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**Synopsis:** "You make it seem like the cross was yours to bear, alone, do you really think you are brave? Let me tell you, who the brave one is, it's each and every member of your family who didn't slap you silly the first time you went awry, the first time you brushed your children aside for merriment. It's your children, Mr. Lockwood, they are the courageous ones. Not you, you are nothing but a coward. And all for what? For your own selfish needs and whims, your own desire to be alone and free. Free from pain, was it? Or do you really want to leave a debauched legacy? Well are you free Mr. Lockwood? I don't see any shackles on you; Are you free from the pain and happy, truly happy?.....No passion is great enough for you to lose sight of what's your duty, and the right thing to do. For that is not passion, but madness. You're mad Mr. Lockwood, completely, utterly, mad."

Thus begins the fiery odd relationship between Jane, the governess, and her employer, the widowed landowner John E. Lockwood. But Jane has her own crucible as well, and it's hers to bear alone. Find out what Jane, The Governess, is made of. After all, True Worth has no regrets and takes no detours. Should you?

A movingly passionate and introspective character analysis of lonely people living through emotional abuse, grief and guilt and how one woman mends a family and regains her life.

**Author Bio:** Noorilhuda is TV current affairs producer and freelance journalist.



## chapter one

### 1

*Come, come!.....you're hurting me.....No!.....make me the happiest man in the world.....you stinking witch..... Stop!.....where do you think you're going?.....Let me have a look, dear.....Do it.....By God you'll never see him again, do you hear???.....*

Jane woke up to a lingering echo.

*If only you screamed like a whore.*

It was six and time to leave the inn. The Chateaux was still twenty miles away and she had to be there before supper. She got up in the rusty wooden bed and tied up her hair in a loose bun. She rarely used pins to hold the thick locks together, preferring hair loops instead. Her hair had once been described as black champagne for its reddish black tint. The fullness made it impossible for regular pins to hold the length and breadth of it unless she tightened it like an old maid. And though she felt the part, she did not believe in it. She had applied for work as a governess, not a widow.

*You can do anything you put your mind to, darling, it's just that there is no need for you to bother.*

Having been raised by a governess, she had a fair amount of idea what to expect from the job. It was a low-paying work with long hours where holidays were hard to come by. It was also the only respectable vocation available to her in the current circumstances. The other one being that of a companion to a lady, and she didn't wish to indulge in the whims and fancies of some old woman when, as a choice, she could be around children,.....*Barren! you damp yourself in perfume and luxury to hide that barrenness. Or hasn't the madam noticed yet?.....*and still have some control over what to do with her time. Plus, the place where she was going for the interview was far away from the Northeast where she was born, raised, robbed and disowned. It wasn't much of a start but it was a start on her terms and one she could call her own.

She had woken up in a small room - made up of few necessary furnishings to achieve the purpose of a running bed and breakfast. A small hard bed in the center - if there was indeed a centre for the few metres of space - followed by a small writing table with a lamp and a creaking chair on the left side, and a small round cracked mirror on the right side,

next to the window. The ruins of the room were testament to its regular usage and hence, its popularity amongst travelers staying in for a night or two. The stench was somewhat disagreeable, though it was hard to decipher whether it was the smell of mulberry and horse-dung from the street outside or the peculiar state of the first-floor room itself - the rotted wooden roof panels, the disregard for cleanliness. The landlady had put her two-cents on the matter last night when she first brought Jane to the room.

“We are not in the business of performing miracles, M’Lady” - in a cockney tone meant to slight the guest - “There’s only so much the hands can do”.

Mrs. Bunton had then promptly left. It was not as if Jane had pointed it out as a matter of fact, but her expression gave her away. The composure with which she usually met everyone, on account of traditional grooming and steely discipline, probably failed her while inspecting the room. She hadn’t expected much. Indeed, she hadn’t expected anything. But coarseness was hard to get used to when you hadn’t been born into it. The usual parameters of good breeding, learning how to speak in Latin, excelling in piano, being a good housekeeper, keeping a track of accounts, even general hygiene - none of it really prepared one for poverty, obscurity and rejection.

Mrs. Bunton, the landlady, was puzzled by the plain and ‘slightly off’ appearance of the young woman whose firm straight posture, careful manner of speech and walk and soft well-kept hands betrayed a finer rank than what she currently had. It perplexed people Jane had come in contact with these past few months - from servants to school mistresses to ladies of some-such manor. In the hierarchy of acknowledgements, each greeted her as they saw fit. The history and pedigree was only relevant and sufficient, for acquaintances, to accord appropriate graces. But the farther one is from the previous station in life, the nearer the all-knowing smirks, stolen looks, innuendos or ignorance that often lead to crudeness, a certain roughness of speech that one lends to lesser beings or those of no consequence. Each spoke to her as they saw it fit. Such was the case with the landlady who did a mental head-to-toe review of the smooth-voiced woman. The lace on her looked expensive but this was no fancy place.

‘What’s the fancy mouse doing here?’ Mrs. Bunton had thought, right before cracking the fine line about the state of the linen, and presently left Jane to her devices, who fetched a sheet from her luggage and spread it over the mattress instead of using the ones brought in by the Missus. She couldn’t do much about the bed spread. It was cold and she had gotten used to sleeping in rooms with no heating. Just like she had gotten used to counting the pence and shillings and not ‘waste’ it on carriage boys and servants and meals she could do without. Just like she had gotten used to a certain expression.

*We'll rule the world, you and I. Just you see my love!*

Straightening her collar and finding the silk slippers to slide the feet in, she got up to look outside the small window. The street below was gathering people and carts, buyers and sellers were getting on with the business of the day. It was just the break of dawn. Carriages were being drawn up to the right with beggars at bay. It was too early for prostitutes to litter the street with offers, and for gentlemen to beg ignorance. But it was the right time for such women to scurry for cover after a night's work, whether in the inn or the alley near the stable. Sounds of sparrows, crows, children and wheel carts filled the room through the open window, while she washed herself with a bowl of cold water on the table next to it. She patted a bit of aloe and lemon on her face and hands. Stripped away from previous pre-occupations, it was one of the few remaining constants in her life. Not that it did any wonders for her pale skin. She still had to pinch her cheeks hard, like her governess used to tell her to do, to fake some color on an otherwise bland complexion. What the effort did accord her was a soft dewy texture on a flawless face. It made her feign health inbetween irregular meals, uncertain workload and a dull future. And it was one of those few things she still had a control over. After all in the great chasm of likes and dislikes - based in three parts equally of good advice, societal approval and life style one was born into, there were few rituals she could still call her own and keep. Jane had never been one to prune over her appearance, or labor on the effect it was supposed to produce in fine company - for she had always believed in valuing necessities, in people as well as in fashions - she had always been frugal with expense and took pride in all the savings she had drummed up over the years - the stored money she once had - and for which she was praised by her father.

*You mean nothing. Nothing! Care to know why?*

Jane's preparation for the journey ahead had begun the previous evening. The cotton dress she was to wear for the interview was sliding over the chair - black with brown lace trimmings and purple beads that buttoned up the bodice to the neck. The idea was to make a safe impression on the prospective employee - stable, neat and efficient - the dress was one she had stitched up recently for work-related endeavors. She still had some of her more embellished ones in the luggage - all in lighter shades, the creations from fashion houses of London and Bath - but they now remained more as an alternate source of savings - there to serve a purpose other than as clothes for a ball. Their jewels, the beads, the craftsmanship in the layout, the pricey cloth and stitch-work all were guaranteed to fetch a few pounds in tens; the name of the original dressmaker alone would ensure an extra half-pound - incase there was a sudden need and an urgency. After all, one could

always fall ill. And there were other considerations to be made: Her precarious future. She may have had to settle to live the life as a lowly governess, she certainly was not planning on dying as one. She knew it wouldn't be easy and it wasn't all that realistic given the annuals governesses attracted, and the temporary nature of employment, but she couldn't give up without a fight. She had to hope. She had to try hard and work hard and be patient. After all, despair was one of the things she could control. And there was much to despair. Hence, much to control.

*Tell me, my love, how to be more pleasing for you?*

She gulped down her medicine with a glass of water. Marriage, as an escape and means for secure future, was out of the question - and while many would have believed it to be unthinkable because of her past - she preferred to believe it as a matter of choice. It was less painful to imagine that than face reality. No one would have a scandal-ridden, poor feeble woman of twenty-eight. Not unless they wanted a mother for their seven children, as one house master had suggested while proposing to her when she had shown up for her third interview for work at a prestigious boarding school. She gathered he had taken her for a desperado, who would be perfect as an unpaid maid for the large brood. Life was already a cage of misfortune, she didn't wish to enhance it. A number of her father's relatives had recommended her to take up the offer - as one had put it, "to restore the lost honor and provide grace where none was before" - the same relatives who could not be bothered to make her safe in their own homes, who felt she would be a burden, or worse - as the disgruntled wife of Uncle Joe, and happy mother of five sons had put it, "you don't set a cat loose amongst pigeons". And Jane, seeing the malice in the words, agreed with that, though silently - experience and naivety only worked best with spouses and not between other relations where division of thought, status and money was always at an imbalance and more a source of thinly-veiled superiority, exploitation, competition and envy than pride, comfort and dignified acknowledgement.

Jane had seen better days. It went without reason, she had seen better relatives as well. Each one of them had his or her own idea as to how she could better her situation and fix herself - as long as it was done as far away from them as possible. Being an only child, she had always been alone, but had she ever been this isolated?

A single child had some merits. She didn't have a sibling to look down upon or uphold allegiance to. Her father's attentions were squarely focussed on her. Her mother dead at birth was not even a distant memory, beyond a tiny picture that her father kept near his writing desk, and which she had learnt to associate as 'mother' - but in reality, her mother had existed as a wife, and that's how her father had often reminisced about her, and that's

where her dead mother gained the strength of her memory from. Since her father had insisted on taking her to his many travels across the country, her initial education was sketchy, uneven. Being alone, she learnt to think for herself and initiate tasks. It was only when she turned six, that her father decided upon a governess on a fixed income to tag along.

Mrs. Fletcher, a hard-as-a-knuckle governess who could make Duke of Kent look soft in comparison, had soon a mutiny on her hands not unlike that the Duke had suffered in Gibraltar. The girl seemed incorrigible! But the seasoned governess made schedules - and oversaw punishments - that were hard to ignore - and that her father couldn't do anything about. The plump woman, through lectures, books and exercise made the young girl think linearly, to be level-headed, to fulfill duties to herself and the family, to keep appointments as a good hostess - of sending invitations, or accepting them, to recognize painter or tailor through works of art or embroidery, to be quiet until spoken to, and develop a frivolous sense of humor to indicate accepted level of naughtiness in the female sex - preparing her to keep good society amongst women of fashion and substance.

"Being a woman takes an enormous amount of practice and an elephant's memory," as she oft-liked to remind the student.

Mr. Adams on the other hand, was different altogether, who through his mere presence and effort to keep the girl close, made her think in broad strokes of all that the world had to offer, to value the importance of keeping promises to others, to help him in his work, be it of accounting, or greeting customers, or planning meetings ahead

"The art of life is to believe," he used to say, "Believe in the power of God, in His better judgment, to trust Him that each person was accorded a life for a reason".

And true to form, Jane always made time for church and the sermon, no matter where she was or how sick she was, trying to decipher what God had in store for her. His meaning for her. She found it soothing, inspite of being a contrived tradition. But there were things she never learnt to appreciate. Poetry was one of them. She never developed a taste for reading or writing verses. She considered it pretentious to wrap the words in language as if they were tongue-twisters, though she leant to bear it. Worst of all, as she would be reminded through most of her married life, no matter how many places she saw, or people she met, or books she read, that she had failed to develop an imagination.

Mrs. Fletcher didn't believe in good luck. Mr. Adams didn't believe in evil eye. But both agreed in what a woman ought to do and achieve as a loyal daughter, wife and mother. Mrs. Fletcher thought a woman, brought up in a good household and married well, would have few surprises along the way; Mr. Adams, tradesman who dealt with all things

unpredictable, from stocks to buyers, thought an education ought to prepare one for the unexpected. Hence, at fourteen Jane was sent to one of the best finishing schools in France to prepare and as his father reminded Mrs. Fletcher as Jane had boarded the train:

“I want her to understand the responsibility that being a woman demands and what privilege expects; that there is no such thing as a second chance and a second Act”.

Mrs. Fletcher had no choice but to agree.

At eighteen, when she returned, she was good at handling the house as well as commerce. But all the education in the world isn't enough to prepare one for unhappiness and regret. Though girls of her station, generally studied the same subjects, perfected the same instruments, gathered similar intellect and invitation to similar balls, shopping and moving more or less in the same society, the fate of each woman was one left to chance. What a shame that all the devices in the world couldn't help foresee, prevent or subdue the effect of savage notoriety. That with so much to carry her forward, there would inevitably be so much to hold her back. Not the least of it, her own reputation. A woman's character once lost, was lost forever, unless she found comfort in being a second-hand tool for a first-rate man and become his mistress, or go into the working classes and earn - considered reprehensible for a woman of consequence - a living.

Mrs. Fletcher had raised her to believe in the word of God to help restore her faith and balance, to trust in God to fix a wrong, a trust that doesn't take one anywhere, doesn't allow one to strive to correct a wrong, almost like letting nature take its course - Jane had never understood the use of what she believed was an inherently pessimistic reaction; Her father had disagreed with Mrs. Fletcher's view, and his belief was adopted by Jane, to not fret over a battle that one had already lost, since there was no question of usurping it, all adversity should be managed. It was simply a matter of good management, a means to move on to bigger, better things.

Jane arranged her belongings in two small luggage cases. She knew she had to remember the words of the two wise old people long gone, even if she didn't remember most of the lessons. She failed to see the use of being good in the spoken word, when it failed her miserably; when the good manners preached on in school were her undoing, when all the knots in the world couldn't stitch up respect for her, when - after all the books she had been made to study and articulate - she still had miserable sense; Yes, she had spent too many hours perfecting skills that were no use to her in the real world, the world of men, for men, with men in it; She could hardly remember the time when she was good with numbers, the kitchen, or music; All the trips to horticultural society were of no use. The hours she gave to arrange the perfect rose-shade on dinner table, the effect that

different foods had on the mood of the recipient, and Latin! Could anyone tell her the significance of Latin?

'Quomodo mutum potest eris? Tu es stultior quam vaca as a matter of fact, Vous etes une cause perdue Jane', she thought.....What a waste of time, money and effort! What good was developing an ability to speak her mind when it was un-lady-like to do so? What a waste! Interview for a position. What could she possibly teach children when she hardly knew anything herself?

Mrs. Cavendish, the lady she was about to see, was looking for a suitable private governess for the children of her nephew. She first heard of the vacancy, a fortnight ago, over correspondence with Mrs. Fletcher's daughter, Susan Birch, who ran a school as headmistress in London. Over the last six months, Jane had written to many benefactors of her late father's generosity for help, few had replied and fewer still had valuable leads for gainful employment. Most had shrugged indifference or denied knowing her father. Some had no recollection of any good deed done by a deceased trader. Some had claimed they were too poorly connected to make a useful suggestion. Two incidents though stuck out like shards of pain: One dealt with someone very close to her - her bosom bud - her friend, Madeleine - and the other with a couple, Mr. and Mrs. Popper, of whom she was only familiar by name.

Madeleine and she had become friends after meeting at a ball thrown at Rosewood. In her current troubles, soon after her father's death, she had tried to reach Maddy - as she called her fondly - first through letter and then in person. When she went to Maddy's home, a word was sent at the door through the maid that she had a headache and she was too ill to receive any guests at that hour, and that Jane should come the following day. The next morning when her name was announced and she was asked to sit in the drawing room, she had to wait for some time before Maddy showed her face. Agitated and contrived, Maddy had to lay bare the source of her discomfort: her husband had banned her from meeting Jane on account of what had transpired. Jane couldn't believe her words, was angry, but she had to respect her decision. She had convinced herself as to faithfulness of her friend who had been bogged down under the influence of a husband fifteen years her senior. But Maddy did no favors to the friendship by wounding Jane's pride further by asking her all sorts of questions on what, why, how of the despised event. Soon, having heard enough, Jane bid farewell promptly. That was one way of getting rid of her - to lay all sorts of questions on her.

The questions followed her wherever she went - the proprietors, lenders, fellow businessmen, solicitors - men of importance in town - even the pastor's wife, all had but

queries that Jane had no answer for, assumptions that she could not justify and accusations that she could not defend herself against. It vexed her. It tired her. It filled her with contempt for the charlatans of mercy. There were times she would be bitter, though she would be the last one to confess to that.

“Bitterness is no good for the complexion dear!” Maddy had said patting her hand consolingly in the living room. It was hard to digest, but her dear friend had mocked her.

As Jane folded the sheet from the bed, she wondered, whether it was really that true a friendship? Would she have reacted similarly if tables had turned? All she could gather in her mind, was that, when all was said and done, she would have still been ‘nicer’ than Maddy - neigh Mrs. Madeleine Taffen, wife of pastor - had been to her.

She suffered no illusions nor bore any expectations in the case of Mr. and Mrs. Popper. She had seen Mr. Popper with her father a few times; Her father had spoken fondly of the man who was in his first term as member of the Commons, as he did of other people he chanced upon or worked with over the years. She had written to Mr. Popper a few months ago, and received a reply after much wait: Mr. Popper had invited her to have tea with him and his wife at their London residence. Once there, Jane was met by a cordial Mr. Popper and a quiet Mrs. Popper. She mistook it as a sombre acknowledgement of her father’s death and her own misfortune. Mrs. Popper offered her cinnamon cupcake while a maid poured tea for her. Mr. Popper was a good listener, nodding every few sentences, and agreeing in muffled silence. They inquired in turn about her father and what impressions he had left to her on his acquaintance with Mr. Popper. Jane’s request and engagement was short, her answers even more brief. She wanted a good reference for any reliable post. They said they would look into it and let her know as soon as anything ‘appropriate’ came about. They were courteous in bidding her farewell. That is until she overheard their ensuing conversation once she left the room.

“Her husband threw her out Robbie, Threw Her Out!!!,” Mrs. Popper blurted out in a frightful shock as if she had just realized that fact. “And she had a wonderful husband, so Fanny tells me, and mind you she lives two doors down the village from Rosewood! She was disowned by her father! Disowned! I’ve never heard of such a thing! And you want me to tell Lady Cavendish about her! Of Bradbury and Fine Wine! Are you out of your mind?”

Pausing for breath, she went on, “I am not so sure Mrs. Cavendish will approve of such a commendation. And she has been so good to us over the years,” she sat down ending her list of negatives.

Mr. Popper who was quite used to the infractious sentiments and rapturous ridiculousness of his wife, pointed out in an equally high-pitched tone: "Don't forget my dear that Adams arranged and paid for the solicitor in that drowning up North."

"That was TWENTY years ago Robbie! and it was an accident and you were all but eighteen then and there were seven of you. And who cares what happened at a bridge in a town called Hayton in eighteen-twelve?!"

"Well, I do, and so shall London. There was a record of it, and this girl can make use of it to be our ruin."

"Well, surely she wouldn't know that! Or she would have said something in her letter or while here."

"She did sound meek," agreed Mr. Popper. "And Lord knows she can make use of a good blackmail considering her circumstances. But you never know about such things. It's better to appease the beast my dear. She may be a small-town nobody but judging from what she did to her husband and father, she cannot be of sound character. And she has had a good education, Mrs. Cavendish cannot fault that!"

"But her reputation..."

"Well, she wouldn't seek such work if she had another option, I'm sure Mrs. Cavendish will think likewise -"

"Mr. Popper!" said Mrs. Popper whenever she was truly miffed with her husband. "You will do no such thing! We are not a charity house nor are running an orphanage. The woman had to come all the way to London for 'help'. We are not even the near and dear ones. If *they* didn't think it suitable to render her a hand, why should We?"

She went over to her husband's side by the fireplace.

"My dear, you are good, with nothing but goodness in your heart," she said while rubbing the grey flakes off his shoulders. "But I fear you are letting your situation at Commons to cloud what should be the true and proper course of action: Every law in the country would punish her, if not for her good husband who refused to bring charges against her. We were civil to her, that should be good enough as charity."

"My dear, you did not let me finish. As I was suggesting, her reputation precedes her, and Lady Cavendish will almost certainly refuse her. In this manner, I would have done my duty for the Adams and to Mrs. Cavendish. Trust me, it's for the best. Her father was a good man. Well, it's like you say my dear, with that reputation, I doubt anyone will believe a word of what Jane Adams has to say."

"Believe her they will not, but your better judgment will come into question. Lady Cavendish may ask 'what the hell was your husband thinking in recommending such a

woman?' Do you really want your wife to suffer the consequences of Lady Cavendish's ill will?"

Mr. Popper who had exhausted himself quite enough on the matter, and didn't think it big enough or important enough a matter to be fretted about to such an extent and such a length, asked his wife to desist.

"So then it's agreed. You will do no such thing." said a satisfied Mrs. Popper. "Would you like some more tea?"

"Let me first write the letter to Ms. Adams."

"And then we'll do something of those flakes!"

There is always a difference between spoken words and what a person assumes people think or say while referring to the person. Jane had heard insinuations, coded threats, and fake assurances, but hearing how much she was loathed and ridiculed, in true measure of society, was painful. Hearing the two people who benefited from the good name and good deed of her father, and the kind of language they reserved for his daughter behind her back, made her feel ashamed. Yes, she was ashamed, for the first time, sitting in the narrow corridor outside the drawing room of the Poppers. She felt bad for ruining her father's name. Growing up, she wanted nothing more than to be the subject of pride for her father. Looking up to him, as a little girl, she wanted him to look up to her, once she turned into an independent woman. And she had nothing but wrath to show for, and had brought nothing but disgrace to his name. She hurried away from the house, sobbing uncontrollably.

The eavesdropping at least led to a lead and Jane made sure to mention it to Susan Birch, Mrs. Fletcher's daughter, who set about making inquiries, and indeed confirmed that a Lady Cavendish in Bradbury, Berkshire was meeting prospective employee for the position of a governess.

"I'm afraid, some are recommended from the best organizations," Susan had said, "But let's hope she sees you as mama saw you."

Jane didn't bother to change the chemise, drawer or stockings she had slept in. She didn't have the time. But she felt naked. She put on the boots, picked up the corset and the contraption that went along it and set about tightening the knots. Naturally light, she had lost a lot of weight in the last eight months. It was vexing to fix a well-rounded corset into a tiny waist. She closed the last loop near the bosom and checked the result in the mirror by standing on her toes. She decided there was nothing wrong with the ill-fitting since the corset was not showing beneath the dress. She combed her wavy hair, parted it in the middle and pulled it away from her face as tightly as was humanely possible. She put a bit

of powder on her face, dabbed rose water on her hands and neck and looked at the visage in the broken blemished mirror on the wall.

*You could start by growing a new face.*

She was plain indeed. She seemed to agree with The Voice, her companion in the journey into loneliness and oblivion.

## 2

Thud! Thud! With two bangs on the roof, the coachman signaled that they were near the place she was to be dropped at.

“Whatever for?”, asked the curious young woman passenger who couldn’t fathom what the well-dressed dark-haired, blue-eyed woman wanted from the place - ‘looks too well-bred to not be able to afford a single carriage, let alone be in a coach with five other passengers.....Those shoes were expensive!’ wondered the curious woman. It is generally true that people born and bred in poverty were quicker to see and realize the difference in class than the elite, who could be fooled by mere dress or speech and not distinguish a fake when he or she stood amongst peers - the curious woman canvassed Jane left and right, up and down and sideways to the best of her abilities, all the while thinking to herself, it was the little things that stood out. ‘It looks like she hasn’t worked a day in her life, with those petite hands. Household help don’t have that groomed manner of speaking.....Those brows look waxed, what is that on her lips, is she wearing rouge?.....She couldn’t possibly be an acquaintance of any one in The Chateaux! They wouldn’t be friends with people who traveled in coaches!!! Maybe she was a tutor, going to visit some relative, a maid perhaps, who worked at The Chateaux, wasn’t Martha expecting someone?’. The line of thought raised the point of introduction, and curious woman went ahead:

“I’m Beth, I work as parlor maid there.....”, the curious young woman trailed off expecting Jane to finish an invisible question.

“That’s wonderful. I have some business to attend to over there. I applied for a vacancy. Of a governess.” said Jane matter-of-factly.

“Well, well, it’s too fine a place to have just about anybody. I hope you have good references.”

“I hope so too,” she answered with a soft smile.

“It’s a grand place. The Chateaux,” went on Beth swiveling her hands, “It has the best gardens in the whole Shire! Not too lucky for the residents though.”

“Really? I’ve heard.....” - right at that moment she looked out the window and saw a mansion hiding behind the trees, and finished off the sentence - “good things about it”, remembering something long ago. ‘Papa, how big is this valley?’ She had asked her father on one of his stops. She had traveled all over with her father. His business took him to towns all over England. He loved architecture, old buildings, new constructions; The more dust and grime, the better his father felt about the place. So every curve, each arch, all slabs had a purpose and harmony. It was science mixing with good taste - well, more often than not, as her father used to snort: ‘Some things Jane, one has to praise for the heck of it, the society does not permit dissent in what it considers the fashion of the day - no matter how long one has to stand that ugly structure for! Sense has to satisfy beauty and vice versa or else. Or else one is stuck with an ornament for life, and one tires of accessories that outlive their purpose.....God! that is one awful building! Let’s see if the tenants are any better!’

She was ten, and she had giggled. It never failed to amaze her the joy or ridicule a few blocks of brick and stone evoked in the recipients. For all the passengers of the coach, including her, were in awe of the egg-shell white two-storied building with brown trimmings along the window shades.

‘It most probably is ten - no, twenty thousand square feet or so’, she surmised. It was truly gorgeously grand. Seeing the expanse of it, she immediately wondered about the tenants and the state of their happiness, as if a house of such grandeur and precision could have no anomaly, no crisis, indeed no sadness. Certainly there could be no pain? Indeed, wasn’t it said of beautiful landscapes that people could rinse everything if only they stayed long enough in it and had the good sense to own and hold on to such a place. The expense of upkeep or lease would be huge for sure, but look at the glow! The place glowed - like a smile ear to ear - and even the surrounding trees bowed in reverence to the invention - nothing could be this perfect and be stain-free, could it? - was she being cynical or hadn’t the old woman said something? It struck her, the remark of the nubile woman by the name of Beth on the ill-fortunes of the inhabitants.

“What makes you say that?”

Before the curious young woman who had introduced herself as Beth could reply, the coach came to a stop near the main gate. The coachman told her that this was as far as he could go, since no one was allowed at the front entrance. She understood that he couldn’t go towards the back because she was not a servant and not applying for the position of a servant. She had to walk the rest of the way. And she did. Without Beth, who waved at her

while being driven to the back side. She waved back, for the lack of knowledge on any other appropriate social gesture.

There were a few manservants along the path who were apparently on duty for some one or some thing, since something was definitely up, she was told to leave her visiting card at the front door and go around the back for entrance into the house. So much for not being a servant.

Soon, she was sitting in a corridor waiting to be ushered into the tea room for her appointment with the lady of the house. It was twelve in the afternoon and three in the corridor besides her, waiting for their turn. One of them looked stern - very professional - like an old horse at the derby - who knows her time has come to retire but finance and duty doesn't permit it. The other one had rattled feet. Both were older than her, and looked straight ahead in thin air as if soldiers ready for war. And while Jane gave a little smile as hello, the two were more interested in scanning her, and having satisfied themselves as to her ineligibility - those muddy shoes! that tired face! - went about looking straight ahead in thin air. Both left with satisfactory smiles on their lips. Jane was the last to be called in.

The room itself was small. At the centre of the room, in a sofa-seat overlooking a bay-window, sat Lady Cavendish.

"I hope the journey was satisfactory", asked Lady Cavendish in a room that smelt in equal parts coffee, jasmine and strawberries.

"Pleasant enough ma'am," she replied.

"I should hardly think so. The road from London gets very bad around the town of Mayfair."

Lady Cavendish who was having a sip of lemon-grass tea offered her some. She had to graciously accept it, though she didn't feel like having any.

"Oh, but I didn't travel from London today, it would have been too long and cumbersome a journey to partake, no, I stayed overnight at a place and resumed this morning."

"At Baker's Inn I presume?" Lady Cavendish narrowed her eyes.

"Yes." She wondered if it was a suitable choice.

"It's the only one close by," said the Lady picking up a teaspoon.

Jane thought she was in trouble. The Inn was not good enough a place to impress the old lady and she may be looked down upon simply for making the poor choice in accommodation.

“Well, yes, ofcourse, it’s the only reasonable place in the area.” she shrugged, surprising Jane with her answer.

Lady Cavendish was a woman who had once been extremely beautiful and her face still held remnants as proof of that; She had married young and married well, she had had a long happy marriage that ended a few years ago when she lost her husband to consumption, around the same time as Dear Mary, her favorite from her sister’s brood of six, whom she raised as her own.

Now fifty, she often scolded her nephew, her brother’s only child, for not spending time with her, but then the wayward man had a problem of prioritizing in any case, what with neglected children and frequent debauchery. It was the children, his and her daughter’s, that worried the elder guardian. She wanted what was best for them, and she thought she knew how to get it, till she met the candidates. She had interviewed eight till now. She had been on the quest to look for a good caretaker for the children for a while now - two months to be exact. And once she made her wish known, the best in society wasted no time in making seasoned recommendations for the lucrative post - and lucrative the post was! At fifty to sixty pounds annual - but working for the Cavendish-Lockwood household was not just about money, it was a way of life, it opened up the chance to live in a fashionable household, with a full social calendar, of amusement and gossip - no matter how limited the access would be for the governess - it still retained the possibility of even catching the eye of some poorer respectable gentleman of distant relation or acquaintance. As much as Lady Cavendish detested the social climbers, she sighed as to the inevitability of it’s occurrence. Men would be men, and women would remain but women. And what was bound to happen, would happen.

But the matter at hand was simpler than that of getting rid of the unborn child or the maid or the stable boy responsible for the indulgence - and Mrs. Cavendish did consider any sort of excess to be a crime. She couldn’t understand the need for an aficionado of good wine to taste scotch. The stable boy had a perfectly healthy young wife at home, hence he could not take comfort in the excuse of neglect or opportunity or desires gone awry, without accepting that he had everything that God had intended him to have and take pleasure from. There was a rule to everything and though Mrs. Cavendish was surrounded with excess, indeed was born in it, and would likely die in it, she abhorred it. It wasn’t as if she had one good lamp shade, one good carpet, or one good house. For she had plenty of each. No. And it wasn’t as if she wanted to live the life of - God Forbid - a mere simpleton, for she loved luxury. She just disliked too much of it. And according to

her, a sensible man and woman ought to have a limit, know the limit, of wants, needs, and be able to tell the difference between the two, and knowing when to stop.

“That is just the problem in today’s world, the young just don’t know when to stop!” she said out loud, unthinking of the attendance in the tearoom. She had been unable to give children to her husband and yet, he had retained no mistress. She had been good enough for him, the man of the world, and Lords, and riches. What did the stable-boy have to gloat over? Why was he such a magnet?

No. The matter at hand was simpler. All she had to do was subtract the qualities she was looking for from what she was presented with. The candidates were all good, in their own unique way. But she saw them lacking in something she couldn’t put her finger on. All eight were accomplished, had been part of the ‘right’ kind of houses, and had glowing references to prove it, some slightly cheesy and overdone. That amused Lady Cavendish and left her feeling strangely empty, and nervous and she couldn’t quite put her finger on why she was dissatisfied with each one who came in through the door.

That is, until she saw and spoke to the last one, this one sitting in front of her, that she realized what it was that all the previous candidates, for all their civility, knowledge and precision, had lacked.

Warmth.

It was something that Mrs. Cavendish had understood a long time ago about herself. She never had children of her own, and had always noted that women with children had a certain softness - in features as well as in demeanor - than an infertile one. She was extremely jealous of her sister, who kept getting pregnant every two years, till the sister handed over her youngest one, Dear Mary, to her to satisfy the loneliness of the middle-aged couple. And suddenly, Lady Cavendish could feel manufactured pride. The relaxed - or was it satisfied, like a well-fed cow? - expression that she used to notice on the faces of social butterflies was hers now. All the harsh wrinkles that crowded her brow evaporated overnight. She could sense a freedom, a new swing in her step, as if she had achieved a milestone by holding a three-year old in her arms, one that no one could take from her, not even her sister, for she had made her sign the papers, and no one could call their own, legally or under social convention, but she and her husband.

After a few years of tending to the child and keeping up in society, she noticed that Warmth could not be faked, it could not be manufactured, and certainly was not dependent on the status of one’s womb. It was something more inherent, more in-built, than how many times a woman had been pregnant and carried a child to term, or what schools the children went to, or what kind of future was set up for them. The Warmth

came from a place far deeper, more deeper than where a man could go. And not every mother had it. For not every mother liked being a mother. Nor liked all children equally. Every mother had her favorite though none admitted to it. Some wished to be with their children, but could not for tradition did not allow them to spend more than a few hours with them. Some hated a child for they reminded them of the husband, some hated the child for reminding them of someone else. Some used their children as props to enhance their image as a Christian family. No. Warmth came from wanting to be around children, wanting to hear them talk, taking pleasure in their nonsense, and you couldn't manufacture that.

Lady Cavendish had it and saw through the maternal facade of a few of her friends who did not. And it was the lack of this peculiar characteristic in the eight previous candidates that had left her cold. She just didn't know why the married mother of two sat expressionless; why one stressed on disciplining the children without showing how she would plan their extra-curricular time; why the third was determined to stress on the time she would spend with each child 'for their mental and moral health'; why the fourth felt no role was required of the absent father; why the fifth made no attempt at conversation; why the sixth one's idea of punishment was a child without food - the idea horrified Mrs. Cavendish to the core who could think of nothing worse than an empty stomach - and that too for a growing child.

No. It was obvious that none of them really liked children. The seventh and eighth even fidgeted on the question of whether they enjoyed the company of children, one of them even replying:

"Children are for the family to enjoy; The family is supposed to indulge in them and with them; Our role is to merit their behavior and growth. And as any weather-beaten hard-boiled school master would tell you, there is no enjoyment in that!"

Lady Cavendish expected more from the person she was going to entrust her grandchildren with. Governesses were supposed to spend eight to twelve hours with children and the thought that her grand children, the children of her Dear Mary could be surrounded with a - what seemed to her as - a dreary obstinate villain, was too much to bear. She felt that somehow the process of selection of a governess was much simpler when she was choosing one for Dear Mary, than it had been for her children! That was until the last one, this one sitting in front of her, had entered the room, that she remembered what she had missed in the others.

This, Jane Adams, formerly Mrs. Jane Pritchard, of Rosewood, had poor references. A woman by the name of Mrs. Susan Birch, who was heading an educational enterprise in

London and who had thought it fit to be a bit forward in their mutual acquaintance - Mrs. Cavendish had once donated a sum for the school's orphans through her London barrister - and wished to recommend Ms. Adams, a woman she said was of 'superior birth than one usually sees in the profession.' Mrs. Cavendish saw it as an admission of the candidate having had a 'past' for stooping to the level of the vocation, and though she saw the inherent hypocrisy in that statement, she had developed enough empathy over the years to appreciate the less fortunate and their desire to better their condition - as long as it was not at the expense of them forgetting their real station in life; also, that 'she has had impeccable training at the finest French Institute for....' - which Mrs. Cavendish could not fault, if indeed it was true, but then the chances of a school mistress lying to her benefactor, a powerful benefactor, was an impossible idea in any case; that 'her lack of family, both by birth and by marriage, and young age make her suitable for the responsibilities of a full-time teacher at your disposal who will match the young ones in energy and temperament'. Mrs. Cavendish had seen many a governess in her day whose household made unnecessary demands on her, and she had just seen a few out of shape ones. Infact she had once theorized direct relation between the proportion of the waist to the mood of the governess.

Hence, there were merits to Ms. Adams case.

There was only one problem. It had something to do with her virtue, or lack thereof - for why else would a husband throw away a wife? The moral problem of exposing the children of Dear Mary to a tainted woman was solved when she saw Ms. Adams. Her first thought recognized the Warmth in her eyes and general countenance, though none were displayed to full effect. Her second thought recognized that she was very plain.

Given her looks, even the stable-boy would stay away from her. And that would be one less thing for the lady to worry about.

"Your father is dead." Began Lady Cavendish, who knew very well that he was.

"Yes." said Jane calmly.

Lady Cavendish arched the right brow as if expecting an enhanced reply.

Jane filled in the blanks. "Heart ailment."

"And your extended family?"

"I have a cousin in Yorkshire." - who, Jane thought was atleast straightforward in his admonishment. 'Do not try to contact us again, I have two daughters, I do not seek a damnation for them as has befallen you'.

Jane continued, sidestepping Uncle Joe and his wife, "My mother's side never really warmed up to father, and the tradition continued with me. My mother died when I was three months old."

"Oh, that is frightful. How did she die?"

"Scarlet fever."

"A grown woman catching the fever?! Now I've heard everything! Pray, how old was she?"

"Twenty-eight, as old as I am now."

"Well! And you were but of few months? How come you were not affected?"

"I was sent to live with my uncle in Yorkshire. My father sent for me only when mother had been buried."

"Your father was a tradesman and yet sent you abroad. Today, money is able to buy all kinds of privilege for the middle class!"

"I hope it also shows that good sense is not restricted merely to the station one is born to. My father dealt in antiquities. He counted many noble men as clients of his."

"Hm...mh...Ms. Adams, I will come straight to the point. I've been through at least six women before you, four of them were interviewed today. They all have, some very good pedigree, excellent references, the right age and appropriate wisdom, I may add, between them. They also are career governesses. Why should you be picked?"

"I do not believe it's a question of whether I have the qualities that these women possess but more of whether that is what you are looking for."

"What else would I be looking for Ms. Adams?"

"You would not have agreed to see me if you were satisfied with any of them, let alone offer me tea. You do not come across as someone who likes to waste her time dilly dallying with strangers over a fine afternoon that could do with a walk in the garden. I have no doubt they have all the essentials, but have they lived in the world? Have they been part of its execution in anyway other than a boardroom? or classroom? or children's study? I am younger than them and hence would be able to form a reasonable attachment with the children under my care. One needs a certain amount of vigor and energy with children of a certain age."

"You seem to assume a lot about children, though you have none I believe of your own."

"One is raised to be a good mother," Jane stopped.

*You barren fickle witch.* Shrugging off The Voice she continued, "I am excellent in piano and I can show you samples of my needlework." She almost added 'though you may find that beneath your station.'

"Ms. Adams, one rarely suggests such a method to a lady."

"Judgment is best made through first-hand knowledge, so that there is no room for second-guessing one's own choices in life, let alone that of hiring a governess. References only take one so far as an appointment, but one should be prepared to show all that one knows or is capable of to a possible employer and the employer should encourage the endeavor."

"People with experience rarely need such declarations or introductions."

"Then why are they seeking employment? One of many applying for the same piece of work? If one was that good and that accomplished, surely one wouldn't need to sit in a corridor alongwith mere mortals to come in when announced? One look at the visiting card should provide secured guarantee should it not?"

"Well, now that you've given me a positive headache, I may as well see your hand at forte!"

Lady Cavendish had no doubt the woman had brains and hence was a threat to no one except herself. Even the stable-boy wouldn't have her. She bid her to move across the room with slight of her handkerchief. Jane knew her skill and knew she was remarkable on the keys.

*You're good for nothing!*

Ignoring The Voice, she started playing. And she knew the Lady would be impressed.

"It's Bearable," is all she got as a reply. "Where are the samples? Hm, I've seen better work in Brighton! Pray, why did your husband get rid of you?"

Jane was taken aback. Lady Cavendish was throwing sling arrows as if it were hunting season. That she was trying to intimidate Jane was apparent the moment she set foot in the room but now, for the first time, she had succeeded in making Jane nervous.

"I guess he had seen better work in Brighton as well," replied Jane.

It amused Lady Cavendish immensely. She would re-tell the tale with a hearty laugh to Louisa, her sister's eldest daughter, later. She and Louisa were eighteen years apart and had the love of astrology to keep them together. Lady Cavendish decided that Jane was sensible enough and good enough. She had a certain reserved finesse about her that been a pleasant surprise. Governesses could be such a bore, and this one sounded well-read by choice, not merely as a requirement of study or vocation. And as she had often found, those were the ones who truly knew what they were talking about. Besides, it was the Year

of the Dragon under Chinese tradition and Louisa had made The Merry Widow of Berkshire promise to keep her new year resolution throughout the year for once! It was the year of trying new things and Lady Cavendish had every intention of following it through! Especially since the previous governess had found herself a suitor and a husband all within the span of a year and half - good looks would do that for an otherwise unfortunate woman - well, there would be no such threat from this Jane Adams. She was the rare case of financial ruin inspite of a wealthy father and husband. And she had a tongue. But she was accomplished and one needed both with insolent youngsters to be a success at the vocation.

“Very well then, sixty pounds per annum should be good enough? You’ll have one day off for the month. Mind you, one wrong move and you could be playing at a salon somewhere. You have your luggage?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“What - all your bags? That was very presumptuous of you,” Lady Cavendish was slightly offended.

“I have but two.” Jane did not wish to elaborate that the twins contained the only possessions left with her and let the old lady assume that the rest of her accessories were with Mrs. Birch in London.

“Well you can settle in today. Maybe you can see the children before dinner. I’ll have to check. We have a busy evening tonight, busy week actually, friends of my nephew have come down for a buck and a ball. I want you to meet the children in my presence. I’ll have to check whether I have time to get that done today. And Martha will show you your room.”

Lady Cavendish rang the bell.

“Thank you”. Jane got up.

“You’ve not eaten since morning have you?”

“I had coffee and toast at the inn.”

“I can always tell a pale face from a well-fed one! Oh good, Martha, is the room prepared? Very well, this is Ms. Adams, she is the new governess. she’ll have lunch downstairs. You can have your meals in your room thenceforth. Martha is the main housekeeper, she will provide you with the needful. I think it would be best if you were introduced tomorrow after breakfast.”

“Thank you.”

Jane was breathing heavily in measured form, trying to keep her calm. Relieved by how the interview had gone, she felt embarrassed. She had prepared to answer any question regarding her past and her marriage, having practiced her responses and facial expressions in front of the mirror and otherwise earlier. She had perfected the lisp, the fluctuation, the chosen words, for she knew the eye of a recipient already laden with many rumors and innuendos, could detect every note of vexation and hesitation, and for an outsider everything, even that lisp, that fluctuation and that chosen word, if noted, would be news, something to talk about with others while exchanging knowing looks and smiles. Just the thought of it vexed her, to be judged, talked about. It angered her that while society would probably be sympathizing with the husband and foregoing any queries that could and should have been made towards him, merely concentrating on acknowledgement of his plight and his loss and his stealthy honor, she bore the brunt of not just stolen glances, pitiable assumptions, or rude bold admonishments, but also questions, because she was supposed to answer for what had happened to her and why. As if she held all the pieces of the puzzle. It was almost as if society would congratulate a man for marrying well but accuse a woman for ending it badly. Yes, everyone thought she was at fault; yes, she was expected to repent; and no matter what she said to the contrary had any effect; but for the collective society to not burden the husband with questions on any sort of details seemed strange, lopsided, unfair.

Hence, Jane was surprised that she had gotten off so easily with the old lady who seemed proud and pride-worthy. The small tea-room looked like a familiar resting ground for Lady Cavendish and had been kept warm, cozy and pretty. Jane had tried her very best to not come across as wounded or angry. She knew that the only reason she had even got an appointment with Lady Cavendish was because of her better status than the usual applicants for the position but she had expected a harder interview, because of that very status, the very past which had brought her to asking for menial work in the other side of England. She had expected pointed questions, accusations, or worse, pity - for she hated pity, she had come to detest pity, real or fake, intentional or without, by man or woman, it made her feel worse than a beggar, for a beggar atleast got a pence for his time, while the last thing she wanted from any one was money or sympathy.

Her wants may have been to see her honor restored some how, her rights to be re-established in time and for someone to help her without asking anything in return, but no one knew how to get that done, no one was interested, no one wanted to get in the middle of what was known as 'the messy affair', and no one believed her. She half-expected the

old lady to demand to know the whole truth, for laying out what had happened to her in clear detail, so that there would be no further surprises as to her character. Lady Cavendish had surprised her by not asking much for anything and just observing her. And Jane was taken aback when she was accepted for the position and even more so, when Lady asked her about lunch.

*Let's see how far you get on without me!*

Martha led the way to what was a very long walk to the other side of the corridor from where the tea room had been, tempering each step, towards a large straight staircase decked with a red-colored runner. A few maids were busy doing different chores: two were mopping the floor that led to the staircase, three were busy dusting furniture, one was polishing the vase and china placed on side tables through the pathway.

"The staircase divides the house into two parts Miss," said Martha as she led Jane past the stairs. The wooden railing on either side was cut at the base below and up, by two small statues of lions that lay on the railing poles! Jane stared at them.

"Down below is the living area, drawing, dining, the ball room, and master's study, as well as the kitchen. The foyer is also there. The bedrooms for the master, Lady Cavendish and their guests are on this floor. Upstairs is your room, alongwith that of the nurse and the maid. Children's bedrooms and nurseries are upstairs as well. You are to use these stairs to come down to this floor, first floor, and then move left towards this door", Martha pointed to a small door on the left side, "and take the small spiral ones to go down towards the kitchen or out towards the fields or stables."

She made a quick turn towards left and took the small spiral stairs, instead of the large carpeted one, to take Jane to the kitchen.

Then she went on to describe the day for the laundry, the day for the post, the day for chicken soup, the day for prayer, the day for going to the market and the day for weekly celebration amongst servants "if you feel like joining".

The ground floor landing was a scene of frenzy. Two men were carrying a carton from the carriage outside, fish was being stored in ice buckets, water vases and towels were being carried upstairs, the floor was ridiculously muddy, vegetables lay on a table and a man was shouting "out of the way! out of the way!", another blasted through the door with a dozen dead fox - a girl came running towards Jane and held her arms - it was Beth from the ride earlier.

"So did you get it? Are you in?", she asked excitedly. Jane nodded with a smile.

"Elizabeth behave. That's no way to talk to the governess. And out of the way!" said Martha.

“Oh Martha! She’s my aunt, but you’d never guess it through faces! Or mannerisms! And she practically raised me. You don’t see resemblance right?”

“Stop behaving like a child, know your place, and weren’t you supposed to handle the cutlery? s everything ready at the table or will I get another scolding from Mr. Bennet on your performance?”

“It’s done, only the forks remain.”

“What? It’s almost time! The gents will be here any minute for supper! Where’s Abby? Is she done with the library? Then why isn’t she downstairs yet? and where the hell is Laura? I told her to fix the room next to the nursery.”

It seemed like the parlor maids, Beth and Abby, were supposed to have taken care of the morning rituals by now, in time for afternoon tea and supper. Preparation was already on for the dinner. And it looked like the maids hadn’t completed their morning chores yet. Laura, the housemaid, was busy cleaning the rooms of the guests and hadn’t even started the governess’ room yet.

“See you later!” said Beth to Jane who smiled, running away as quickly as she had come in.

“Watch your step, you silly child!” shouted Martha behind her and then turning to Jane “Never mind her, it isn’t hard to get her excited, foolish child. Come, let’s go to the kitchen.”

The kitchen was relatively calmer. No one was bumping into each other there! Pots were either on the stove or placed nearby, waiting their turn in an invisible chain to be boiled, baked, roasted. One kitchen maid was washing dishes, the other was mopping the floor. Martha told her to have a look at the corridor outside as well once finished.

Standing still, waiting to be asked to be seated, Jane looked at one end of the kitchen to the next, remembering what her own kitchen had been like. The smell of warm roasted garlic, onions, and parsley, soft dose of pepper mixed with that of fruit in a barrel nearby, and crisp coal in the stove! There was that whisk in the air that comes from a place being inhabited and frequented by domestic help and grocery. She had had seven full-time servants: Mrs. Thomas, the housekeeper, Walter, the cook, Mr. Roberts, the manservant, her lady’s maid Daisy, Janet, the parlor maid, Hoffie, the scullery maid, and Perry the coachman. The gardner used to come every Saturday, the vegetables and meat every Tuesday and Friday, the curtains were washed every fortnight, the budget re-arranged every month, the four-wheeled carriage checked every Thursday, the dressmaker came every Wednesday, the ladies from the book club every Monday, the meeting with the horticulturists every Tuesday, the meeting of Benevolent Fund Society every Wednesday,

The Charity for the Houseless met every Thursday - the irony not lost on her, the meeting with the clergymen and parishioners every Sunday, tea with her father that very day, apart from the weekly newspaper *The Broomhall Chronicles*, which held pro-monarchy views, all the while championing the rights of the common man and invaluable advice on *How to Keep a Husband*.

Jane had liked her food a certain way. But after marriage, she accustomed her taste to that of her husband's, slightly more boiled, slightly more spicy, slightly more nicely arranged. 'How I stood over that stove! Timing the chicken as if there was no tomorrow! Scolding Walter if he sidestepped for a second! And the floor! My floor never looked this bad! I would not have allowed it,' she thought to herself, 'But this room is so much bigger than mine. You could fit two kitchens of mine in this one space. And the household has company at much larger numbers.' She counted the number of servants she had seen till now, outside near the front gate, in the corridor, and now here in the kitchen. 'Twenty, and that's minus the ones employed for the gardens and stable, the laundry maids and manservants. How many would be full-time and how many only for few days a week?' she sighed. 'Just for polishing the silver,' and started reminiscing about her staff again. 'I wonder what they are doing right now?'

Five years was a long time to get accustomed to people and the routine that came with them. Today, was Tuesday.

"Have a seat here," Martha pulled out a chair next to a table, and started a conversation with the cook. "Did Mr. Bennet find everything okay?.....did he review the curry? Do you have the soup from last night's dinner? Very well, give some to Ms. Adams here.....Would you like some bread with it or just sticks?" she asked Jane. "Okay, make a separate plate of vegetables as well."

Seeing an old man, she immediately got up. "Mr. Bennet, we are there, almost there."

"Not remotely there, from where I am standing," said the displeased butler. "I just inspected the dining. George just broke a bowl, and flowers in the drawing are wilting."

"Elizabeth will fix it. But as I keep reminding you - " Martha was cut short by Mr. Bennet who apparently had heard this line before:

"- Oh no, not another one of your schemes to employ more family members!"

"It's not a scheme and you know very well that we need a hall-boy, or few new maids, there is too much cleaning at the servant quarters, as well as our own table, the scullery maids cannot do everything, the footmens have been busy with the hunting since morning, the other maids at my disposal are all upstairs tending to the first floor. Where does that leave us?"

“And what does that have to do with broken china, missing forks and unkempt flowers?”

“Demand and supply Sir! Too much work and too few to do it!”

“I am more inclined to view it as a case of inefficiency. We have always managed to have order during busy weeks. I think you are slacking in your methods Martha.”

“You wouldn’t if Hector, and not George, had been hired!” said Martha, pointing to the hiring of her cousin’s son as opposed to Mr. Bennet’s sister’s boy as a footman recently. A sore point for Mr. Bennet that won Martha no friends. Both had been in service at The Chateaux for twenty-five years and had never seen eye to eye on anything. Both thanked God and Lady Cavendish for the distribution of responsibilities.

“We will talk about this later. In the meantime, I suggest you.....” Mr. Bennet had just noticed the pleasant-looking woman eating at the center of the kitchen table. Martha looked back and told him:

“Oh, it’s Ms. Adams, Ms. Jane Adams, the new governess, just hired.”

“Good, good, hello,” Mr. Bennet gave Jane a nod, “Good. Well, get on with it.”

Martha rolled her eyes.

Jane quietly finished the turkey soup. No one in the kitchen spoke to her.

“Come I’ll take you to your room,” said Martha. “Oh, good, Beth you are here, has Laura finished? Okay, take Ms. Adams upstairs.”

Beth talked too much. Infact, she had verbal diarrhea. Martha was right, she was easily excitable. Probably because she was so young, only eighteen and had a curiosity about any and all. She kept naming the help they ran into on their way up. Jane hardly had time to register the flurry of names thrown at her at every instance. Beth also proved to be a wealth of information on things without much prodding.

“Today is a good day. Master is out hunting with his friends, his lady friends are having tea in the garden, party of eight came just yesterday. Fifteen will be at dinner, it’s all crazy right now. But you won’t have to worry, the children are usually kept away from the gatherings and guests. Poor Sarah is usually sick and in bed. I have been here two years, and I’ve never seen the poor child well - ”

“How old is she?”

“Oh, she’s three years old, Master David is nine and Miss Agnes, the eldest, is almost ten. They are good kids, not much trouble. The last governess found a groom and ran away with him.”

“Groom? You mean she ran off with a horseman?” she immediately felt silly.

“Oh, no! though the vicar did come on a horse to take her away!”

Her room was at the left end of the passage on second floor. It was situated right across two nurseries, a classroom, a play room and the nurse's bedroom. The rooms on the right side of the passage were of the children and their maid. The rooms of all other servants were in the basement.

The room was a moderate square with two windows. If a room had to be described in colors then this one was all slaty grey though the bedding was predictably white and furniture brown. The small space with stony walls was overbearing. It was like a dungeon. 'My pantry was bigger than this', she thought with a wry smile looking over a room she concluded was eleven foot in length. There was hardly any gap for broad movement. A person was a crowd. The good thing was that it had been furnished in bare essentials. A bed was stretched between the two windows with a green-orange motif rug ahead - the only bright component in otherwise dreary decor - ironically only visible when one approached the windows. An empty book shelf was beside chair-table set. An oak almairah with minimal wood carving was within a wall. The fireplace was cold. She went up to a window and removed the faded curtain.

*There's not a sight without roses here! Oh I dare say, Jane, you are positively rose-mad!*

The view was of stables.

"So do you like it?" asked Beth putting a water vase and match box on the table.

"Yes. Very much so. Can the fireplace be lit in the evening?"

"Yes. Ofcourse, with two blocks it burns for a full two hours! You're lucky. The nurse had to get hers installed."

"The nurse is for the youngest one?" asked Jane checking the shelf for dust.

"Yes. Has been here since the baby was born. That's when the mistress died. Giving birth. Ugly ugly business, or so Lilly says, Lilly, that's the nurse."

"Must have been hard for the father," said Jane going through the desk drawers.

"That's a matter of opinion. Though Lilly says nothing can be done about a child that is hell-bent on remaining sick."

What an odd thing to say, cruel even, thought Jane, though she didn't say it out loud. It was best not to offend sensibilities of people one was to see more often than her employers. And words between servants travelled faster than those between employers. Servants by and large had more to do and more to talk about. And she was not about to get sucked in the politics of hired help. Who knew what her own servants had said behind her back, though she imagined it would not be any more shocking than the station she found herself to possess now.

Seeing her quiet, Beth quickly added: "But, you don't have to worry about Miss Agnes and Master David. They are good-natured quiet creatures. Though the master is entirely a different matter altogether," she said dryly.

Jane thought it was an odd introduction as to the manners of the master of the house.

"Where are the children right now?"

"They are in their rooms with Nancy."

"The youngest one too?"

"No. Miss Sarah is supposed to be in bed."

"And the nurse?"

"She should be in bed too. People don't get out of their rooms unless called for and the children are with the maid. Plus, it's Lilly's nap time."

"It's one in the afternoon."

"She likes her sleep before dinner, keeps her energized the remainder of the evening. You will like her."

Jane doubted that. She had never liked lazy people. Helping her father in his business, she had learnt the value of money. 'If you don't respect money, it will not respect you', her father used to say. Even as a house mistress, she liked getting her money's worth and paid attention to skills versus inevitable problems. Each hired person brought their own set of positives and negatives on the table. Nobody was perfect and Jane had learnt the hard way that one had to ignore the shortcomings for the amount or quality of work done. Good help was hard to come by, even harder to make stick to one job. Everyone wanted to do less than what they were supposed to do, everyone thought of a way to get out of completing tasks every now and then and every one made excuses to go on a holiday even if it was for half a day. Her housekeeper, Mrs. Thomas, was addicted to some drug. Her cook Walter was involved in a one-sided love affair with her maid Daisy, who was more interested in Perry the coachman who refused to make a formal proposal. Perry also used to make petty excuses for time off - which after a little while became obvious ruses - after all how many times could a fellow's grandmother die?! Mr. Roberts had a slight trouble holding his drink and had to be carried to a bucket of water every other fortnight. Janet had frequent problems with her eldest son, who was always either in jail or getting out of it. But all of them did what they were hired to do - and Jane could trust them to complete their work to satisfaction. A candlestick was never dusty. The home was never out of wood. The glasses were always shiny. The bread was always fresh. The cigars always well-stored. The pantry was always well-stocked. The weeding was done on time. So their

personal failings didn't bother Jane as much as they bore on her husband who constantly nagged her about them. And Jane never understood why.

*Can't you do anything right?*

But a nurse-maid hired for a child of weak constitution should have been more attentive to her duties. It disturbed Jane that the sick child was alone.

Her luggage arrived. She thanked Beth and asked her to bring in some stationary later on. Beth smiled.

"Hey, I hope you won't mind, I've been meaning to ask you, that's some mighty fine lace you have over there, on your sleeves. Did you do it yourself?"

"No, I had someone do it for me," said Jane. She had taken the expensive embroidery off another dress and hemmed it to make the sleeves longer on this one.

*The finest shop in the world, the best, only the best for you my love.*

*Thank you, Charles, Vivian's work is magnificent.*

Beth gave her an envious smile, "Well Good luck!" and closed the door behind her. Jane was now part of the unseen imperceptible class.

#### 4

Lady Cavendish sent a word that the new governess could see the brood after three and in the mean time, encouraged her to take a walk near lake, an area now free since all the guests - done with the shooting and hobnobbing - had returned to the drawing room or their rooms for supper.

Once on the grounds, Jane felt strangely free. It was a nice day. Sun was out in full blast this first morning of the summer. She soaked it all in. Looking ahead at the broad landscape in the front, with the canopy of hundred year old trees farther down, she realized she had no idea which passage led to the lake.

"They all do", said the stable boy, taking a somewhat limping horse back.

"Which one's the shortest?" she asked. She didn't want to get stranded or lost or miss her task later.

"Take the stony one, where the white bushes are," pointing towards the path where hibiscus lay.

"Thank you. Is it serious?"

"He'll live, it didn't get shot down, tough old sod."

She watched him lead the horse away, and made way for the vegetable cart.

"Fresh from the market?" Jane was surprised at the mid-afternoon excursion. There must have been groceries in the morning. Did they run out of the supplies so soon?!

"No, miss, dug up fresh from the farm. Soup for the supper."

Wondering whether it was a habit with the owners or formality for the guests, nonetheless much was being done to please the guests. She took the - what was it that the stable-boy had said? - 'the stony path, with the white bushes' - they were hibiscus shrubs, Red Heart variety, not her favorite since she had always been partial to Woodbridge, and other brighter, more crimson colors in that family. She liked the Rosella tea, without sugar, which almost had the effect jasmine had with a pinch of lemon and cardamon. But Rosella was colorful, already acidic, and required no further garnishments. It was good enough just as it was.....isn't that what her father always said? She smiled. And no two were ever alike, maintaining similarities with the parent flower yet having distinctively unique features, generation after generation, evolving as it were, not just because of what the parent flower possessed, but inspite of it, and beyond it's conditions. She continued her trip in wonderland.....in some parts of the world, the flower was used in ceremonial worship, in others it denoted a happy marriage, always a sign of fertility and continuity.

*Isn't this the Die. Before. Your. Husband. variety?*

She stopped walking. How could something so nice make her remember the most horrible? The mind was as helter skelter as the yellow hybrids around her. She shrugged off her head.

The route was strewn with bushes, trees and nests and Jane, ever the green thumb, appreciated the minute fine work done on climbers, and damask roses. It relaxed her. This was a good suggestion, and she made a mental note to thank Lady Cavendish for the idea later.

'Oh, the varieties I had!' she bit her lip with bitterness. Her annuals had won for three straight years, before she missed to make the cut on account of illness, last autumn. She used to spend hours and hours at the glasshouse at Rosewood, preening, pruning, refining. She missed her pots and clay trays, as much as she missed her old self. She missed them as much as she missed her home. It was all for no use. She didn't feel sorry for herself, as much as she felt pathetic at being unable to do anything about it. Well, there was still time, everything in life required patience and sturdiness, just like plants.....She went past a few unoriginal rows of perennials followed by tropicals.

'What in the devil are these doing here? Didn't they work best in dry lands?'

Some slacked in proper care.

‘That should have been thinned, that one could have done with a bit of pinching’, observed a critical Jane, ‘The master is not getting his money’s worth over here’.

Then rows of chestnut and birch trees followed, their color now gaining the thick greenish tint they had lost in autumn, then there were clusters of some very old-looking oak trees had flowered, looking gorgeously abundant, enveloping beds of bleeding hearts and groves of vines. How could something be so treacherous and so pure at the same time? Was there a plant that was not here? She felt happy. She was always able to restore her balance amongst plants. She felt refreshed. She always had a calmer spirit amongst her private audience. Even The Voice went quiet. She felt like humming.....She felt silly just thinking about it.....It made her smile. The path was now thicker and narrower and wild flora lay at it’s border. It required a good strong hand of weeding.

Suddenly, she heard something. Or thought she heard something. Was that a woman’s laugh she had heard? She stopped and looked around. She heard no encore and decided it was nothing. Moving through the embellished bushes and fruit trees, suddenly, Jane noticed a figure far away, that on closer inspection turned out to be two figures, entwined together. It seemed like a struggle at first, and Jane fearing the worst - that the man - for one of the figures was a man - was strangling what looked like a woman. She moved ahead, this time in hurried short steps hoping not to make noise, since she wanted to get a closer look at the proceedings. It was a man alright. Her instincts were never wrong. A dark haired man of moderate height in hunting gear. And it was a woman that he was holding. A blonde fair skinned woman wearing fur stood with her back to a walled cave. The man was holding her ferociously tight. It was a strangle-hold, but not the kind that had brought her to the precipice of the cove. With the woman entwined within his arms, he was busy kissing her. Hard. Or sucking the life out of her, as it appeared to Jane, she could hardly see the lips, it was just the jaws clasped together, going one way and then the other, while the woman’s hands were all over the man’s neck. Jane stared at them foolishly. She did not know how long.

Till she stepped on a twig and broke the performance that had left her spell-bound.

The man looked at her, his dark eyes made her blush, and she resented it since she had done nothing wrong. His face was expressionless, his eyes emptier. His lips were wet and looked burnt with feverish activity. The woman at first looked surprised, then her face showed a few colors, her lips a strong red, and she looked thoroughly peeved at the interruption. The man and the woman made no attempt to move, standing close still, wrapped around each other, their lips spaced within an inch.

“Really!” exclaimed the woman as if it were a question.

Jane did not stay to hear either of them speak further. She apologized hurriedly and left, not stopping till she was safely back in her room. She was embarrassed and she could think of no reason to be embarrassed. She had done nothing wrong. She had not intruded upon a wrong either, by the looks of it, for none of the two showed any sign of fallacy in emotion. But she felt perverted nonetheless. She was aroused, and she did not wish to be aroused.

*It only hurts the first time, that's the sign of true love. Or you wouldn't be flushed so.*

She felt annoyed, and she didn't know why. It was as if she were fourteen again and back at the finishing school amidst girls who used to burst into giggles and squeals at the mere mention of the word 'Boy' or even better 'Man'. None of them knew anything other than the fact that opposite sex was just that - opposite to everything they were. Men were flat chested and had something large underneath - no one knew exactly what - a few girls with younger brothers whom they had held as babies were able to describe in weird words what they thought they saw, others drew what they believed to be true - to sighs and sights of wonderment of the unknown. Described by one as 'an orange chalk', by another as 'exactly what the horses have', and yet another as 'large mangoes', few realized or knew the meaning of what they were saying, fewer still were sure of what they saw, but still managing to wrap everyone in the dormitory of fearful excitement, where no one knew what the men had, but everyone wished to be burnt by it. 'It' was associated with extreme fulfillment. 'It' hurt the first time and for all times to come, if love was true and pure and everlasting; 'It' made a woman complete; 'It' was the way a man showed a woman he loved her; Though at the time most of them didn't know the act that 'it' transpired to led to children. Some were of the view that mere touch in the form of a hug would be sufficient for that. Others were sure it had something to do with a couple being naked, but apart from blushes, extreme shame, and a few murmurs of curiosity, none could decipher what the act itself could be or would be.

They all fantasized what The Man in their life - and yes, they all thought life was meant to be spent with one man and one man alone - what kind of Convent would it be if it weren't! - and yes, there were a few charm-stricken girls who begged to differ though not to the nuns or the teachers, but rather to some of their mates in hushed tones on the side - these girls wanted more from their life before marriage - they wanted fun, they wanted to enjoy being pursued by more than one amours, they wanted to be sent gifts and notes of poetry by men who would die if they did not see the object of their affection, they wanted to be loved, and leave men pining for more, leaving the poor chap in a state where he was always unsure of his status or command over them - these girls, far away from home and

under the watchful eyes of mentors, did their bit of sneaking around for they would have none when they went back home. A further minority who had had a bit of experience with boys, held court every Sunday after prayers, behind the oak tree near the stone fountain - a place far away from the main building, from the prying eyes of the tutors - where they gloated about the 'experience' which had been nothing more than a holding of a hand, a peck on the cheek, and in one case atleast, a manly feel of their drawers and corset underneath. Whether any of it were true, one never knew, and no one really cared, for the stories were good enough to fill the imagination with things to come, envy for the lucky ones that had men falling over each other to get their attention, and an abiding feeling of missing out on something fascinating, a longing for an adventure that would begin only after marriage.

The 'experienced' girls were considered superior amongst the students. They held their own classes on the side for fellow students who wished to be more becoming to the other half, to gain their attention and yes, teach the plump ones to lose weight, the thin ones to be more thinner, the fair-skinned ones to get more fairer, the ones applying rouge in secret to stop doing so and telling those that didn't, to commence with the application pronto, they told the talkative ones to shut up and the meek ones to speak a little, they told the insecure ones to be more insecure and to always be in a state of being in need to succeed with men ('for a young man loves nothing more than a weakling, he wants to be needed'), that the pleasure that a man derived from a girl was more winsome and direly required, for men were the better of the two of them, the wiser and more efficient, the rulers of the house and the kingdom beyond, that their pleasure, what they sought from a girl, what they needed and bestowed ought to be appreciated above everything else. After all, it was only when a man was completely satisfied that he would bestow his money, time and privileges on the girl of his dreams. And yet the paradox was to entrap the man with all kinds of whims, fancies and attitudes - to get his time, to be his one and only.

Jane, who was more of a listener, seemed to agree with everyone during her time in the finishing school - she didn't know any better. Yes, it was a fact that they all thought the tool was a means to an end - a life full of happiness in the arms of the one true love.

It had been a while since she had seen anyone being held so tight as she did that June afternoon. There was no need to analyze the feelings that the people caught in the commission of the amorous act, held for each other, for it was literally written in their hands. She had not seen such brashness, where the parties held their ground, with utter disregard to the sight of onlookers, such nakedness of expression. She had seen it's cheap rip-offs in the shape of unfaithfulness, where the look of the participants always was one

of fear of having been caught, or the expected shame. She had seen it's closeted expression in couples in love who obliged each other's flights of fancy by disappearing on a pathway, or in the coarse exploitation of one servant and another, who hid behind a wall or under a hedge. But never had she seen it manifested as a right - a right of a pair to do as they pleased, how they pleased and where they pleased - where the intimacy was not the means to an end, but an end itself - and that if anyone was going to stumble, to retreat - in a sea of guilt and embarrassment, for herself as well as for them - it had to be her, the intruder, who had dared to drive them apart when they were closest to each other, sharing the most private of conversations that can occur between a pair.

She did not speak of it with anyone and soon recovered her spirits enough to go to the bedroom of the older children, who had their supper by now.