

Snapdragon

Revolution

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Warning

This novella contains suicide themes,
sexual activity, offensive language, and violence.

If affected by these themes, read no further.

1922

As Reuven wandered among the crumbling, blackened edifices of Occidental University, occasionally stopping to survey the building's broken windows, he imagined the phantom voices of students discussing Shakespeare and Molière. As a middle-aged man, Reuven longed to relive those former collegiate years: it was an anodyne to deaden the dull ache at having outlasted his college and classmates. Reuven collapsed onto a moss-covered bench. *The war has slaughtered a generation of young men, transforming them into loathsome, shrunken skulls.* The stone of regret gathered in his throat. 'I loved you so, Albert.' Reuven sobbed profusely, 'If it weren't for the war, you'd still be alive.'

Even after thirty years, Reuven remembered his beloved's rufescent features and how they contrasted against the pale-yellow walls of his dorm room from which one could see the grass-covered hills (now a mouldering mound of ash) that encircled the red brick dorms of Occidental University. Reuven recalled Albert's dreamy drawl, 'Only by giving you up,' he had paused, wiping away the tears that streamed down Reuven's cheek, 'can I love you.'

He tried (oh God, Reuven tried) to change the scenario in his mind. Regardless, after many decades, Reuven still perceived his lover's slender fingers twisting the doorknob before exiting the room, leaving him hysterical. Stung by love, Reuven sunk deeper into melancholy, where he saw the discarded fragments (as erotic experiences) float away. A rain cloud of tears gathered in Reuven's eyes as he withdrew a flask from his pocket; after taking a swig, he placed it on the

moss-covered bench. Yet, like a tidal current, time retreated, revealing the rough rocks of regret, which, like previous eons, were pacified by the stupefying effects of alcohol. Reuven remembered how his intoxicated younger self had staggered towards his dorm, vomiting on the multicoloured snapdragons (now desiccated stubs) that bordered the outside stairs.

In hindsight, his drunken antics did not go unnoticed by his fellow chums at Occidental University. They watched Reuven lumbering up the stairs with narrowing eyes from the rafters of the red brick buildings, suspecting that he and Albert had quarrelled. Most Occidental Collegians of Reuven's age hypothesised that Albert discarded his troubled roommate for the wealthy Amerykanka,¹ Edith Andley, whom he purportedly loved. Outsiders never fathomed how close the roommates were that the beloved, Albert, had the power to dissolve his friendship with Reuven to prevent scandal—to escape being labelled by society as a denizen of the cities of the plain².

As Reuven glanced over the disintegrating buildings, it no longer mattered what the world had thought of him: the object of his veneration and the Britannian society had both been destroyed by the flames of industrial warfare. Notwithstanding, Reuven welcomed the cage of nostalgia that not even a falling roof tile smashing a few metres away could dissuade him from the prospect of mentally reimagining those bygone events. In that reimagined past, he transformed into his younger self, where he would again delight in stroking Albert's golden tresses. Reuven closed his eyes and took another mouthful from the flask.

¹ American.

² Sodom and Gomorrah were two cities destroyed by God for their wickedness.

Londinium, the capital of a flourishing empire of Britannia, sunk its military and mercantile teeth in the world's far reaches, where those born poor and non-Britannian were forced into bondage – stripped of their humanity. Despite the sadistic satisfaction with which some landed gentry practised on them, the powerless people persisted, resisting the corrective methods (the branding iron and lash) employed by their overlords to assimilate. After centuries of brutality, the strongest of peoples were worn down and conditioned to think and behave in what was acceptable by the sons of Britannia.

That was not the case for Reuven Hoffman, whose brown eyes widened when he saw Londinium for the first time from the ferry's deck. He marvelled at the architecture, which seemed to pay homage to an earlier empire whose phantom presence was in the avenue of marble buildings, bedecked with ionic columns with golden gilding, that lined the riverbank. Yet something about this city, which Reuven could not put his finger on, was terrifying. As the ship drew closer, the smell of smoke slapped his senses, causing him to thrust his lavender-scented handkerchief to his nose.

A fat man with ginger sideburns, who had ogled Reuven since he caught the same ferry as he, said brusquely, 'One never grows accustomed to it.' He looked Reuven up and down, noticing the young man's sophisticated style. 'You're not from here....'

The young man half-smiled. 'No.'

'Are you looking for...' he touched Reuven's hand. 'A friend?' A look of bewilderment crossed Reuven's face. 'I thought you were.' He looked over his shoulder, making sure no one could eavesdrop. 'I apologise...' he lowered his voice. 'I thought you were a *renter* by your way of dress....'

‘Renter?’

The man asked in a nervous twitter, ‘Don’t they say that from where you’re from?’ Again, an expression of confusion was imprinted on Reuven’s face. ‘It’s refreshing to meet a naïve young man....’ The man smiled, exposing his yellow teeth. ‘I could help you....’ Reuven swayed as the man put a gold sovereign in his hand. ‘Here, take it... Perhaps you’ll help me in kind.’

‘How?’

The ferry’s horn emitted a piercing sound, and the man bent forward to whisper in his ear. He understood what the man desired: the prospect of being enveloped by the older man’s corpulent arms generated a raging disgust in Reuven.

With self-reassurance, Reuven delivered his *coup de grâce*. ‘What you ask of me, I won’t do....’ He threw the gold coin into the murky waters. ‘I’m not for sale at any price.’

Reluctantly, the man stormed off to the other side of the ferry, where he stood scowling. Reuven was relieved, but an earthquake of anxiety spread throughout his body because what he deplored most in life was conflicts. Yet his arrival in Britannia would, in time, put Reuven in perilous predicaments where there was no other choice but to wield a sword and slay the dragons that were lecherous men.

Reuven knew that his life was on a precipice of profound transformation that not even his parents in their haberdashery in Edenglassie³ could have imagined. His acceptance into Occidental University (Britannia’s most renowned educational institution) was a prime example of this transformation at work. Yet this paled in comparison with Reuven’s transition into manhood, evident in his

³ Brisbane

Bar Mitzvah five years earlier, where his voice stammered as he recited from the Torah. Reuven recalled Rabbi Malachi teaching him about the tenets of their Jewish faith, where the aged man, from time to time, would quote Hillel HaGadol to him. For whenever the lad was bullied by the other boys (for his strange surreptitious nature), the young Reuven drew strength by thinking about HaGadol's golden rule:

‘What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow....’

Hence, Reuven directed his impulses for retribution into becoming the best student in the Yeshiva College of Edenglassie. He reasoned, *that an educated man can never be subjugated by ignorant people*. So, Reuven devoted his spare time to reading widely, and from those treasured tomes, he learnt about the world outside of *Terra Australis*⁴, but it also left him wanting to escape. Since providence, not to mention diligence, had fulfilled such nomadic yearnings, all Reuven could do was relish it, evident in him lightly tapping the ferry's barrier and surveying the seagulls that dipped in and out of the grey mist with escalating excitement. As the ferry was moored, a shaft of sunlight penetrated the city's haze, transmuting the dome of *Sancte Paule's* cathedral into moonstone, reflecting the hopes and dreams of those who scurried off to work. Reuven was likewise altered: resolute to succeed that not even the arduous journey from *Terra Australis*, or being born Jewish into a world that hated them and simultaneously accepted credit from Jews, could not dispel.

Hours after disembarking, the young man (valise in hand) walked along the bustling thoroughfare of horse-drawn carriages and omnibuses on which were the

⁴ Australia

billboards of tea, chocolate, and tobacco. Yet more portentous were malnourished people in dull, dishevelled clothes carrying in one hand red snapdragons and in the other placards emblazoned in large letters, ‘Down with the oligarchs and their lackey King Carolus IV.’ However, Reuven took no notice of them, for he was dumbfounded amongst this throng of humanity by a beautiful young man who travelled in the new horseless carriage—a motorcar. Mesmerised, he followed the motor, which, luckily for him, advanced like a donkey at a slow, steady pace. Aroused, Reuven noted the young man’s Apollonian features: pallid complexion, rosy lips, blonde locks, and eyes – oh, yes, those eyes; he would never forget those eyes of deep cobalt. He felt his pounding heart would explode with elation, for this anonymous Adonis was the embodiment of all that was contrary to him. Never had Reuven experienced such sentiments as strong as these, like a seething sea, it swirled, churned, and carried him with such unstoppable force that he feared drowning in its relentless passion.

Mesmerised, Reuven continued to weave among the traffic until the metallic beast shuddered to a halt outside a grand railway station labelled *King’s Cross* in gold letters. The pudgy driver, whose face was concealed by a cap, helped the young man out of the motor. With an imperious hand gesture, the youth directed the driver to carry his two suitcases inside. At that moment, Reuven looked at the railway station’s clock and smiled, ‘The 13:12 train to Cantabrigia will leave in twenty minutes.’

He dashed inside, almost colliding with a man in a top hat and tails who cast a censorious gaze. ‘Sorry, sir.’

His eyes widened with wonderment as the alluring Adonis stood in a queue, preparing to purchase a ticket. Although as affected by this fine specimen of manhood as Reuven was, he strutted over nonchalantly, taking his place in the line-up.

‘Please, God grant my wish,’ said Reuven in a muffled voice.

Suppressing a gasp of delight, he heard the Adonis say in a refined timbre, ‘A first-class ticket to Cantabrigia.’

Flushed, Reuven watched him retreat from the ticket office towards the fat driver, who stood guard over the suitcases. However, the blush of passion drained to white when Reuven recognised the driver as the odious man with ginger sideburns, so he looked away, hoping the older man would not notice him. To the lad’s chagrin, as the fat man exited the station, he paused a few metres from Reuven, emitted a sinister snicker, then scurried away. *I won’t allow that cur to ruin my chances with him*, thought the young antipodean, who might have to discredit the driver, even if it meant employing Machiavellian means.

Anyhow, Reuven got ahead of himself, for he had not talked with his intended beloved, who sat on a bench awaiting the 13:12 train. He purchased his ticket without delay, walked towards the seat, and dropped beside him. Minutes dragged by interminably. Reuven could not ignite a conversation, for apprehension had sealed his lips shut. His eyes were fixed on the platform ahead, daring not to look at the living Apollo.

‘Have you got a cigarette?’ Reuven shook his head, daring not to utter a reply. ‘My Uncle Cecil disapproves of smoking.’ The interlocutor paused. ‘He’s constantly telling me it’s unbecoming in a gentleman.’ Reuven cast a sideways glance. ‘Do you disapprove?’ Reuven shook his head again. ‘Do I frighten you?’ Reuven cast a sideways glance. ‘Has the cat got your tongue?’

Reuven wanted to confess his undying admiration but, out of fear, remained circumspect, so he said with a quivering smile, ‘Please forgive my impudence.’ He paused. ‘I’m not from here.’

‘That’s not surprising.’ He looked Reuven up and down. ‘Your clothes are elegant.’ He stroked Reuven’s jacket sleeve. ‘That’s the finest cloth I’ve ever felt.

You must be a dandy?’ He paused, then said with envy, ‘My uncle would never allow me to wear such stylish clothes.’

‘Why not?’

‘It’s not because of money.’ He paused, then said nervously, ‘Which we have plenty... but my uncle disapproves of anything modern....’ The young man lowered his voice. ‘He especially detests dandies like Oscar Wilde....’

‘Who’s he?’

‘He’s a dramatist.’ The interlocutor looked at Reuven with incredulity. ‘And the talk of Londinium.’

‘Oh, yes, I remember him now,’ said Reuven.

‘What a queer fish you are.’ He noticed Reuven’s perplexed expression, so the speaker snickered, ‘You needn’t lie.’

When the living Apollo’s penetrating eyes were fixed on him, Reuven blushed and stammered, ‘Well, er... forgive my dishonesty.’ He paused. ‘As I said before, I’m not from here.’

‘As that is the case, I shall be your guide.’ He shook Reuven’s hand. ‘My name’s Albert.’

Eager to press Albert’s hot, hard palm against his own, he said suddenly, ‘Mine’s Reuven.’ He knew the answer to this rhetorical question, but Reuven asked it anyway to feign ignorance. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Cantabrigia.’

With a widening grin, Reuven pointed at the swelling, sooty smoke of the approaching train. ‘Here comes the 13:12.’

The rumbling sound surrendered to a hiss, then a screech as the locomotive’s brakes slowed and stopped the carriage wheels.

‘Are you a first-year student at Occidental University?’

As Albert climbed into the carriage, he said in a fluster, ‘Yes.’ His arms buckled under the strain of the suitcases. ‘They’re slipping.’

‘Let me.’ He handed them one at a time to Albert.

The train's bell clanged, so Reuven grabbed his valise and clambered inside, closing the door. The locomotive jerked forward without warning, causing him to nosedive into Albert. From this closeness, Reuven smelt tobacco on his breath, and the familiar fragrance of *Fougère Royale*.

I wish this moment could last an eternity, thought Reuven, whose breath quickened with yearning.

To Reuven's delight, this attraction was reciprocated, for when he pulled away, Albert's dilated pupils roamed the contours of his body, causing both men to blush. Reuven bent forward again, their lips almost touching. However, the sound of approaching passengers caused him to leap like a grasshopper to the opposite seat. Regardless, he and Albert smiled like delighted Cheshire cats.

While the slow-moving train, like a timid turtle, took its time to reach Cantabrigia, the young men spoke at length. Reuven had gathered from this edifying *tête-à-tête* that Albert was an orphan from a patrician family, dominated by the authoritarian Uncle Cecil.

In contrast, Reuven was evasive – unwilling to divulge his mercantile antecedents and Jewish faith. He dreaded the disease of antisemitism infecting their relationship, so Reuven would have to invent a more appealing familial history.

'My parents come from a long line of the landed gentry.'

He hesitated to think of what to say next, igniting his companion's curiosity.

With a raised eyebrow, Albert asked, 'Whom might they be?'

'Well, er...'

Caught on the flypaper of deception, Reuven paused, scrambling to find a lie that would not stick to him like an unravelling spider's web. Albert noticed the hesitation and placed a hand, ever so gently, on the very top of Reuven's knee, 'I shan't judge from where you've come, new friend'.

Flustered, but reassured, Reuven fished from under his buttoned shirt a necklace with a small, six-pointed star. 'Do you know what this is?' Albert shook

his head. 'I'm a Jew... so too is my family... I come from a family of shopkeepers... Does that disgust you?' Again, Albert shook his head. 'I apologise for having lied.' He paused, his voice wavering, 'You'll never know or experience the discrimination of being Jewish.'

Touched by his vulnerability, Albert was about to console him; however, a young woman entered the train compartment. Recognising her, Albert said, 'Hello, Edith.' He half-smiled. 'I thought you weren't coming to Occidental for another week.'

'Well, that's what I thought.' Her gaze darted from him to Reuven, whose intense, mournful eyes fascinated her. 'Mama insisted I come earlier.' She noticed a tear forming in Reuven's eyes, causing him to exit the compartment hastily. 'Who's he?'

'A friend.'

'Why haven't I seen him before?'

'Well, er....'

'He's beautiful.'

'I shall tell Reuven,' said Albert with a laugh.

Her complexion whitened with embarrassment. 'Please, don't, Albert.' Edith lowered her voice. 'Besides, your Uncle Cecil and my Mama are up to something. They've had clandestine meetings for a week, discussing who knows what.'

'Perhaps they mean to marry.' Albert laughed; however, the young woman was deep in thought. So he resumed, 'Imagine us as step-siblings.'

'Why was Reuven so sad?'

'Well, er... It was nothing important.'

'Reuven's an unusual name.' She searched her handbag for a pencil and paper, then jotted it down. 'I should look up its etymology.'

'Edith, you'll make a wonderful linguist,' said Albert in playful jest.

‘That’s what I intend to do at Occidental.’ She saw Reuven approaching. ‘Shh, say not a word to him.’ Edith outstretched her hand as he collapsed onto the opposite seat. ‘As Albert has yet to introduce us, I thought I would. Hello, my name is Edith Andley.’

Reuven admired her forthrightness, so he shook her hand. ‘Reuven.’

Her eyes brightened with delight, for she heard the timbre of a non-Britannian. ‘You’re not from here.’

‘No.’

‘And neither are you, Edith,’ said Albert in mild condescension.

Rather than rebuking Albert for having pointed out the defect of not being born in Britannia (though her mother’s money was ample to provide admission), Edith focused on the taciturn Reuven by asking, ‘Where are you from?’

‘*Terra Australis*.’

‘Oh, how marvellous! We’re fellow colonials.’ What she said next was her way of lightly admonishing Albert, whose eyes darted from her to Reuven with uneasiness. ‘Though Ameryka won its independence in 1777.’ Again, Edith ruffled the waters of social decorum by untactfully telling Reuven, ‘*Terra Australis* should revolt, unchain itself from the motherland.’

Albert clenched his fist, trying to contain his rage. ‘No, Edith, that’ll never happen.’

‘Why not?’ asked the young woman with soaring scepticism.

‘Because they love their motherland.’ He paused, then looked straight at Reuven. ‘Don’t they, Reuven?’

He nodded his head to appease Albert; however, the hardheartedness of the alluring Adonis had sowed doubt in Reuven’s mind. Despite that, as the Cantabrigia sign passed by, Reuven could not (even if he wanted to) swim against the current of carnality, so he would overlook this incident.

In the wallpapered drawing-room of sage green poppies were paintings, statues, and other accoutrements of wealth; however, at the back of the room was an extensive rectangle shadow where once hung a prized picture. The elephantine tread of footsteps disturbed the room's stillness, followed by a low, shrilled woman's voice demanding to enter so she (as she told her host) may savour his Aladdin's cave of *objets d'art*. As Mrs Andley was ushered in by Cecil, who directed her (with an unsteady hand) towards the opposite end, hoping she would not notice the ugly shadow, his subterfuge invited the older woman to turn around.

'Where's the Delacroix?'

'It's being cleaned and revarnished.'

The mask of pretence he wore slipped when Mrs Andley said, 'You needn't lie, Cecil.' His eyes widened with worry. 'A month ago, I bought your Delacroix.' The colour drained from his face, so he looked away. 'I know about your financial difficulties.' The threat of violence erupted as Cecil raised his fist. 'I can help you, Cecil.' She paused, noticing his hand like a drawbridge slowly descending. 'But you must, in return, give me something.'

A smile gradually formed as he looked back. 'Whatever it is, it's yours.'

'I want your aristocratic name.'

Overwhelm with the prospect that the abyss of his avarice would be filled with gold, he supplicated himself before the mortal incarnate of Fortuna, Mrs Andley. 'Do you wish to marry me?'

'Dear God, no,' said the woman with derision as she dropped to the divan. Puzzled, Cecil was about to speak when Mrs Andley continued, 'I want my daughter... And your nephew to be bound in matrimony.'

As Mrs Andley waited for his response, which was not forthcoming, for Cecil was surprised by her audacity, she pulled a cigarette from her handbag, lit it, and took a drag. Smoke streamed from her nostrils, for she had transformed from Fortuna into a she-devil whose sole purpose was manipulating everyone to serve her aspiration. Nothing happened by chance. Mrs Andley, like an archaeologist excavating a tomb, discovered all that had to be known about Cecil: his desperate need for money and lack of scruples for obtaining it.

‘Albert will be easy to convince.’ He rubbed his chin, then continued with a falter, ‘I suspect Edith will be more of a challenge.’

‘I’ve thought of that, so I shall see her a week or two before the university vacation.’ She paused, taking a drag on her cigarette. ‘I’ll remind Edith of her filial obligations.’ As she held the cigarette, its ash fell like grey snow onto the Persian carpet of multicoloured flowers. ‘Besides, it’ll be no surprise that you and I are cut from the same cloth, Cecil.’

‘How much money, Mrs Andley?’

Her eyes sparkled as she chuckled, ‘Call me Catherine, seeing we’ll be related through marriage.’

‘How much, Catherine?’

‘£50,000.’ His eyes bulged from their sockets; however, what she said next caused his heart to throb with rapture. ‘Upon my death, Edith will also get an annuity of £10,000 annually.’

‘It’s settled,’ said Cecil as they shook hands.

Later in the afternoon, when Mrs Andley had left for the more accommodating *Savoy Hotel*, Cecil ordered the ginger sideburns driver, Sims, to wire for Albert’s immediate return. The elite, thought Sims as he motored to the telegraph office, would never venture into the city because, at this time, drunkards would invariably start fights, or naïve clients would fall prey to syphilitic whores.

Yet as Sims sped along the cobbled streets, unease surged up his spine. Londinium's usual hustle and bustle surrendered when he entered Oxoniensis Street to an eerie silence. Ahead, a swarm of famished people in worn, dishevelled clothes flooded the street, followed by mounted police with raised batons encircling them. Sweat gathered on Sims' temples as he slowed the vehicle, hoping the tension would deescalate. He recoiled in disgust as the police charged, hitting men and women, even those pregnant: this was the systematic annihilation of anyone dissenting from King Carolus IV's authority.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

A mounted policeman from behind struck the vehicle with his baton, causing the ginger sideburns driver to flinch.

'Shift it,' said the mounted policeman, waving him onwards.

As Sims motored towards the telegraph office, worry whitened his face as a rivulet of bloody detritus gushed down the drain, purging the street of the police violence that had occurred. Previously, Sims had heard stories of police brutality meted out to impoverished workers north of Britannia as fake news. What he witnessed now (bloodied bodies loaded onto wagons) challenged his beliefs, leading to an epiphany that the King's Government was recalcitrant—unable to empathise with the workers—for they worshipped the golden calf of avarice.

Reports of police brutality against the poor did not penetrate the ivy-covered walls of Occidental University, for this institution had, for countless centuries, remained as silent as the dead workers in their graves. Despite that, as Reuven, Albert, and Edith wandered along the sandstone passageways, they could not escape, even if they wanted to, the simmering scorn of the college footmen, who

cast contemptuous stares as if to suggest, ‘we hate your kind... it’s only because of your money we wait on you.’

In this academic world, nothing was what it seemed, for the Dons of each college communicated to one another in a hieroglyphic code of words and gestures to either help or hinder their students. What mattered was for the university to serve the powerful few, even at the expense of its students. Hence, Reuven, in particular, would have to be careful not to step out of line, whereas Edith and Albert were given more leeway because of their money and social position. The trio were unaware of such machinations, for they were stimulated by intellectual curiosity, impassioned by youthful idealism.

Yet this idealism would be challenged when the young men returned to their male dormitory, leaving Edith to explore the books in the grand library. Behind their dorm walls, away from the prying eyes of women, Reuven and Albert entered a primitive tribe where unfettered drinking and tomfoolery coexisted with intellectual endeavours. Notwithstanding, this environment, as Dante put it, ‘abandon hope, all ye who enter here,’ aptly described the temptations that were on offer, for Reuven and Albert’s eyes widened with delight as half-naked men threw bucketfuls of water on each other. Without warning, the cold slap of water ran down their backs, and in that instant, they joined in the horseplay, and for an hour or more, they frolicked with the other young men.

Exhausted, Reuven and Albert retreated to their dorm room to change for dinner, which would be served in a centuries-old dining room lined with the portraits of famous collegians whose once beauteous faces had been marked with age or death. He looked on with longing as Albert stripped, and in that unabashed state, the alluring Adonis turned to face Reuven, exposing his sculptural body.

Enraptured, Reuven could only stammer, ‘We mustn’t be late...’

Yet in his heart, Reuven wished they could remain in this room like lovers lying side by side in the tomb of nostalgia.

Then there was a knock at the door, followed by a footman saying in a gruff voice, ‘I’ve got a telegram for Albert Sinclair.’

With haste, Albert dashed to the door, concealing himself from behind the wooden barrier, and he snatched the telegram, slamming the door shut.

As Albert read, his hand trembled. ‘My uncle demands that I return to Londinium.’

Albert dressed in silence, unwilling to answer the many questions directed at him by Reuven, who was initially perplexed by the living Apollo’s sudden alteration.

‘When will you be back?’ asked Reuven with worry and sadness.

‘It depends on my uncle.’ Albert threw clothes into his suitcase. ‘A day.’ He hesitated. ‘Maybe longer.’ Albert pressed the case’s latches shut.

Without saying goodbye, he left Reuven alone.

A day passed, and then another. Still, Reuven had not heard from Albert, compounding his dread that the venerated beloved would never be seen again. To his relief, on the third day, Albert returned, but this was not the Apollonian youth Reuven had fallen for, but an altered form that did not respond as he would have done to Reuven’s touch. At first, Reuven disregarded this change as temporary, but he noticed Albert’s attention was focused like a beam of light on Edith as the semester progressed. All Reuven could do was passively watch Albert wooing the young woman, who, over time, was becoming more unwilling to further fuel such romantic yearnings, for she (to Reuven’s bewilderment) was concentrated on the young colonial man.

The more Reuven resisted, the more eager Edith became, where she, at every opportunity, engineered impromptu encounters, for she, like an Amazonian huntress, knew the habits of her prey. Thus, later one day, she saw Reuven flicking through a long-winded book about architecture in the library, so the huntress approached with unwonted courage to talk to him. Yet the instant the

young man noticed her coming, he slammed the book shut, placing it back on the shelf. Awkwardly, Reuven pretended not to have seen her, and dashed towards the exit.

‘Please don’t leave,’ implored Edith, hoping to allay his anxieties. ‘Was the book you’re reading any good?’

‘Well, er... no.’ He swayed like a tree in the tempest of apprehension. ‘It was too trite.’ Her widening smile unsettled him. ‘What is it you want from me, Edith?’

‘Your friendship.... That’s all I desire....’ She dropped into one of the chairs surrounding a long reading table and gestured for him to sit down. ‘You needn’t be afraid.’

‘I’m cautious.’ Reuven edged closer, then sat down. ‘I’ve got a reason to be.’

Lost for words, they sank deeper into an abyss of awkwardness with each passing second. Unable to tolerate it any longer, Edith blurted, ‘You’re Jewish, aren’t you?’

‘Well, er.... yes.’ He jumped up as if the chair were electrified. ‘How did you know?’

‘Your name, it’s obvious you are.’ Reuven dropped back into the chair, casting his gaze downward. ‘That’s nothing to be ashamed of.’ She reached out and stroked his hand. ‘Besides, you and I have a lot in common.’

‘Like what?’

‘We’re both oppressed....’

‘How are you oppressed?’ asked Reuven with sneering scepticism.

‘Women, Jews, and other subjugated peoples must conform to society’s repressive rules.’ Edith detected a flicker of understanding in his beautiful brown eyes. ‘Haven’t you noticed how men like Albert treat us?’

‘You’re mistaken, Edith.’ He withdrew his hand and said with intensifying rage, ‘Albert has never mistreated me!’

‘Trust me, he will.’

Reuven leapt from the chair and dashed to the exit, leaving Edith to censure herself severely. ‘What a dullard I am.’ Tears welled up in her eyes. ‘Now he hates me.’

Defeated, the young woman walked with a downcast head to her dormitory; however, the moment Edith entered the sanctum of feminine society, she heard the low, shrilled voice of her mother calling out. Edith hugged the gruff Mrs Andley, hoping to hide her hurt from the older woman, who sensed the girl’s deception by the ostentatious greeting.

‘Mama, what a pleasure to see you.’

Catherine Andley knew full well that her daughter found little comfort every time they met; however, the mother played along with the farce that was their parent-child relationship. Therefore, Mrs Andley listened to the girl prattle on about university life, but when they entered Edith’s dorm room, the older woman closed the door and told the girl directly, ‘Enough of that. One cannot learn from dusty books about the real world... Besides, academia is no place for a young woman of your high social position, Edith.... You had to serve your dear papa’s interests.... Now he’s dead... Let me remind you I’ve inherited that obligation....’

Edith stared lividly at the domineering dowager. ‘I haven’t forgotten, Mama. Nor have I ignored my filial responsibilities.’

‘What do you think of Albert Sinclair?’

‘Well, er.... He’s... Why are you asking me this, Mama?’

‘Albert’s a handsome fellow.’ She stopped. ‘Has he captured your heart, Edith?’

‘Well, er... Never has that entered my mind... We’re friends, nothing more.’

‘Would Albert make a satisfactory husband?’

‘Yes, for a self-absorbed girl.’ Shaken by her mother’s temerity, Edith threw a disapproving gaze. ‘But not for me, Mama.’

Enraged, Mrs Andley shook her. ‘Listen to me, you stupid child.’ She stopped to allow the fury that raged in her mind to subside. ‘The Sinclair name can open the door to Britannian society.’

‘I don’t care for him, nor does Albert care for me.’

Rather than reacting with violence, Catherine tried to reason with Edith. ‘We can buy people’s affections.’ Mrs Andley saw a glimmer of incredulity in Edith’s eyes, but this did not deter the matriarch. ‘That’s one advantage of being wealthy.’

‘Love isn’t a monetary transaction.’

‘Oh, yes, it is.’ Tears trickled down Edith’s colourless cheeks, for she (even renouncing her inheritance) could not concede to her malicious mother. ‘Darling Edith, my words have upset you. Shh, don’t cry, my baby.’ Catherine cradled the fragile child, who wriggled like a worm on a fishing line. ‘Once, I was young and full of romantic notions like you. Shh, don’t cry.’ The matriarch tightened her grip, fearing Edith would permanently escape her control. ‘The only way to survive....’ She struggled under her mother’s boa constrictor embrace. ‘Is to have money and power.’ Finally, Edith broke free, pushing the older woman aside as she stormed out of the room. ‘Darling, think about it for now.’