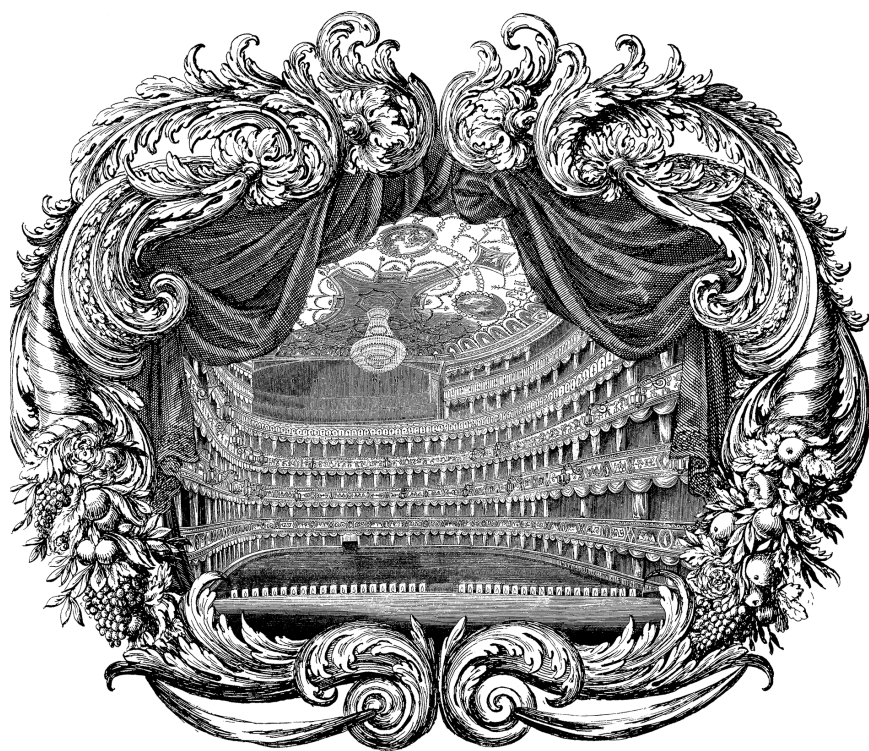


THE  
Illumination  
— *OF* —  
URSULA  
FLIGHT

For my mother, Rose,  
who took me to the theatre



THE  
Illumination  
— *OF* —  
URSULA  
FLIGHT



ANNA-MARIE  
CROWHURST

  
ALLEN & UNWIN

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*being the*  
TRUE TALE  
*of*



THE  
Illumination  
— OF —  
URSULA  
FLIGHT



WRITTEN  
— *by* —  
A LADY





PART

*The  
First*



# I



## BIRTH

*In which I am born under inauspicious circumstances*



On the fifteenth day of December in the year of our Lord 1664, a great light bloomed in the dark sky and crept slowly and silently across the blackness: a comet. The prating in the coffeehouses was of the evil the fiery star portended. Such astrological phenomena, it was known, brought war, famine, disease, fire and flood; the fall of kingdoms, the death of princes, mighty tempests, great frosts, cattle-plague and French pox. Every evening afterwards, though snow lay on the ground and the air bit with frost, men across the land threw open their windows and went out of their doors in cloaks and mufflers to gaze at the heavens, necks stretched up, hands shielding eyes, crooking long fingers to trace the burning thing that flamed across the night, while dogs moaned in their kennels and wise women chanted incantations against bright malignant spirits.

My mother, then in her fourth lying-in for childbed, had heard the tattle, by letter, from her sister, and begged her lady to open up the chamber curtains, the windows being tight fastened against ill winds. A fire blazed in the grate and bitter herbs got from the apothecary smoked in pots. My mother, taut and swollen, sweated in her night-shift.

It was hard to see at first, my mother said: that night the sky was so pricked with stars, the air so thick and dark. But as she gazed, wet-faced, propped full-bellied on her pillows, there broke out from

under a cloud a great white star with a flickering tail. At the sight of it she cried out in wonder, and, I think, in fear, and doing so broke her water: her agonies began.

Thus began, too, my journey into the world: she, crying and clawing, as I strained, sightless and bloodied, to meet the wonder which that very moment was bursting through the empyrean. With a wrench, I was born, into the deepest part of the night, blinking, kicking, then so strangely silent they thought me dead, just as the comet ended its glowing travails and disappeared from earthly sight.





## II



# MOTHER

*In which I assert my independence at three years old*



‘M other! Mother! Motherrrrrrr!’

I liked to call my mother, just to see if she would come. I had copied it from the way she called out to Joan, her lady, who always came a-scurrying and tripping on her skirts, before taking her orders with a heaving chest and a reddened, funny face. I wanted my mother to come and make me giggle. She could tickle me and it would be a game.

‘Mother!’ I yelled again, making my voice go up and down and twisting my face into a few silly grimaces for good measure. I liked the different things I could do with my voice, and it was funny because shouting was naughty. I put my hands to my face to feel it move. There was goat’s milk crusted on one of my cheeks. I scratched at it.

My mother did not come. There was silence in the parlour, save for the faint whistle of the wind down the chimney. I lolled against the wainscot, sniffing at the grown-up smells of wax and wood-smoke. I was afraid of the vastness and emptiness of the room when I was in it all alone, but I pushed at my stomach, feeling a bubbly thrill creeping up to my chest despite my fear at being in a place that was kept for visitors, and mostly forbidden to me. I had stolen in when everyone was busy. Now I could explore. I held my breath as long as I could then let it out in a great gust. If I did it three times then my mother would come.

I went around the room, holding out my arms, stretching my fat child’s fingers to touch each object. I stroked everything a little

in turn, touching the precious things, as I was never allowed to do when there were grown-ups around. It was different from the nursery, where everything was brown and wooden and could not break. Here there was a great black cabinet, painted with sea gods and mermaids, topped by two knobbly silver candlesticks with burned-down wicks; a glossy table with stout, spiralled legs, and in the corner, resting on a stand, my mother's mandalore, with the fat face of a cherub carved into its neck. The tale of the mandalore was one of my favourites; I made Mother tell it to me at bedtime. Then she would whisper in her story voice of how it had been carved from the wood of a little pear tree by one Signior Testore, a gentleman from Venice with flowing black hair and shining eyes like conkers. It was given to her by my father as a present on their wedding day and she would treasure it for evermore.

The sunlight from the window threw bright oblongs onto the floor. I went over to the shapes and jumped onto them with a 'Ho!', hoping I might be transported to a faraway land, as in the stories told to me by Goodsoule, my nurse, who was a wise woman – but that must not be spoken of in company, lest somebody hear, and put her in the pond.

I jumped in and out of the squares, liking the way my body turned from light to dark as I moved. Singing a song about fairies, I hopped up and down on the spot and then stood stock still in an oblong and stretched out my palms, watching the light make them golden. I stayed there breathing in and out, watching the dust rise up, then lay down in the sun, as I had seen our big dog Muff do, and kicked out my arms and legs in a star shape. I was hot and bright all over.

'Muuuuuuu-ther!' I called, sliding my legs open and together on the floor. The swishing of the skirts of my gown as I kicked. 'I am here, Mother! Oh Mother, won't you come to me? Here I am in the parlour, Mother!' I sang.

I held my body still for a moment and waited. 'Mother!' I screamed it as loudly as I dared, then caught my breath, frightened at my own naughtiness. I listened for the squeak of the stairs, the tip-tapping

of running, angry feet... The clock chimed the hour in the hall, but nobody came.

I lay in the light-shape with my eyes closed. The sunlight was under my eyelids: there were purple spots and green swirls. I sat myself up and gazed out of the window. The sky was pale blue peppered with wisps of white. My father liked his turnips peppered and it made my mother sneeze. Children did not like pepper, as a rule, Father said.

I should have liked to go and play outside. It had rained in the night, but now there was only the whistly wind – and the sun looked as if it might be hot. There were birds' nests and the drays of squirrels in the gnarled old oak, and I could make daisy-chains with Goodsoule and wear them as necklaces. We had a squat little crab-apple tree with low branches that could be climbed, if somebody helped, and stood by in case you fell.

The door creaked and Father's wolfhound trotted in, making a noise in her throat when she saw me on the floor. 'Come now, Muffy!' I said, and threw out my arm as I had seen my father do. She came over with a solemn face and lapped at my nose and the salty place behind my ear. I tipped backwards, giggling, and Muff barked joyfully and began to worry at my shoe. I lay back in the oblong, laughing and tugging my foot away, while she nipped at my shoe leather, letting out little excited yips between each bite.

'Oh Muff,' I said. 'You are a very naughty girl.'

The dog had got my shoe off and was joyfully eating it in a corner when Mother came in with a rustling of skirts, a stiff look about her face. I wiggled my stockinged toes and waved at her from my place on the floor. She might lie down in the bright square too, if she knew how warm it was.

'Ursula, you naughty child,' she cried, seizing my arm and dragging me upwards and giving me a few sharp pinches. She set about brushing the dust from my back and rubbing it out of my hair. When she got to the stuff on my skirts it felt much like smacking. But I stood still and leant my weight against her, as much as I dared. I liked being close to

my mother and breathing in her mother-smell, which was roses and cloves and lavender, from the pomander she wore about her neck.

‘You are not to lie on the floor and get your smock dirty,’ she said. ‘And you should not be in the parlour, besides. Where is Goodsoule? Is it not time for your nap? Muff! Bring that here at once.’

Muff eyed my mother balefully, then, dropping her woolly head, spat out a piece of leather.

‘I wanted to see if you would come, Mother,’ I said, in a small voice, for I hated to be scolded. ‘And – and...’ I was thinking up a reason as quickly as I could. ‘And to tell you about Muffy who has been so good and sweet. We had a game and she took my shoe. I think it smells of dog-dinner to her, for she licked it most thoroughly.’

My mother had wrested the remains of my shoe from Muff’s jaws and was now fastening it back on my foot.

‘It is wet,’ she said. ‘But ’twill serve you right.’

‘Yes, Mother,’ I said.

She took my hand and dragged me from the room. Muff, watching me go, started up a moaning, which echoed around the house and made the kitchen maids take fright.



### III



## FRIENDSHIP

*In which I make my very first bosom friend*



The drifting scents of spring were in the air. Bluebells and honeysuckle and sun-dried hay mingled with the piles of manure from the farm horses, who had carried the King and Queen of the May, but then forgot themselves and been naughty.

I spread my fingers out and felt the sharp stalks scratch against my palms. I had been allowed to join the cottage folk on their hay bales on the green to watch the maypole dance. After a week of being trapped indoors, I was mightily happy to be outside – Goodsoule had been busy with my little brother Reginald, who had suffered an attack of the mumps and was much given to screaming, and I had grown bored of wandering about the house in search of amusement. It was good to be basking in the sun, which was high and hot, though it was not yet noon. I touched my nose, feeling it might be getting pink, despite my bonnet. The admonishment of Mother to *stay in the shade* still rang in my ears; I knew she would scold me for sun-burn. In imitation of the village girls, I unlaced my bonnet and tipped it further over my eyes, loosening my linen collar which was high against my neck.

I liked the way the villagers clapped and smiled as the fiddler made merry. He had played ‘May Morning’ and was onto ‘Come Lads and Lasses’, bowing and taking a few jaunty steps in time. I followed the bright-haired dancers with my eyes as they circled the maypole in their white gowns, which had great sleeves and full skirts. I should like

to be one of them, one day, if Mother would allow it. She liked me to learn dancing, at any rate, and was teaching me the gavotte. I loved to hear music and skip around the room, but could not point my toe high enough, though I practised stretching it each night in my chamber.

Mary Goodsoule came over to the hay bales, a bunch of daisies in her hand. She was taller than me by half a head and had light red hair the colour of the stable cat. I had seen her waiting at our garden gate for her mother to come home – I often knelt on the window-seat of my chamber to watch Goodsoule leave us for the day, for my night-times were lonely and I was loath to see her go.

‘Do you want one?’ Mary said, opening her fist to show the fuzzy stalks, warmed and wilted in her palm.

I hesitated. I felt shy of speaking to the child of a servant.

‘Go on,’ she encouraged, pushing back a lock of hair that had fallen over her face. Her cheeks were round and rosy as her mother’s, and she had the same kindly sweetness about her face, the same wide-spaced eyes.

‘Have you been dancing?’ I said.

‘Oh no,’ she said. ‘My sister Kitty wouldn’t have it, for nothing is to spoil her day of being Queen. That’s her, with hair like me, threading ribbons on the maypole. I have been up over yonder’ – she flicked her arm behind her – ‘gathering blooms to make a perfume. My ma teaches me. Mayhap she will teach you, if you ask her. You crush up the petals and put them on your bosom for the gentlemen to sniff, and then they come a-wooing.’

‘Oh.’

‘Take a daisy,’ she said. ‘I picked them in a waxing moon, and that means goodness.’

‘Oh,’ I said again, feeling foolish. But I took a flower from her, and held it between my fingertips. I twirled it a little in the air, uncertain of what to do.

‘How old are you?’ said Mary. She had fair, freckled skin and the same long nose as her sister, which gave her an elegant air, child as she was.

‘Seven years and one-hundred and thirty-eight days. I counted yesterday.’

‘I’m nine,’ she said. ‘I’m Mary.’

‘I’m Ursula,’ I said.

And that was how I made the very first bosom friend of my life.



One bright day in early summer, Mary came to me while I was playing a boisterous game with the dog in the orchard – Muff had a stick in her mouth that she would not let go of and it made me laugh ’til my belly hurt when I hung onto its end and let her pull me along the ground, she shaking her head and growling all the while; me kicking my legs and feeling the damp grass slime across my arms as she dragged me, the warm huff of her breath on my hands.

‘Ho,’ said Mary. ‘Where’s my ma? You’ll be scolded later, for you have covered your second-best gown in grass stains, and they are harder to get out than blood.’

‘What do you know about it, Mrs?’ said I, letting go of Muff’s stick, so that she flew backwards with it, and danced about by a tree.

‘A great deal,’ said Mary, sitting down daintily beside me, ‘for Ma has been teaching me the work of the household, and that includes washing.’

I turned up my nose at this. ‘I do not need to know about it,’ I said, pulling up a fistful of grass and letting it shower upon my head. ‘For the servants do it, I think.’

‘Aye,’ she said, ‘but not for us, for we *are* the servants and must do it ourselves.’

‘I suppose that is true,’ I said, looking at her, for in truth I had not thought much about my Mary’s lot in life. We were both quiet then, I tugging evermore vigorously at the grass. Muff had seen a squirrel, and dashed off after it with a volley of joyful barks.

‘But do you not want to know why I am come to visit you?’ Mary said.

‘No,’ I said, which was often my instinctive answer to questions. She pursed up her face in the cross way she had. ‘Yes, yes of course,’ I said quickly. ‘For who is looking after your brothers and sisters while your father is in the fields?’

‘Old Mistress Claxton is with them, and I have come to be your companion,’ said she, peering at my face. ‘I am now old enough to earn my living. Your ma asked mine to see if she might set about finding a village girl to keep you company and be your playmate, for she is afeard,’ – here she jabbed me playfully in the ribs – ‘that you are growing up strange and wild...’

‘Wild!’ I cried.

‘You cannot argue with it,’ said Mary. ‘And you are lonely – so here I am come to play with you and to keep by your side.’

‘Faith, can it be true?’ I cried, getting up and pulling her with me into a stumbling sort of passepied about the orchard, and kissing her face. She pretended to push me off, and we romped about between the trees then in a topsy-turvy game of tag.

Goodsoule came out and I ran to her and put my head in her skirts, and she patted my back with her rough hands, the hands I knew and loved, though they had slapped me when I was naughty. I lolled in her embrace feeling the fabric of her apron on my cheek. ‘Now, now,’ she said in her deep voice, and bade us both smooth our hair and come into the parlour, where my mother was waiting by the window, stiff-backed on her favourite chair. Goodsoule pushed me forward and I stepped reluctantly away from the comfort of her nearness.

‘For shame, child – can it be that you have mussed your gown again?’ said Mother, darting at me and flicking at my skirts, smeared irrevocably with green. ‘Lo, ’tis all up one sleeve, and your bodice too.’ She slapped at my arms, and I tried to dodge her hands.

‘Ow! It was a game with Muff, who...’ I began.

‘Goodsoule,’ Mother said, ‘see that Ursula does not drag herself along the ground, for it makes too much work for Lisbet – and you besides.’



‘I beg your pardon, mistress,’ said Goodsoule.

I turned my face to look at her. ‘Tis not her fault,’ I began, but seeing Goodsoule’s eyebrows rise, I kept my peace, and went and sat on the little footstool my father liked to rest his feet upon in the evenings.

‘Come here, child,’ said my mother to Mary, and my friend went to her, and was turned around by her shoulders, and peered at by my mother in a way which made me feel strange. I wondered at Mary being able to bear it.

‘Are you a good girl?’ said my mother.

‘Yes, mistress,’ said Mary in a docile voice, so different from the one she used when we called to one another, which was high and light as a bird’s.

‘And will you work hard and be a helpmeet to my daughter, and keep by her side, and see that she is safe?’

‘I will, mistress,’ said Mary.

‘Very well,’ said my mother, in a cold sort of way which made my belly churn. ‘Your mother is run off her feet, what with Reginald and his maladies and the nursing of the babby. So we will try it and see how we fare.’

‘Oh thank you, sweet Mother!’ I said, jumping off the footstool and rushing at her, at which she put her arm around me, quickly bent her head towards mine then straightened it again, before releasing me and pushing me off.

‘You must be a very good girl now, Ursula, or Mary will be sent away.’

‘Yes, Mother,’ I said.

‘Thank you, mistress,’ said Goodsoule.



## IV



# HOME

*In which I meet an actress and get a head pain*



Viewed through the eyes of the approaching traveller, our village of Bynfield, in the southerly county of Berkshire, is a pleasant and countrified place, with its rolling hills, gurgling stream and wild moors of waving grasses, which are dotted with the oak and beech trees characteristic in those parts. It was then, and is now, bordered by a forest to the west, and by a small wood to the north: a shady place carpeted with needles and bracken, which turned orange in autumn and gave camouflage to deer.

This place was known to Bynfield children as Bear Wood, which, we told each other, was on account of the wild and hungry creatures that roamed there. I passed many happy days here as a child – there were fleshy fairy rings of toadstools which sprang up in the shade and wildflowers to gather and weave into our hair. I never did see a bear, or anything more frightening than a vixen, but the older children knew stories of the ancient days and told them to us in such whispering tones, I had strange and unquiet dreams: of dark, waving branches and outstretched, catching claws.

Few travellers, in truth, came to Bynfield for its own sake – its inhabitants were mostly farmers and a few handy folk who made stockings on looms. The place comprised but a dozen scattered dwellings, some cottage farms, a church, and a few heaths and copses on which cattle roamed. We therefore saw few strangers, save for the summer months

when the Court was at Windsor. Then, a few courtiers travelling eastwards to the castle came to the inn, which perched on the edge of His Majesty's Great Park and, being just behind the eight-mile stone to that royal town, was convenient as a stopping place.

My family had a good sort of house, for we were the nobles of that parish, and kept Bynfield Hall, a sprawling brick and timber manor which was built by my great-grandfather who had had a sickly wife in need of country air. It was a godly sort of place, with a pleasing aspect across the bright fields of corn to suit the invalid, and fresh water from the spring that flourished just beyond the garden wall.

When my grandparents went to God, my mother and father took it up and, because Mother was rich and brought a great dowry, added a wing, and a stable block, and a kitchen garden that grew thick with thyme and lavender. They were young and true sweethearts when they married (or so my mother said) and so they were merry as the day is long at Bynfield, or as they could be, for the age was a hard one under Cromwell.

My father had been a loyal supporter of the King and, through all the misery and the darkness of the time, kept himself strong and true and proud, being part of a sworn-secret faction with a band of other local men, who had vowed a lifelong allegiance to the Crown. To this end they met every Thursday at the All Saints church, where they whispered morsels of news from the Continent and drank the King's health out of earshot of the vicar.

When Old Rowley was Restored, my father prospered, being rewarded with a contract to build His Majesty's ships, for he had grown up near Norwich, and had spent many years inland, dreaming of the sea, which had got to the King's ear and tickled him. How pleased my mother was at my father's frequent absences I never knew, but she was kept busy enough in the bearing of children, for every time he came home he got a babby on her, and she had given birth to three that did not live, before I came, with the comet.



Having been released from chores and sewing, and not inclined to begin one of our woodland games – for though it was an unseasonably fine day in March, it was not yet warm – a group of us children – Grisella and Nicholas and Mary and I – were sitting on the tumbledown stone wall that ran opposite the inn, hoping to catch sight of a stranger. We had all but given the game up for lost, and were debating Nicholas's suggestion that we make for Bear Wood to look for nightjars' eggs (it was ever our ambition to raise the chicks of wild birds, which could then be tamed and taught to do tricks and carry messages) when Mary heard the tell-tale thumpings and clatterings of a carriage coming down the way, and we stood up to better catch the first glimpse of the finely dressed lady or gentleman.

It was our habit on such occasions to clutch at each other as the approaching traveller pranced up on horseback, at which the boldest of us might call out a saucy greeting, which was usually ignored. Then we would watch agog as the mud was brushed from cloaks and Mr Sproget the innkeeper was bidden to water the horses, tarrying until the travelling party had retired to their chambers to fortify themselves with sack in preparation for Mrs Sproget's cooking. In the morning they would primp their hair with sugar-water and ribbons, so that they could go before the King looking their best – all the better to get a royal favour or a pardon for a misdeed. And we would never see them again, but go home very well satisfied that we had had a peek at another sort of life.

On that particular day, the sound of approaching hooves was accompanied by the jingle of a carriage, and a coach and four drew up in a cloud of dust. Mary clutched me and Nicholas gave a whistle as a foppish gentleman in velvet emerged from within, and supported a masked lady in a shell-pink gown, who seemed to be weeping and dragging her feet. That the man had the lady by the elbow as he led her into the house, and that the lady was twice prevented by him from

removing her vizard, caused a rumour that ran the breadth of the village that she was an heiress and kidnapped by a scoundrel with designs on her portion.

By eleven o'clock the bruits reached Rector Thistlethwaite, who, feeling it was his Christian duty, if it was anyone's, went to enquire, while we children crowded round, chattering. Presently the slamming of a door was heard, and the rector came down the front path with a face as red as roast beef, stuttering that she was a married lady after all, and all was as God would wish it. On further questioning by Nicholas, who hung on his sleeve and worried at it, the rector said that it was his own belief that the lady was an actress, which was not godly, but he did not make the rules.

After he had gone off in the direction of the rectory mumbling about the whimsies of the gentry and the liberties of the age, my friends challenged me to go and enquire after the lady and see if she was an actress and to discover, if I could, what an actress might be.

I could hardly get out of the dare, as Grisella had thrice turned around and touched the ground, so to go against it would mean seven years' bad luck. And so, after some argument, I consented.

'That's the spirit,' said Nicholas.

Mary cried: 'Good luck to ye, Urse!'

I could hear their giggling as I crossed the path, approached the inn, lifted the latch on the door and passed inside it.

It was dim and cool in the inn, and the yeasty smell of hops rose up to my nose; my feet kicked the straw that lay strewn on the ground in readiness for spillages. There was a fire blazing in the large and oft-blackened hearth, but no one warming themselves by it, or tending the bar neither, so I swiftly crossed the room to a stout-looking door and turned the iron handle as slowly as I might.

A staircase lay behind the door, with a high-up mullioned window casting a dim pool of light that fell in a scatter of shapes across the steps. 'Hello?' I whispered – I half wanted to be found and sent back to my friends with a twisted ear.

No reply came, so, remembering the challenge, I crossed my fingers and stepped slowly up the stairs, going mighty carefully to avoid squeaking, and pausing on each step, my ears pricked for the coming heavy tread of furious grown-ups. I heard nothing to frighten me but the groan of boards overhead, higher up in the house.

I had almost got to the top, and was wondering what to do next and whether I might in all conscience go back outside and pretend the inn was empty after all, when I caught the sound of laughter: a woman's voice, bright and pleasantly musical. It floated out to where I stood, one hand on the newel, one toe pressed on the very top step.

'Confound thee, Mistress Minx!' came the rumbling voice of a man, and with it more laughter, and muffled sounds, and the creaking of a bed.

'Nay,' came the woman's voice. 'Not until we are wed, Felix. For I did not miss two performances to hole up in a low tavern and act as your concubine.'

'Hush, madame!' was all I heard before the voices dropped to murmurs that were beyond my hearing. I stood stock still on the landing knowing not what to do, for I knew ear-wigging to be a wrongdoing that was often punished with a spanking. I had turned back towards the staircase once more and was stealing my way down the first of the steps, when the door was flung open and the man emerged, still wearing his velvet breeches, his periwig askew.

'What's this?' he said, sweeping past me as I pressed against the wall, but took no more notice of me, and went down the stairs, banging the door behind him, so that it sprang open again with the force. I stood not knowing what to do, but then the woman's voice came.

'Who is there?'

I could hardly disobey a grown-up, and so I went meekly to the open chamber door and dropped one of my best curtsies (I had been practising but was still unsteady about the knees and very much given to leaning).

'Tis I, mistress,' I said, with my eyes politely pointing floorwards. 'Ursula Flight. But I did not hear a thing I oughtn't and will be on my way now, if it please ye, mistress.'

‘Strange, bold child!’ said the lady, coming towards me, and I saw she was very pretty, with a coil of chestnut hair and pearls at her ears and throat. She looked me up and down, with her painted lips twisted into a queer little moue. ‘What do you mean by lurking there? Do you live here, at the inn?’

‘Nay, but at Bynfield Hall and I do beg your pardon, mistress. For it was a challenge by my playmates,’ I said, knowing now the fat was in the fire. ‘And I am very sorry for troubling you.’

‘’Tis no trouble,’ said she, with a toss of her head, which rattled all the pearls. ‘Come in and tarry awhile, for I am apt to grow bored, and you amuse me with your strange, fierce face, child.’

I went in as she had bidden and stood with my arms crossed behind my back.

‘What do you wish to be when you grow up, Ursula Flight?’ said she.

‘Why, a dashing adventurer, and if I cannot be that, a nun, and if I cannot be that, a mother to ten children, all of them twins and with bright golden hair.’

‘Is that so,’ said she, with a twisted sort of smile. And then she looked at me. ‘Tell me, child. What age do you think I am?’

‘Why, I do not—’ All grown-ups looked famous old to me.

‘I am three-and-twenty, but I am a fool,’ she said, going over to the window and looking out of it, running her white hands up and down on the window-sill all the while. ‘And that man you saw just now is not my husband,’ she said, watching my eyes. ‘Does that amaze you, Ursula Flight?’ She had a pink look about her cheeks, and a restlessness about her person.

‘A little,’ I said. ‘For the rector said so and that you were not kidnapped after all.’

‘Nay, I am not kidnapped,’ she said. ‘But I am not wed. I told that man a falsehood when he came, and do you know why, little maid – aside from the fact he is a great sticky beak and should not be poking it hither and thither?’

‘Nay,’ said I, being mightily confused by the conversation.

‘Because I am an actress ’pon the stage in London, and ’tis not respectable. At Court I am much admired by the King – and, ooh, well everyone admires me, in truth. I am a great beauty, you know. I have silks and jewels and a little servant boy called Peregrine and a green parakeet in a golden cage brought from foreign lands, and I dine with duchesses and make merry all my days.’

I shuffled in my place. I was growing troubled that my friends would by now have run away and Mother would surely be cross at my staying out past dinner-time.

‘Forgive me, mistress,’ I said. ‘But what is an actress?’

‘What is an actress!’ cried the lady. ‘Are we that far from Court? But I see we are,’ she said, looking at my face. ‘An actress is a lady actor, who goes ’pon the stage and acts in plays, taking the parts of ladies – or of gentlemen if it is required – and in truth my own performances in breeches get the most applause of all. But never mind about that.’

‘The rector said ’tis not godly,’ I said.

She laughed at this and twirled at a lock of her hair. ‘I can find nothing in the Bible against it,’ she said. ‘And I have read many books, for I greatly delight in the written word as much as I do the spoken. But there are those that cannot abide change, nor the freedom of women neither, and will do anything to keep us down, and the whole world caught in the Dark Ages besides. And it is for us as women to put them in their place, and do as we will, though many would prate at us for it.’

‘I see,’ I said, though I only half did.

‘Acting is a wondrous career for a woman, in faith,’ said she, a brightness coming into her eyes. ‘For it means applause, and wages, and fame and flirtation – and if you play the thing right, jewels and marriage, for there are always noblemen who will call ’pon the ’Tiring Room, and are spun about the head by a cream-skinned wench half out of her shift. Such as he . . .’ She tossed her head towards the doorway. I followed her gaze.



‘But I gave it all up to let myself be driven in a draughty, rattly coach to this ghastly backwater because I thought by the end of it I would be a Marquess. Now it has become apparent that I have not got him by the nose as I had thought.’ She began to walk up and down the room a little, with a dainty, light-footed tread. ‘Unless I can get him to the church I have wasted my time, and have lost my career and my place besides.’

There did not seem to be much to say, and I did not understand the half of it, but I knew enough to say: ‘I am sorry, mistress.’

‘Aye,’ she said. ‘Aye.’

We stood still like that, her eyes fastened on the window, mine on the floor, waiting on the moment when I might make my escape. I was growing evermore uncomfortable that the man who was not her husband might return at any time, and cuff me for my intrusion, or worse.

I coughed.

‘Go now then, child,’ she said, turning to face me again and waving her hand at me. ‘But remember this. Ware the man that says he loves you – for it means nothing without the marriage contract. Nothing but tears.’

I ran then, caring not who heard me, but that I got away from the sad, beautiful lady and dark inn. Nicholas was the only one still waiting on the wall and he let out a low whistle when I told him what had transpired and that I had met the lady and gone into her chamber, though I did not say she was not married after all. I ran home wishing with all my might I was an actress ’pon the stage in London with a shell-pink gown and a green parakeet. I scrunched up my eyes so many times in my imagining, I woke in the morning with the first head pain of my life, which Goodsoule dosed with a posset made of nutmeg, orange peel and the burnt foot of a rabbit.



V



# LESSONS

*In which I begin my education*



I had got what I had prayed for on so many nights, on my knees, in my chamber. I had promised the Lord our God in heaven to do many things in the getting of it too: I would not chatter at dinner, I would put away my toys (the peg dolls *would* get out and roam about the house), I would practise my scales at the spinet and I would be obedient for my mother.

How fervently I had murmured with my eyes fast shut, my hands clasped together over my head: *O Christo Jesu in caelo, da mihi sor rem*. I had a brother already – Reginald had come along when I was two – but I knew I needed a sister too: I wanted someone to play with, and to tell my secrets to, and she would look well in the pudding cap I myself had worn which had been sewed by my mother in her confinement and was trimmed with gay yellow ribbons.

My sibling-lack was not for the want of my mother's trying. She oft grew stout and round about the middle, and went about in a loose-laced gown, groaning when she got off the couch, and grumbling at my father about the pains in her back – but she could not get a babe to live. Every twelvemonth or so there would come a time when I was hushed in the parlour or bade to play in the nursery, from where, roused by the strange sounds that echoed in the house, I would slip out to see a white-shrouded little bundle laid out on the table by the servants, which would then be taken off and put into the ground with the others

while my mother wept and my father prayed to God in heaven, send me another son, O Lord, amen.

By the time I got my sister, Reginald was a burly little boy of six; a whiny child who could never lose a game and was only sunny when being praised. I had given up trying to play with him, for he would not charade at prince and princess, or cruel king and pretty maid, or any of the other entertainments I devised for us with costumes. Neither did he like to stay out of doors and roam about Bear Wood, as I did. I cut us both branchlets for swords and tried to make him have a duel (he was supposed to be the Dutch, and me the King's man waiting to run him through at Lowestoft), but he went off and cried to Mother that I beat him, so I gave the whole thing up for lost, leaving him to lurk about the stables with the queer gleam in his eye that usually meant he was about to do a mischief to the cats.

My sister finally came, at the end of a mighty storm that tore the roof tiles off the stable and uprooted three saplings in the orchard. What I first took for the moaning of the wind around the gables was in truth my mother's wailing, a strange unearthly noise that lasted all the morning and frightened Muff, so that she leapt about the house, knocking over with a clatter the silver candelabra that my parents had got as a wedding present. I crept about the corridor, listening for the usual sound of women's tears and the appearance of the midwife with yet another tiny bundle – but the weeping did not come, and the midwife neither.

I tip-toed up to the door of my mother's chamber and pressed my ear to it. Through the thickness of the oak I could dimly perceive the tap and creak of several pairs of feet moving rapidly across the floor, and the rise and fall of voices, the cries of my mother, and then – oh wonder! – there started up a set of lusty infant yells which seemed to shake the very door and made me step quickly away from it. My father must have heard the crying too, for he came bounding up the stairs two at a time on his long legs, and crashed open the door.

An exclamation. The sound of voices. More footsteps.

My father came out again, ruffling my hair as he went. I knocked and was admitted by Mistress Knagg the midwife, a stout lady with burly forearms beneath her rolled-up sleeves and a kindly looking face. My mother's complexion was wan and her hair stuck fast to her cheeks with sweat, but she whispered that God be praised I had a sister, and showed me the babby, who was dark haired and fiery red all over, with a slimy, scrunched up face that could not be called beautiful and looked somewhat like my father, with the same bulbous nose and cupid's bow lips that he had, in miniature. She slept soundly while I kissed her hot little head and whispered in her ear that though she was ugly, it did not signify, for I was her big sister and would love her all my days.



Catherine was still a babe in arms, and become quite bonny, when I was told I should begin my education at last. We were playing cribbage after supper and my father handed me a hornbook on a thin leather strap. It was a thing of great significance, for he had decided – here he looked up at my mother, but she was chucking the babby's face, fussing and scarlet-cheeked in her swaddling – that at eight years of age I was old enough to begin my schooling. Today would be our very first lesson.

How I clapped at this! I had often wandered into my father's study and run my fingers along the leather-bound volumes on his shelf, before leafing through their pages and wondering at the meaning of the black letter-shapes, which I knew would be greatly interesting, if only I could make them out. My father was a very learned man who had taken a degree at Cambridge before marrying my mother, and it pleased me to be following in the family tradition. I had also been musing on my duties as an elder sister and it seemed fitting that I would be educated and could teach Catherine in turn.

Father's quill was too long for me; I could not get hold of it and flicked ink in a great arc that landed as a long dark spray across his face, his shirt, and the table. He said an oath, and the next lesson he had cut me

my own quill. I liked the dipping of it into the ink pot and the clicking, liquid sound as the nib hit the pot.

The first task my father set me about was to write my name and the name of our family, so that I would always be able to sign documents and contracts, such as the one pertaining to my marriage portion, when I was a grown-up lady. He drew my name out for me in a fine hand, with a flourish on the end, and set me about copying it, which I did painstakingly, but making many mistakes, and sighing over them, my lower lip caught between my teeth all the while. My childish blunders were many: I pressed the nib too firmly into the paper, and tore it, my hands grew clammy at the effort and I dropped the quill, and the shapes I made looked crude and ill-formed against my father's, but by Ascension Day I had mastered the thing at last.

I discovered, too, that there was nothing I liked more than to see my own name drawn out by my own hand, and so I wrote it everywhere I could, including places I knew were forbidden:



on the end papers of my prayer book, the inside of my left arm (it lasted for six days), and behind the door on the wall of my chamber (where perhaps it may be still, for I do not believe the current owner would distemper it).

'Mary cannot spell out her name as I can,' I said to my father at the end of a lesson – we had started on the counties of England, and the dukedoms and the Kings and Queens of England too; these I was to chant and scratch them over and over in my hornbook, to better commit them to memory. It gave me great pride to do what I knew none

of the village children could and the tools of my trade were precious to me: I sewed my own quill-case and, after carefully wiping the nib, stowed it there safely after every lesson.



It was coming on for summer; the windows were pushed wide open, and the scent of the lavender bush floated in. There was a bee buzzing near the top of the plant; he went from flower to flower, clinging onto each one and humming there for a while.

‘Is he making honey?’ I asked.

‘He is,’ said my father. ‘And next week we shall drink it in our honey wine.’ He moved around the things on his desk – sticks of sealing wax and the stamp with our family crest, a silver candle-snuffer, and books and scrolls, held open with weights. I liked to watch his hands, with their moon-shaped nails bitten down to the quick. I had started nibbling at my own nails, but Mother slapped my hand away and threatened a whipping. Hands were important to a lady – not so much to a man.

‘Mary could have lessons with *her* father,’ I said, returning to my original topic. ‘And then she might write her name out too. And we could write other things and send each other secret messages in invisible ink, such as ladies and gentlemen do in an intrigue!’

‘Perhaps,’ said my father, moving his books about.

‘But is it not a good idea, Father? I think it is. I shall run and tell her now and she can ask Mr Goodsoule to begin. He is not often at home as he works in the fields, but she will have to ask him nicely.’

I got down from my stool and began to wipe my inky hands. I was always being scolded for it.

‘I do not think Mary’s father will be able to give the lessons, as I do. He is in the fields all day, for his duty is with the cows.’

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘But p’raps it would do no harm to ask him. He might spare an hour, after supper, as we do when we swap verses. Even Mother likes that game.’

‘But I do not think Mr Goodsoule can make the letters himself, child. So he cannot teach it.’

‘Oh,’ I said, digesting this. ‘Well, then Mary must join in our lessons. Could she not do that?’

‘She might.’ He had moved over to the window and was watching the bee as it zig-zagged over the lavender. ‘But I do not think she would want to. Book-learning is not the thing of servants, for they do not need it. You will comprehend it better when you are older, child.’ He came back to me and put his hands on my shoulders. ‘Next lesson we will learn the habits of the honey-bee and his ways of making honey for our puddings.’

‘Aye, Father,’ I said.



IN THE NAME OF GODDE,  
HERE ARE THE RULES  
*of*  
OUR *CLUB*  
(*If you are Reggie GO AWAY*)  
Written down by URSULA FLIGHT  
&  
helped by MARY GOODSOULE to do it

On the 15th day of JULY, in the year 1673 A.D.

Rule the 1st: Do not tell about the S E C R E T S, on pain of a grisly, lingering death at Tyburn!

Rule the 2nd: Practise the dance steps and song every morning, even if your mother scolds you for it.

Rule the 3rd: Reginald and Johnny are the enemy!!! They smell of dung!

Rule the 4th: Our motto is Singulare Aude.

Rule the 5th: Our pass-word is 'Blue Boy'. (For he is our favourite horse!)

Rule the 6th: Our uniform is bonnet straps undone and the nut-shell necklaces (to be kept in the secret box – shhh).

Rule the 7th: On *washing day* we meet in Bear Wood by the great twisted root and speak the *solemn vow* and wear the vizards and when we do this we bring great luck upon us and we will be happy all our days and be rich and marry well and live next door to each other for ever when we are grown.

Rule the 8th: We are best friends and Grisella cannot speak to us.

Rule the 9th: Huzzah for Muff!

Rule the 10th: Huzzah for the King and Queen of England!



I soon began to take such pleasure in my expanding knowledge that I grew to anticipate my lessons as I once had my mealtimes. I remember now too well the feeling that my young mind was opening up and enlarging with each new subject we began. I developed a craving – to read more, to absorb more facts, to memorize more verses, and to understand mathematics, which we had started with an abacus, and which was a great puzzle to me, though I slaved at its understanding and spent nights after bedtime wondering aloud over complicated subtractions and the great eternal mystery that was algebra.

My father had started me on the Classics as soon as I had got my reading and writing to a standard that he was pleased with, and this I greatly enjoyed. The Greek myths were my greatest discovery – I begged my father to read them to me aloud, for listening to his low, measured voice was another pleasure of my lessons: he was a great story-teller, and could speak well, and so had the knack of making things seem diverting. During the telling of these tales I liked to creep up to him and lean my head on his arm, enjoying the vibrations of his voice and the comforting heat of his nearness while he told of the



cyclopes and the Titans and the Argonauts. I shivered to hear of the horrible minotaur burrowed deep in his underground lair, and Medusa with her undulating snakes'-pit hair that was cut off by Perseus. I liked to draw as he told me these stories, filling my hornbook with strange gods, coiled serpents, and armoured warriors in golden winged sandals. We moved from myths to the languages of the ancients, reading Homer and Ovid and Virgil together, my father patiently correcting me as I traced my finger over the unfamiliar characters and recited my verbs aloud: *amo, amas, amat, amanus, amatis, amant*. We began to use Latin as a private language between us, to my mother's irritation, for she had never learnt it beyond her prayer book, and though my father offered to teach her, she did not have the patience to try.

*'Salve pater. Quid agis?'*

*'Bene. Esurio.'*

*'Mibi placet lingua latina!'*

At my father's encouragement I spent much of my time roaming about his library finding books to devour – even when he was away, I had his permission to take what I would, though my mother was always calling me to come to her to do some task I thought very dull – for in comparison to reading, there was no joy in mending my stockings or practising my music.

It was with great joy one rainy morning that I came upon a high-up shelf near the window which was stacked with volumes of plays bound in calfskin and, opening their pages, found tales of other worlds, of pretty maids and fearsome kings; of enchanted islands and avenging wizards – I took them one by one and read them at a fevered pace. It was my habit to creep off into corners of the house where I could not be disturbed: on my chamber window-seat, half-hidden by the curtain; under the vegetable store in the scullery; in the low crooked branch of the apple tree. It was here I had Shakespeare, and Fletcher and Jonson and Marlowe and, when no one was watching, Dryden. I copied out great speeches and committed them to memory, reciting them for the assembled company after supper, with my hands clasped behind my

back and my voice rattling a little in my throat, for I was nervous at first, before I grew used to the thing and became bolder. All the while the actress at the inn floated into my mind, and as I declaimed and struck poses or when I took my curtseys in the parlour, I did it all as I imagined she would do it, with pearl drops in my ears, a toss of my head and a bright, pleasant voice that floated on the air.

As I grew in confidence at these charades, it seemed natural to include Mary in my games, for as my ever-constant companion, she was the loyal audience to all my recitations, and, I soon realized, could play the parts I could not. There was the difficulty that she could not read to contend with, but she was as good a mimic as any child and, after diligently learning her lines with me by rote, spoke her part as well as any I had heard.

We had the orchard as an outdoor stage when it was fine, and when it rained we had the parlour, if we pushed back the side tables and set the vases on the floor against destruction. On these occasions it was often the habit of my brother and sister to creep in and be our audience, and for their sake we began to costume ourselves.

We gave performances of *Tamburlaine* in which I strode about in Father's cloak making extravagant heroic gestures which seemed to increase twofold at each playing – for I well enjoyed my part as the Scythian shepherd who seemed to me a bold and dashing fellow. We acted *The Alchemist* and *The Maid's Tragedy* and *Cymbeline* and *Macbeth*, though we had to get Muff to stand in as Third Witch, and she would not keep still, and barked. When we had run through all we had and the children clamoured for something new, I began to devise us our own little scenes, which I scribbled down in my hornbook. To encourage Mary's involvement – for at first she was wont to say that my mother would not like the playing – I let her be the princess or the queen or the chaste and pretty maid, while I took the roles of nursemaid, tavern keeper, rake and hobbling serf. I discovered in these roles that I had a flair for comedy, and the thrill that came from making people laugh; there was no greater reward for my scribblings than my sister Catherine's