

THE SPIDER GLASS

An Edwardian Story

By

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro

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It's only fitting, I think, that we end this volume with one of the series' most favorite contributors. Chelsea Quinn Yarbro was one of the first women to establish what should have been known by editors and publishers all along—that women can write “this stuff” just as well as men. Sadly, she and the other women in the field still have to prove it, it seems. That is, not to put too fine a point on it, dumb. A writer is a writer is a writer, by God, and what the hell does sex have to do with the price of apples? Nevertheless, she perseveres. She grows. She gives us some of the best writing the field has ever seen. And when Shadows finally, inevitably comes to an end, I can only hope that it will end with something she has written.

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“THERE IS A curious tale behind this mirror, actually. I'm pleased you noticed it,” their host said to the select and exclusively masculine company that had gathered in the Oak Parlor at Briarcopse after dinner. He reached for the port and rather grandly offered it around. “Surely you'll have some. It was laid down the year I was born—splendid stuff. My father was quite the expert in these matters, I assure you.”

Five of his guests accepted with alacrity; the sixth declined with a polite, Continental bow, and the Earl put the decanter back onto the silver tray set out on the gleaming mahogany table. “Don't stand on ceremony, any of you,” he said with a negligent wave of his long, thin hand. He then settled back in his chair, a high-backed, scallop-topped relic of the reign of Queen Anne, and propped his heels on the heavy Tudor settle before the fire. Slowly he lit his cigar, savoring the aroma and the anticipation of his guests.

“For the lord Harry, Whittenfield...” the rotund gentleman with the brindled mutton-chop whiskers protested, though his indignation was marred by an indulgent smirk.

Their host, Charles Whittenfield, ninth Earl of Copsehowe, blew out a cloud of fragrant, rum-scented tobacco smoke and stared at the small, dull mirror in its frame of tooled Baroque silver. “It is a curious tale,” he said again, as much to himself as any of the company. Then, recalling his guests, he directed his gaze at his wiry, middle-aged cousin who was in the act of warming his brandy over one of the candles. “Dominick, you remember my mother's Aunt Serena, don't you?”

“I remember all the women on that side of the family,” Dominick said promptly. “The most amazing passel of females. My mother refuses to mention half of them—she feels they aren't respectable. Well, of course they're not. Respectable Women are boring.”

“Yes, I'm always amazed by them. And why they all chose to marry such sticks-in-the-mud as they did, I will never understand. Still, they make the family lively, which is more than I can say for the males—not a privateer or adventurer among them. Nothing but solid, land-loving, rich, placid countrymen, with a yen for wild girls.” He sighed. “Anyway, Dominick, Great-aunt Serena—”

Dominick nodded with vigorous distaste that concealed a curious pride. “Most misnamed female I ever

encountered. That whole side of the family, as Charles says—they marry the most unlikely women. Serena came from Huguenot stock, back in the middle of the seventeenth century, I think.” He added this last as if the Huguenot influence explained matters.

“Ah, yes, Great-aunt Serena was quite a handful.” The host laughed quietly. “The last time I saw her—it was years ago, of course—she was careering about the Cotswolds on both sides of her horse. The whole countryside was scandalized. They barred her from the Hunt, naturally, which amused her a great deal. She could outride most of them, anyway, and said that the sport was becoming tame.”

“Whittenfield...” the rotund man said warningly.

“Oh, yes, about the glass.” He sipped his port thoughtfully. “The glass comes from Serena’s family, the English side. It’s an heirloom, of course. They say that the Huguenot who married into the family took the woman because no one else would have her. Scandal again.” He paused to take wine, and drained his glass before continuing. “The mirror is said to be Venetian, about three hundred and forty or fifty years old. The frame was added later, and when Marsden appraised it he said he believed it to be Austrian work.”

“Hungarian, actually,” murmured the sixth guest, though no one heard him speak.

“Yes... well.” Whittenfield judiciously filled his glass once more. “Really wonderful,” he breathed as he savored the port.

“Charles, you should have been an actor—you’re wasted on the peerage,” Dominick said as he took a seat near the fire.

“Oh, very well, I’ll get on with it,” Whittenfield said, capitulating. “I’ve told you the glass is Venetian and something over three hundred years old. The latest date Marsden ventured was

1570, but that, as I say, is problematical. In any case, you may be certain that it was around in 1610, which is the critical year so far as the story is concerned. Yes, 1610.” He sank back in his chair, braced his heels once more on the Tudor settle, and began, at last, in earnest.

“Doubtless you’re aware that Europe was a great deal more chaotic then than it is now—”

“That’s not saying much,” the rotund man interjected.

“Twilford, for God’s sake, don’t give him an excuse to digress again,” Dominick whispered furiously.

“As I was saying,” Charles went on, “Europe was doing very badly in 1610. That was the year Henri the Fourth of France was assassinated and his nine-year-old son succeeded him, and you know how Louis the Thirteenth turned out! James was making an ass of himself by prolonging Parliament and by locking up Arabella Stuart for marrying William Seymour. One of the tsars was deposed, but I can never keep them straight, and I believe a Prussian prince was offered the job—”

“Polish,” the sixth guest corrected him politely. “Vasili Shuisky was deposed in favor of Vladislav, Sigismund III’s son.”

“Very likely,” Whittenfield agreed. “Spain and Holland were having a not-very-successful go at a truce. The German Protestant states were being harried by their neighbors... That will give you some idea. Well, it happened that my Great-aunt Serena’s nine times great-grandmother was living—”

“Charles,” Twilford protested, “you can’t be serious. Nine times great-grandmother!”

“Of course I am,” Whittenfield said, astounded at being questioned. “Serena was born in 1817. Her mother, Eugenia, was born in 1792. *Her* mother, Sophia, was born in 1774. Sophia’s mother, Elizabeth, was born in 1742. Her mother, Cassandra, was born in 1726. Cassandra’s mother was Amelia Joanna, and she was born in 1704 or 05; there’s some doubt about the actual date. There was flooding and fever that winter and they were not very careful about recording births. Amelia Joanna’s mother, Margaret, was born in 1688. *Her* mother, Sophronia, was born in 1664—”

“Just in time for the Plague and the Fire,” Dominick put in.

“Yes, and only three of the family survived it: Sophronia, her mother, Hannah, and one son, William. Terrible names they gave females in those days. Anyway, William had four wives and eighteen children in his lifetime and Sophronia had six children and even Hannah remarried and had three more. Hannah’s mother was Lucretia and she was born in 1629. Her mother, Cesily, was born in 1607, and it was *her* mother, Sabrina, that the story concerns. So you see, nine times great-grandmother of my Great-aunt Sabrina.” He gave a grin that managed to be smug and sheepish at once. “That Lucretia, now, she was a sad one— married off at thirteen to an old reprobate in his fifties who kept two mistresses in separate wings at his principal seat as well as having who knows how many doxies over the years. Lucretia turned nasty in her later life, they say, and there was an investigation over the death of her tirewoman, who apparently was beaten to death under mysterious circumstances. The judge in the case was Sir Egmont Hardie, and he—”

“*Charles!*” ‘ thundered his cousin.

Whittenfield coughed and turned his eyes toward the ceiling. “About Sabrina. Let me see. She was twenty in 1610, married to Captain Sir James Grossiter. Cesily was three and her boy, Herbert, was one. It is a little hard to tell about these things after so long, but apparently certain difficulties had arisen between Sabrina and her husband. Sir James had quarreled with his father when he got into trouble with his commanding general, and ran off to the Continent, which was a damned silly thing to do, considering the times. He tried a little soldiering, which was the only thing he knew, and then got caught for some petty offense and was flung into gaol, leaving his wife with two children to feed and no one to help her, and in a foreign country, to boot.”

“Well, she’s not the first woman to earn her bread on her back, but I shouldn’t think you’d bring it up...” one of the guests was heard to remark.

Whittenfield shook his head. “Most men prefer whores who can speak to them, which Sabrina could not. And her children were inconvenient for such a profession. She knew some French and had been taught a few Italian songs as a child, but for the most part she was as good as mute.” He drained his glass again. “She was greatly distraught, as you might suspect, and did not know which way to turn.”

“That’s a female for you,” the same guest said, and the sixth guest turned to him.

“What makes you believe that a man, in those circumstances, would fare any better?” The sixth guest clearly did not expect an answer, and the man who had spoken glared at him.

Charles went on as if he had not heard. “She sold all that she and Sir James possessed, which was not much, and then she began to sell their clothes, so that they had only what they wore on their backs, and that quickly became rags. However, she was able to afford a few bits of food and to hire mean lodgings in a back street of Antwerp. By doing scullery work at a nearby inn she got scraps to eat and enough to buy cabbages to boil for her babes. But it was inevitable that there would come a time when she would not have enough money even for those inadequate things, and her children would have no shelter or food.”

“What on earth has that to do with the glass?” Twilford asked, blustering to conceal his perplexity.

“I’m coming to that,” Charles Whittenfield said with a great show of patience. “If you’ll let me do it in my own way.”

“Well, I don’t see how we can stop you,” muttered a younger man sitting in the corner, hunched over his pipe.

“Everard, please,” Dominick put in imperiously.

The older man beside him gave Dominick a contemptuous glare. “No manners these days. None at all.”

“Pray go on,” said the sixth guest in slightly accented English. It might have been because he was the only man not drinking that his clothes were the neatest and most elegant of any man’s in the room.

“I intend to,” Whittenfield said to his guests. “As I’ve intimated, my many-times-great Aunt Sabrina was stranded in Antwerp because Sir James was in prison and she was destitute. She had been cast out by her family when she had elected to follow her husband to the Continent, so she could not turn to them for relief, not that she was the sort who would have, in any case. Of course, Sir James’s family had washed their hands of him some years before and would have nothing to do with him or any of his. Sabrina could play the virginal and had a fair knowledge of botany, as many well-bred women did in those days, but those were the limits of her skills. Yet she must have had courage for all of that, because she did not despair, or if she did, she conquered it. She was determined to keep her children with her, as the alternative was giving them to the care of nuns, and being a good English churchwoman, she could not bear to surrender her unprotected babes to Roman Catholics.” He recrossed his legs. “My Uncle George married a Roman Catholic, you know. There was the most frightful uproar and dire predictions, but Clara has shown herself to be a most reasonable woman and a truly excellent wife. No trouble there, I assure you. So all those warnings came to naught.”

“The glass, Charles, the glass,” Twilford insisted.

“I’m coming to that,” the young peer protested with mock dismay. “You’ve no patience—positively, you haven’t a jot.” He held out his glass for refilling as Everard helped himself to the port. “So,” he resumed after an appreciative moment, “I trust I’ve made her predicament clear to you. Her husband was in prison, she had no one to turn to, her children as well as herself were in real danger of starvation, she was living in the poorest part of the city in a low-ceilinged garret in a house that should have been pulled down before the Plantagenets fell. There was no reason for her to hope for anything but an early grave in Potter’s Field.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Dominick interrupted. “Very touching plight. But as her daughter had a daughter, we must assume that all was not lost, at least not then.” He splashed a bit more port into his glass and lit another cigar.

“Well, Charles, what happened?” Everard demanded. “Did she catch the eye of an Earl traveling for pleasure, or did some other person come to her aid?”

“Not quite that,” Whittenfield conceded. “Not a traveling Earl in any case, but a traveling Count.”

“Same thing,” Dominick scoffed.

“He was, as you perceive from the title, a foreigner,” Charles persisted. “He had arrived in Antwerp from Ghent some time before and had purchased one of the buildings not far from where Sabrina lived in terrible squalor.”

“And he gave her the mirror for primping,” Everard finished. “There’s nothing very mysterious about that.”

“Now, that’s the odd part of it,” Whittenfield said, leaning forward as he spoke. “He gave her the glass, but not the frame; that she bought for herself.” He did not wait for his listeners to exclaim at this, but went on at once. “But that comes later in the story. Let me tell it as it must be told.” He puffed his cigar once and set it aside again. “She became acquainted with this foreigner through an act of theft.”

“What could anyone steal from her?” Twilford asked of the air.

“You don’t understand—it was Sabrina who was the thief.”

The reaction ranged from guffaws to shock; the sixth guest gave a small, wry smile and said nothing.

“Yes, she had decided to steal money so that she and her children could eat that night. You must understand that she had not stolen before and she knew that the penalties for it were quite harsh, but she had come to believe that she had no other choice. It was late in the afternoon when she saw this foreigner come to his house, and she determined to wait for him and accost him as he came out. She thought that since the man was not a native of the place, he might be reluctant to complain to the authorities, and of course, since he was foreign, he was regarded with a degree of dislike throughout the neighborhood.”

Everard shook his head. “Sounds like a rackety thing to do.”

“It was better than starving,” said the sixth guest.

The other man with the pipe coughed and made a gruff protest. “But what is the point of all this, Whittenfield? Get on with it, man.”

“Lord Graveston, you are trying to rush me,” Whittenfield said with the slightest hint of a slur in his pronunciation. “That won’t do. You’ll have to listen, the same as the rest.”

“Then stop this infernal dallying about,” Lord Graveston said with considerable asperity. “At this rate, it will be time for breakfast before you’re half done with your story, and we’ll never know what the point of it is.”

Whittenfield shrugged. “I don’t see the virtue in haste when one is recounting the travail of a family member, but if you insist, then I will do my humble best. . .”

“For all the saints in hell, Charles!” Dominick expostulated.

“Very well,” Whittenfield sighed lavishly. “Since you insist. As I told you, Sabrina conspired to set upon this foreigner and rob him so that she would have money for food and lodging for herself and her children. She went down the street at night, filled with terror but determined now on her course. There were beggars sleeping in doorways, and a few poxy whores plied their trade in this quarter, but most of the denizens of the night left her alone. She was an Englishwoman, don’t you see, and isolated from them. It was a cold, raw night and her shawl did not keep her warm. Think of her predicament, gentlemen—is it surprising that she nearly turned back half a dozen times?”

“What’s surprising is that she attempted it at all,” Dominick said quietly. “Not that I approve of thieving, but in this case. . .”

“Precisely my point,” Whittenfield burst out, the contents of his glass sloshing dangerously. “Most women would have not been able to do a damned thing, at least not any of the women I know. Sabrina, though, was most. . . unfeminine.”

“Hardly that,” murmured the sixth guest.

“She reached the house of the foreigner and slipped into the doorway of the shuttered baker’s shop across the street, and set herself to wait for her prey to appear.”

“How do you know that?” one of the guests interrupted. “How do you know that her shawl wasn’t warm, or that there was a baker’s shop where she could wait for the man?”

“I know,” Whittenfield said with a faintly superior air, “because she kept a diary, and I’ve read it. She devoted a great many pages to this unfortunate time in her life. Her description of the rooms where she lived with her children almost make me itch, so deeply does she dwell on the filth and the vermin that lived there.” He shuddered as proof of his revulsion.

“Well, you’ve got to expect that poor housing isn’t going to be pleasant,” Twilford observed, appealing to the others with a wave of his hand. “Some of the tenant farmers I’ve visited—appalling, that’s what it is.”

“Now who’s digressing?” Whittenfield asked.

“Charles is right,” Dominick admitted. “Let it keep, Twilford.”

“Well, I only wanted to let you know that I had some comprehension of what—” Twilford began but was cut off.

“**We can** all agree that we’re shocked by the reduced circumstances of your whatever-many-times-great-aunt,” Lord Graveston said portentously. “Get on with it.”

Whittenfield glared around the room to be certain that all his guests had given him their attention. All but one had. His sixth guest was staring at the spider glass with a bemused smile on his attractive, foreign face. Whittenfield cleared his throat and was rewarded by the sixth guest’s reluctant attention.

“Pray forgive me,” he said politely. “That glass...”

“Precisely,” Whittenfield said. “That is why it has remained intact for so long, I am convinced. In any case, I was telling you about how Sabrina Grossiter came to try to rob this foreigner in Antwerp. She took up her post outside the baker’s shop, hidden in the shadows, and waited for many long hours. She had thought that the foreigner used the house for romantic assignations, but that did not seem to be the case, for no woman came to the house, or man either, for that matter. Well after midnight a middle-aged man in servant’s livery left the building, but the foreigner remained. It was cold, very cold, and Sabrina’s hands and feet were numb by the time she saw the lights in the upper windows go out. She hoped that the foreigner was going to leave so that she could at last try to take his purse. There was no one else on the street; even the beggars had found whatever shelter they could.”

“Sounds a foolish thing to do, wait up half the night for a man to walk out of his house. Not very sensible of her.” Twilford looked to the others to support him.

“All the women in our family are like that,” Dominick said, at once proud and disgusted.

“She was desperate,” the sixth guest said.

“In her journal,” Whittenfield went on more sharply, “she remarks that it must have been an hour until dawn when the man came out. She did not remark him at first, because he was dressed all in black, and at night, in the shadow of the buildings, he was little more than another shadow.”

“He was a knowing one,” Lord Graveston said to the air. “Should stay away from such men, if I were her.”

“But she didn’t,” Whittenfield put in, downing the last of his wine before going on. “She couldn’t, you see. She says herself that hunger and worry had driven her slightly mad. She believed that there was no other course, but when she saw the man start away from the building, she all but failed. It was only the click of his heels on the pavement that alerted her to his departure. It may be that she dozed, though her journal insists that she did not. However it was, she did not have quite the element of surprise she wished for and took after him, stumbling in the dark so that the foreigner turned and reached out a hand to her to keep her from falling.”

“Did she abandon the idea of robbing him then?” Lord Graveston asked as he filled his pipe a second time.

“No,” Whittenfield said with half a smile. “She thought this might be to her advantage, so she leaned up against the man and reached out for his belt. You know how they wore them then, over the padded doublet and a trifle below the waist in front? She thought she might be able to release the buckle and pull the whole belt away. Most men carried their purses on their belts in those times, and if she got the belt she would also have the purse.”

“A clever woman,” said Peter Hamworthy, who had been listening in silence. “Surprising she had so much gumption.”

Whittenfield glanced over at the speaker. “Gracious, Peter, I thought you were asleep,” he said with sarcastic sweetness.

“Not quite, merely dozing a bit,” Hamworthy responded affably. “I’m finding your tale, though circuitous, interesting.”

“You relieve me,” Whittenfield said, then went on. “I’ve told you that it was a cold night, a very cold night, and that Sabrina’s hands and feet were chilled. This probably accounted, at least in part, for her ineptness. She had not stolen before, and with her hands nearly blue with cold she had little control of her fingers, which fumbled on the buckle. The foreigner seized her hands in his and held her securely.”

“And then he called the Watch, and she was taken along to join her husband in gaol. And that still doesn’t explain about the glass,” Twilford said, exasperated.

“But he didn’t summon the Watch,” Whittenfield said slyly. “He held her hands and stared hard at her. And though it was deepest night, Sabrina said in her journal that she had the uneasy feeling that he could see her plainly. He demanded to know what she was about, in Dutch, of course.”

“Of course,” Dominick said as he refilled his glass and poured more port for his cousin.

“She does mention that he had an accent she could not place, but that is to be expected, since she had no more than a few words of the language herself. She tried to explain that she had only fallen, but he did not believe her. He also realized that her native tongue was not Dutch, for he addressed her in French and German and then English, of which, Sabrina insists, he had fluent command.” Whittenfield drank half of his port with the air of a man making a sacrifice.

“Go on, Charles!” Twilford bellowed.

“In good time; I must not abuse this wine.” He drank again, less deeply, and set the glass down on the rolled arm of his chair where it balanced precariously. “So this foreigner discovered that she was English

and upon learning that, asked to be told how she came to be in a back street in Antwerp. At first Sabrina refused to answer him, saying that it was her concern. He protested that since she had attempted to rob him, he was entitled to some explanation before he called in the authorities. It was that threat that caused her to tell him what had befallen her. At least that is what her journal says on the next day, though there are later entries that hint at other factors.”

“What other factors?” Hamworthy spoke up. “Don’t be mysterious, Charles. What factors are you talking about?”

Whittenfield lifted his wine and stared into its garnet-colored depths. His expression was slightly bemused. “Other factors... well, it’s hard to know how much to believe, but this man was not what Sabrina had expected. She remarks, several days later, upon his kindness, which she first perceived that night. Apparently she held nothing back, and out of caprice or compassion he made a bargain with her.”

“I can imagine the bargain,” Twilford said, his tremendous side-whiskers bristling like the jowls of a tomcat.

“No, you can’t,” Whittenfield corrected him mildly. “You know what most women, and men, too, for that matter, would expect at such times. Yet that was not Sabrina’s experience. She says in her journal that she wondered at first if he was one of those whose love is inverted, but it turned out otherwise. She made a bargain with this foreigner, as I say. She agreed to live in the house he had bought, to keep it for him. He did not object to her children and gave her permission to care for them as she felt best. He did not require them to serve him—”

“Well, they were what, one and three? Hardly old enough to wait upon anyone, foreigner or not,” Dominick pointed out.

“There was the matter of bonds,” the sixth guest said quietly.

“Precisely,” Whittenfield agreed. “And this foreigner did not require that Cesily and Herbert be bonded to him, which was something of a wonder in those times. Sabrina mentions in her journal that her employer’s manservant told her that he had been a bondsman, and when his master found him he refused to continue the bond.”

“One of those damned humanitarian sorts.” Lord Graves-ton sighed portentously. “The world’s full of ‘em.”

“Doubtless an opinion shared by the children of White-chapel,” the sixth guest commented without smiling.

“Terrible state of affairs, those slums,” Dominick said indignantly. “Had to drive through there once; there’d been an accident and it was the only way round. There was the most appalling stench, and the buildings looked to be held together by filth alone. The people—a complete want of conduct.” Two of the other men nodded their understanding and disapproval. “One drab tried to climb into my carriage, and those who saw her make the attempt made such rude and licentious comments... The children were as bad as their seniors.”

“This is hardly appropriate after-dinner conversation,” Hamworthy opined.

“Very true,” Whittenfield said smoothly. “My great-aunt’s adventures with a foreigner are much more suitable.” He drank down the last of his port and let the glass tip in his fingers. “Unless, of course, you’re not interested in what became of her...”

“Oh, get on with it,” Dominick said, nudging Everard with his elbow so that he would add his support.

Obediently Everard spoke up. “Yes, by all means, Charles, let’s have the rest of the story.”

“I still don’t see how that bedeviled glass comes into it,” Twilford muttered, dropping his chin forward.

“It *is* bedeviled, if Sabrina is to be believed,” Charles said rather dreamily. “How aptly you put it, Twilford.”

Lord Graveston coughed twice in an awesome way.

“Yes. Of course.” Charles leaned forward in his chair and filled his glass. “I’ll probably regret it in the morning, but for the present, this is precisely what’s wanted.” After he had settled back again and once more propped his heels on the settle, he resumed his story. “Well, as I said, Sabrina agreed to be the housekeeper to this foreigner in exchange for shelter and meals for herself and her children. She was most uneasy about the arrangement at first, because there was no saying that her benefactor might not suddenly decide to change the nature of their arrangements and make demands of her or her children. She was also very much aware that he could dismiss her at any time and she would be in the same sorry state that she was when he made his agreement with her. Yet she had no other choice. She could not return to England, she had no one she knew who would protect her in Antwerp, or indeed any European country and there seemed to be no other way to get money. The foreigner settled a small amount of money on her to enable her to buy cloth from the mercer so that she could dress herself and her children.”

“Sounds like one of those missionary types,” Twilford growled. “They’re always doing that kind of thing.”

“There were, naturally, certain restrictions to her duties,” Whittenfield continued, “and they caused her some alarm. There were rooms of the house where she was not allowed to venture, and which were locked day and night. The foreigner often received heavily wrapped parcels from many strange lands. Gradually, Sabrina began to fear that the Count was engaged in nefarious or criminal activities. And she became convinced of it some seven months after she entered his employ. There are three entries in her journal that are at once baffling and thought-provoking. She mentions first that the Count did not often go abroad in the day. At first this disturbed her, but she saw him more than once in sunlight and noted that he did cast a shadow, and so her fear that she had fallen into the hands of a malignant spirit was lessened. Oh, you may all laugh if you choose,” he said in a wounded tone. “In those times there were many with such fears. It was a superstitious age.”

“And this one, of course, is not,” the sixth guest said, his fine brows raising in courteous disbelief.

“Oh, those uneducated and unintelligent masses, **I** daresay, are still in the throes of various dreads, but for those of **us** who have the wit to learn, well, most of us cast off the shackles of superstition before we were out of lead strings.” **H**e took a

meditative sip of his port. “Still, I suppose we can understand a little how it was that Sabrina felt the dread she did.”

“Well, women, you know...” Hamworthy said with an indulgent smile. “Wonderful creatures, all of them, but you know what their minds are. Not one in a thousand can think, and the ones who can are always distressingly masculine. That Frenchwoman, the writer with the English name... Sand, isn’t it? That’s a case in point.”

“My Great-aunt Serena was another,” Whittenfield said, frowning a trifle. “Wasn’t a man in the county

cared to trade words with her. They respected her, of course, but you couldn't say that they liked her. Nonetheless, most of us loved her when we were children."

"Will you get back to Sabrina?" Dominick asked plaintively.

"Oh, Sabrina; yes. Told you, didn't I, that she was afraid of malign spirits? Of course. And she made up her mind that it was not the case. She thought for a while that her employer must have a mistress somewhere because of the strange hours he kept and the absolute privacy he maintained. There was always the chance that he was working for the Spanish or the French, but she found no evidence of it, and after the first few months she was looking for it. She feared that if the man was working for another government and was discovered, she would suffer as well, and after enduring so much she did not wish to expose herself to such a hazard. She came to believe that the Count was not, in fact, an agent of any of the enemies of the state. And that intrigued her even more, for there did not seem to be any reasonable explanation for his behavior, if he was not keeping a mistress or doing some other questionable thing. So she set herself the task of finding out more about her employer and his locked rooms."

"Very enterprising," Hamworthy interrupted. "Dangerous, too. I wouldn't like my housekeeper prying into my activities."

"Sabrina also had to deal with the manservant, who was as private and aloof as his master and whom she suspected of watching her. She describes him as being of middle age or a trifle older, lean, sandy-haired and blue-eyed, and yet she did not think that he was from northern Europe as such characteristics might indicate. Once she heard the manservant in conversation with the Count and she thought that they spoke in Latin, though she had not heard the language much. Their accents, if it was indeed that tongue, were strange to her, quite unlike what little scholarly intercourse she had overheard in the past, and not at all like the doggerel of the Roman Church. Yet there were a few words that made her think it was Latin, and for that reason she was more curious than ever. So she set upon a series of vigils, and after many months her patience was rewarded to a degree."

"To a degree," Lord Graveston repeated derisively. "Speak plainly for once in your life, Charles."

"Of course. I am speaking plainly. This story is not easily told, and the wine is playing great hob with my thoughts. You must make allowances for the excellence of my port, Graves-ton."

"I'll make allowances for anything that gets on with the tale!" was the acerbic answer.

"I'm doing my poor best," Whittenfield said in a slightly truculent manner. "I'm not certain you appreciate the intricacies of Sabrina's life."

"Of course I do. She was serving as housekeeper to a mighty private foreigner in Antwerp and her circumstances were badly reduced. There's nothing incomprehensible in that." Lord Graveston emptied out his pipe and gave Whittenfield a challenging glare through the tufts of his eyebrows.

"And that is not the least of it," Whittenfield insisted.

"Probably not, but you have yet to tell us that part," Dominick put in.

"Which I will do if only you will give me the chance," Whittenfield remonstrated. "Each of you, it seems, would rather discuss your own adventures. If that's your desire, so be it."

"Oh, Charles, you're being temperamental." Everard had dared to speak again, but he laughed a little so that his host would not think he had been reprimanded.

Whittenfield stared up at the ceiling in sublime abstraction, his eyes faintly glazed. "You know, when I

first read her journal, I thought that Sabrina was indulging in fancy, but I have read a few things since then that lead me to believe she was telling the wholly accurate truth about her experiences. That disturbs me, you know. It means that a great many things I used to regard as nonsense may not be, after all.”

“What are you talking about, Charles?” Dominick demanded. He had selected another cigar and paused to light it.

“You haven’t read the journal, have you?” He did not bother to look at his cousin. “Naturally not. But I have, several times now, and it is a most—unnerving document.”

“So you persist in telling us,” Hamworthy sighed. “Yet you have not particularly justified your claim.”

“How little faith you have, Peter,” Whittenfield said with an assumption of piety. “If you would bear with me, you will find out why I have said what I have about Sabrina and that glass. I wasn’t the one who brought the subject up; I have merely offered to enlighten you.” He drank again, licking away the crescent it left on his upper lip.

“Then be kind enough to tell us the rest,” said the sixth guest.

With this clear invitation before him, Whittenfield hesitated. “I don’t know what you will make of it. I haven’t sorted it out myself yet, not since I realized she was telling the truth.” He smiled uncertainly. “Well, I’ll leave it up to you. That’s probably best.” He took another nervous sip of wine. “She—that is, Sabrina, of course—she continued to watch the Count. She was up many nights, so that it was all she could do to work the next day. During that time she took great care to do her work well. And she made herself as useful as possible to the manservant so that she might stay in his good graces. In her journal she related that he never behaved in any but the most polite way, and yet she felt the same sort of awe for the servant that she did for the master. And she feared to face him directly, except when absolutely necessary. When she had been the Count’s housekeeper for a few months, she had enough coins laid aside to enable her to purchase a crucifix—she had sold her old one the year before—and she mentions that the Count commented on it when he saw it, saying that it was merely gold plate. She indignantly reminded him that it was the best she could afford, and that the gold was not important, the faith it represented was. The Count acknowledged her correction, and nothing more was said. Then, two weeks after that, he presented her with a second crucifix of the finest gold, finished in the Florentine style. It was in the family for some time, I recall. Aunt Serena said that her grandmother used to wear it. That was a great surprise to Sabrina, and she promptly took it off to a Roman priest, for all she did not trust him, and asked him to bless the treasure, just in case. He did as she asked, after he had satisfied himself that though Sabrina was one of the English heathen, yet she knew enough of religion to warrant his granting her request.”

“And did her Count vanish in a puff of smoke next morning?” Dominick ventured sarcastically.

“No. He was unperturbed as ever. From what Sabrina says, he was a man of the utmost urbanity and self-possession. She never heard him raise his voice, never saw any evidence that he abused his manservant, never found any indication of moral excesses. I’ve been trying for years to puzzle out what she meant by moral excesses. Still, whatever they were he didn’t do them. Finally one night, while she was keeping her vigil on the stair below one of the locked doors, being fatigued by her housekeeper’s tasks during the day and having spent the better part of most nights watching, she fell asleep, in this case quite literally. She tumbled down the stairs, and in her journal she states that although she does not remember doing so, she must have cried out, for she does recall a door opening and light falling on her from one of the locked rooms.”

“Was she much hurt?” Everard asked. “I fell down the stairs once, and ended up with torn ligaments in

my shoulder where I'd tried to catch myself. Doctor said I was fortunate not to have broken my skull, but he is forever saying such things."

Whittenfield's brow puckered in annoyance. "She was much bruised and she had broken her arm—luckily the right one, for she was left-handed."

"Ah," Twilford said sagely. "That accounts for it."

"The left-handedness?" Whittenfield asked, momentarily diverted. "It may be. There are some odd gifts that the left-handed are supposed to have. Come to think of it, Serena was left-handed. There might be something to it."

The sixth guest smiled wryly. "And the ambidextrous?"

"I don't approve of that," Lord Graveston announced. "Isn't natural."

"You don't think so?" the sixth guest asked, but neither expected nor got an answer from the crusty old peer.

"Back to Sabrina," Dominick ordered.

"Yes, back to Sabrina," Whittenfield said, draining his glass again. "Remarkable woman that she was. Where was I?"

"She had fallen down the stairs and broken her arm," one of the guests prompted.

"Oh, yes. And her employer came out of the locked room. Yes. She swooned when she fell, or shortly after, and her next memory was of being carried, though where and by whom she could not tell, for her pain was too intense to allow her much opportunity for thought. She contented herself with closing her eyes and waiting for the worst of her feeling to pass."

"Only thing she could do, probably," Everard said grimly.

"It would seem so. This employer of hers took her into one of the rooms that had been locked, and when she came to her senses she was on a splendid couch in a small and elegant room. You may imagine her amazement at this, for until that time she had thought that the house, being in one of the poorest parts of the city, had no such finery in it. Yet there were fine paintings on the walls, and the furniture was luxuriously upholstered. And this was a time when such luxury was fairly rare, even among the wealthy. This Count was obviously a much more impressive figure than Sabrina had supposed."

"Or perhaps he was a rich tradesman, amusing himself with a pose, and that would explain the remote house and the lack of company," Dominick said cynically.

"I thought that myself, at one time," Whittenfield confessed. "I was sure that she had been hoodwinked by one of the best. But I made a few inquiries and learned that whoever this Count was, he was most certainly genuine nobility."

"How curious," the sixth guest said.

"And it became more curious still," Whittenfield went on, unaware of the sardonic note in the other man's voice. "The Count dosed her with syrup of poppies and then set her arm. She describes the whole event as unreal, and writes that she felt she was floating in a huge, warm bath though she could feel the bones grate together. There were so many questions she wanted to ask, but could not bring her thoughts to bear on any of them. Then she once again fainted, and when she woke she was in her own chamber, her

arm was expertly splinted and bound with tape, and her head felt as if it were filled with enormous pillows.”

“And her employer? What of him?” Twilford inquired, caught up now in spite of himself.

“He visited her the next day, very solicitous of her and anxious to do what he could to speed her recovery.” Whittenfield paused for a reaction, and got one from Everard.

“Well, she was his housekeeper. She was of no use to him if she could not work.”

“He never told her that,” Whittenfield said, gratified that one of his guests had said what he had wanted to hear. “She made note of it in her journal. Finally, after ten days she got up sufficient courage to say something to the Count, and he reassured her at once that he would prefer she recover completely before returning to her duties. There is an entry then that hints at a more intimate exchange, but the phrases are so vague that it is impossible to tell for sure. Mind, that wasn’t a mealymouthed age like this one. If something had passed between them, there would be no reason for her to hide behind metaphors, unless she feared the reproach of her husband later, which I doubt. When at last Sir James was released from gaol, he hired on as a mercenary soldier and went east into the pay of the Hapsburgs and nothing is known of his fate. On the other hand, at the end of her three years with her Count, Sabrina came back to England and set herself up in fairly good style. She never remarried but apparently had one or two lovers. Her journal is fairly explicit about them. One was named Richard and had something to do with Norfolk. The other was Henry and was some sort of relative of the Howards. She is very careful not to be too direct about their identities except in how they had to do with her. Doubtless Sir James would have gnashed his teeth to know that his wife ended up doing well for herself. Or he might have liked to live off her money.”

“But surely your great-aunt did not become wealthy through the good offices of this Count, did she?” Twilford asked, eyeing his host askance.

“Probably a bequest. Those Continentals are always settling great amounts of money on their faithful servants. I read of a case not long ago where a butler in France got more than the children—” Lord Graveston stopped in the middle of his words and stared hard at the sixth guest. “No offense intended.”

“Naturally not,” the sixth guest said.

“You’re a Count, too, they say?” Dominick inquired unnecessarily.

The sixth guest favored him with a wry smile and a slight inclination of his head. “That is one of my titles, yes.”

“Smooth-spoken devil, aren’t you?” Dominick challenged, his eyes growing bright.

“In the manner of my English... acquaintances,” he replied, adding, “if I have erred, perhaps you will be kind enough to instruct me.”

Everard stifled a laugh and Dominick’s face reddened.

“Let it alone, Dominick, can’t you?” Twilford said before Dominick could think of another insult to launch at the sixth guest.

“Get back to Sabrina, Charles, or you’ll have Dominick asking to meet your foreign guest at dawn.” Lord Graveston sounded both disgusted and disappointed.

“Yes, I will,” Whittenfield said with alacrity. “She had broken her arm and took time to mend, during

which time her employer was most solicitous of her health. He saw to it that she was well fed and that her children were cared for so that they did not impose upon their mother. Sabrina was astounded and grateful for this consideration. She had never expected such charity from a stranger. And the more she learned about the Count, the more curious she became. He was without doubt wealthy, and had chosen to live in this poor part of Antwerp so that he would not be put upon by the authorities, she suspected. Yet she doubted that he had broken the law or was engaged in espionage. Eventually she wondered if he were doing vivisections, but she never found a body or any part of one in the house, though she did once find the manservant with a large piece of raw meat. With every doubt that was quelled, another rose to take its place. She did not dare to approach him directly, for although he had never shown her anything but kindness, Sabrina reveals that she sensed a force or power in him that frightened her.”

Twilford shook his head. “Women! Why *will* they endow us with godlike qualities?”

Dominick stifled a yawn.

“It was Sabrina’s daughter, Cesily, who first stumbled upon the Count’s secret, or one of his secrets,” Whittenfield said, and took time to top off his port. He was enjoying the sudden silence that had fallen. Slowly he leaned back, smiling in delight with himself.

“Charles...” Dominick warned.

“The secret was one that Sabrina said she should have guessed. How it came about was—”

“You’d try the patience of half the saints in the calendar, Whittenfield,” Everard said, attempting an amused chuckle with a distinct lack of success.

Whittenfield refused to be rushed. “Cesily came running into her mother’s chamber one afternoon with a large glass beaker clutched in her small hands. She said she had come upon it in the hallway near the locked door, but upon close questioning, she admitted that she had found the door unlocked and had decided to explore. You may imagine how aghast Sabrina was to hear this, and she trembled to think how the Count would react to the news that the child had invaded his private rooms. She thought it best to be prepared for the worst, and determined to approach the Count before he came to her. She had a little money set aside, and if the worst came to pass she was fairly confident that after she had paid for the damage she would still have enough money left to afford passage to England, though she did not know what she would do once she got there.”

“Just like a woman,” Everard said, attempting to look world-weary, though his young features did not easily lend themselves to that expression.

“Whittenfield, have you had pipes put in, or must I seek the necessary house in the garden?” Lord Graveston asked unexpectedly.

“You’ll find what you need by the pantry door, my Lord,” Dominick said, a malicious undertone to his good manners.

“Thanks, puppy,” the old man said, getting out of his chair. “Should be back in a little time.” He walked stiff-legged to the door and closed it sharply behind him.

“Well...” Whittenfield said, rather nonplussed by Lord Graveston’s departure, and uncertain now how to pick up the threads of his narrative. “As might be expected—” he covered his awkwardness by pouring himself yet another glass of the excellent port “—it took her some time to convince herself that it was appropriate to interrupt the Count at his work. She did not want to go to that locked door and knock, for fear of his wrath. She also realized that she was not eager to be dismissed. The man was a generous

master and had treated her far more kindly than she had thought he would. Yes. You can see her predicament. But if the broken beaker were not acknowledged, then it might go unpleasantly for her and her children. Sabrina was not a foolish woman—”

“What woman is not foolish where her children are concerned?” Hamworthy inquired piously. He often remarked that heaven had seen fit to visit seven daughters on him, as others were visited with plague. It was tacitly acknowledged that one of his reasons for attending this gathering was to talk with Everard about a possible alliance with his fourth daughter, Isabel.

“Be that as it may...” Whittenfield said more forcefully, glad that the general irritation with Hamworthy for once worked to his benefit. “Indeed, Sabrina feared for what would become of her and her children. There were several possibilities, each one more horrifying than the last. She could be dismissed. That was not desirable, but she could manage, if she acted with caution. If, however, the Count decided to take action against her or, more horribly, her daughter for her actions, then it might go very badly for them. Her thoughts were filled with tales she had heard of the fate of children in prisons, their abuses and their degradation. At the very contemplation of such a possibility, Sabrina was filled with overwhelming fright. She considered taking her children and leaving under the cover of night, and getting as far from Antwerp as she could. Lamentably, her resources would not allow her to fly a long way, or rapidly. She had to hope that she could persuade the Count that any restitution he demanded, no matter how severe, should be taken from her and not from her children. Imagine what terrors filled her as she went up the stairs—the very stairs down which she had fallen—to knock on that sinister locked door.”

“Why did she not simply talk to the manservant, and ask him to explain what had happened?” Twilford suggested.

“Apparently she did consider that, but decided that if she had to face the Count, she would prefer to do it at once, rather than go through the ordeal twice. It’s an understandable attitude, don’t you think?”

“And this way she would have the strategic element of surprise,” the sixth guest said quietly.

“Just so,” Whittenfield said emphatically. “You understand me very well, Count.” He drank again, inwardly delighted at the increased attention he had been given. “So she knocked at the door. A gentle rap at first, and then a stronger one. You would have thought she was far more brave than she claimed to be, so boldly and directly did she present herself. In her journal she says that she quaked inwardly, and there was almost nothing she could do to keep her hands from shaking, yet she did not allow these considerations to hold her back.”

“Females, so precipitous,” Twilford muttered.

“In a general, that quality would be called audacity, and would earn glory and praise,” the sixth guest pointed out.

“Not the same thing at all,” Twilford said, much shocked.

“Of course not,” answered the sixth guest.

“To return to Sabrina,” Whittenfield said sharply, “she knocked on the door and waited. When there was no response, she knocked a second time, hoping all the while that the Count would not be there or, for whatever reason, would not answer. She had begun to worry again: what if this man were hiding men and women in those rooms? What if he had a cache of arms or gunpowder? What if there were other sorts of equipment, things that would not be favored by the officials of Antwerp? Was she required to report what she saw, assuming the Count allowed her to leave the house at all? When she had knocked a third time, she was convinced that the Count was away, and she turned with relief to descend the stairs. And

then the door behind her opened and the Count asked her why she had disturbed him. He spoke reasonably, her journal says, telling her that her errand must be of great urgency, for she had never before gone contrary to his orders regarding that door. Sabrina gathered up her faltering courage and told him what her daughter had done, then stood silent, waiting for his wrath to fall on her, for it was not rare for a master to vent his wrath with a belt or a stick on servants who did not please him. That's not done much anymore, but in Sabrina's time she had every reason to think that she might be beaten for her daughter's offense, and Cesily might be beaten as well. She tried to explain to the Count, then, that Cesily was only a child and had not intended to harm his property, or to trespass in his private rooms. She had got halfway in to her tangled arguments when the Count interrupted her to say that he hoped that Cesily was not hurt. Dumbfounded, Sabrina said that she was not. The Count expressed his relief to hear this and assured Sabrina that he was not angry with her or her child, but that he was upset to realize they regarded him as such an object of terror. Sabrina demured, and tried to end this awkward interview, but it was not the Count's intention to allow this. He opened the door wider and asked her if she would care to see what lay beyond. Poor Sabrina! Her curiosity was fired at this offer, for she wanted to enter those rooms with a desire that was close to passion, but at the same time she knew that she might be exposing herself to danger. Had it been only herself, she wrote in her journal, she would not have hesitated, for a moment, but again, her consideration for her two children weighed heavily with her and for that reason she did not at once accept his offer. After a moment, her curiosity became the stronger force in her, and she went back up the stairs to the open door."

"They'll do it every time. They're as bad as cats," Twilford said, and looked to Hamworthy for support.

"Charles, you're the most infuriating of storytellers," Dominick said as the door opened to readmit Lord Graveston, who made his way back to his seat without looking at any of the others in the room.

"Doubtless," Whittenfield said, quite pleased with this encomium. "Let me go on. I think you'll find that most of your doubts will be quieted. For example, I think all of you will be gratified to learn that this mysterious Count was nothing more ominous than an alchemist."

"Of *course!*" Everard said as the others nodded in varying degrees of surprise.

"That was the great secret of the closed rooms. The man had an alchemical laboratory there, as well as a library where he kept some of his more... objectionable texts for perusal." He smiled at this revelation and waited to hear what the others might say.

"Alchemist!" Dominick scoffed. "Demented dreamer, more like."

"Do you think so?" the sixth guest asked him.

"**Base** metal into gold! The Elixir of **Life!** Who'd believe such trash?" Dominick got up from his chair and went to glare into the fire.

"Who indeed," murmured the sixth guest.

"You're going to tell us that all your aunt's precious Count was doing was pottering around among the retorts, trying to make his own gold?" Hamworthy demanded. "Of all the shoddy—"

"Yes, Sabrina's employer was an alchemist," Whittenfield said with completely unruffled calm.

"No wonder he bought a house in the worst part of town," Lord Graveston said. "That's not the sort of thing that you want put into a grand house. Smells, boilings, who knows what sort of flammable substances being used. He had a degree of sense, in any case, if he had such a place for his work."

“Exactly my opinion,” Whittenfield said at once. “I decided, as did Sabrina, that the Count was a sensible man. He showed her his laboratory and his equipment and warned her that it was not wise for Cesily to come in because there were various substances that might harm her in the laboratory. He showed her where he made his glass vessels by blowing them himself, and the oven where many of the processes were conducted. It was called an athanor, Sabrina says, and was shaped like a very large beehive made of heavy bricks. The Count showed her, since he was not involved in any experiments at the moment, how the various vessels were placed in the athanor, and told her how long and in what manner they were heated to get the results he desired. She watched all this with great fascination and asked very few questions, though she longed to pester him with them. At last he told her he would appreciate her discretion, but if she had any doubts about remaining in his employ, she would have to tell him and he would arrange for her to have passage back to England. She was taken aback by this suggestion, for she believed that the Count wanted to be rid of her now that she had learned his secret. Apparently he discerned something of this in her countenance, and he assured her at once that he did not wish her to leave, but he was aware that there were many who did not view alchemy kindly and wished to have nothing to do with it. If that expressed her own feelings, then he wanted her to tell him at once in order to make proper arrangements for her. He had, he told her, another house in

Antwerp, and he would send her there if she felt she could not remain in good conscience so near his laboratory. Sabrina was startled by this consideration, which was a good deal rarer then than it would be now. She told the Count that she would inform him in the morning of her decision, but she wrote in her journal that she was determined to stay, and had been since she was shown the laboratory. In the morning the Count sought her out and asked to know her decision, which she told him at once. He, in turn, declared that he was very pleased to have her be willing to stay on with him. She then inquired what sorts of experiments he was making, but he did not wish to discuss that with her, not at that time. He did give her his word that he would present her with a few of the results of his labors in due time, which she, perforce, agreed to. She mentions in her journal for the next several days that she saw little of the Count because he was occupied in his secret room working on some new experiment. It isn’t precisely easy to tell, but it seems she put some stock in his skill, for she states she suspects the crucifix he gave her might have been made from alchemical gold.“

“Absurd!” Hamworthy declared.

“Oh, naturally,” Whittenfield said. “And no doubt the Count had his own reasons behind his actions.”

“Wanted to put her at her ease,” Twilford ventured.

“Still, a crucifix is hardly appropriate to give an Englishwoman. It seems much too Roman.” Lord Graveston had paused in his fiddling with his pipe to give his opinion, and having done so, went back to scraping out the burnt tobacco so that he could fill it again.

“Queen Bess herself was known to wear crucifixes,” Everard mentioned, his face darkening from embarrassment. “Probably the Count, being a foreigner and a Roman Catholic—most of them were, weren’t they?—wanted to make a friendly gesture. It’s a more circumspect gift than any other sort of jewelry would be.”

“Everard, your erudition astounds me,” Dominick said with a nasty grin at the young man. “Read Classics, did you?”

“History. At Clare.” His voice dropped to a mumble and he would not look at Dominick.

“Clever lad,” Hamworthy said, as if to take the sting out of Dominick’s remark.

“What else did your great-great *et cetera* aunt have to say for herself?” Twilford inquired with a polite

nod away from Dominick.

“She said that her employer continued to treat her well, that her arm healed completely, and aside from twinges when the weather changed, it never troubled her in all her years. She did not have much opportunity to view the laboratory, but she found that the manservant, Roger, was much inclined to be helpful to her and told her once, in a moment of rare candor, that he liked her boy Herbert, and said that he had once had a son of his own, but the boy had died many years before. Sabrina was shocked to hear this, for she had not thought that he was much used to families. He offered to assist her with Cesily and Herbert when her duties made it awkward for her, and she thanked him for it but could not bring herself to trust him entirely, so aloof did he hold himself. In the end, she asked Herbert if he would like to go with Roger when he purchased certain items from the great market in the centre of town. Herbert, having turned two, was developing an adventurous spirit, and he was eager to explore a greater part of the world. Roger spoke English, albeit with an accent, and told Sabrina that he would be happy to keep the boy talking in his own language, or teach him German or French. He admitted that his Dutch was not very good and his Flemish was stilted, but he would not mind being Herbert’s tutor. In a moment of boldness, Sabrina said that she would rather Cesily be taught the languages for the time being, and Herbert could learn in a year or so, when he had a better grasp of speech. She did not think that the man would accept this, but he did, and inquired what languages Sabrina would like her daughter to speak. When Sabrina expressed her surprise, he reminded her that Queen Bess spoke seven languages quite fluently and it did not seem intolerable to him that other females should do likewise. So little Cesily became his student, learning French, German, Spanish and Italian. He must have been an excellent teacher, for Cesily was noted for her skill in these tongues for all her life.”

“Damned silly waste,” Twilford said. “If you ask me, it’s a mistake to educate females. Look what happens. You start sending them to school and the next thing you know, they want to vote and who knows what else.”

“Reprehensible,” said the sixth guest with an ironic smile.

“It isn’t fitting,” Hamworthy declared. “What could your great-aunt have been thinking of, to put her daughter forward that way?” He straightened up in his chair. “Charles, you’re not serious, are you? The girl didn’t try to be a scholar?”

“It seems to have taken her remarkably little effort to be one,” Whittenfield answered. “She took to it like a potentate takes to vice. In the next year she showed herself to be a most ready and enthusiastic pupil. She started to read then, so that by five—”

“Started to read? So young? Was Sabrina lost to all propriety?” Lord Graveston demanded.

“She must have been. Herbert soon joined his sister in her studies, but lacked her aptitude, though he did well enough. To Sabrina’s surprise and, I think, disappointment, there were no further invitations to enter the laboratory, though on one occasion the Count presented her with a fine silver bracelet set with amber. She says in her journal that there was nothing remarkable about the amber or the silver except that the workmanship was exceedingly good. I wish I knew what became of that bracelet,” Whittenfield added in another voice. “We have the mirror, which is an object of considerable speculation, but not the bracelet, which might have had a great deal of value, both for the materials and the antiquity.”

“Don’t talk like a merchant, Charles. It’s unbecoming,” Hamworthy interjected.

“You’re a fine one to talk about merchants, Peter,” Dominick said to him with false good humor. “Didn’t your sister marry that merchant from Leeds?”

Peter Hamworthy’s face turned an amazing shade of raspberry. He stared at Dominick with such intense

anger that the rest fell hopefully silent. "My sister's husband," he said at last with great care, enunciating each syllable with hard precision, "is not a merchant. His family started the rail shipping business in Leeds over eighty years ago, which hardly counts as being shop-stained."

"Naturally, naturally, and the money he brought to the family had nothing to do with it, though your father was almost ruined and your sister twenty-six years younger than her husband." Dominick strolled around the room.

"What about Sabrina and the glass?" Lord Graveston asked in awesome accents. He puffed on his pipe and waited.

"Yes, Charles, what about the glass?" Everard echoed.

"That is coming," Whittenfield said, shooting a blurred, hostile look at his cousin. "I've told you that Sabrina had been given a bracelet and that she had been in the employ of the Count well over a year. That is important to remember, because she had a fair familiarity with the man and his habits. She knew that he spent much of the night in his laboratory and a fair amount of his time otherwise in study and reading. He went out fairly often, but irregularly. If he had friends, she knew nothing of them, though she assumed he must occasionally receive them at his other house, wherever it was. She appreciated his kindness and the attention he gave to her and her children. When she had been working for him about eighteen months, her tone changes slightly. She is not more wary or more forthcoming, but she admits once or twice that he is an attractive and compelling man, and that she has had one or two vivid dreams about him. You may all guess the nature of those dreams. At first, she only mentions that she did dream that he came to her in her bed, and later her descriptions become more detailed and... improper. She mentions that after one such dream she met the Count in the morning room where she and her children were eating, and to her amazement she found herself blushing as she looked at him. She records in her journal that until that moment she was unaware of the penetrating strength of his eyes, which she describes as being dark and large. The Count, she says, saw her blush and smiled enigmatically, but made no comment to her. He had come to talk to Cesily in Italian, as Roger was out of the house on an errand to the docks."

"Perhaps he read her journal. My mother always said that it was wise to read the diaries of your servants. She always kept records of what her maids said among themselves and in their diaries." Hamworthy announced with portentous confidence.

"And did she allow the maids to read *her* diary?" the sixth guest asked gently, dark eyes turned on Peter Hamworthy.

"What?" Hamworthy protested loudly.

"They probably did, you know," Dominick said bitterly. "My valet reads mine, though I've told him thousands of times that he must not."

"Sabrina doesn't seem to think that he did read it. She considered the possibility, but her attitude is one of disbelief. For more than a week she had no dreams, and then they began again. After three or four months she began to anticipate them with pleasure, and was disappointed when nights would pass without them. During the day she continued to be the sensible woman she was, looking after the house and caring for her children and overseeing their meals. Apparently her employer did his cooking in the laboratory, for he never asked Sabrina to serve him at table. She speculated that he must have his banquets and other entertainments at his other house, for never did such an event take place where Sabrina lived. She commented on it once to Roger and he told her that the Count dined in private, as it was a custom with him to take sustenance with no more than one other person. Roger himself ate alone,

but he kept his meat in the cold room below the pantry.”

Twilford, who had been drinking heavily, looked up with reddened eyes. “No fit place for an Englishwoman, if you ask me,” he remarked. “Shouldn’t have stood for it, myself.”

“The children enjoyed their lives in that place, though both lacked playmates. In England there were cousins and others who would have been available to them. In that house in Antwerp there were only the poor, ragged urchins of the street nearby, and so Cesily and Herbert learned to entertain themselves. Roger became a sort of uncle to them, alternately teaching them and indulging them. Sabrina says in one of her entries that he had the remarkable knack of obtaining their obedience without beating or berating them. The Count was regarded with more awe, but neither child was afraid of him, and he often was willing to spend time with them correcting their accents in various languages and telling them tales that Sabrina commented were unusually vivid. Cesily was particularly fond of the adventures of a woman named Olivia, whom the Count cast in different roles and different times in history. Sabrina once questioned this, telling the Count that she was not sure tales of the corruption in early Rome were proper for children of such tender years. The Count told her then that he was being mild, and reminded her that there is a marked difference between ignorance and innocence, though one is often mistaken for the other.”

“Sophistry!” Lord Graveston insisted.

“And patently false,” Hamworthy added. “Haven’t we all had cause to observe how quickly innocence departs when too much learning is present?”

“Your brother, I believe, is a don at Rebel in Oxford,” the sixth guest said to Hamworthy. “A most learned man, and yet you remarked this evening that he is as naive and innocent as a babe, and it was not entirely complimentary.”

Peter Hamworthy glowered at the elegant foreigner. “Not the same thing at all, Count. You’re foreign... don’t understand.”

“I doubt I’m as foreign as all that,” the sixth guest said mildly.

“When do we get to the glass, Charles?” Twilford asked plaintively. “You’ve been going on for more than an hour.”

“I’m coming to that,” Whittenfield said. “You have all come to understand, I trust, that this household was not a usual one, either for this country or any other in Europe. Sabrina had been with the Count for almost three years. She had put aside a fair amount of money and was beginning to hope that she would not have to return to England as a poor relation to hang upon some more resourceful relative. She writes in her journal that it was the greatest pleasure to think of her condition at that time compared to what it had been before she entered the Count’s employ. Then Sir James, her husband, was released from gaol, and came searching for her.”

“You said he became a mercenary, Charles,” Twilford reminded him.

“He did. That was after he saw his family. He came to the house late one evening. Apparently he had been celebrating his liberation, for Sabrina says in her journal that he was half drunk when he pounded on the door, demanding admittance. She had, of course, left word with the warden of the prison where she might be found, and the warden had told Sir James. He was a pugnacious man, of hasty temper and a touchy sense of honor. A lot of men like that, then,” he observed reflectively as he turned his glass, of port by the stem and squinted at the reddish light passing through it. “He was most unhappy to find his wife serving as a housekeeper to a foreign Count, and in the wrong part of the city, at that. At first

Sabrina was somewhat pleased to see him, and commiserated over his thinned and scarred body, but she quickly realized that the reunion was not as happy as she had intended it to be. First he berated her for her scandalous position, and then he shouted at their children, saying they were growing up among ruffians and thieves. When Sabrina tried to convince him that they were being well cared for and educated, he became irate, shouted at her, and struck her.”

“As you say, a hasty temper,” Twilford commented with a slow, judicious nod of his head. “Still, I can’t say I’d like to see my wife in such a situation. A man can be forgiven for imagining any number of things, and if Sir James was touchy of his honor, as you say...”

“Probably he suspected the worst. Those three years in prison can’t have been pleasant for him,” Hamworthy observed.

“Poverty wasn’t pleasant for Sabrina, either,” the sixth guest pointed out.

“A different matter entirely,” Hamworthy explained. “A woman needs the firm guidance of a man. Very sad she should have had such misfortune, but it was hardly unexpected.” He reached over for a cigar and drew one out, sniffing its length with enthusiasm before reaching for a lucifer to light it.

“I see.” The sixth guest sat back in his chair.

“I’m baffled,” Everard confessed. “If her husband returned for her, how does it happen that she came back to England and he went into Europe? And what has the glass to do with it?”

“Yes, you keep holding that glass out as a lure, and I can’t see any connection between Sabrina and it,” Twilford complained.

“Have patience, have patience,” Whittenfield reprimanded them gently. “Let me get on with it. You recall that I said that Sir James struck his wife? They were in the receiving hall of that house, which was quite small, about the size of a back parlor, I gather. Cesily and Herbert both cried out, for they were not in the habit of seeing their father discipline their mother. Sir James was preparing to deliver a second blow as Sabrina struggled to break free of his grasp when the inner door opened and the Count stepped into the room. Sabrina says that she is certain he knew who Sir James was, but he sharply demanded that the man desist and explain why he was assaulting his housekeeper. Sir James, astounded and enraged, turned on this new arrival and bellowed insults at him, calling him a seducer and many another dishonorable name. The Count inquired if Sabrina had said anything that led him to this conclusion, to which Sir James replied that she had in fact, denied such accusations, which made her all the more suspect. He demanded to know who the Count was, and why he had dared to take in Sabrina and her children, knowing that she was a woman in a strange country and without benefit of male protectors. The Count gave a wry answer: he would have thought that Sir James should answer that question, not himself. Sir James became more irate and demanded satisfaction. He ordered his wife and children to prepare to leave the Count’s house at once, that he would not tolerate this insult to his name one night longer. In vain did the children scream their dismay. Sir James reminded them that he was their father, with rights and obligations to fulfill. The children besought their mother to refuse, but it was the Count who stayed the question.”

“Impudent foreigner!” Twilford burst out, straightening up in his chair with indignation.

“How dared he?” Lord Graveston demanded.

“What did he do?” Dominick asked in a low, harsh tone.

“He said that he would not allow any man to hurt a servant in his employ. At first Sabrina was greatly

shocked to hear this, for in the time she had been the Count's housekeeper he had been most respectful and rarely mentioned her subservient position in the household. But what he said again stayed Sir James's hand. Sir James was furious at the Count for making his wife a servant, and explained to him that well-born Englishwomen were not to be hired as common servants. He insisted that he had endured unbearable insults from the Count and would demand satisfaction of him. Now, in Sabrina's journal she says that the Count laughed sadly and asked her whether or not she wanted her husband to die, but I doubt he was so audacious. Whatever it was, the Count promised to meet him at midnight, in the great hall of his other house. Sabrina, in turmoil from this, begged both men not to embark on anything so foolish, but her husband insisted and the Count told her that if this were not settled now, she would have to leave his employ and go with her husband, and in her journal Sabrina admits that that prospect was no longer a happy one. She turned to her husband and asked that he rescind the challenge, but her husband chose to interpret this request as proof of an illicit relationship between his wife and the Count, and only confirmed his belief that Sabrina was the mistress of the Count. He told her as much and asked for directions to the house the Count had mentioned and vowed he would be there. The matter of seconds was a difficult one, as Sir James, being just released from prison, had no one to act for him. The Count suggested that the matter be private and that each fight on his honor. Sir James agreed with alacrity and went off to find a sword to his liking."

"He did not insist that Sabrina accompany him?" Everard asked, quite startled.

"No, he said that if Sabrina had taken a lover, she could remain with him until he avenged her honor, not that any was left to her." Whittenfield gave a little shrug. "Sabrina says in her journal that at the moment she wished she had become the Count's mistress, for the thought of parting from him was a bitter one. Until she saw her husband, she says, she did not realize how she had come to trust and rely on her employer. At last, the night coming on and the hour of the duel approaching, she searched out the Count as he was preparing to leave the house and told him that she would pray for him, and that she hoped he would not despise her for turning against Sir James. He answered that he was grateful for her prayers and did not fault her for seeking to stay away from Sir James—if not for her own sake, then for the sake of her children, who must surely suffer at his hands. She agreed with some fear and told the Count that she wished she had not told the warden where she could be found, so that Sir James might never have found her. The Count did not chide her for this, but reminded her that she had chosen to follow her husband rather than turn to her family when he cast him out. She did not deny this, but said that part of her fears were that she would become a drudge if she appealed to her father or her uncles for maintenance. With two children to care for, she had decided it would hurt them, and when she and Sir James had come to the Continent, it was not too bad at first. The Count heard her out and offered to provide her with funds to allow her to return to England and set herself up in reasonable style. He told her that no matter what the outcome of the duel was, he feared it would be most unwise for her to continue living under his roof, for doubtless Sir James would spend part of the time before the meeting in composing damning letters to send to various relatives. Sadly, Sabrina admitted this was true. Shortly before the Count left, she asked him why he had not made her his mistress. He had an equivocal answer for her: that surely her dreams were sweeter."

"Why, that's outrageous!" Lord Graveston burst out. "And she tolerated it? The effrontery of the fellow."

"How could he know?" Everard wondered. "If she never told him, it may be that he was telling her that he did not fancy her in that way."

"Any real man fancies an attractive woman in that way," Hamworthy said with a significant and critical glance at Everard.

"Whatever the case," Whittenfield said sharply, "the Count left her and went to his other house. And after

debating with herself for the better part of an hour, Sabrina got her cloak and followed him. She remembered the directions the Count had given Sir James, and she went quickly, avoiding those streets where taverns still did business and roistering songs rang through the hollow night. It took her some little time to find the house, and once she feared she was lost, but eventually she came upon the place, a great, sprawling manor three stories high, with an elegant facade. Most of the windows were dark, but there were lights in the area she thought might be the kitchen, and a few candles flickered in one of the other rooms. Now she was faced with the problem of how to enter the building. There was a wrought-iron gate, but she was confident she could climb it; but the house itself puzzled her. She hitched up her skirts and grabbed the ornamental scrollwork...

“What a hoyden!” Dominick sniggered.

“I think she’s jolly intrepid,” Everard said, turning slightly rosier.

“Sounds like just the bubble-headed thing she would do, judging from the rest of your narrative,” Twilford sighed.

“Well, no matter what we think, gentlemen, the fact remains that she did it,” Whittenfield said with a hint of satisfaction.

“Does she tell whether or not she stopped the duel?” the sixth guest asked. He had been still while Whittenfield talked, giving his host polite attention.

“She was stymied at first, she indicates in her journal. She looked around the house and judged, from the number of rooms she could see that were swathed in covers, that the Count was not much in attendance there. It was by the veriest chance that she found a door at the far side of the house with an improperly closed latch. With great care she opened the door and entered a small salon with elegant muraled walls she could not easily see in the dark. Realizing that if she were caught by a servant she might well be detained as a thief, she hesitated before entering the hall, but recalling what danger her husband and the Count had wished upon themselves, she got up her courage and went in search of them. It was by the veriest chance that she stumbled on the room where Sir James and the Count were met. Apparently they had already exchanged one pass of arms, and Sir James was breathing hard though the Count, according to Sabrina, seemed to be unaffected by the encounter. At the sound of the opening door, the Count reminded one whom he supposed to be a servant that he was not to be disturbed, at which admonition Sabrina revealed herself and hastened forward to confront the two men. Then, just as she neared them, Sir James reached out and took hold of her, using her as a shield as he recommenced his attack on the Count, all the while taunting him to fight back. At first the Count retreated, and then he began to fight in a style quite unknown to Sir James. Sabrina does not describe it adequately, but I gather that he would switch his sword from one hand to the other with startling rapidity, and instead of hacking and thrusting with his sword, he began to use it as if it were some sort of lash. Remember, the art of fencing was far from developed at that time, and the swords used were not the fine, flexible epee we know now, for sport, but sharp-edged lengths of steel. Yet the Count had a flexible blade that did not break, and it terrified Sir James. Finally the Count pressed a fierce attack and, while Sir James retreated, was able to wrest Sabrina from his grasp and to thrust her away from the fight. Then, in a move that Sabrina did not see clearly and does not describe well, the Count disarmed Sir James. Sabrina states that she *thinks* that the Count leaped forward and passed inside Sir James’s guard, clipping his shoulder and knocking his sword from his hand. That’s quite a feat, no matter how it was done, but Sabrina’s impression is the only information we have, and so it is nearly impossible to guess what the man actually did. The Count held Sir James at swordpoint and politely inquired of Sabrina what she wanted done with him.”

“Disgusting!” Twilford said.

“But the Count didn’t kill Sir James, did he?” Everard asked eagerly. He had a certain apologetic air, as if he did not entirely want to be against his countryman but liked the gallantry of the situation in spite of the Count’s arrogance.

“No, he didn’t kill him, though the thrust to his arm could have done so, Sabrina thought, if he had intended it to,” Whittenfield said. “Sabrina said that she wanted Sir James out of her life, and to this the Count told Sir James that he had heard the verdict of his wronged spouse. Sir James began to curse roundly, but the Count brought his blade up and warned him that such behavior would not be tolerated. Sir James lapsed into a sullen silence and barely acknowledged his wife’s presence. The Count informed him that on his honor—since Sir James was so jealous of it—he must leave within twenty-four hours and take up whatever station he wished with any noble or fighting company east of the Rhine, and he was not to seek out his wife again, either in person or by message. He required Sir James to swear to this, not only by the oaths of the Church but by his sword. Grudgingly, Sir James did this, and then the Count let him go.”

“And that’s all there was to it? Charles, you disappoint me,” Dominick remarked.

“That is not quite all. There is still the matter of the glass,” Whittenfield pointed out.

“Ah, yes, the glass,” the sixth guest murmured.

“The Count escorted Sabrina back to his house where she had lived for almost three years, and as they walked, he inquired why it was that she had come. She admitted that she feared for him and did not want him to come to hurt. He told her that was highly unlikely, but did not explain further until she asked if it was an alchemical secret that protected him. Again he gave her an equivocal answer, saying that it was something of the sort. Before they entered his house, she confessed to him that she would not refuse him if he wished to pass what remained of the night with her. He told her that he was much moved by this, for women did not often make that request of him, which, in her journal, Sabrina finds amazing, for according to her the Count was a pleasing man, of middle height and compact body, with attractive, slightly irregular features, who was most fastidious about his person and somber in his elegance. Once in the house, the Count led her to the laboratory and lit a branch of candles, then opened a small, red-lacquered cabinet which seemed to be of great age, and removed the glass. It was not in the frame it has now, as I believe I mentioned, but it was rimmed with silver. The Count gave this to Sabrina, telling her that when she could see the spider in the glass, he would come for her. She did not believe this, but he assured her there was the image of a jeweled spider set in the very center of the glass, and that when one stood directly in front of it, under special circumstances, it could be seen.”

“Very neat,” Dominick approved with a jeering toast of his glass. “I must try that myself, one day.”

“Did the poor woman believe that?” Lord Graveston demanded with a shake of his head. “And you have kept that worthless piece of glass?”

“There’s a bit more to it,” Whittenfield remarked. “Apparently that night the Count did spend some time with Sabrina, and though she does not record what passed between them—”

“It’s not difficult to guess,” Hamworthy said with marked disapproval.

“I gather that it was not precisely what Sabrina expected. She mentions that the glass was put by the bed and lit with the branch of candles—”

“Really!” Twilford’s expression was livid with disapproval.

“Decadent foreigner!” Hamworthy ejaculated.

“And,” Whittenfield went on, giving them little attention, “Sabrina says in her journal that for one joyous, incomprehensible moment she could see the spider—that it sat in a fine diamond web, a creature of ruby and garnet and tourmaline. And she was elated at the sight, though she says in a later entry that she does not expect to see it again. She left it to Cesily with the admonition that it be kept in the family as a great treasure.”

“A woman’s whim for a trinket!” Dominick scoffed.

“It may be. But, as you see, it is still in the family, and no one is willing to part with it. Serena had great faith in it, and she was not given to superstition. I remember her standing here, saying that if it had brought such good fortune to Sabrina we would be fools to be rid of it. My mother wanted to put it away, but it never happened, and I admit that I’m so used to it, I would miss having it. And every now and again I stare at it, hoping to see the spider.”

“Oh, Charles,” Dominick sneered.

“Did you see anything?” Everard asked.

“Only my face. If there is a spider in it, only a man who cast no reflection could see it,” Whittenfield leaned forward and put his glass down.

“Do you mean that after sitting here for well nigh two hours, you have the effrontery to offer us nothing more than a third-rate ghost story?” Hamworthy demanded.

“Well, that *is* the story of the glass, as it’s put down in Sabrina’s journal. She returned to England and set herself up well, saying that she had been given a legacy that made this possible. And you will admit that whoever her Count was, he was something of an original.”

“If you look into it, you’ll find he was just another charlatan,” Lord Graveston said with confidence. “Generous, it seems, but nonetheless a charlatan.”

“Why do you believe that?” the sixth guest asked him. There was no challenge in the question, just a certain curiosity.

“It’s obvious,” Lord Graveston said, rising. “Well, if that’s all you’re giving us, Whittenfield, I’ll take myself *off* to bed. Excellent port and brandy.” He made his way through the room and out the door.

Peter Hamworthy groaned as he got to his feet. “The hour is very late and I like to rise early. I had no idea how long this would be. It’s what comes of telling stories about females.” As he went to the door he made a point not to look in the direction of the Spider Glass.

“I’m for the billiard room, if anyone cares to join me,” Dominick said, staring at Everard. “You may come and do your best to... beat me, if you like.”

Everard was suddenly nervous. “I... in a moment, Dominick.” He turned toward his host. “I thought it was a good tale. I don’t understand about the mirror, but...” On that inconclusive note he left the room in Dominick’s wake.

“Whittenfield, that was the damnedest farrago you spun us,” Twilford admonished him. “Why did you begin it?”

“You asked about the glass, that’s all.” Whittenfield had got to his feet and stood, a little unsteadily, beside his Queen Anne chair.

“Then I was an ass to do so.” He turned on his heel and stalked majestically from the room.

The sixth guest turned his dark, ironic eyes on Whittenfield. “I found your story most... salutary. I had no idea...” He got up and went toward the old mirror as if compelled to do so. He touched the glass with his small, beautiful hand, smiling faintly.

Glistening in the mirror, the spider hung in its jeweled web. The body was red as rubies or fresh blood. The eight, finely-made legs were garnet at the joints and tourmaline elsewhere. It was delicate as a dancer, and though the mirror had faded over the years, the Count could still take pride in his work. Beyond the image of the spider the muted lamps of the Oak Parlor shone like amber in the glass.

For, of course, le Comte de Saint-Germain had no reflection at all.