side—do not *worry*, my dear!—and the difficulty of taking hold of any object with the most reprehensible left hand.

“The result was a Telegram from Beard announcing his arrival, and, before dinner, the presence of our friend the good medico. I showed Beard the Guildhall for the Reading, and then we returned to the hotel for the consultation. He was most thorough and, as ever, respectful. Afterward, Dolby came in and asked if he should ring for dinner. I told him “Listen first to what Mr. Beard has to say and then do as you think best.” And Beard, as curt as ever in responding to medical matters, said this: “All I have to say is that if you insist upon his taking the platform tonight, I will not guarantee but that he goes through life dragging a foot after him.” I confess to an unmanly seizure, for I did weep and hang on Dolby’s neck, saying “My poor boy! I am so sorry for all the trouble I am giving you!” I then recovered my

composure somewhat, after explaining to Dolby that I feared for the reactions of the crowd who had purchased tickets, and I said to Beard "Let me try it tonight. It will save so much trouble." "As you like" Beard said. "I have told Dolby what I think."

"My only thought, then, was for Dolby, and all the arrangements he must make. Dolby assured me that he would manage. At which point I decided that we must escape Preston at all costs, lest some ill-disposed person, seeing me there, report that, despite reports of my ill-health which Dolby would circulate, I was up and about.

"Dolby notified the newspapers and sent messengers to stops some fifteen or twenty miles away, to save the incoming audience the remainder of the trip. Arrangements were made with the local authorities, and with Messrs. Chappell, and I am sent home like a failing child."

With which she slowly tried to jump to her feet and, panting then, gave a series of orders for the house to be made ready for his imminent arrival. She quite forgot to discuss with me his bravery and the nobility of his steadfastness. I was much relieved at the omission. He came home. Bearing his paralysis like the shield upon which he refused to be carried.

Much to-ing and fro-ing, the Master sequestered, great hush at Gad's Hill, the silence of visitors, and the sense below stairs that soon he would die.

He did not. He refused to. In five or six weeks he was practicing again, and the Murder echoed down to us. There was talk of his going to Australia for a Farewell Tour of that most distant of places, and a visit to his sons. I smiled to think of Plorn. Polluted Plorn. But the journey was abandoned, out of fear for another failure of his health. I thought of Plorn and licked my lips.

With no Readings yet for a while, the Master resumed his literary life. He worked again at his paper, *All the Year Round*, turning the sub-editorship over to his son Charles, who had miserably failed at business. He went to the theater and dined in town with Dolby and other friends. Mr. Collins returned frequently and studied my body when he could. His head looked too large for thighs to surround. Mr. Forster came. As if from the grave. He disapproved of everything but the Master, and approved of him only in his own company. The Master secured apartments at the St. James Hotel in Piccadilly, that he might the more easily entertain his London friends. His daughter and Miss Hogarth went with him and, though we heard of their tepid adventures when they returned to Gad's Hill for country entertainments, the house grew silent once again.

In the leisure thus offered, I read his books and thought on Mr. Collins. He was interested in whores. I thought, then, of myself and the day my life ended, of the time at Curzon Street. Of Susan in America, shooting Indians

and preaching virtue to her farmer's children. I thought at night of the lit candle's quick extinction. It is true. I swear it. That for the first time I asked myself why I had come into the Master's service. I had left Curzon Street not because I was bored with whoredom but because I had stayed there for Susan. She had given me a family and a feeling of necessity. With her departure, my only occupation fled as well. Urania Cottage had been the only way away. But had I gone to it or to him? And why had I volunteered as a Jewess to be in his home?

One night I told myself that it was his smug assurance that a whore must die. That in heaven and on the earth there *was* no forgiveness for me and my ilk. What he said in his books was plain. If you err you cannot be forgiven. If you fall, no matter the reason, you are fallen forever, and lost. But had I not known so before his language and pomp came into my life? Perhaps. But he was the spirit of household and hearthside by whom such hypocrites as Father and Mr. Caldecott swore. His was the tone of assurance which rigidified the membrane between me, as then I was, and a possible life. His son would have nightmares and deeper night-time lusts because of me. I had fouled his home and witnessed his humanness. I was not an unhappy woman.

And then he returned to Gad's Hill, leaving his daughter and Miss Hogarth at the apartments, bearing with him the bulbous Collins and visitors from abroad, Mr. and Mrs. Fields of Boston, Mr. and Mrs. Childs of Philadelphia. He brought them out to see the country and his manor house. And one afternoon, as his guests were driven to the station to greet Miss Hogarth who was arriving by train, he called me into the sitting room.

I looked for Mr. Collins, but he was not present. The Master slouched in an easy chair with his foot propped on a large ottoman. A kerchief was laid upon the foot so as to hide its nakedness, which it did not do. He could not, that day, bear the pressure of a shoe. One arm clove to his side and the shoulder slumped somehow into the body. His head was tilted, his features drawn, his face white with strain. He told me to sit.

He said "My son has been gone more than a month."

"Somewhat more, sir, yes. I believe so."

He stared at me as Collins might. But differently as well. "This has been an expansive period for you, has it not? A time, shall we say, of growth? Have you not *grown*, Miss Barbara. Hey?"

I knew of course what he was saying. I replied "Not so much as to *groan*."

He did not smile, but nodded as if well-challenged. "But you will" he said. "In—what?—eight months? Seven, shall we say?"

I nodded and folded my hands at my waist.

"Did you come here for that?" he asked. "I would not be surprised. My

friend Mr. Collins has wagered that your purpose is somehow united to your . . . anatomy. You do not object to my discussing one of my staff with a gentleman and colleague?"

"Mr. Collins writes about whores and the physical instincts" I said. "I should be glad to have his opinion."

"You yourself are unsure?"

"We all are unsure, sir, are we not?"

He pushed against the gryphons' heads and bulbous vegetative carvings of the arms of his chair. As if he would rise. As if he could not, he slid lower. His eyes were somehow happy in their jellies of pain. Or pleased, at least. He sighed deeply and shook his head. "You are alone and yet show a fibre and resiliency. Of the streets, you read your betters' works and penetrate them. Brought low, you talk high. A vulnerable woman, you eschew protection. I do not understand you, Barbara."

"Are you trying to write me, sir, or comprehend me?"

He slammed his hands upon the chair and whitened. He opened and closed his small fists, then closed and opened his large bright eyes. "Be still! Do not be more impertinent—is it *possible*? I have contributed to your welfare in the general and then the particular. You have repaid me with upstart banter and a mind full of Billingsgate. And the corruption of my son. It is a vile and filthy matter."

"Pardon me, sir," I said, "but I did not know that your beneficence required payment. If I may say so—"

"Yes, by God! I predicted you would say so—that *your* profession is the one requiring payment. Eh? *Eh?*"

"It had occurred to me."

"Had it not" he said low. Despite himself (or because of himself) he was amused. There was a long silence in the cluttered room. The dark chairs and chaise-rests, the brown velvet cloth and dull-red rugs. The sense of heaviness despite the sunlight pressing at the windows. Then he said "Do you expect that I will pay for the midwife and confinement? The expenses of nursing? The . . . *costs*?"

"I do not require it, sir. But, yes. I do expect that you will become involved, I confess it."

Now he hissed. "Can you confess to me why?"

"Yes, sir."

A silence. "Then *do* so!" he shouted.

"Because you will think of the flesh alive within me as somehow your own. You are a man of immeasurable acquisitiveness. You sense profoundly what you own. Or feel you ought to own. I think that you will not permit an *item of mortality*—"

"I wrote those words" he cried.

I nodded, said "Your interjection is a type of what I try to describe. You claim much as only yours."

He sighed again and rubbed at his face as if to bathe it. "You suggest that I am no Christian" he said.

"No, sir, I do not. I suggest that there are no Christians. Everyone kills Christ, I have been taught."

"Surely not—"

"Sir: everyone. I fear I do believe that."

"Yes," he said, staring at me, "yes you do. Tell me about my son. No!"

And another silence.

And then he said "He is only a boy. And soon I will be dead."

"Perhaps his child will live" I said.

"And therefore? Miss, in light of the circumstances, therefore *what?*"

"There are no therefores, sir. Perhaps his child will live."

"Do you want it to live? Do you know what its life can be like? I have been showing my guests the Horrible London they crave to see. You have been of it, Miss Barbara. But you have never been confined to a workhouse. Aged people in every variety. Mumbling, blear-eyed, spectacled, stupid, deaf, lame, all vacantly winking at the sun which managed to creep in through the open doors. Weird old women, all skeleton within, all bonnet and cloak without, continually wiping their eyes with dirty dusters of pocket handkerchiefs. The ghastly kind of contentment upon them which, as you may think, was not at all comforting to see.

"Miss, I saw a young woman in deep grief, sobbing most bitterly and wringing her hands, letting fall abundance of great tears that choked her utterance. She spoke over and again of 'the dropped child.' The child that was found in the street, and she had brought up ever since, and which had died an hour ago, and see where the little creature lay, beneath this cloth! The dear, the pretty dear!

"The dropped child seemed too small and poor a thing for death to be in earnest with, but death had taken it, Miss Barbara. And ugly old women crouching, witch-like, round a hearth and chattering and nodding, after the manner of monkeys. All ignoring the diminutive form, neatly washed, composed, and stretched as if in sleep upon a box. Is that what you would wish?"

I breathed in deeply and then out again. Deeply again. I forced myself to laugh, my eyes to remain opened. I nodded as he sat forward to better witness my horror. Or my impudence. "Sir," I said, "I know for a fact that you have taken your guests in the company of a police sergeant for some awful strolls. And that you have spent a goodly amount of time at the opium dens in the neighborhood of the Ratcliffe Highway. And I should expect that those wasted victims of the dreamy obsession should have been dreadful to see." I drew another breath. "But I am a whore of some small learning, sir. I hope that my child might be intelligent on that account. You see, I have read what you have written. And what you have just told me was penned by you some many months ago. Your horror is accurate but

perhaps no longer quite so keenly felt? Oh, I do admire you even more for that. You are one of our greatest dramatists. And clearly our greatest author. But I am an informed audience, sir. I shall not drop my child."

He closed his eyes as if in sleep.

My child is named Edward after his father, though I do not call him Plorn. I was provided for at the time of his birth, and after. Mr. Collins came to see me occasionally at Falmouth where I went to live, and where I keep this Book. Of him I could say much and intend to. He was gentler than my Master and more of a man than my Edward's father. He has written of me, using another name. He insists upon thinking of me as tragic. The Master wrote of me too—in his will. I am taken care of. The family do not speak of me.

Though Miss Hogarth came to visit after the Master's death on the fifth anniversary of Staplehurst. She sighed and heaved and was embarrassed. She knew him best, perhaps, of all of them. She devoted herself to his service as if at an altar. After his death her sense of service clearly continued. She leaned her elbows on the American cloth of my small dining room table and bowed her head into her arms. My child played outside in the air what washed from the sea. The sea went over the world to Australia and America and then it came back. I often sat and listened to the tide of my history washing on the bright rocks. I did so as she wept. The terns cried with her. And then she lifted her head and looked beyond me as if to the altar of the man who was dead. She said "Barbara, did you love him too?"

"I liked some of his writings" I said. I made my voice coarse.

"But *him*, what of him?"

"He was kind to me. He used me well."

"Surely you think more of him than that?" She wore black. It did not diminish her size. Her face was that of an old woman. She had given him every young year. Her grief now seemed as old as she was.

"I knew him as little as he knew me" I said. "But I have written of him. I have constituted him according to my mind and body. You know," I leaned in closer to her sweet and unintelligent face, "I am not certain that he's dead."

Her eyes widened, first in surprise and then in horror. She composed herself a little, and very slowly, and then she said "You mean—his books?"

"No" I said, thinking of insipid Oliver and Nancy the spiceless whore. Thinking of even this Book. "No, a book is no more than a voice. There are many voices. All of them in time are lost, I suppose."

"Barbara, I have not always been your friend. I was your mistress for a time. But I have always tried to treat you kindly and instruct you. I beg of you to understand my bereavement. It is great. Will you tell me what you know?"

I heard my son's feet on the gravel at the cottage door. The latch rose and fell and rose and the door began to swing. I said "Here he is." Miss Hogarth

rose from her chair and whimpered. The door swung in. She shielded her eyes. The sun burned bright as if the door-frame were afire. I licked my lips and laughed. The Master's eyes rode wide in the sun. I said "Mind you wipe your feet, love."