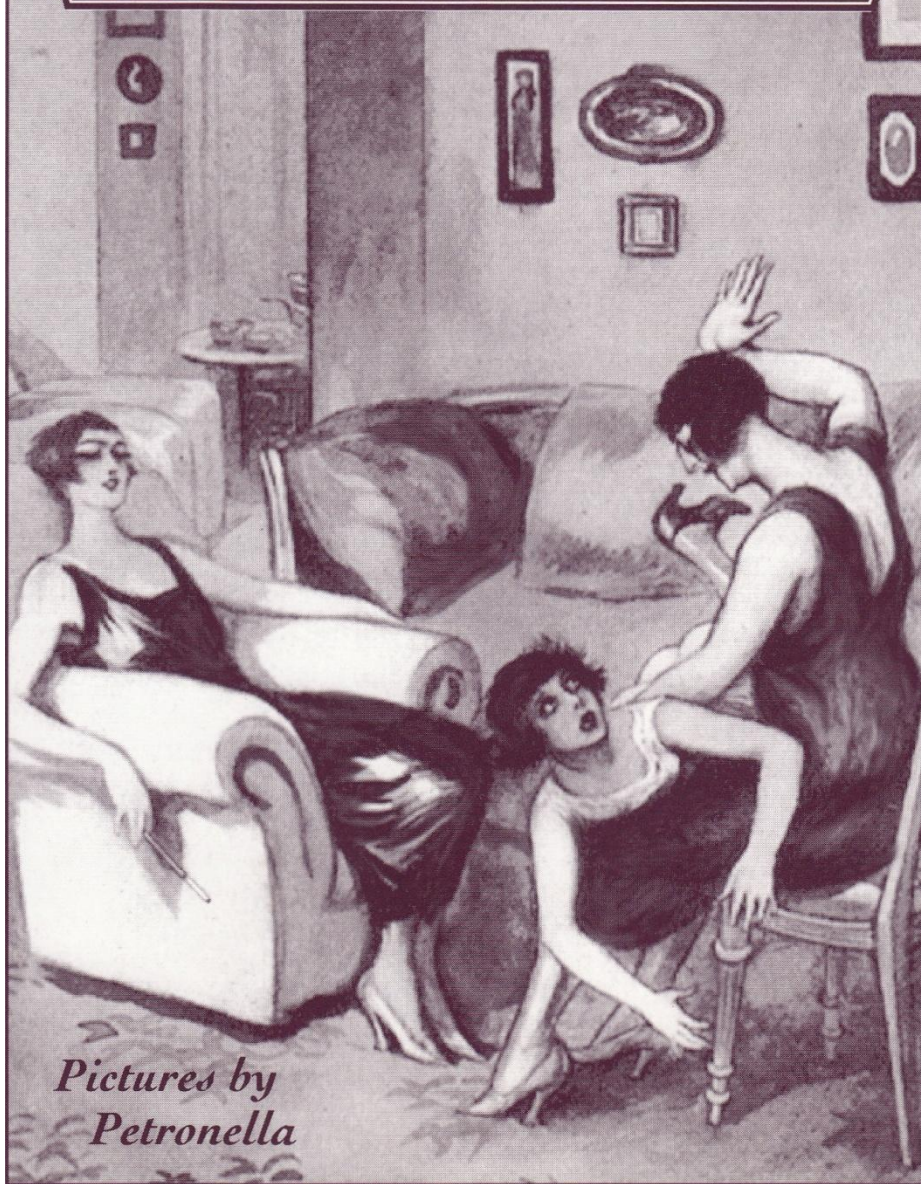


# *The Feminine Régime*

*by Miss Regina Snow*



*Pictures by  
Petronella*

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*by Miss Regina Snow*  
*pictures by Petronella*

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*by Ulalua Novariana, Principa of Literature at the Imperial Academy*

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**Afterword: Is the Empire Real?**.....

# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

*Lavinia gasped.*

*The sting was unbearably ferocious.....Frontispiece*

*She licked her lips with feline languor...her nipples  
were more pronounced than ever beneath the blouse.....*

*Miss Wellard positioned the strap over her shoulder in the same  
studied and meticulous manner that she always used.....*

*It was a beating quite unlike anything she had  
experienced before.....*

*The Slip.....*

*Introduction*  
*On the Birth of a New Species of Literature*

WITH THE publication of *The Feminine Régime* we are witnessing nothing more nor less than the birth of a new species of literature: one which explores, with great subtlety and sensitivity, an area of human, and especially feminine, sensibility, which – although it is known throughout the world and in all periods of history; although it is, for a large number of people, almost as fundamental as the sexual urge itself – has never before been the subject of the psychological depiction and examination possible only through the medium of the novel.

On the face of it, of course, *The Feminine Régime* falls into the category of ‘disciplinary novels’; belongs, in other words to a curious sub-class of what the booksellers used to term ‘curiosa’, and what, in more general parlance is called either ‘erotica’ or ‘pornography’, depending upon its literary merit and the disposition of the speaker. The majority of such literature was and is simply crude, deserving only the second designation: but even the more elegant and tasteful minority was written purely for the purpose of titillation. The plot was a mere framework upon which to hang undressing, bindings, and whippings, or to display the various rituals and paraphernalia of chastisement. The characters, in every instance of which I am aware, are more or less two-dimensional ‘pornographers’ dummies’ upon which to hang, *mutatis mutandis*, the same things. In a majority of instances the ‘discipline’ (if we may call it such) is harsh to the point of cruelty, and its effect upon the reader all the more bleak because it is unrelieved by the warmth of real human character and sympathy. There is, furthermore, a sense of utter unreality – of a fantasy world created purely for the gratification of certain very limited urges. Just as the characters of the more usual sort of pornographic novel have been described as “disembodied genitals’, so the characters of the flagellation novel are disembodied whips and bottoms. There is a sort of steamy aridity about such books which leaves one half-sickened after reading them, wishing for something wholesome and ordinary to take the taste out of one’s mind.

It is, to our way of thinking, very much a *masculine* form of literature, with its possessive concentration upon the isolated object of desire and its underlying Freudian-reductionist assumption that one can get at the ‘real thing’ by ignoring the frills and superfluities and just depicting ‘hard discipline’ – as if the whole magic did not lie in the intangible, and the unquantifiable; as if one could find the ‘real onion’ by peeling off all the skins – but then this consummationist reductionism is not just a fault of flagellation literature; it lies at the root of the entire capitalist-socialist world-view of late patriarchy: it is responsible for the ugliness and banality of the post-Eclipse★ world as well as the ugliness and banality of pornography even before the Eclipse – for pornography is essentially a pre-Eclipse exercise in that stripping of the world down to grasping animality which is the essence of the post-Eclipse world. It becomes less and

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\* See the Glossary on Page 9 for a definition of the Eclipse.

less necessary as the whole fluorescent circus-world created by the post-Eclipse mass-media increasingly takes on the characteristics of cheap pornographic fantasy, both where its content is specifically erotic and where it is not.

There have been a few – a very few – partial exceptions to this rule. *The Story of O*, for example (significantly written probably by a woman), has been hailed as a work of true literary merit by such luminaries as Mr. Graham Greene, and yet for the present writer its effect is not so greatly different from the other works of this *genre* and certainly we learn little of the central character other than her relation to discipline.

*The Feminine Régime* is not a book of this sort at all. Its plot is a real plot and its characters real characters with true personalities.

Are we simply saying, then, that *The Feminine Régime* is a good flagellation novel? No, we are saying something rather more than that. Until the twentieth century, explicit discussion of erotic acts and urges was confined to the pornographic fringe. It was considered to be a mere self-indulgence by both its readers and its writers: something to be read in private and destroyed afterward except in the case of the odd rather roguish collector. Only in the twentieth century were the *nuances* of human erotic desire explored in depth by novelists of serious intent and adequate powers, and it was not until the time of the *Lady Chatterly* trial that this project received full public acceptance.

The disciplinary novel, however, is still in the pre-twentieth-century stage – or was, until the publication of *The Feminine Régime*. *The Feminine Régime* is a novel ‘about discipline’ only in the sense that a D.H. Lawrence novel is a novel ‘about sex’. It is a novel essentially about the human soul and the deep, mysterious and passionate urges that lie within it toward submission and punishment. These urges have been with us since the earliest times; they are a part, whether recognized or not, of the psychological make-up of many of us, they influence unconsciously or not many of the things we do, and yet never before have they been explained in a serious work of fiction.

It is true, of course that various passages in *The Feminine Régime* do describe scenes and situations not dissimilar to those which are the stock-in-trade of the old ‘flagellation novel’. This is because, just as with the offending passages in *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*, the feelings which passionate discipline evokes can hardly be conjured up without recourse to some description of what T.S. Eliot would have called their ‘objective correlatives’. But it is also a book about many other, related things – it is a book about the nature of the feminine and about the nature of civilization itself.

There are a number of reasons why the serious disciplinary novel should have been so long in coming. In former times disciplinary and submissive urges were often sublimated in religious feelings and practices, or in the everyday transaction of a more hierarchical society (where, for example, domestic service was still common). The ‘liberal’ forces responsible for the breaking down of social hierarchy and serious religious devotion, while they were friendly toward sexual expression, were extremely hostile to discipline in all its forms. Thus, while sex was ‘liberated’, discipline was driven further underground.

That the first serious disciplinary novel should have emerged at the time and from the pen that it did are highly significant facts. Most people are agreed that, not

long after the *Lady Chatterly* trial, the Western world underwent a radical change – a change which Miss Snow and her associates call the Eclipse. We said earlier that the reader of the old-style flagellation book was left half-sickened and wishing for something wholesome and ordinary to clean her mental palate. By the fourth decade after the Eclipse, however, it may well be argued that there is nothing wholesome and ordinary left in the world. Certainly a walk through any public street, a perusal of the magazines in the newsagents, the books, or the television programmes of the closing decade of the twentieth century will reveal very little that can be called wholesome; and if, by force of continual and wearisome repetition, this state of affairs has become ‘ordinary’, it can never be called ‘normal’ by any one who retains a trace of sanity.

*The Feminine Régime* is written in the white heat of a profound reaction against the Pit (as the post-Eclipse world is termed therein) and all that it stands for. It puts forward discipline and femininity as the driving-forces of a small world which has returned to sanity. Unlike previous disciplinary novels which have had, essentially, a bad conscience about discipline, this book has a good conscience and more than a good conscience – its authoress is convinced that she and those like her are the only people left in the world with a *right* to a good conscience.

The Empire in which the action of the book takes place is made up of people who practice discipline in their daily lives, and who, far from seeing themselves (whether apologetically or vauntingly) as ‘perverted’, know themselves to be the only healthy and right-thinking people in a perverted world.

It was perhaps necessary for this position to have arisen before a serious disciplinary novel could be written. Discipline which takes place outside the context of authentic hierarchical relationships, *is* mere barren self-indulgence. The term ‘discipline’ applied to such antics is even more absurd than the usual sloppy usages of the Pit, since whatever sense that word is used in, it must always indicate the very reverse of indulgence. Thus, pornographic ‘discipline’ is not simply *not* discipline, it is the precise opposite of discipline – and as such it inevitably defeats its own purpose: for the true *frisson* of discipline depends upon its *being* discipline in the true sense, not upon the mere mechanical action of flagellation. The masculine, consummation-oriented literary approach to discipline destroys the thing it seeks. It sets out with a whaling-harpoon to hunt down a delicate and evanescent sensation that cannot even be caught with a butterfly-net. It cannot be caught at all: only appreciated as it fleets through the cloistered sunlight of an authentically disciplined reality.

The discipline described in this book is part of something greater than itself; part of a way of life contrived to free souls from the Pit, and of a profound feminine sensibility. Although it is described in terms which sometimes invoke a warmth of sensuality, that sensuality is never an end in itself; it is only ever a part of a greater whole, and it is for this reason that the book is able to capture the essence of the disciplinary urge. It is a truism to say that one cannot find happiness by seeking happiness. It is only when one is pursuing some other aim, be it victory in a tennis match, the appreciation of a Beethoven quartet or the perfection of one’s work, that happiness comes unsought. It is the same with the ‘pleasurable’ aspect of discipline. It is

not when one is seeking a thrill that one finds it, but when one is submitting oneself in all earnestness to one's mistress.

When one seeks the thrill abstracted from its true context, one is subject to a law of diminishing returns. One must seek more and more intense and extreme stimuli in order to produce a steadily dwindling effect. Hence the leather-clad, pierced, tattooed freaks who grub for 'disciplinary' action in the Pit. The same is true of a literature that seeks the *frisson* of discipline as an isolated phenomenon.

On the other hand, the true magic of discipline may come upon us at any moment in a truly disciplined world. That is why *The Feminine Régime*, being a *real* novel, rather than a 'flagellation novel', is able to convey the true sensibility of discipline. We live and breathe with the characters, we understand them as whole personalities, and then the curious *frisson* of discipline catches us, as it were, from behind, just as it does in real life. It is the only way to capture the evanescent, unmanufacturable tingle of the real thing.

In this book many nuances of discipline are explored, from the passionate dominance of Amanda, through the no-nonsense severity of Miss Wellard to the curious bullying of Vasarde and the classical order of Lady Chelverton's household: each one, in its particular way enriching the disciplinary sensibility of the feminine reader.

It may well be that the foundation of a feminine Empire with a true cultural purpose combined with a high aesthetic of discipline was a pre-condition for the *experience* of the highest disciplinary sensibility to arise, not merely for its literary realization. Literature and life in the Empire are, in any case, closely interwoven. The writings of Miss Snow and others have helped to develop the sensibility of which we speak, while the existence of the sensibility was a necessary condition for their writing.

We have compared *The Feminine Régime* to the work of D.H. Lawrence, yet in many ways it is a book written in direct opposition to the Lawrentian revolution, holding that the cult of manly 'frankness' in sexual matters is fundamentally inimical to eroticism of the deeper and more feminine sort, and has been partially responsible for the creation of the ugly, anti-feminine world which followed upon its acceptance by the mass-media. Where Miss Snow is similar to Lawrence is in her belief that eroticism contains a profound and mystical dimension.

For Miss Snow, however, it is the feminine aspect of erotic mysticism that is important, the masculine being all too predominant in the Pit – and no less in its version of 'lesbian' sexuality than elsewhere. The truly feminine is delicate, ætherial, subtle, understated and probably unconsummated: "It is exquisite and it leaves one unsatisfied; what more can one ask for?"

But we have spoken too long of this book in a vein that is very far from its delicacy. Let us hastily step aside and leave the reader to enjoy what one of its early admirers has called "the first book of the twenty-first century", and is certainly the richest, warmest, most intelligent novel – of any kind – that has been penned for a very long time.



ULALUA NOVARIANA  
*Principa of Literature at the Imperial Academy*

## A Short Glossary of Imperial Terminology in Conceptual Order

*Imperial terminology has been avoided as far as possible in this book: however a few terms were unavoidable if the Imperial point of view was to be represented at all concisely.*

**The Eclipse:** The utter cultural collapse of the 1960s, with its destruction of all order, sanity, and feminine values.

**The Pit:** The dark, disjointed and de-feminised world created since (and as a result of) the Eclipse. The spatial metaphor is vertical rather than horizontal, thus the Pit is referred to as being 'below' the Empire, rather than 'outside' it. One speaks of "the world below", not "the outside world".

**The Empire:** The sovereign feminine country created above the Pit for those who would continue, or return to, civilised existence.

**Barbarian:** A dweller in the Pit. The word should be understood in the Classical sense of "a foreigner outside the pale of civilisation", although the more colloquial modern connotation of "a yahoo" is not entirely absent.

**Bongo** (slang): *adjective:* Belonging to or characteristic of the Pit – e.g. bongo-money (decimalised British coinage), bongo-clothes, bongo (i.e. metric)-measurements, bongo-music etc.

*Noun:* a barbarian, especially one of the more egregious specimens.

**Native:** A barbarian – more formal and less pejorative than *bongo*.

**Up-to-date** (of objects, popular songs, films, motor cars, etc.): made in the period from c. 1920 to c. 1959. Earlier things are 'old fashioned' later things are 'out-of-date'. Up-to-date things are also called *real*.

**Pette:** a girl (short for 'chapette').

**Miroir:** the 'look' or 'surface' which one presents to the world.

# *The Feminine Régime*



*"In an ugly world, the richest man  
can buy nothing but ugliness."*

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

*"People use the word 'escapism' as if it were  
a criticism; but if one finds oneself in a prison, the  
rational course is to escape."*

G.K.CHESTERTON

*Chapter 1*  
*Escape from the Pit*

EVERY ENGLISH CHILD dreams at some time of looking-glasses or of wardrobes: – of magical doorways which will transport her from the drab regime of mundane existence into a world where the colours are not besmirched by the grime of worldly industry; where possibility is not limited by the vulgar calculations of banker and bureaucrat; and where the things we see and hear about us are made by some force higher and nobler – or even merely more whimsical – than the soulless mind of the industrial designer and the mindless soul of modern mass-communication.

She dreams for a week or a month; for a year, or, sometimes, for several years. She dreams until she is claimed by the hand of what is called with unconscious – nay, with insentient – irony, ‘reality’ She is claimed by the screaming guitar-player and by the lounging, loose-mouthed youth; she is claimed by the latest ugly clothes and the latest ugly thoughts; she is claimed by ‘emancipation’ and ‘responsibility’, which are the latest names for commercial servitude and the death of the heart.

But what of those who will not be claimed? Of those who refuse the claim? What of those who are not at home when the press-gang knocks at their souls? What of those who are called but have chosen not to answer? Do they hover in some grey limbo on the margins of the noise and chaos? Or do they find their way beyond what is called “reality”? Do they find their way to the wardrobe that has no back or the looking-glass that does not resist the pressure of the hand?

Lavinia, certainly, had found her way. The realities that pressed upon her were different from those which shaped the girls among whom she had grown up (if we may be allowed such a misleading expression – for certainly she had never felt herself among those girls, and equally certainly she had never grown up). Yet the realities which pressed upon her were no less real nor less pressing than those which pressed upon the girls she had left behind her.

At this moment, her present reality was sitting in front of her in the form of a small pile of lined foolscap paper. She was sitting at a desk, at the end of a row of empty desks. She had chosen the desk nearer the window, but while she was warmed by the early-summer sunshine, she resisted the temptation to look out over the grounds at the sunlit lawns and distant tennis courts. We have spoken of the small pile of lined foolscap paper, but strict accuracy would compel us to say that there were two such piles: one virgin but for the printed lines and the pencilled, half-inch margins which had been methodically ruled in advance; and the other, smaller, pile, covered with a neat, round hand-writing, much slower and more careful than Lavinia’s ordinary hand. She had been writing for something under an hour. So far she had written:

“Walking is one of the accomplishments proper to a young lady. Her walk must convey dignity and modesty, and not the lounging casualness of the uneducated.”

That was all that she had written, but she had written it forty-seven times and still had two hundred and fifty-three to complete; assuming Jill found them acceptable,

which often she did not. It did not seem strange to her that she, a grown girl and legally an adult, should spend the long hours of a beautiful afternoon writing the same phrase again and again, merely because another, younger, girl had passed her in the corridor, had noted some small imperfection in her deportment, and had decided, upon the whim of the moment, to set an imposition of six or more times the usual length for such an offence. Lavinia had seen, from the prim little half-smile which Jill had hardly troubled to hide, that she took a marked pleasure in wielding such effortlessly crushing authority.

It was, however, but the pleasure of a moment, and by now she had long forgotten the victim of her whim, sitting at her shadowed desk, writing line after line at her behest. She was now laughing and playing tennis in the brilliant sunshine, as Lavinia had been meant to do that afternoon. Indeed, Lavinia's racquet had been in her hand and she had been walking to meet her friends when the sentence had fallen so lightly from Jill's lips, accompanied by a little trilling laugh. Jill would not now think again of Lavinia until that evening, when the girl would come to her door with her little sheaf of papers covered with her careful writing. She would look over them for perhaps half a minute and then, depending partly upon the quality of the work and even more upon her mood of the moment, might or might not decide to spoil Lavinia's next afternoon with a repetition of the task.

"Lounging casualness" was hardly a just description of Lavinia's manner of walking. She had always possessed a certain grace of manner and a certain natural dignity, although the latter had been crushed from her by her years of abrasion in a world which hates nothing more than dignity, unless it be innocence; which hates all that is upright and crystalline, and all that rises, of its very nature, above the flat and shallow democratic norm. — But it is the wise who are most conscious of their own ignorance, and the good who feel their shortcomings most acutely; and so it was that Lavinia, for all her grace and uprightness, which had been remarked upon — not always complimentarily — throughout her life, felt how far she was from the ideal to which a young lady should aspire and how much she had allowed herself to be compromised and tarnished by the shabby demands of a worthless world.

Now that she was in another world and subject to other, and better, demands, she fell short of them, and it served her right. If the instrument of her correction was a flighty and rather silly little girl who took a thoughtless pleasure in the tears and labours of those over whom she was given power, still the occasion of her tedious suffering could be attributed to no fault other than her own.

Even if it had been otherwise, there was little value in nurturing rebellious thoughts, for Jill, who walked and spoke consummately well, who played the piano and was a niece — whether real or "adopted" was not known — of Miss Hazeldean; Jill, young though she was, was one of the minor powers of this world. Her commands must be obeyed without murmur and her whims and caprices suffered with meekness; the alternative was a fate far more unpleasant than the hours spent on lines or the humble acceptance of girlishly supercilious admonitions. There was, of course, another alternative:—one might leave this world altogether and return to that other world;—after

all, one was held here by no force beyond one's consent. — But that was not to be thought of. That, to Lavinia, was a thought more terrible than the worst chastisement any mistress might devise.

As she wrote the same words again and again, carefully concentrating upon the even shape of her letters and on keeping each word neatly aligned with its counterpart in the sentence above, she found the inner vision of her mind gazing back upon the events that had brought her from that other world to this.

She had been, as we have intimated, one of those who have eluded the press-gang of the soul. It is a condition not without its moments of pride and of elation; and yet, for the most part, while one remains exiled in a world in which most people have joined, whether more or less voluntarily, the motley crew of vulgar modernity, it is a condition of loneliness and of dull pain, relieved, when relieved at all, mostly by spasms of acute pain. Lavinia, since first reaching adolescence, had sought in life whatever was rich and deep; whatever was illuminated by passion and delicacy, by gaiety and refinement. In the spiritual emptiness of the Pit she found nothing to satisfy her profound and nameless longings. She had turned to religion, only to find a cheap and shallow social gospel, more flaccid and valueless — if such a thing were possible — than that preached by the politicians. She had turned then to magic and occultism, even to witchcraft. There, at least, despite the dangers to her soul, she felt assured that she would find depth and richness: seers and conjurers of spirits who spoke in tongues and thought in ways little changed since the dawn of ages — or at any rate since the reign of Queen Victoria. In her innocence, she could not envisage how she could be disappointed at least in this expectation; but she was. The modernised occultist spoke the language of California pop-psychotherapy or of vulgar, politicised feminism; she thought the thoughts and shared the values of any other television-watching suburban hobbyist.

Music, literature and the arts continued to feed her soul and to nurture deep, romantic longings in her breast; but all these things were from the hands of men long dead: their modern exponents were as much a betrayal and a parody of their true calling as were the modern priest and magician. She lived in a world without eccentrics and without exceptions.

Of course, every third inmate *regarded* herself as an eccentric and an exception. More people imagined themselves to be 'rebellious against convention' than at any other time in history. That *was* the convention. That was how the system worked. Every escape-route had been co-opted. Every exit led back into the Pit. Every 'alternative', however 'way-out', was merely another way in. It was a world where all thought had been tamed and trivialised; all passion de-sublimated and degraded to the level of plebeian banality. — Or so it seemed.

Meantime, her heart was dying within her. The hideous, casual clothes, the awful, garish motor-cars, the moronic hoardings, the hateful shop windows, the brainless noise, the dreadful talk and manners of her contemporaries and their banal, pointless, passionless loose morals — the sins of zombies — all this gathered in her heart as lead gathers in the stomach, killing by inches the joy and the vitality of her life.

While she did not read a newspaper, she continued to take in, from time to time, various publications of different sorts which were not known in the newsagents and which catered to the bizarre extremities of the Pit. She did not actually like them, nor, come to that, did she actually read them, for she had long since decided that, for all their claims to eccentricity, they were too much part and parcel of the world she despised to be of any interest to her. She did, however, carefully examine the small advertisements and announcements, for she felt sure – or almost sure – that she could not be the only one in the world who felt as she did; that somewhere there must be others who had not been drawn into the ugly superficiality of mass-civilisation: somewhere, beneath the surface, must be a world – however small – of depth and richness and inequality; of aristocratic *hauteur* and intellectual passion; of dignity and gaiety, of colour and reality, of warmth and wit and truth and life.

And there came a day when her search was rewarded. In one of the more outlandish of the publications she found an advertisement for a kitchen-maid to an all-female household. The post was to be unpaid and the girl must accept the discipline of an Edwardian maidservant. In return she would be totally cared for, free from all responsibility for herself and inducted into a magical world which had no point of contact with the current world. A telephone number was given, and Lavinia, her hands numb and her brow feverish, picked up her receiver there and then. As the ringing tone commenced, she tried not to be unduly hopeful. She had experienced many disappointments in her short career, and this would more than likely be another. The language of the advertisement seemed to come from a portion of reality such as she had been seeking; but she knew how easily the barbarians deceive themselves – they probably had a television sitting in the corner!

There was a click and the ringing tone stopped. A prim female voice said: "This is P---- House. Can I help you?" Lavinia's heart leapt. The tone was right. There was no sense of relaxed, casual modernness; no dull-voiced sullenness or lazy self-absorption; no transatlantic false friendliness or over familiarity. The consonants were sharp, the vowels were disciplined, the tone was businesslike and neutral, ready in an instant to become deferent to a superior, briskly firm to an inferior or icy to a time-waster. It was not proof positive:--secretaries and receptionists of such calibre *did* still exist in a few of the best establishments, but it was certainly an unexpectedly good indication.

"Can I help you, please?" The voice had become several degrees colder as Lavinia failed to reply. She had picked up the 'phone so hastily that she found she really did not know what to say.

"It is about your advertisement."

"Which advertisement, please, madam. We have several." The voice had warmed considerably, and the 'madam' was no doubt a recognition of Lavinia's upper-class vowels. No democratic nonsense here – another good sign.

"The one for a kitchen-maid." This, of course, was not really what Lavinia wished to speak about, but she found herself at a loss as to how to begin.

"One moment, please." The 'madam' had disappeared again. Clearly she did not wish to 'madam' a kitchen-maid, even a well-spoken one. Her tone, however, was still



somewhat deferential: after all, she might be speaking to a lady with a surplus bonded maid to dispose of. The post had been advertised in the private publications of the Empire.

The receiver was silent for the better part of a minute, then another voice spoke. It was at once delicately feminine and utterly authoritative, and with a perfection of aristocratic enunciation which put both the receptionist (if such she was) and Lavinia deeply into the shade. It was, perhaps, the first time Lavinia had been made aware of the shortcomings of her voice, of which, hitherto, she had been rather proud and even, in moments of weakness, had been a little abashed in case it should be rather *too* patrician. She blushed inwardly, which added to her confusion.

"I understand that you are replying to my advertisement. Have you a maidservant whom you wish to make over to me?"

"No."

"Do you wish to take a post as a kitchen maid?"

"No."

"I am sorry. Perhaps I should allow you to explain in your own way."

"Well, actually, I am not ringing about the advertisement at all. That is, I *saw* the advertisement and that is why I am ringing, but it is not really anything to do with kitchen maids----" She felt hopeless. What *was* she to say? Rescue came.

"Let me guess. You saw the advertisement and you were fascinated by the glimpse of our way of life. You do not feel that your *metier* is to be a kitchen-maid, but you wish to know more of the world into which such a maid might enter. Is that an approximate summation of the position?"

"An *exact* summation."

"'madam'."

"I am sorry?"

"'An exact summation, madam'. You will end your sentences with 'madam' when speaking to me, at least for the time being."

"Yes, madam."

"Good girl. Now what is the nature of your interest? Idle curiosity, burning desire or something in between?"

"Burning desire, madam."

"Pray elaborate."

"I am not part of the late 20th century, madam. I have never been. I am looking for something sane and decent and thrilling and true; and if I have found it, I will give up all I have and strike out for the nether shore with never a backward glance, madam."

"Excellent sentiments, and charmingly expressed. Clearly you are not a newspaper reporter:--they often try to inveigle their way into our confidence, but always expose themselves by their entire ignorance of the English language. Suppose I were to invite you to visit us and step through the portal of our world?"

"That is my dearest wish, madam."

"I must warn you that the portal is a magical thing – whatever you may understand by the term 'magic' – and that once in it may not be easy, or even possible,

to leave. Do not misunderstand me. There is no danger of your being held by physical force; but there are forces other than physical ones, and far more potent."

"If this world is all that I hope it to be – all that it seems to be more surely with each passing minute – then I shall have no wish to leave, madam."

"And if your path within this world be not always a happy one? –"

"Is any path within any world happy? My path in *this* world has been one of pain, and can never be otherwise. If I must suffer, let me suffer in the world of truth rather than in the world of shadows; and if my sufferings be more intense than those of the dull void of this place wherein I now exist; at least I shall be living and living fully ----madam."

"Your understanding of these things is surprisingly wise and sound, my child. I am inclined to think that this *is* the world you have been seeking and that you are, as we say, 'one of ours'.

"Well, then, to practicalities. In the first place, do not take too literally the word 'Edwardian' in the advertisement. It is put there partly to give an impression of the sort of regime and discipline which the servants must expect and partly to indicate that we do not belong to the present time. The reality is a little more complex; impossible to express in an advertisement or even to tell adequately at all. It must be seen and lived in order to be understood.

"However, to give you a general idea before you come, I will tell you that we inhabit a world which has elements of the Edwardian, but, in our particular case, more pervasive elements of the period between the two great modernist wars. We do not seek to imitate in all particulars any exact era; indeed, we see ourselves as belonging as much to the future as to the past, for the madness of the present period is but an aberration, and one that has already passed its peak some two decades ago. Our style is composed of many styles and each must find her own particular *nuance*. For each of us this takes time; but it is necessary that you should make a beginning before you arrive, in order that you shall not bring too alien an element into our sanctuary. Where are you now?"

"In London, madam."

"Good. And you are not hopelessly poor."

"I am reasonably provided for, madam."

"Excellent. Then you will proceed to the address I shall give you and ask for Mme. Gauvain. Tell her that you have been sent by Miss Hazeldean and are to be prepared for entry. She will instruct you and will find a style for you with which you may begin."

Chapter 2  
*Into the Fuchsia Tunnel*

THE STREET TO WHICH LAVINIA had been directed was not difficult to find, although it was in a quiet area of North London which required a walk of two or three streets from the nearest omnibus stop. The houses were tall, prosperous-looking Victorian edifices, and, but for the ugliness of the motor-cars and the occasional denim-clad shamble, the tree-lined streets looked much as they must have done a century ago.

As she reached the street of her destination, Lavinia experienced a curious *frisson*. Years ago, she had often looked along rows of streets and mused upon what went on behind the closed doors. Surely, behind some of them existed scenes and persons which were not moulded and leveled by the mass-consciousness of the Pit; after all, she had reasoned in her adolescence, the reality one creates behind the doors of one's own castle is limited only by one's imagination and creativity and that of one's immediate associates. As years went by she was painfully to discover that this limitation of imagination was straiter and more confining than any edict which might be imposed by the sternest of tyrants; that the imagination fed on television is robbed of the power to create any reality which lies outside the confines of the suburban soul. Lately she had looked at such rows of houses with a heart filled with cheerless disdain rather than with the thrill of unlimited possibility and romantic wondering. But today that old sensation came flooding back to her with all the intensity of adolescent romance;--an intensity enhanced yet further by the consciousness of a real and imminent encounter with one of the realities which lay behind the high-gabled Victorian *façades*.

She noted the house-numbers as she approached the one which was scribbled on her little piece of paper: 78 – a well-kept garden with seasonal flowers in neatly-tended beds. 76 – wild and jungly. One could almost imagine the house was deserted, except that houses in this part of London do not lie empty these days. 74 – this was it! The hedges were tall but not unkempt, almost as if they were grown deliberately as a screen and a defence against the outside world. Outside it were parked two cars which stood out from the others in the street. Lavinia was no authority on motor cars, but certainly these were made before the last World War, and immediately cast an aura of reality and solidity about the place where they stood, in contradistinction to the cheap-toy atmosphere exuded by even the most expensive barbarian car. The house, like all the other houses in this street, was set well back from the road, and one must make one's way between two towering walls of fuchsia-hedge which quite cut one off from the light of the sun.

As one reached the house, the world opened out again and one was in a little garden area where the sense that nothing had changed for a century struck one with renewed force. Here, nothing *had* changed and the sights and sounds of the quiet, mutedly-modern street were cut off as by an impenetrable curtain. Lavinia was conscious of the song of a bird, and the rhythmic sound of a spade turning the earth in

the garden behind the house. She saw, briefly, down the drive that led to the garden, the figure of a man with some garden implement in his hand. The sight was so brief that she could not afterwards be certain of his appearance, but she was left with the impression of side-whiskers, a collarless shirt and checkered neck-cloth.

And then, equally briefly, she saw another sight which stopped her heart. High above, in a gabled attic window, she saw a face looking down at her. It was a face which was to remain etched upon her consciousness for years to come. A girl – of what age it was impossible to tell: anything between thirteen and her own age, though she was almost sure that it was a child – but a child of a sort one does not see in these days. Her hair was fair and her eyes large and haunting. She was, perhaps, in black and with a black band in her hair, like a Victorian child in mourning; but it was those eyes which struck into Lavinia's soul. They were not the eyes of a child who has ever watched television or been exposed to the vulgar melée of a barbarian school; they were not the eyes of a child who has heard "the facts of life" bandied about in blasé clinical terms, or in dirty schoolyard terms; and, although she was certainly in her 'teen years they were not – not remotely – the eyes of what is called a 'teenager'. They were eyes deep with nameless yearning and with the mystery of life; they were eyes rich with the brightness of joys and of sorrows subtler and deeper than those which touch the brash and coarsened barbarian soul.

And then she was gone. A woman, certainly in black, perhaps with a black lace veil, with her hair drawn tightly back and with a face of considerable and habitual severity, laid her hand sharply on the child's shoulder; and both were gone from the window.

Lavinia climbed the steps and struggled with a heavy, Victorian bell-pull which at first would not move and then shot out violently, giving rise to an alarming clangour within. After not more than a few seconds, the door was opened by an imposing parlourmaid in black uniform, lace-trimmed apron and white lace cap. The maid's demeanor was aloof in the extreme. Lavinia worried throughout her journey that she would not make the correct impression. The whole question of her personal appearance was, she realised as soon as it had been raised, something of a problem. Still, that was the problem one was here to solve.

Clothes had not been a thing to which Lavinia had paid a great deal of attention. Of course, she had despised modern casual clothes as any sensitive person must, but she had moved largely in the realm of ideas and the rather practical question of what to wear had not much occupied her. She tended, on the whole, to wear clothes which were conservative, not particularly neat; perhaps even tending toward the drab. Oldish cardigans and nondescript skirts figured large in her wardrobe. Her clothes were not a statement of her innermost convictions; they were a troublesome necessity, or perhaps even a colourless camouflage to keep her from the attention of a world with which she desired no dealings. However, in this new world, clothes were clearly of decided importance.

"I have come to see Mme. Gauvain. Miss Hazeldean sent me."

"Very good, miss. Follow me."

As Lavinia followed the maid over the threshold, she had the distinct feeling that she had crossed an invisible barrier into another world;--that the air she was now breathing had something in common with the air breathed by that child at the window. Lavinia was conducted into a room which had some of the characteristics of a shop. There was a glass cabinet with a wooden top, which had a brass ruler fixed along the edge, like a draper's counter. There were some bolts of cloth and a wooden cabinet containing numerous small drawers with little brass handles. There were also two tailor's dummies. Behind the counter stood a woman of about fifty with her hair in a bun and an old-fashioned style of clothing which Lavinia could not quite place. Before the counter was a younger woman dressed in the *chic*-est of coats, with a large, high fur-edged collar and fur-edged cuffs. Her face was powdered almost white and her lips and eyebrows painted on with doll-like precision. Her whole manner was marked by a delicate, self-conscious femininity which Lavinia had noticed sometimes in the women in up-to-date films, but never in living, modern women, whose style and movements are so little different from those of men. It was the first time she had observed the effects of what is sometimes called 'the cult of femininity' -- a thing with which she was to become more intimately acquainted in the near future.

The proprietress glanced across at Lavinia, decided that she did not merit her immediate attention, and continued to attend to her *cliente*, who was engaged in a careful examination of a pair of stockings of the most exquisite fineness. Lavinia watched her movements as she drew the delicate garment over her hand, examining the heel, the seam, and assessing the near-transparent quality of the fine-spun silk as a connoisseur might savour the colour and bouquet of a rare wine. Something in this woman fascinated her; but her reverie was interrupted by a young girl assistant hovering beside her, as if unable to speak until she had won attention by her silent presence. As soon as Lavinia looked directly at her, she ventured to say: "How may I be of service to Mademoiselle?"

It was a curious sensation. Lavinia had never been addressed in quite this way before. Shop assistants in general tended to be uninterested or overfamiliar, brash or bored or just neutral -- they behaved toward one just as they wished to behave, or as their temperament directed them; they were suffused entirely with the democratic spirit and looked on one as more or less an equal. Even the most obsequious assistants in the best establishments were merely obsequious. It was a manner. They did not really consider one their superior -- or at most, only a little bit their superior, if they happened to be impressed by one's accent and manner and thought one might be the daughter of Some One Important. They certainly did not seem to look on one as a different class of being, towering above them and existing only to be served; yet that was how this particular assistant seemed to look upon Lavinia,--her less-than-perfect attire notwithstanding,--and she felt a sense of pleasure and rightness. This, she felt, was how people *should* be whose business was to serve -- and the lower classes in general.

The girl stood submissively, waiting for her answer. There was a certain, rather attractive, feeling of anxiety to please, as if the smallest complaint about her conduct

from a *cliente*, reasonable or unreasonable, justified or unjustified, would bring some sharp chastisement upon her.

"I wish to see Madame Gauvain," said Lavinia, feeling the mantle of command about her shoulders, and standing, unconsciously, a little more erect.

A look of sweet nervousness entered the girl's eyes. "Madame is occupied for this moment. Is Mademoiselle pleased to wait?" She seemed much concerned that Mademoiselle should be pleased and not displeased.

Mademoiselle considered the matter. Was she pleased? She watched the girl's pretty face, the slight movement of the lip as if a nervous habit of biting it were being instinctively suppressed. She watched the little white hands, kept carefully still in front of the charming, dark blue velvet 1930s dress. She prolonged the moment as far as possible before replying with courtly magnanimity: "Thank you, I am happy to wait." On a little table was a small, white magazine with a curious silhouette on the cover, entitled *Imperial Angel*, but Lavinia could not read now.

After a few minutes, the *cliente*, her parcels neatly wrapped and carried before her to her car, left the room. As she went she looked directly at Lavinia as if taking her in with a single intelligent glance. She was not, Lavinia thought, exactly beautiful, but was most poignantly pretty – with a prettiness that conjured up sleigh-rides and Christmas shopping, Autumn walks and Summer punt-rides and a whole world of better, happier days – an almost unbearable, unreachable happiness that stabbed deeply into her heart.

"You wish to see me, Mademoiselle?" It was the voice of the proprietress. So many strong sensations had assailed Lavinia's breast in the few minutes since she had passed through the green-and-red fuchsia tunnel into this world, that she hardly knew where she was. She felt as if she had been given some drug, and, indeed, were it not for its manifest impossibility, would have suspected that she had been. "You wish to see me, Mademoiselle?" This time the 'Mademoiselle' was no longer a title of infinite respect. It had a faintly derisive quality. It meant 'young woman'.

"Yes, Miss Hazeldean sent me – Miss Hazeldean of P---- House----She said that you were to----" the words now seemed strange and awkward, "----to prepare me for entry."

"To prepare you for entry," said Mme. Gauvain in a neutral tone which yet managed to convey the air of one who has been given an out-of-season neck of mutton with which to prepare a feast for royalty; and then, briskly, as if it should have been done half an hour ago: "Well then, take off the coat."

This was the moment Lavinia had been dreading. She had no idea what to wear, and had eventually settled for the most respectable, conservative, new-looking blouse and skirt in her wardrobe. They were not calculated to impress, but at least they should not provoke shrieks of horror. Mme. Gauvain made no comment upon them, which seemed almost a compliment.

"Well then, take those off too."

Lavinia unbuttoned the blouse and slipped the skirt over her hips. She stood in a short, white nylon full-slip with a lacy hem. A torrent of violent French expletives rent the air.

“*Sacre*----What have you got on your legs?”

“Just tights----” replied Lavinia uncertainly, wondering whether they were the cause of this storm or whether something else was at issue.

“‘Just tights’,” mimicked Mme. Gauvain. “‘What are you doing?’----‘Just murder’. And you think no one can see that you are wearing these tights? You think it is a secret? They have only to look at your ankles or the back of your knees to see this horrid clinging stuff with no crinkle – that is if their eyes are too poor to discern the rudeness of the tissue. You might as well walk the road in the naked.”

All this was puzzling to Lavinia who did not, of course, realize the importance of fine hose in the culture she was entering, and in this house above all; nor the abhorrence in which tights were held as representative of the unspeakable 1960s and of the entire degradation of womanhood since that time. Mme. Gauvain took from one drawer a flat, white cardboard box and from another a small white silken garment and gave both to Lavinia. “Go behind the screen and wear these,” she said.

Lavinia retired behind the silk-panelled screen, slipped off the offending tights and examined her new acquisitions. The white garment was a satiny suspender belt which she quickly put on and the cardboard packet contained a pair of stockings. They were not silk ones – Mme. Gauvain felt it would be a kind of sacrilege to put on something truly exquisite immediately after those things, but they were very fine nylons, fully fashioned, free from a hint of stretchiness, and therefore needing to be exactly the correct size (which Mme. Gauvain’s expert eye could judge at a glance), sheer as cobweb and with proper toes and heels and real seams (one could see the turned-over nylon on each side of the seam). Lavinia pulled the first one carefully over the toes of her left foot and drew it cautiously up to her knee. It was so fine that she felt as if the slightest rough movement would ladder it, then she drew it gingerly over her knee and up her long, white thigh, watching her leg subtly change colour as it was encased in a sheer, ætherial mesh, which became hard and smooth as the soft flesh filled the soft nylon and stretched it taut, and yet remained so subtle and fine as to be almost non-existent. Only the slightly darker welt of the top few inches seemed to possess a real and earthly substance. She slipped the little white rubber button of the suspender behind it and fastened the shining metal clip over it, pulling firmly so that the button was covered with a drum-tight film of nylon. She felt the elastic pull of the suspender-strap, the only part of the *ensemble* which had the slightest give, and noticed the slight folds or creases forming about the suspender-clip as the stretchless nylon stocking-top was pulled into a peak by the strong, no-nonsense elastic. As she completed the second stocking, she felt the curious sensation of real, sheer, stretchless nylon – her legs felt at once a strange coolness and a strange warmth; her upper thighs were squeezed to a slight but noticeable feminine swelling. She slipped her shoes on hurriedly as Mme. Gauvain called: “Come, come!”

Lavinia stepped from behind the screen, her newly-encased legs strange and elegant beneath her short nylon slip, her tights in her hand.

"Take those things, Alouette," said Mme. Gauvain to her assistant, who respectfully relieved Lavinia of the shrunken and shapeless unfilled tights, "and burn them."

Lavinia was overwrought. At the best of times, Mme. Gauvain's unexpected tirade would have unnerved her. The tights were expensive ones which had been bought at Harrods yesterday especially for the occasion; suddenly a childish petulance rose up in her at this insult to her innocent and well-intentioned preparation. She addressed the servant herself. "No, don't burn them. You have no right – she has no right!" Almost at once she realized that she had said something terrible. She half-expected a storm of abuse and shouting, but it did not come. Instead, Mme. Gauvain spoke with an icy, restrained fury which was far more frightening.

"You countermand my orders in my own house. You come to me for instruction and you insult me." She shrugged, her face cleared and it seemed that it was over. Lavinia hesitated. Was she expected to leave? Had she better put her clothes back on? After a moment, Mme. Gauvain spoke in a calm, businesslike voice. "Now, stand just here." It seemed that she was simply going to resume the fitting – or whatever it was – after all. Lavinia took the place indicated, a little in front of the counter. "Feet together. Good. Now whatever you do, you must not move your feet. Keep them exactly there. Do you understand? Good." Mme. Gauvain pushed Lavinia's shoulders until she was tilted so far forward that she must put her hands on the counter for support. "Good." She then pushed her firmly in the middle of the back until, to maintain her balance and keep her feet from moving, she must adopt a curious, duck-like posture with her back arched inwards and her bottom jutting deliberately out. "Straighten the legs!" She did so, feeling a painful strain in her calf muscles. "Good, now hold that posture and do not move at all, *not at all*, do you understand? Good."

Mme. Gauvain stepped to the counter and picked up an object which Lavinia had seen but had not recognised. It was a light, thin, whalebone switch, about eighteen inches long and covered with tiny plaiting of the thinnest, finest leather. It was so flexible that it could easily be bent into a complete circle. Mme. Gauvain flexed it in her hands and then cut the air with it. It made a high, whistling hiss, and for the first time, Lavinia began to understand what was happening.

Before she had time to speak or move, Mme. Gauvain had tucked inward the back of the short, nylon slip, exposing her thighs between the lace edge of her white cotton knickers and the dark tops of her stockings. The switch whistled again, and this time bit into Lavinia, leaving a livid red stripe across the soft, creamy, girlish flesh. Lavinia gasped. The sting was unbearably ferocious, as if a red-hot poker had been lain across her thighs. The world seemed to swim before her. It was a moment before she knew how to regain her breath; and that moment had hardly come before the switch hissed again. It was so thin that there was hardly any crack or slap as it hit her tender flesh, but the sting was blinding. The third cut drew an involuntary cry from her lips. "Be silent," commanded Mme Gauvain coldly.



Three more burning streaks were laid across her legs. Lavinia did not know how she stood them, nor *why* she stood them, except that there seemed nothing else to do. If she rebelled or refused to accept this extraordinary punishment, she might be expelling herself from what was, she knew, the only reality worth living for.

“Stand up,” said Mme. Gauvain. Lavinia obeyed. Her face was flushed, her lips trembled and her eyes were glistening. “Little sniveller,” said Mme Gauvain scornfully. “One day you will have a *real* beating. I hope it is soon.” With Lavinia satisfactorily chastised, Mme. Gauvain went briskly about her business. She was truly a mistress in her chosen field, and her refined instinct swiftly discerned a style which illuminated and brought to the fore something of what had lain latent in Lavinia’s soul these many years:--the true self which she might have been, had her heart’s growth not been stunted by formative years spent in a world where – however she may have avoided its worst corruptions – all that was fine and true in her had been forced to grow without light or air or nourishment.

The style was to a large extent that of the ‘20s. Her lips were rouged, though modestly. Her brows were plucked (she had instructions upon how to continue this process each day until her ideal shape was achieved) and pencilled. A deep cloche hat almost covered one eye. Her dress, though emphasising her slight, schoolgirl figure, was not in the low-waisted, flat-chested, short-skirted style of the archetypal ‘20s, but was a high-collared, full-skirted confection which somehow contrived to exude the *aisance* of the ‘20s, while in fact being fuller, richer, and more romantic than the authentic style of that somewhat aesthetically-Spartan period. She recalled to mind the appearance of the previous *cliente*, which had also breathed the spirit of the ‘20s but in a much richer, full-skirted, fur-trimmed style. This, she was to learn, was a great characteristic of the Empire into which she was entering. Styles of the past might be adopted, but always they were adapted – not in a way which made them more ‘modern’ in the barbarians’ sense of that term, but in ways which made them more amenable to the values of the Empire itself, and which placed upon them the indelible stamp of its characteristic style. In the case of the 1920s and ‘30s, all that was theatrical, gay, stylish and stylised was happily adopted; but all the elements of stark functionalism, anti-traditionalism, moral looseness and bleak, levelling democracy which characterised those inter-war styles were skilfully edited out and replaced by fresh elements of flamboyance, richness or demure modesty.

But it was in her subtlety, above all, that Mme. Gauvain’s genius lay. While, in terms of broad description, the style of the previous *cliente* and that which she had given to – or rather, drawn from – Lavinia had a certain similarity, they were, in fact utterly different. The first had a delicate, china-doll prettiness, which enhanced the natural attractiveness of the subject into a breathtaking porcelain perfection, which brought out not only her woman-child playfulness, but also her child-woman wisdom and displayed, as in a splendid china-cabinet, the sweetness of her heart.

In Lavinia’s case, the style had an entirely different *nuance*. Her guiding *motif* was *naïveté* and her style looked inward rather than outward. She seemed a pretty child, a little unaccustomed to the world. This may seem no great thing; but each of Mme.

Gauvain's creations was perfect of its own kind, and the exquisite delicacy with which this modest *persona* had been realised struck Lavinia, as she looked in the full length glass, with a sensation compounded of rapture, admiration and shock. Was this really her? It looked like a completely different girl; and yet, at the same time she knew not only that it *was* her, but that it was the *real* her; the Lavinia that she should have seen in the looking-glass all along. The truth of Mme. Gauvain's work was such as to transfix the soul with utter conviction. *This*, then, was who she was. She had often wondered, and now she knew. It might take some time to get to know herself, but at least she had seen herself for the first time.

Was there a hint of disappointment? Perhaps there was. She might have hoped to have been more flamboyant, more captivating, more like that other woman whom she had seen this morning, or at any rate, not so very *naïve* and introverted – but there it was; there *she* was. She could learn, perhaps, to be more the way she would wish to be, but at present she must begin from here. At least she *had* a self. A real, and rather pretty self; not a hollow shadow-self, like all the shamblers down there beyond the fuchsia-hedge. Having lived her life down there, of course her self must be very small and under-nourished;--but oh! to have a self at all! A real self that could move and breathe, however humbly, in the same world as the woman whose parcels were carried to her car, and the girl at the window. It was as if, in that very moment, she had been born.

"Mademoiselle is pleased?" asked Mme. Gauvain, and for the first time there was neither impatience nor irony in her voice.

"Very, *very* pleased."

As she settled the details: the clothes which must be made for her to replace her present off-the-peg makeshift (Mme. Gauvain intimated that her present transformation was merely in the nature of a rough sketch), the underwear she would need, the outdoor coat, the make-up, the cost (oh dear! The cost!), she was brought into more intimate contact with Alouette who fetched things, packed things, showed her samples and performed a dozen other little offices. At first Lavinia wondered whether the sight of her punishment would have lowered her in the eyes of the assistant (Alouette had gone quietly about her business during Mademoiselle's whipping, as if such chastening of *clients* was nothing out of the common, though she had certainly not mortified her natural curiosity by averting her eyes as she passed); it seemed, however that this was by no means the case. If anything, the serving-girl was more deferential than before. Lavinia's doubts were replaced by a warm feeling that perhaps her suffering, together with her New Look had made her something of an Insider; perhaps she and Alouette were somewhat made kindred by their common experience of Madame's rod. The thought embarrassed her as soon as she had framed it. It seemed at once impertinent and foolish: undoubtedly her beating had been as nothing compared to the discipline under which Alouette lived; and, in any case, why should one wish for a sense of kinship with a mere serving-girl?

*Chapter 3*  
*“Dove-White, Trembling Purity”*

SHE THOUGHT, as she walked back through the guardian walls of fuchsia, of the girl at the window. Profoundly as she had been impressed by all that had transpired within the house, the thought of that brief meeting of eyes returned at once to haunt her. She did not, however, look back as she made her way down the deep-shadowed path. Had she done so, she had met those eyes once again, and perhaps have prevented a tear from misting them over.

When a child is playing happily in a garden at duskfall and is called for a moment into a lighted room, the dusk which had seemed so playful and alluring feels suddenly cold and dreary in contact with the fire and candle-light. So did the world of denim and gaudy motor-cars seem to Lavinia after her little time within a world of enchantment. Even the more splendid of the two real cars which had been parked outside the house was now gone. It seemed somehow symbolic of the increased flatness of the profane world. What a curious thing is enchantment. It had by no means been an unmixedly joyful experience. She had been scorned and bullied and even – so incredibly that she would doubt her memory were it not for the hot smarting at the tops of her legs – beaten. Mme. Gauvain had been impatient, cold and abrasive, the parlourmaid had no respect for her and Alouette had respected her only because she was strictly trained to respect every one;--and yet, back in the greyness of an ordinary, rather pleasant, street, she felt almost homesick for that place as if it had been the only true home she had ever known.

The girl at the window was surrounded with an aura of inexpressible romance. She conjectured – perhaps quite wrongly – that her life might be an unhappy one; and yet she knew that, if she were offered a chance to exchange places, she would seize it without a moment’s hesitation – unless she were to hesitate because she knew that she were serving the girl a most evil turn. Of course, it may be that she would soon be off upon her own adventure into enchantment – and that unburdened by whatever sorrow she imagined to lay upon the child – yet what would she not have given to have spent her formative years amid scenes, whether happy or sad, of traditional solidity, unpoisoned by the diseased influences of barbarian mass-culture?

Fate had been more than kind to her. It seemed to have granted her – at an age that was still, after all, very young – that for which one might search for a lifetime and discover too late, if at all. She should be happy; and it was with a guilty sense of her own ingratitude that she found herself dull and depressed. The street, as she walked away from the finest Victorian houses, seemed drabber and drabber. Only her new clothes consoled her. She no longer looked a part of the dreary world about her. The warm-and-cold feeling of the 1950s nylons had taken on something of the romance of enchantment;--but her adventure was over for a whole week. Even dressed as she was, nothing of the remotest interest could possibly happen to her before her visit to P---- House. She was in a desert world, devoid of people who counted as people at all;

devoid of mystery; devoid magic; devoid of adventure. Any one who noticed her clothes and was fascinated by her style would be a bore and an annoyance. Pit inmates, of whatever stripe, held not the smallest interest.

It was just as she was thinking these thoughts that a noisy motor-horn jarred on her nerves, followed by the sound of a car pulling up beside her.

"What-ho, there!" called a precise feminine voice, whose delicacy made a delicious counterpoint to the jauntiness of the words. "Can I give you a lift anywhere?"

It was the other car – the one which had been parked outside the house when she had arrived: a long, square-fronted, bottle-green 1930s Rolls Bentley, and at the wheel was the *cliente* who had been before her at Mme. Gauvain's. Had she been an angel from Heaven she could not have been a more welcome sight. Lavinia breathed a silent prayer of thanksgiving. The passenger door was thrown open and she climbed in. As she sat in the seat she gave an involuntary gasp. It was the first time she had sat down since her encounter with Mme. Gauvain's switch, and the soreness of her upper thighs, to which she had now become more or less accustomed, suddenly leapt into throbbing life. The woman beside her laughed, though whether because she understood what happened, Lavinia could not tell. "Where to?" she asked. Lavinia showed her an envelope on which Mme. Gauvain had written the address of a hairdresser. Inside were precise instructions as to the style which should be created.

The engine purred into wakefulness and the car set off. Lavinia felt that it seemed more like a real *place* than a barbarian car. The upright seats were like real chairs, the high-roofed, spacious interior was more like a room than a little tin box, the smell of the leather, and the polished dashboard with its neat, chromium-mounted instruments had an air of furnishing rather than of mere gadgetry. She was later to discover that this was the case with even the most modest up-to-date motor car. The Bentley, of course, was more grand and opulent, but even the popular models of Ford or Austin had a sense of human dignity and civilisation before the Eclipse. They were machines made for dignified human beings, not machines which expected people to crush themselves into their low contours and accept as æsthetic value whatever chanced to be technical and commercial convenience.

The soreness of her thighs was beginning to subside again, and her legs felt once more luxurious and sophisticated. She noticed the crinkle at her heel which Mme. Gauvain had spoken of, then she looked at the driver's ankles and saw the similar, though slightly different, crinkle of her silken hose. Mme. Gauvain was right. It was quite unmistakable. No one who had the smallest discernment could possibly mistake a pair of tights or barbarian stretch stockings for the real thing, even at a glance. The gossamer sheen of silk or up-to-date nylon; the firm, shimmering surface, created from the tension of the ætherial yet unyielding film, held taut by the inner pressure of feminine flesh, was a subtle and perfect blending of art and nature to which the dull cling of the barbarian counterfeit did not even pay the flattery of reasonable imitation.

The driver turned her foot elegantly on the pedal, affording a glance of her die-straight seam, as if aware and not displeased that her rather delightful calves and ankles were the subject of rapt scrutiny. Lavinia wished, with an intensity that

surprised her, that she might glimpse the little crinkles behind her companion's knee, and realized, with a sense of frustration which was somehow not wholly displeasing, that such a blessing was one which circumstance allowed but rarely, if at all.

"Thank you for the lift," she said, remembering her manners.

"Not at all," said her companion. "We Imperials always help one another, what?"

"Imperials?"

"Subjects of the Great Celestial Empire and all that sort of thing. But I suppose you don't know you are one yet." Her voice was like a silver bell.

"Am I?" asked Lavinia, hardly noticing the import of the words in her admiration of her voice.

"Oh, yes. No one asks your consent. I mean, why should they? It is fate. You are born One of Ours or you aren't. One looks down a street and sees a desert place. If there is but one other Imperial in a crowd of natives, the two of you are alone in emptiness. No one chooses you; you do not choose yourself. You are picked out of the sea of life by the nameless necessity of your own inward being, what?"

"I like that. It is closer to poetry. Your voice was made to speak nothing but poetry." It was a daring thing to say; and yet, why should one not say it? All her life she had suppressed the rich and eloquent thoughts within her and substituted the colourless banalities of barbarian discourse. Where else, if not here in the enchanted world, could one speak one's soul?"

"I say, you *are* a chap." She said no more, as if waiting for Lavinia to let off another firework. Lavinia playfully returned to the every-day.

"How lucky that you were passing as I came out of Mme. Gauvain's."

"Not luck entirely. You interested me then, and, to tell the truth, I was rather curious to see what sort of a swan Mme. Gauvain would turn you into. So I gave you an hour and coasted back this way. I thought, if fate did want the meeting it would take place, and it appears fate did; though I must admit that Mme. Gauvain is not usually much over or under an hour with a newie."

"And what sort of a swan has she made of me?"

"Rather a white and downy one. Very much of an *ingénue*. Perhaps a shade *gauche*, but very pleasingly so. How does it feel?"

"Delicious. I only wish it were true."

"Oh, it is true enough. Madame is never wrong."

"But I, an *ingénue*? I have seen things and heard things which have poisoned my innocence forever."

"Have you?" said the driver, laughing her silvery laugh. "Have you lived among the *apaches* in the slums of Paris, and worked your way through the *bordellos* of Siam? Were you taken by white slavers at the age of twelve to live a life of nameless infamy in Cairo? I never should have thought it,--but there: if you can deceive Mme. Gauvain, no doubt it is no difficult matter to deceive me." It seemed but banter: an attempt at consolation through gentle mockery and an enjoyment of word and image for their own sake, and yet it touched, with an unerring touch, upon a deep well of unspoken anger and of unshed tears. The outburst it provoked was neither expected nor unexpected.

"My mind has been raped by television; by the grinning and gibbering monkeys of barbarian foulness. My soul has been soiled and spotted by filthy words and filthy thoughts spoken by educated cretins to whom filth is as bland and commonplace as the air they breathe."

"Yes," said her companion wistfully. "There is that wonderful phrase, 'a sheltered childhood'. What a depth of trembling, dove-white purity that phrase conveys. And yet it is all gone; smirched and pillaged, like a temple sacked by barbarians. No one can be said to have had a sheltered childhood if there was a television in the house. The little girls in their velours and pleated skirts have been privy to the nastiest thoughts of the lecherous tramp by the roadside and the worse lecher in the college chambers. Their little eyes, that should be bright with the freshness of the world, have a knowing look that chills the heart, like the flash of a gold tooth in the mouth of a newborn infant."

"There you are!" cried Lavinia. "You understand perfectly, for all your rot about *apaches* and white slavers. So how can I be an *ingénue*?"

"Yes," said her companion thoughtfully, "I wonder how you can."

The engine hummed for a minute or so, and then she spoke again. "Perhaps it is that you knew you were being poisoned. Your very being tensed against it. You felt ill. Your soul rejected it as your body might reject a material poison. It has not been a pleasant experience – nausea never is – but you are clean. You are an *ingénue* – or as near to it as is possible under the conditions."

"I have seen a real *ingénue* today," said Lavinia quietly. "Upstairs at Mme. Gauvain's house."

The queerest of looks passed over the serenely pretty countenance of the driver, and she affected to have heard nothing. "So, now that we have bared our jolly little souls, perhaps we should introduce ourselves. You first, as I am the elder."

"Miss Lavinia Delacourt."

"Lady Chelverton. Actually I am not taking you to that hairdresser."

"Kidnapped already, my lady. What fun! Not Cairo, I hope."

"I fear not. One cannot sell an *ingénue* at her true value these days; they have not the discernment. So it is merely a different hairdresser."

"What is wrong with Madame's hairdresser, my lady?"

"She is excellent, of course; but she is a brute. She specialises in the most exquisitely painful razor-cutting. Legend has it that she dulls the razors purposely because she enjoys making girls cry – and, of course, you cannot help your eyes crying when your hairs are being individually and systematically pulled to the roots. I do hope I am doing the right thing. Nearly every one has suffered at the hands of Antoinette. It is like a part of the initiation ceremony. Perhaps without it your initiation will not 'take' and you will end up drubbed out of the Empire and cast into the cold, cold snow."

"I had rather endure a thousand razor-cuttings than that, my lady," said Lavinia with a real chill in her voice.

Lady Chelverton's laugh rang like a crystal wind-chime. "It is merely my fancy, little one."

"I hope so, my lady," said Lavinia, whose own fancy had suddenly conjured a dark sense of prophecy into those light words.

"You are very punctilious about calling me 'my lady', little one."

"Does it please you, my lady?"

"Yes, it does. Would you like to serve me?"

'Serve me' – what did that mean? Perform some little service for her? Become her lady's maid and devote her life to the care of her clothes and hair? Scrub floors and peel potatoes in her kitchen?

"Yes, my lady."

Lady Chelverton opened her little tooled leather clasp with one hand, and extracted three things, one by one: two rather sumptuous silver-and-enamel Art Deco cases and a long ebony-and-silver cigarette holder. One of the cases was a cigarette case, the other a lighter.

"Light me a cigarette," said Lady Chelverton. Lavinia opened the case and extracted a long, thin, rather unusual-looking cigarette from the band which held them in place. After a little experimenting she discovered how to produce a flame from the lighter, and then tried to light the cigarette. Nothing she did would make it stay alight. The delicate, wind-chime laugh thrilled her soul once more. "Oh, how precious you are, little one! Do not you know that you cannot light a cigarette without drawing on it?"

"With my breath?"

"Yes, with your breath, you funny little goose. But do put it in the holder. I dislike to see a girl sucking on a naked cigarette. It looks so ordinary."

"Yes, my lady." Lavinia fitted the cigarette into the holder and lit it. She drew in the smoke deeply and went into a fit of coughs. Lady Chelverton laughed once more.

"Oh, I was right about you. No one could buy you at your true value. No one could afford you. You are perfect. Truly."

"Your cigarette, my lady."

"Thank you, little one. Now, what are you frowning at. Have I offended your girlish pride?"

"No, my lady."

"What then?"

"I am not sure if it is my place to say, my lady."

"Of course it is. You are not *really* my servant."

"Well, I am not certain that I like to see you smoking."

"Really? Why not, my strange child?"

"Um – it isn't good for you, my lady."

"Not good for me? I have always believed that tobacco was absolutely stuffed to the gills with medicinal properties."

"Oh no. Have you not seen the warnings on the packet, my lady."

"What packet?"

"The packet the cigarettes come in, my lady."

"Do cigarettes come in packets? How quaint. I have never seen one. My lady's maid always puts them into my case for me. Are they worth seeing, these packets?"

"No, my lady."

"Then do not regale me with these sordid details of barbarian commercial and Governmental low-life. In any case, I do not believe in your medicinal hypothesis – either its truth or that it is the real reason for your objection to my smoking. Try again."

"Well, it does not seem to go with you, somehow."

"Much better. You think I am a sort of Christmas-tree fairy. I fill your little heart with thoughts of log fires and endless Summer days. I should be prettiness and purity and truth; a sort of virgin motherliness; not a sophisticated lady who smokes cigarettes."

"Yes. Yes, you should, my lady."

"Good. A bongo would have been cowed by my words. 'How can we ask any one to be Ideal?' 'Each of us is an individual with her own needs'. But you are right. We should enact the Ideal that is in us, or we are nothing. You have a right to demand it. How can I justify my existence in this world if I do not strive to embody the truth that you and others have seen in me?"

"My lady, I did not mean –"

"Yes you did. Or at least, that was implicit in your words, whether you realised it or not; and you are right." She drew on her cigarette, the holder poised elegantly between her fingers. The scented smoke tinted the air inside the car with a fragrance quite unlike any that Lavinia had smelt before. "But I do not smoke in an ordinary way. I am a *gourmet*, not a *gourmand*. I do not take more than one or two in a day, and sometimes not so many in a week. I do not smoke when no one is watching me. That would be like drinking Chartreuse in one's *boudoir*. Dear Oscar Wilde said that smoking – he meant, of course, fine cigarettes like these; not the dreadful things the barbarians smoke – that smoking 'is the perfect type of the perfect pleasure. It is exquisite and it leaves one unsatisfied. What more could one ask for?'

"Can you understand that?"

"Yes, my lady, I think I can."



Chapter 4  
*The Severity of the China Doll*

“MISS LAVINIA DELACOURT,” announced the maid. Lavinia entered the room, her hair trained exactly into its short side-curls, and her neo-’20s ensemble complete down to her splendid, full-skirted, high-collared overcoat. A tall woman with raven hair drawn back into a French roll came forward to greet her. The woman’s dress combined elements of the Edwardian and of several Victorian periods. Her elaborate collar and great pagoda sleeves, together with her imposing stature and upright bearing, gave her the air of a very powerful figure from a world which has more grandeur and a greater sense of its own *reality* than our the Pit. If Lavinia had expected in any sense to be stepping from the ‘real world’ into a world of ‘fantasy’, she found that the very reverse was the case. Here was reality of an order that simply did not exist among the cheap trivialities of the world below. Mme. Gauvain’s had been rather like that, of course; but here was a sense that one was entering a world of much greater form and ceremony; a world where any move one made, however small, might transpire, for reasons one could scarcely guess at, to be a most reprehensible gaffe.

The woman took both the girl’s hands in hers. “Miss Delacourt,” she said, “how very, very charming.” And, indeed, Lavinia did look very, very charming. Her awe and nervousness were the final touch needed to perfect what Lady Chelverton might have called her dove-white, adolescent *miroir*. She stood, suddenly – the false maturity of her but half-lived former life stripped away from her like a meaningless dream – trembling on the brink of puberty. Her ears were hot beneath her deep cloche hat. She hoped she was not blushing.

There was a tea-table, and two women from a period later than that of the woman who had greeted her – from the ‘20s or the ‘30s – were drinking tea. They were much older than she; – not in years, but in grown-upness. They talked cleverly, wittily; their conversation was like a brilliant performance. They greeted her charmingly. She heard their names and forgot them immediately, remembering only the name of the hostess, who had greeted her: Miss Hazeldean. She felt like a child at an adult tea, except that these were *real* adults, of a kind that had not existed in her world: imposing, certain, complete. She noticed again the cult of femininity that she had seen in Lady Chelverton. Their gestures were precise, curvilinear and delicate, not like the broad, half-mannish gestures of neutered barbarian women. Their voices were delicate and careful, even though they were chattering spiritedly; their posture was posed and self-conscious, even though they were, in their own terms, relaxed. Lavinia felt more *gauche* than ever. Everything had a rushing, floating, fever-dream quality in Lavinia’s mind, though she knew that, to those about her, all was perfectly normal. She tried to join the conversation, but could think of nothing to say, and, it seemed to her, no particular opening was made for her. Miss Hazeldean left the room, and she was alone with the two younger women from between the wars. Alone with them? It seemed a curious

way to see it, but with the departure of the older, more authoritative woman there seemed to be something of a change of atmosphere; almost as if the mistress had left the classroom;--or rather, as if she had left a common-room where she had been conversing with two sophisticated sixth-form girls, courteously treating them as adults, almost as equals, though all, of course, knew that they were not;--and as if, now that she had left, they sighed a little with relief and resumed their citizenship of the world between childhood and adulthood. The atmosphere was a touch lighter and less restrained, and for the first time, the two women turned their attention properly toward Lavinia. Oh, yes, they *were* adults and not children. Adults such as Lavinia had not seen before; and yet there was a lightness, a *fantaisie*, about their manner of a kind which she had not seen before either.

"Miss Lavinia Delacourt," said the fair-haired one, the elder of the two. She said it as if it were the name of some unfamiliar species, and she said no more, but continued to look enquiringly at the new girl.

"I am sorry. I must seem a bit quiet."

"Of course you are quiet. You should be quiet. Children should speak when they are spoken to." Slowly, as through the mists of dream, the speaker slid into focus. Until now the two young women had been almost indistinguishable; part of a strange ritual taking place before her. But now one of them stood out as an individual. She was blonde—intensely blonde, about thirty, elegantly attired in a '20s cocktail dress with tiny pleats in its short sleeves. Her demeanour was calm, self-possessed and gently mocking. "How old are you?" she asked.

"Nearly twenty," said Lavinia. Her questioner pursed her lips and looked at her friend. Her friend was brunette, much younger, much more sympathetic-looking; rather childlike herself, but still very self-possessed. She looked half amused, half disapproving. The blonde girl was not amused at all. She turned a disdainful glance upon Lavinia.

"It is a very bad beginning to tell stories like that; and such silly stories, too. Say you are sorry."

"I am sorry," said Lavinia falteringly.

"No, that will not do at all. You aren't really sorry. We can tell you aren't, can't we, Bébé?"

"Well, weally we can, Dowinda," said Bébé primly.

"Now, one last chance to make a proper apology for telling naughty impertinent fibs to your elders and betters."

So curious was the atmosphere that surrounded her, and so phantasmagoric her own state of mind that she hardly knew whether they were teasing her or whether she was really being naughty, at least within their terms. The most natural thing was to accept all as it was presented to her. "I m really very sorry," she said. "I will try very hard to be good and truthful." This time she sounded—and perhaps felt; not even she was quite sure—really contrite. Bébé emitted a squeal of delighted laughter.

"Be silent, Bébé," said Dorinda severely. "Lavinia, you must apologize to Miss Bébé as well."

Her ears were hotter than ever as she turned to the glittery-eyed brunette who was clearly laughing at her. "I am very sorry for being impertinent to you, Miss Bébé." Bébé smiled with pleasure and amusement. 'Miss Bébé' was an unaccustomed and rather frivolous dignity. She was simply Bébé to every one except strangers and servants, and they used her surname. Dorinda, however, betrayed not the smallest amount of pleasure or amusement. "Now, let me ask you again. How old are you?"

"Um, fifteen, I think."

"You *think*? Do you not know your own age, child?"

"I—I am almost sure." Bébé pressed her handkerchief to her mouth.

"What a *splendid* achievement for a child of fifteen. Do you know your *alphabet*?"

"Of course I do."

"Fortunately for you, child, I do not believe I quite heard you. Do you know your alphabet?"

"Yes, Miss Dorinda."

"Recite it, then."

Lavinia chanted: "Eh, bee, see, dee, ee, eff, gee, aitch, aye, jay, kay, ell, em, en, oh, pea, queue, are, ess, tea, you, vee, double-you, ex, why, zed."

"Good girl. Are you sure you are fifteen?"

"No, not sure." How could she be sure? Her voice was frank and childlike. Why have opinions of one's own about things one did not know? Dorinda smiled.

"Do you know any nursery rhymes?"

"Oh, yes."

"Which?"

"'Twinkle, twinkle' and----"

"Let us have 'Twinkle, twinkle'."

"Twinkle, twinkle little star,

How I wonder what you are----"

"No, no. Not reciting. Singing."

There are few things more mortifying to most English souls than the prospect of exposing one's singing voice before strangers, unfortified by strong drink. Lavinia just could not do it. It was like trying to jump down one stair too many. An invisible force prevented her.

"Lavinia, we are waiting to hear you."

Lavinia retreated into a childish pose which would have shocked her a quarter of an hour ago, but seemed now quite natural—or as natural as anything seemed. She clasped her hands behind her back, tilted her body awkwardly, and said "Can't."

"Lavinia!" said Dorinda, in the tone reserved for disobedient dogs and infants, "Do as you are told."

"Twinkle, twinkle----" began Lavinia in embarrassed haste.

"No, not like that, Lavinia. Slowly, tunefully, Let us hear your very best singing. Now, stand up straight, take a deep breath, and begin."

Her voice was a sweet one, but completely unpractised. Even so, she might have done better was not her throat so dry and her body so shaken with nervousness, and

had she not been able to see, out of the corner of her eye, Béb  watching her intently with her pretty, folded handkerchief never far from her mouth, and often pressed suddenly to her lips. She wavered about the notes and once her voice cracked completely, causing B b 's head to dip toward the handkerchief, rather than raising the handkerchief to her mouth. She ended with a feeling of unutterable relief that she had it over with, but her relief was premature.

"I am sure you can do better than that," said Dorinda, "would you like another try?" How awful. Fancy *saying* how bad it was.

"I think I can do it better tomorrow."

"Do not be silly, child. Now, deep breath and sing again."

Lavinia sang again. Her nerve was quite gone and it was worse than before. B b 's composure was a lost cause. This time her face was half-buried in her handkerchief and her shoulders were shaking.

"No, it still will not do," said the pitiless Dorinda. "I *know* you can sing better than that."

How many times was it? Three? Four? Long enough to seem like a whole afternoon; not long for the mortification to wear off. At last she got through the song fairly creditably, if a little hoarsely.

"Much better," said Dorinda. "Here is a little reward for you." She took a sugar-lump from the bowl and held it out on the palm of her hand to Lavinia. Lavinia did not actually want to take it, but thought she had better. She reached out her hand, but Dorinda's fingers closed over the treat.

"Not like that. Eat it out of my hand." She held it up to Lavinia, so that she only had to bend a little way, but as she bent down, Dorinda lowered her hand, so that Lavinia was on her knees before she could reach the sugar, with her head beside Dorinda's lap. She took it carefully with her lips so as not to wet Dorinda's hand.

"Good girl," said Dorinda. "Now, stand up and let me see your pretty frock." Lavinia stood up. Her coat had been taken by a serving-girl, but she had kept on her cloche hat and white gloves. Her dress was tight-bodiced and full-skirted, in a pale powder-blue satin. Seen in a particular way, it looked rather like a child's Sunday-and-visiting frock, a *nuance* that had, no doubt, been part of Mme. Gauvain's intent. "Turn about." Lavinia turned. The skirt floated a little, supported by three layers of net petticoat. "Silk stockings. How very grown-up. No." Dorinda ran her finger from below Lavinia's knee to her stocking-top beneath her skirts, feeling the crisp, firm surface of the nylon film and making a shiver pass over Lavinia's body. "No, not silk; only nylons. But very charming ones. Who has dressed you?"

"Madame Gauvain."

"Oh, Madame Gauvain. Little girls must behave themselves for Madame Gauvain, or she gives them a taste of her switch. Have you had a taste of Madame Gauvain's switch, little girl?"

Lavinia flushed deeply and twisted on the soles of her pretty little bow-topped shoes. She felt she could not answer, yet she knew she would be made to. She was wrong. Dorinda was not inclined to make her answer. The answer, in any case, was

obvious. Lavinia had thought that nothing could be worse than this pressing attention from Dorinda, but at once she realised that something could be worse. Dorinda was beginning to look bored.

"Are you refusing to answer me again? You are a stupid, dull little child. You are pretty and well-dressed, but you are not interesting. Go and stand in the corner." Lavinia stood stupidly for a moment, but she had lost Dorinda's attention. "Go on!" she repeated snappishly, but without looking at her. She began to converse with Bébé. She had not even indicated which corner Lavinia was to stand in. There she she was, in a large strange room, suddenly ignored, reduced to a nonentity, and afraid lest she should bring back Dorinda's attention upon her in this mood. She found herself a dark corner over by the French windows and turned her face to the wall. She clasped her hands behind her back and tried to stand straight and demurely, but it did not seem to matter what she did now. No one was interested in her any more. It was a large room and she had positioned herself at the furthest point away from the tea-table. She very soon began to wish she had not done so, for Dorinda and Bébé were talking in an intimate undertone and she could not catch more than one word in a score, and the conversation seemed rather charming and intriguing. She was annoyed with herself. She could have chosen any corner. She could have been in the light and have stayed just on the edge of things, still hearing what was taking place, but in her panic, she had scurried to a far corner and placed herself in exile. Again and again as time ticked by, she wondered whether she dare edge to a nearer corner. They probably would not notice:--but what if they did? Once she stole a glance over her shoulder and saw them deep in conversation, but although that glance had been safe, she dared not look again. She felt an inexplicable dread of being caught in an act of disobedience.

After what seemed an age, the door opened, and at the same instant Dorinda called gently: "Lavinia!" Lavinia turned just as her hostess entered the room.

"I am sorry to have been so long delayed," said Miss Hazeldean. "A business matter which may be of interest to Miss Carleton as well as to myself. Lavinia, do join us and stop hovering at the edge of the room."

"She is rather shy," said Dorinda.

"Charming, I am sure," said Miss Hazeldean, "but it can be overdone. Perhaps, Bébé, you would like to show Miss Delacourt a little of the grounds while I speak business to Miss Carleton for a moment. I am sure it will interest neither of you." Bébé tripped over to the French windows, opened them and stepped out onto the verandah. Lavinia followed her.

The house was set in ample grounds: not a great estate, but several acres, bordered by high stone walls, making it very much a world of its own. From the verandah one looked across well-kept lawns to a summer-house and a little spinney.

"Shall we walk over to the summer-house?" asked Bébé. Alone she seemed quite ordinary and approachable. Ordinary? No, not that. Every word, every gesture, every tone of voice was carefully poised, giving her the air of a delicate, Oriental marionette in some highly stylised ritual play. And yet, here she was – not holding one off, not mocking or scolding or standing aloof; just suggesting a walk to the summer house, as if

to be a stylised marionette were a natural, everyday thing to be, or as if Lavinia had been another marionette like herself.

"Do you like the grounds?"

"Yes."

"You have not seen the best places. You have not seen the Japanese garden, or the wosawy."

"I like the grounds because they are well ordered and secluded."

"You like order, then, and you like seclusion?"

"Yes. I like those things."

"You will find them here. As much of each as you could wish. More than you may wish."

"How very sinister you make it sound, Bébé. Am I entering a gothic novel?"

"Oh no. There will be no stwange happenings. One could wish for more stwange happenings. Weally one could."

"And what of the way Dorinda treated me indoors?"

"Oh, well, yes. If you find *that* stwange, then you *may* be in for a stwange old time." Bébé evidently found this rather amusing.

"Can you explain it to me?" asked Lavinia, taking care to ask in the tone of one asking for a mathematical equation to be explained, and keeping the smallest hint of challenge out of her voice.

"Explain it? What is there to explain?" Her face was a mask of porcelain perfection, impervious to intrusions from another world.

"Well, how old do *you* think I am?"

"I don't know. Fourteen, fifteen – thirteen perhaps. I thought fifteen was a bit of a fib, weally." They had reached the summer-house, which had a broad wooden verandah with wicker chairs and a table. "Shall we have tea? I know we have just had some, but it will be wather fun to have our own tea-party here, won't it?"

"Oh, yes, that will be charming." Bébé pulled a rope which led to a little bell-turret mounted, like a gable, on the roof of the summer house. A bell clanged sonorously. Bébé sat down in one of the wicker chairs, crossing her silken legs and elegantly feeling her perfect bob for an invisible stray hair. Lavinia took another chair near her. She wished to pursue the question of how Bébé saw her, but she did not want to seem like a crass outlander unable to take up the game (if it *was* a game) easily and intelligently.

"Why did you call me 'Bébé'?" asked Bébé suddenly. "You were supposed to call me 'Miss Bébé.'"

"I am sorry. 'Bébé' seemed natural."

"Who told you to be natuwal with me? Dowinda made you call me 'Miss Bébé' and you just *decided* to call me 'Bébé'. That is almost the same as disobeying her."

A maidservant came across the grass in a brisk walk which was almost, but not quite, a run, covering the ground as swiftly as possible without loss of decorum. She stood silently before the verandah awaiting her orders. Lavinia noted that, unlike the other maidservant she had seen – the one who had let her in and taken her case – this

one had a small steel band about her left ankle. It fitted quite closely over her black nylon stocking, and there seemed to be no obvious way to remove it. Lavinia wondered whether she had carefully to work her stocking under the anklet each morning, or whether she had some way of removing it. Somehow she sensed that the anklet was *not* removable – not by its owner at least – or, should one say, not by its *wearer*.

“Bwing tea for two,” said Bébé, hardly glancing at the girl.

“Very good, miss,” said the girl, and hurried away without a moment’s hesitation.

“Pway do not look so shocked,” said Bébé. “She is only a slave-girl. It is not *done* to say ‘please’ or ‘thank you’ to slave-girls. They are not the same as the servants, any more than the servants are the same as you or me. You will learn. But you need not think I am forgetting about your naughtiness. How would you like me to tell Dowinda that you disobeyed her?”

“No, please don’t,” said Lavinia, partly because this seemed to be the response that was wanted and partly because she really would prefer Dorinda not to be told.

“You do not want me to tell her?”

“No, really I don’t.”

“You aren’t a vevy well-disciplined child, are you?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know. There is not much you *do* know, is there? You do not even know your own age.”

The serving-girl returned with a tea-tray, and placed it on the table.

“There is no sugar,” said Bébé. The girl looked panic-stricken. “It is no good looking at me like that. There is no sugar. I know I do not take it, but Miss Delacourt might. Go back and get some.”

“Very good, miss.” The girl turned away with considerable relief.

“Oh, girl!”

“Yes, miss?”

“Report that I am displeased with you.

The fearful look returned to her eyes, but her tone showed nothing. “Very good, miss.”

“Now, where were we?” said Bébé. “Oh yes, so you do not know your age or whether you are well-disciplined. Well, when was the last time you were caned?”

“I am not sure.” She was wondering whether her punishment at the hands of Mme. Gauvain counted as being ‘caned’. She thought probably not. A caning sounded rather heavier and more terrifying than that. Something you waited for outside a headmistress’s room in fear and trembling.

“So, you do not know *that* either. Are you an idiot-child?”

“I don’t think so.”

Bébé laughed. “Not even sure of that! At least you are honest! Perhaps you would be better off with a chain round your ankle. It could happen you know.”

An icy fear gripped Lavinia’s heart. Could it happen? Presumably they could not hold her in slavery against her will, but if they told her that was the condition of her

remaining in this world, what would she do? She could not go back to that other world. She knew that. So why was she behaving like such a stupid outsider. Why was she not throwing herself fully into the 'game' and acting within its terms. Since this *was*, for better or worse, her fate, why not show herself worthy of it rather than make a bad impression at the start which might prejudice her whole position?

"Oh come on, tell me when you were last caned and do not be silly."

"Never, Miss Bébé. I have never been caned."

Bébé pursed her stylised, painted lips. "I find that rather shocking. I cannot believe that you have never needed it. What do they give you? The strap? The birch?"

"No, neither." She wondered if she should be being so truthful or not. Bébé seemed to like it, anyway.

"Oh, really! I suppose your mother just puts you over her knee when you are *very* bad."

"Not even that, but – but I do get the switch sometimes."

The serving-girl appeared again with a bowl of sugar. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes showed signs of recent tears. She put down the sugar and stood quietly, waiting to be dismissed.

"Do you take sugar, Lavinia?" asked Bébé.

"No, thank you," said Lavinia.

Bébé giggled and turned to the serving-girl. "Did it hurt?" she asked conversationally.

"Yes, miss," replied the girl, surprised to be addressed.

"Good. Dismiss." The girl left. "Now, what are we going to do with you? I could find a switch, I suppose, but I cannot be bothered, weally. I know! I have a splendid idea. Wait there."

Bébé elegantly uncrossed her legs and rose to her feet. She sauntered round behind the summer-house and returned in a minute or two, carrying what looked like a small bouquet or a large nosegay in her white-gloved hand. She sat down again, and Lavinia saw that what she was carrying was a little bundle of the fresh, pale-green heads of stinging nettles.

"Stand up," said Bébé. Lavinia stood. "Here." She indicated a spot just in front of the right arm of her chair. Lavinia stood where she was bid. "Legs slightly apart." Lavinia obeyed. Bébé smiled complacently. "This is not exactly six of the best, but it is quite effective."

He began gently to tickle the backs of Lavinia's knees with the nettles. At first it felt quite harmless, and then the sharp, hot, prickly stings began to come through. Bébé touched the insides of her knees and then moved her hand up, under Lavinia's skirts, gently brushing the insides of her legs. Slowly she worked upward until she came to the unprotected inner thigh, above the stocking-tops. Here, without ever losing her languorous delicacy, she concentrated the nettles more fiercely, stinging the unseen, delicate maiden-flesh, pressing the cruel leaves almost to her most secret places. Lavinia gasped in shock as the sharp irritant attacked her tenderness. Bébé smiled a cool, rather distant smile. It was to her a pleasure, but not an obviously sensual one. She flourished



her bouquet along the fronts of the thighs as a finishing touch and then, withdrawing her hand, tossed it lightly over the side of the verandah.

"Sit down," she said. Lavinia's punishment was only beginning. It had not been at all as hard to bear as the switching. Rather more frightening than really painful, but now the stinging was beginning to develop. A beating begins to abate as soon as it is over, but the stinging was actually getting worse, particularly between her legs. Bébé had an ingenious purpose in stinging her so concentratedly there, for, not only is it one of the tenderest parts of a girl's body, but such stings are assuaged by coolness and aggravated intensely by heat. Lavinia knew already that one must sit correctly; back straight, legs primly together, and her inner thighs, inflamed by the stinging, were already very warm. As they pressed together while she sat, the warmth and the stinging increased one another in a vicious cycle.

"Of course, that was nothing," said Bébé. "Just a little girl's punishment. Just something to amuse me. But perhaps it will teach you some manners. Do you think so?"

"Yes, Miss Bébé."

"Good. Now, how old are you weally?"

"Fourteen."

"I thought so. Why did you say fifteen?"

"I was confused, really I was."

"Were you weally?" Bébé's mood seemed to have changed and there was a note of sympathy in her voice.

"Yes, really."

"I thought you were delibewately pwetending to be older. Perhaps you wanted to be older than I."

"No, I want to be a *good* girl."

"Not tediously good, I hope."

"Just what I should be."

"There is not much diffewence in our ages, weally."

"Really? You seem – well, rather more sophisticated than I."

"Oh, *thank* you. Yes, I have stwong dwinks and all *sorts* of things. But we can be fwriends, perhaps."

"Yes, I would like that. I haven't any friends, you know. None at all."

"Oh, weally. How sad. Where do you come fwom?"

"From a sort of orphanage. It is not really the sort of orphanage where poor orphans go. More of a sort of place where the better type of girl goes when she hasn't any one who really wants to take care of her. But it is a rather awful place where they make terrible noises instead of playing music, and they all sit round and watch the most appalling, monstrous things on a little square box, or else common, stupid things; and they all pretend to be common whether they are or not. It is like a sort of madhouse, really. But I escaped."

"How *exciting*. How did you escape?"

"Oh, the old knotted sheets trick. They are so keen on everything being new and original there that they do not even look out for the old knotted sheets trick. So I slipped

away one night out of the window, but what do you think I found? I was in a dreadful land where *every one* was the same as the people in the orphan asylum. They all listened to the mad music and watched the square box and wore ridiculous clothes and had no minds and no imaginations and----oh, it was horrible.

"Then Miss Hazeldean just sort of found me wandering the streets and brought me here, and I don't know if she will keep me or what she will do. But that is why I was confused about my age and things – they confuse you about *everything* there; and that is why I am so undisciplined; and really I *do* want to be better."

What interested Lavinia about this narrative was that it was almost entirely true. The orphanage and the knotted sheets were, of course, rather liberal "translations" of the truth, and it was really she who had found Miss Hazeldean – at least, she supposed it was – but otherwise the story was exactly true. It had a curious effect upon her. Suddenly she saw everything from a new perspective. Everything made perfect sense. The last vestiges of her independent adulthood left her. Her sense of strangeness was only the strangeness of a child in a new place and among new people.

"It hurts," she said suddenly, referring to the stinging.

"Oh, it is nothing weally. Just a baby punishment. You've been spoiled. You need some pwoper discipline."

"*Can* we be friends?"

"Yes, I think so. I wather like you. I know. – I will show you something. Come with me."

They left the tea things and Bébé led Lavinia into the house by a side door. They went down a long passage and up a narrow winding stair. This part of the house was less bright and opulent than the front part that Lavinia had so far seen. It seemed older and less immaculately cared for, but not at all un-lived-in. The stairs seemed to wind up for at least four storeys, but Bébé stopped at the first and opened a tall black door. She turned to Lavinia.

"We should not weally do this," she said, and stepped into the room.

It was a Victorian classroom, complete in every detail – iron-framed wooden double-desks made in one piece with the hinged seats behind them, white-painted walls, slightly peeling in places, a blackboard on an easel at the far end and in front of it a high wooden schoolmistress's desk, overlooking everything. There was a smell of wood and chalk-dust, which had an aura of antiquity about it, but, though the things were old, the smells were new. This was not a museum-piece, frozen in time, but a real and living place.

"What do you think of it?" asked Bébé, her voice echoing strangely with that echo which belongs only to an empty classroom.

"It seems – overpoweringly real."

"It *is* weal. You should be here when there are weal lessons and a weal mistwess. In fact, you *will* be. Then you will see how weal it can be. Come here."

They walked to the front of the class. The board had been cleaned, but the ghosts of recent words and figures were still upon it and chalk-dust lay white upon the ground. On the mistress's desk lay a leather strap, some twenty inches long, shaped at one end

into a grip, with a hole by which it might be hung and divided at the other end, for the last nine inches into two tails. It was stout, seasoned leather with the sheen of many years of use, and if not actually Victorian or Edwardian, had certainly been made before the last War. It was embossed with a plain edging as well as the name of the maker and the letter "L", which stood for "light", though it certainly did not look light to Lavinia.

"Wather charming, isn't it?" said Bébé, picking up the strap. She smiled mischievously. "Can you imagine what I would get if the schoolmistress knew I had touched it?"

"I can imagine quite a lot of possibilities," said Lavinia.

"Yes, so can I. Would you like to see what it feels like?"

"Well, I don't really know----"

"Oh, come on. You want to be my fwient, don't you?"

"Alright then."

"Hold out your hand."

Lavinia nervously put out her right hand.

"No, I have a better idea. Sit down at that desk." Lavinia sat down. Bébé closed her eyes for a moment and opened them again. "Who was that girl whispering?" she demanded in a girlish imitation of a schoolmistress. "Lavinia Delacourt, *again*. Stand up and come out to the fwont."

Lavinia came to the front of the class.

"Hold out your hand." She did so. Bébé drew back the strap and brought it down on Lavinia's palm with a crack that echoed and re-echoed through the tall, empty room. Lavinia's eyes were wide with shock as she clasped her stricken hand to her breast, covering it tightly with the other hand. It was several seconds before she had enough breath to speak. Bébé smiled, delighted with the intensity of the effect she had produced.

"Oh, Miss Bébé," said Lavinia at last, "that was *cruel*."

"Oh nonsense," said Bébé lightly. "That was not anything much. You could easily have six of those fwom some one much stwonger and more expewienced than I."

"I could not, Bébé. Really, I could not. I could not bear it. I should not be able to hold out my hand."

"Oh yes you would. You would have to. You will see."

The rest of the evening passed swiftly. Dinner was a feast of excellent food and wine and still better conversation, to which Lavinia contributed only a little, though quite creditably. There was for her a sense of being a child at an adult meal – a privileged, festive and rather heady feeling; and, indeed, this was the last grown-up dinner which she was to attend for a long time. Bébé, she now realised, was only a little older than herself, but Bébé was mature in other ways and occupied a privileged position; though how far that privilege extended was uncertain. Lavinia felt as sure as she could be of anything that her remarks about what might have happened to her if she had been caught playing with the school strap were quite genuine.

The room she had been given was a small attic chamber with a gable window; comfortable and rather charming, but clearly not the best room in the house – more the

sort of room one would give to a child. It was in the back part of the house, away from the main apartments and not far (though she was not yet familiar enough with the geography of the house to know it) from the school wing; and she had been taken there by a maidservant with a chamber-candlestick, who had gone first into the room and lighted the candles on the mantelshelf and on the little chest of drawers *cum* dressing table. As she lay, staring into the darkness, a dozen different thoughts perplexed her brain. Was she going to be sent to that school? And if so, when? How would she be supported? She had a few thousand that she could contribute to her keep, but what after that? Would she have to work as a servant after all? Even that would be better than having to go back. The stinging in her inner thighs still persisted, making sleep more difficult. She placed her cool hand in the tenderest place and pressed her flesh against it from both sides. It was now more an irritation than a real pain, but it would not go away. She thought, half-dreaming, of Bébé and heard her curious, intelligent-yet-babyish voice.

“Are you asleep?” She saw a shadowy figure in the darkness: Bébé in a rather fetching pink dressing-robe.

“Hello.”

“Hello. I just came to see if you had said your prayers.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, people often don’t you know – down there; and it would be such a bad start if you did not say them here on your vewy first night. Like taking a bit of the outside into your new life, do you see?”

“Yes – I think so.” It had indeed been some years since Lavinia had said her prayers. The two girls knelt at the side of the bed and Bébé said some prayers aloud and then they were silent for a short time, in which Lavinia thanked God for bringing her out to this haven. She hardly knew what sort of a haven it was yet, but she felt a new sense of trust and a kindling feeling of being in the hands of a higher Power. She was conscious, also, of the *tableau* of two little girls saying their prayers, and conscious that Bébé would be conscious of it; and yet she understood also that affectation and sincerity are not necessarily incompatible. Most of the mannerisms, gestures and ways of speech of any one are, after all, affectation; but they are jaded, scarcely conscious affectations of a particular time and type of person. Even when people try to be natural and unaffected they only adopt certain mannerisms which they have learned to associate with natural and unaffected behaviour, probably copied unconsciously from a hundred television programmes. Bébé, in her utter self-consciousness and premeditatedness of pose, was infinitely more *herself* than most people could conceive of being.

As Bébé tucked the sheets about her and placed a good-night kiss upon her forehead, Lavinia felt herself to have relaxed the muscles of her mind and body for the first time since she had been here – and, perhaps, for the first time fully for several years. Sleep, which had seemed before so elusive, came so swiftly and so softly that she was wholly unaware of its approach.