

The
ETRUSCAN



LINDA LAPPIN

"Haunting...vivid...entrancing!" Kirkus



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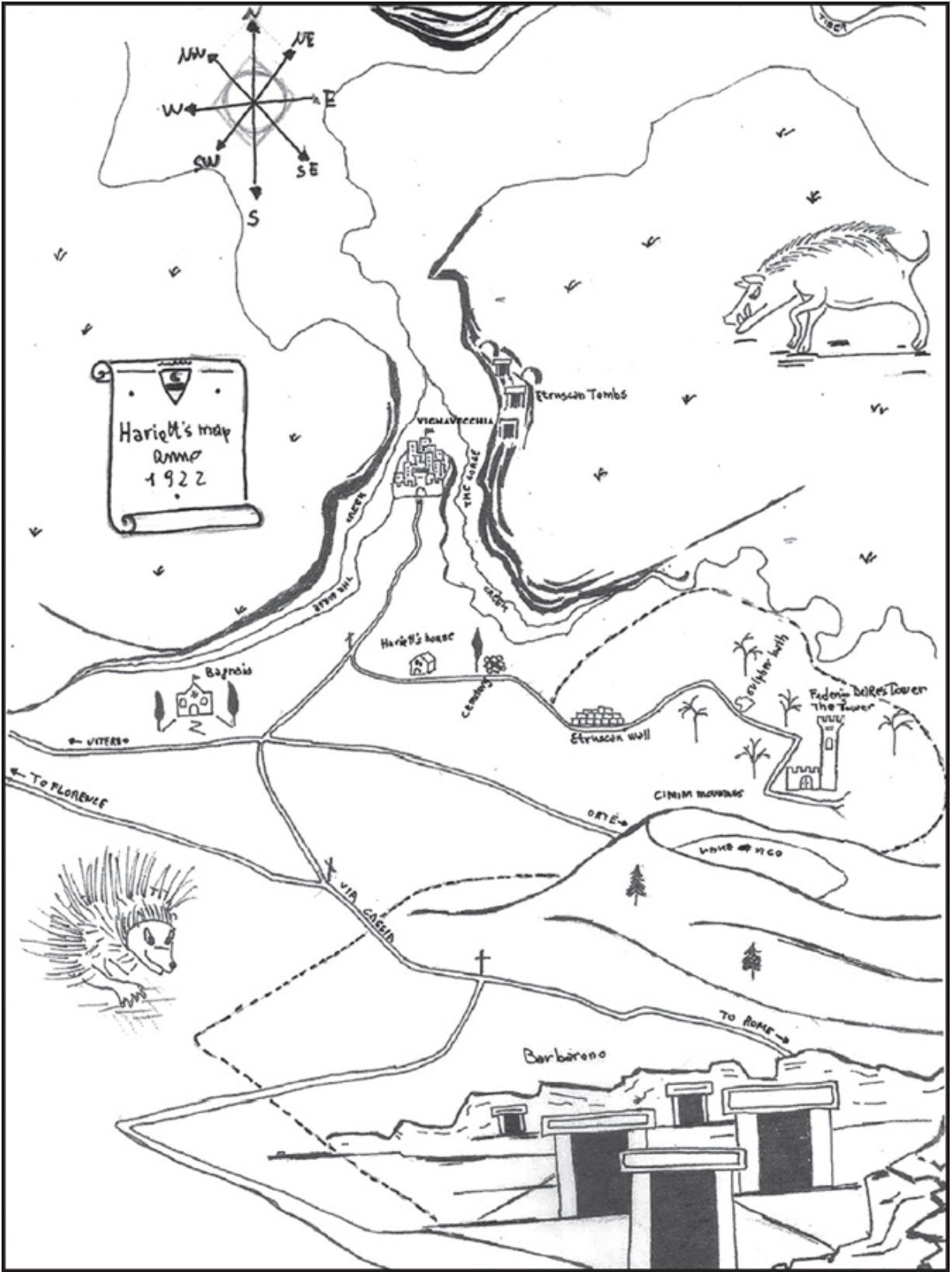
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ONE

Stephen Hampton sat on the sofa of his sitting room, reading a letter, a blanket thrown over his crossed legs. It was a chilly October evening, and he and his wife, Sarah, had just finished their tea. The maroon damask curtains had not yet been drawn, and a deep indigo twilight coated the tall windows as the street lamps flickered on across Russell Square. There was an ordered stillness in the room, as often reigns in childless households; the stillness required by men like Stephen who dedicate their lives to scholarly pursuits, and must not be disturbed by children, women, or servants. In this house where he had lived all his life, the silence sifted down with the dust motes, settling on polished teak and rosewood, burnished brass and bronze. Electric lamps with green shades illumined a space recently cleared of ancestral clutter and refurbished by his American wife in a more modern style, with a handsome new sofa and a clock above the mantelpiece, both made in Berlin. Yet some remnants of empire remained, brought back by Stephen's deceased father, James Hampton, from his journeys to the East. Rich, red Bokhara carpets softened footfalls. Statues of Buddha and Kali peeped out from behind the lush fronds of exotic ferns which flourished miraculously here in Bloomsbury, thanks to the tireless ministrations of Mrs. Parsons, the Hamptons' housekeeper.

Outside, the gates to the garden in the square had clanged shut for the night. The clatter of omnibuses and vans gradually thinned to the tinkling drone of motorcars and taxicabs, vaguely reminding Stephen that they would be staying at home again that evening. Earlier in the afternoon, he had urged his wife to refuse an invitation to the theater that night, and they had quarreled. But Sarah had only just recovered from influenza and he did not want to expose her to the evening damp. Perhaps later, after she went up to her room, he might step out to his club, for a smoke and a game of chess.

The gas fire leapt behind the grate, casting dancing flecks of light across the lenses of his spectacles as he skimmed, lips pursed, through the letter. Stephen was a small but agile man, just short of fifty, sharp-featured with

pinkish cheeks and a mustache so immaculately groomed it looked as though it had been painted on. Behind the steel-rimmed spectacles, his canny grey eyes were bloodshot from eyestrain, for his work as assistant curator of Chinese antiquities at the British Museum overtaxed his vision in his zeal to identify forgeries and frauds.

He turned this same grave scrutiny upon the letter, held by the tips of his fingers with wary precision, the way one might hold the beating wings of a large, menacing insect. The letter was from his cousin Harriet, to his wife, bringing news of her recent journey to Italy. Harriet, always traveling somewhere, kept up an inexhaustible tide of letters with Sarah. They had been bosom friends since their Chicago schooldays, and nothing delighted Sarah more than finding one of Harriet's pale green envelopes decorated with exotic postage stamps, waiting for her on the table in the hall.

It was not his habit to read his wife's correspondence, but Sarah had thrust the letter into his hand the moment they finished their tea. The thing was, they had just spent several months with Harriet as their houseguest, when she had come for his father's funeral and for the reading of the will. He had felt immensely relieved at her departure—he could barely tolerate Harriet's presence in the house. And now with this letter, Harriet was back again, proposing something, stirring Sarah up.

Stephen did not quite approve of Harriet, who had been born in America and who styled herself as an independent lady traveler and photographer. She wandered about the world, carrying a camera and wearing khaki trousers, the latter a habit, thank goodness, Sarah had not adopted. Nor had she followed Harriet out into the streets to parade for women's suffrage, another of the many causes to which Harriet had devoted her energies in the past.

Sarah had, however, imitated his brazen cousin by cutting off her hair in that deplorable new fashion, the bob. Like many American women of good family, Stephen's wife was a piquant mix of the modern and the traditionally feminine. She scorned corsets but swathed herself at bedtime in yards of expensive French lace, rouged her lips, noosed her neck with ropes of pearls, and on occasion, he was convinced, smoked cigarettes, though never in his presence. Smoking was another habit she must have picked up from Harriet, although all the ladies seemed to be doing it these days, ever since the war had ended.

He studied his wife, intent on her embroidery, the picture of feminine patience, dressed in a midnight-blue velvet frock buttoned snugly over her bosom, the gold fringes of a paisley shawl tickling the white neck he loved to kiss. The fitful flame of the gas fire had brought a bluish gleam to her dark hair and a rosy tint to her full face. She was waiting, he knew, almost holding her breath, to hear his reaction to his cousin's letter. Harriet had invited them to join her in Italy for the upcoming holidays.

At present, he gathered, she was somewhere not far from Florence, photographing Etruscan tombs. Her letter clumsily attempted to capture the reader's admiration with its overblown descriptions of abandoned ruins immersed in an ivy jungle. By this trite means, Stephen supposed Harriet hoped to entice them into accepting her invitation. He had little desire to see his cousin again so soon, and it was a journey he did not want his wife to make alone, given her delicate constitution. Still, if Sarah insisted, he knew they would have to go—otherwise she might be foolhardy enough to set out for Italy on her own.

The clock above the mantelpiece struck six and his housekeeper, Mrs. Ethel Parsons, appeared in the sitting room doorway to announce an unexpected visitor. Stephen looked up from his letter, and Sarah paused, needle in mid-air, as George Wimbly bumped into the room. An old family friend, Wimbly was a tall, brawny fellow, balding and angular, with a perpetually rumped but winsome look about him. He was a great favorite of Sarah's, and seeing him, she gave a cry of surprised delight. Stephen too was pleased. Gladly tossing the letter aside, he rose to greet his friend. Wimbly was looking older at fifty-three, a bit yellowish and not quite well.

"I had no idea you were back from India," said Stephen. Aside from a brief exchange of telegrams after his father died, Stephen had had no contact with Wimbly for several months.

"No, Sarah, don't get up," said Wimbly, bending down to kiss the cheek which she turned eagerly to his lips. "Forgive me for barging in like this." He lay his large hairy hand on Stephen's shoulder. "So sad about your father's death. Hope it was a peaceful end."

Stephen averted his face. Though almost seven months had elapsed since his father had passed away that spring, the rankle of grief had not abated. "Thank you," he said hoarsely, his smile tightened to a grimace, "and yes, yes, it was."

“You must have a cup of tea, George,” said Sarah, setting aside her embroidery to rescue her husband from further explanations about his father’s demise.

“Indeed, you must,” said Stephen. His self-control regained, he rang for their housekeeper and upon her appearance barked, “More tea, Mrs. Parsons,” then ordered her to draw the curtains.

“And could you please, Mrs. Parsons,” said Sarah, smoothing over her husband’s curt manner with a gracious smile, “bring us some more of that lovely lemon tart?”

Mrs. Parsons stepped to the window to close the curtains, then took the tea tray away to replenish it, while Stephen returned to his place on the sofa and Wimbly settled himself comfortably in a chair by the window.

“What brings you to London?” asked Sarah.

“Came back a bit earlier than expected. Needed a bit of fresh air.” When in the company of old friends, Wimbly sometimes spoke a telegraphic language, often omitting pronouns and sometimes verbs. He saved all his intellectual energies for his business ventures, at which he was particularly successful. Wimbly was a tea merchant.

“I can’t say London is the right place for that, George, but we are so pleased to see you,” she said.

“Thinking of going to Cornwall, but have some business to tend to.” Wimbly paused and cleared his throat. “Reason why I am here.”

“Oh,” said Sarah, arching an eyebrow and glancing at her husband. She had a hunch why Wimbly had come: to see Harriet. Years ago, before his marriage to Dorothy, the daughter of an Anglo-Indian colonel, he had been Harriet’s most ardent suitor. Dorothy had died three years ago, and he had not remarried. Wimbly must have heard that Harriet had come from America for the reading of her Uncle James’ will. He had probably expected to find her still in London, as her departure for Italy had been rather sudden.

Mrs. Parsons arrived with the tea. Sarah dismissed her with a smile, then rose to pour the tea. Wimbly drank his cup abstractedly, his eyes darting around the Hamptons’ sitting room, which had been redecorated since his last visit. His gaze finally came to rest on a lifesize statue of Buddha, glinting darkly in a corner from behind the thick, trailing fronds of

an Amazonian fern. Wimbly had always found that sculpture rather disturbing, like a silent intruder, eavesdropping on conversations, sizing everyone up. He marveled that Sarah had not convinced her husband to pack it off to some charitable bazaar. Rattling the cup in his saucer as he set it down, he cleared his throat again and shot Stephen a meaningful look. “Hoped to see Harriet here.”

“Harriet is in Italy,” said Stephen, in a neutral, yet potentially ominous tone, his eyes fixed on a spot on the wallpaper, “where she is photographing ancient tombs.”

“Oh?” said Wimbly, with undisguised disappointment. “Didn’t say in her recent letter she was planning a journey to the continent.”

“It was unexpected,” said Stephen.

“I see. Well.” Wimbly lifted his hands in the air and let them fall heavily on the armrests of the chair in a gesture of resigned determination. “Must be going.”

“Don’t be silly, George,” said Sarah, smiling at her old friend’s restlessness. “You have only just arrived. I won’t let you go yet.”

“Was there any particular reason you wished to see my cousin?” asked Stephen.

Wimbly quite openly replied, knowing that Stephen and Sarah were his greatest allies in the project that had brought him to London. “Wanted to propose marriage.”

Stephen sighed. He too had guessed as much. “You have heard, I suppose, of her unhappy liaison with Peter Cranshaw?”

“Gossip travels to the darkest jungles,” Wimbly grumbled.

“I never liked that fellow,” spluttered Stephen, welcoming an opportunity to express feelings long brooded over in silence. “It was obvious he was only interested in her connection with my family. And then when he learned that her inheritance from my father had not been as much as he had hoped . . .”

“Was it not?” Wimbly’s voice held a quaver of concern. Stephen’s father, an art history scholar of international renown, had been inordinately fond of Harriet, and everyone had imagined she would receive a handsome endowment from him when he died.

Stephen nodded. “Yes, but never fear, suitable provisions were made for my cousin. She will be nicely-looked after in all circumstances. My father did see to that, fearing she might end up like her mother.”

“Stephen, please, don’t start in again.” It pained Sarah to hear Stephen deprecate Harriet’s mother, an unfortunate woman who had run off to America with a fellow—against the family wishes—and then had been left destitute at his sudden death. Estranged for many years from the Hamptons and stricken by illness, she had committed suicide shortly after her reconciliation with her brother, Stephen’s father, who had then assumed financial responsibility for Harriet.

Harriet had continued living in Chicago where she had been educated in exclusive schools. Sarah and Harriet had met at boarding school, where they had been inseparable companions throughout their youth, although Sarah was four years younger than Harriet. While traveling together in Europe one summer, she had met Harriet’s cousin, Stephen, and three years later, had married him. In recent years, Harriet spent most of her time abroad, but she always kept in touch with Sarah by letter, and from time to time, she would pass through London to visit them when her itinerary allowed. On her last visit, Stephen had been grievously shocked when his cousin became involved with a younger man, Peter Cranshaw, a hanger-on in literary circles, without a penny to his name.

Sarah now appealed to Wimby. “I don’t believe that Peter was only interested in her money. I think he was truly fond of her. And of course, there was never any talk of an engagement. You know how strongly Harriet feels about women’s independence.”

“Independence!” snorted Stephen. “If it wasn’t for my father’s money, she would be spending her life as an impoverished schoolteacher in some backward American cattle town, rather than gadding about the world. She owes her independence to us. To my family.”

Sarah bristled. “I’ll have you know that Chicago is a thriving metropolis. And it’s her family, too, you know. Do you think that justified your interfering with her happiness?” Addressing Wimby, she continued, “You see, George, Stephen had a little talk with Peter and insisted that it would be to his advantage to leave Harriet alone.” Glaring at Stephen she said, “And he dutifully followed your instructions.”

Wimbly was shocked. “Surely you didn’t offer him money. To stop seeing Harriet?”

“Yes. And he took it. That’s the sort of man he is. Her poet. And now I’ve heard he’s engaged to be married—so he didn’t really care that much for her.”

“But still, why . . .” protested Wimbly.

“I didn’t want people laughing at her, laughing at us, at our family, at me! Friendship between men and women must be conducted with . . . a certain amount of decorum. She was making a fool of herself, with a man like that, fifteen years younger.”

“You are exaggerating the age difference! It wasn’t fifteen but ten. And does age really matter?” Sarah rebutted.

“It matters greatly.”

Stephen’s solemn pronouncements exasperated his wife. “What about the difference in our ages? You’re eight years older than I am!”

“You know it’s not the same thing. It’s fitting and natural when the man is older than the woman.”

“Why?”

“Oh bother! Don’t pretend you don’t understand.”

Embarrassed by their bickering, Wimbly intervened with a cough. “Not surprised that a younger man like Cranshaw succumbed to her charms. Hard-headed, but so very lovely. Still. At thirty-nine.”

“Forty-two!” Stephen snapped, “And old enough to know better.”

“Forty-two?” echoed Wimbly, slightly taken aback. “How the time passes!”

“A shame she didn’t accept your first proposal, years ago,” said Stephen.

“Wouldn’t have me. ‘You need a wife to knit you scarves and tell you which end to eat your egg from. I refuse to do either!’ That’s what she said, when I asked her.”

Sarah laughed out loud and hid her mouth behind the fringe of her shawl.

Stephen scowled at her. “That sounds *exactly* like something Harriet would say.”

“Oh, wasn’t offended. She was right. Always ignored small details like that: how the bacon is cooked or if my socks match.”

“So now you are thinking of remarrying?” asked Sarah.

“Have been a widower sufficiently long enough to consider it. Doubt if Harriet will accept this time around, but I could offer comfort in our mature years. Not the dashing suitor she may still be waiting for.”

Stephen sniffed, rose from the sofa, and approached the gas fire, rubbing his hands to warm them before the tiny blue flames. He stood in silence, contemplating a row of Tibetan lions on the mantelpiece.

Sarah picked up her needlework and smoothed it across her knee. She was embroidering a pillowslip for Harriet, who had copied its geometrical design for her from the floor of a mosque she had visited on one of her trips to Cairo.

“Harriet’s very much the modern woman,” she mused, “I don’t think she would ever marry, unless for love, and perhaps not even for that.” As she forced her needle through the stiff cotton, she abruptly jabbed her thumb. Stifling a cry, she sucked a drop of blood away, unnoticed by the others.

Still standing at the grate, Stephen whirled round with sudden impetus to face Wimbley.

“Your quest is quite hopeless, my friend,” he sneered. “My cousin doubtless intends to elope with an Etruscan.”

Sarah burst out laughing again despite herself, and shook her head.

“Heavens man! Elope with an Etruscan? Aren’t they extinct? Surely you mean an Italian?” asked Wimbley in alarm.

“Come, Stephen,” Sarah coaxed, “I cannot bear to see you in such an ill-humor.” To Wimbley she said, “Take no notice, George. That’s just Stephen’s silly idea of a joke. Harriet’s gone to Italy to photograph Etruscan tombs.”

“Last I heard was studying Sanskrit. That at least put her interests in my quarter of the globe,” muttered Wimbley.

“Well,” said Stephen, “she seems to have given up on Sanskrit, at least for the moment. I believe she will be documenting the current state of

archaeological research on some Etruscan tombs, and compiling a catalogue of artifacts for a society of table-rappers.”

“Harriet’s patron is a distinguished member of the Theosophical Society,” corrected Sarah. She hated the way her husband always belittled Harriet’s projects and friends.

Wimbly sighed. “But a project like that could take years. I may be more decrepit than the ancient mariner by the time she returns.”

“Well, you know Harriet. Once she gets it into her head to do something like this, she throws herself into it, and then drops it the moment she grows tired of it.”

“Her main project is to take pictures of some tombs that have never been photographed before. I think it is fascinating. I admire her greatly, and you should too,” said Sarah.

“Of course I do. And I am fond of her, whatever you may think,” her husband rejoined.

“How did Harriet become interested in the Etruscans?” asked Wimbly.

“She had a vision,” said Stephen with sardonic emphasis, turning to the gas fire to toy with the lions on the mantelpiece.

Frowning, Sarah explained to Wimbly, “Harriet discovered an intriguing Etruscan statue at the Museum, and decided that she would like to know more about the Etruscans.”

“And then,” Stephen broke in, “at a séance, an Etruscan rapped on the table and commanded her to go to Italy. To Viterbo, to be exact.”

“Good God!” cried Wimbly astonished. “Didn’t know Harriet frequented séances. Is she quite well? Perhaps this Cranshaw business rattled her nerves?”

“I assure you that Harriet doesn’t believe in table-rapping. She was just amused by the coincidence, you see,” said Sarah. “She went along to that séance because she was a bit depressed about Peter, and needed some distraction. She met a gentleman there from the Theosophical Society who offered some funds for her research. It’s all very logical, really.”

“I see,” said Wimbly, dubiously. “Viterbo. Isn’t that somewhere near Florence?”

“I found it on the map this afternoon. It seems to be a farming town somewhere between Florence and Rome,” said Sarah. “She’s actually staying in a farmhouse outside a village not far from there. Vignavecchia. The name means Old Vine, but it’s not on my map.”

“Harriet has just invited us to spend the Christmas holidays with her in Italy,” said Stephen, retrieving the letter from the sofa. “Sarah is determined to visit her, and I am afraid she might go off on her own if I don’t come along. You might come with us, George?”

“Harriet might not want me to come.”

“I’m sure Harriet would love to see you,” said Sarah.

“You can always lodge at a pension. We might have to do that ourselves,” said Stephen. “The place she is renting in the countryside sounds a bit primitive. Have a look for yourself,” and he handed Wimbley Harriet’s letter.

“The two of you may indeed lodge at a pension if you wish,” said Sarah, as Wimbley perused the letter, “but I will stay with Harriet. Her descriptions are so charming. ‘A house where time is not,’ she says, full of huge old mirrors and stone masks of Etruscan gods. It sounds like such an adventure, a quaint old farmhouse and those unexplored tombs all carved in a canyon. I am resolved to go even if I must go alone and drive there in a mule cart.”

“Indeed, we may have to do just that,” said Stephen.

Wimbley folded the letter thoughtfully and handed it back to Stephen.

“Well, old man? What do you think?” asked Stephen.

“Curious,” said Wimbley, “curious indeed.”

Sarah could not persuade Wimbley to stay for supper as he felt rather unwell and wanted to retire early. Around seven o’clock, he said goodbye, and let himself out through the gate. A light drizzle had begun to fall. Directing his steps toward Gower Street, he surveyed the high houses along the way, checkered with yellow windows in the gloom. A taxi rattled past and pulled up to the curb a few yards ahead. He watched the passenger alight: a tall woman in a cloak, carrying a bouquet of yellow chrysanthemums, on her way to a party, perhaps. The graceful stride of the hooded figure reminded him of Harriet, although he knew of course it could

not be her—but then she was so unpredictable. Could she have returned from Italy without telling anyone her plans?

He hastened his step behind the woman. Just as she was slipping through a gate into a small garden, she turned to look sharply at him, alarmed, perhaps, by the sound of his advancing footsteps. In the dim light of a lamp hanging by the gate, a haggard, elderly face glared at him from beneath her hood. He halted and made an appropriate grimace of apology as the gate banged shut in his face. The woman scurried up the steps of a dark house and disappeared through the front door. A diamond of yellow light appeared in the window, casting a bright lozenge upon the steps, then flickered out again.

This is what I have been reduced to, he thought, buttoning the top button of his trench coat against the London chill: frightening old ladies on deserted streets. He glanced up at the sky. The drizzle had momentarily abated. He took out his pipe, paused beneath a streetlamp to light it, then continued on his way, sidestepping puddles on the pavement.

Such a long way to have come for nothing! Not that he had dared hope to convince Harriet to return to India with him. He had armed himself ahead of time against disappointment. Reaching into his pocket, he touched the leather pouch containing the lapis lazuli necklace he had brought her as a gift and brooded a moment on the uniqueness of his feelings for Harriet. He had never met anyone like her. Harriet was all of one piece, simply herself. Why was that so appealing in a woman? Stephen couldn't understand it, he supposed. Stephen liked his women plump and rosy and submissive.

Wimply first met Harriet over twenty years ago when she had come, accompanied by Sarah, to spend a summer with the Hamptons. Her wildness, her strong-boned frame, her sinewy limbs, had excited him as no woman had ever done before. He had indulged in sexual fantasies of Harriet riding him in the tall grass, her face hidden behind a mass of tangled blonde hair. For an entire summer he pursued her, but she would never have him. He was too tame.

He had gone out to India then, partly to show Harriet he was not afraid of the adventurous life. What it had cost him, at first! He had ridden elephants, shot at tigers; he had even taken a servant girl with a silver ring in her navel, not quite by force, no—she had been willing enough. But Harriet had not been impressed with his exploits. In the end, he married

Dorothy and produced two strapping sons, both of whom followed in the footsteps of their maternal grandfather in choosing a military career. With one son stationed in Burma and the other in South Africa, Wimbley rarely saw either of them. He was a free man, so to speak, and financially in excellent stead, for over the years, he had doubled the family fortune in the tea trade. But Harriet did not care about money.

Harriet was one of those people who believe there is a secret to life, a secret that perpetually eludes them. This, he supposed, was the key to her restlessness, her travels to remote places, her obsession for photographing temples or tombs. Her poetic description of her Italian sojourn was characteristic: lonely canyons carved with ruins, a house full of mysterious mirrors, '*where time is not.*' He too had once stood in awe before the great bronze Buddhas ablaze in the glow of a thousand butter lamps, wondering if there was a secret he had missed, buried deep in some cellar or locked away in a moldy chest on a mountaintop. But life had taught him that most secrets are sordid, or at least, not really worth knowing and that the answers to existential questions are to be sought in the practical details and duties of daily life.

When Dorothy was dying, he kept asking himself what the sense of all that suffering was. Then after she had gone, he had felt her near him, at first, as a sort of presence, but that sensation, so strong, so unbearably poignant, had faded within weeks. Now instead there was just the blank space of her absence, filled with the empty sleeves of the fine silk dresses she had become too portly to wear in later years, packed into wardrobes he dared not open again—an absence filled with the dusty china cups in the cupboard alongside the hideous Japanese dolls she had adored, and a silence that boomed in his ears when from some obscene error he called her name aloud. Harriet with her bold movements and loud laughter might have changed all that somehow, or so he had hoped.

He would go with Stephen and Sarah to Italy at Christmas, as he had some business to tend to in the south of Italy in the New Year. January might be a suitable season for a southern journey, after the holidays. Perhaps Harriet might accompany him to the land where the lemon trees grow. In such a romantic setting, she might find his arguments more appealing.

Coming out onto Tottenham Court Road, he hailed a taxi and was soon delivered to his rooms in Pond Street. Before falling asleep that night, he remembered Sarah's mention of the Etruscan statue, and resolved next day to visit the British Museum and acquaint himself with Etruscan funerary art.

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