

'The Eyes of other People are the Eyes that ruin us. If all but myself were blind, I should want neither fine Clothes, fine Houses nor Fine Furniture.' Letter to Benjamin Vaughan, 1784.

Society's Eyes

There she exists. Body bending over a copper pot, lips pressed in tantalising concentration. The swirling cloak of steam is fae-like. I could watch her stir for hours.

'Miss Harrison, why are you stood in my kitchen?' Mrs Potts' voice rings out like a warning bell.

'Mrs Potts, you know I care about the welfare of my parents' staff. I simply had to check on the morning's happenings. Is there anything I can help with?' My eyes glance over to Flora who pauses mid-stir.

'Do you know how to cook, young miss?'

'No, but I know the art of taste-testing. Perchance you have a spare rhubarb and custard biscuit?'

Mrs Potts folds her arms, a small smile spreads. 'I've lost count of the amount of times I've chased you away with a sound hiding from my tea towel. Biscuit thief was never a worthier pet name.'

I walk over to Flora. She lifts the ladle and pours the soup into my mouth. With the edge she catches the creamy droplets, how I wish it were by her fingers. 'Mmm, this is the most exquisite soup, you've outdone yourself again, Flora.'

'It's a pleasure to hear your praise. I'm sure the lord and lady of the house will also be pleased.' She dips a curtsy, which I return.

'Mrs Potts, are you certain you have no post that needs delivering to town? If so, might I borrow Flora to accompany me on my ride.'

'I assure you there are no errands that need performing. Besides, Flora has other duties to attend while I finish seasoning the soup. Hop to it, girl. The fires need preparing.'

How I wish Flora could finish me.

Flora darts towards the stone steps. ‘Wait!’ She abruptly stops and turns. ‘Mrs Potts, I have need of a lady’s maid. I’m forever impressed and shocked with how dexterous Flora’s fingers are. Her nimbleness would make her an expert at unlacing corsets and undoing pesky buttons.’

She glares lightning. Heat creeps into her cheeks, turning them the colour of pink blossom. They remind me of the roses I’d swiftly pluck from Mr Digby’s pristine flowerbeds. Like a chivalric knight, I would thrust them at the fleeting forms of female staff. The gesture would earn me a giggle of bemusement or a curse if I snagged their cracked palms with thorns.

‘Flora is busy enough.’ Mrs Potts signals with her eyes and Flora disappears upstairs.

Each thud of the stone steps punches my heart. The swirl of her parting skirts like a waltz coming to an end. A cough from Mrs Potts draws my attention.

She sprinkles some pepper into what my youthful imagination once perceived as a cauldron. After instructing Betty to continue stirring, she rubs my forearms. ‘I’ll never forget the day the lord and lady of the house brought you down to meet us. Sweet as a lamb you were. We joked you’d fit in the jelly moulds, so tiny was your size.’ A catch in her voice causes her to pause. She smooths my ringlets behind my shoulders. ‘Now, look at the woman you’ve become.’

How could I not? Every time I step into town with my parents, they cast me looks. Gentlemen tip their hats and waft their pipe smoke away from my face. They step aside as if I were a celestial specimen. Their whispers felt visual. Like moles, their compliments burrow into my spine.

‘Elsie, forgive this old crone’s deviation from proper ways of speaking, but I think of you as the lass I was never blessed with. I promise that this luncheon will knock Master Humphrey’s socks off. He’s sure to propose.’

If I were a hedgehog, my spines would be poised to fence. His name alone brews a drilling headache. I fight hard to snuff the threatening tears. With all the dreary years of home tutelage, I lift my voice as if displaying a vase of yellow roses in all their unfaithful glory.

‘Nothing would make me happier than to dine on your scrumptious food with a man of such infamous character.’

Mrs Potts titters as she releases her motherly hold. ‘The flush in your cheeks tells all—you’re smitten. Why, it even causes your pretty tongue to slip. Famed or famous I think you meant. Pay no mind to rumours. Play your cards right, and you’ll have a lot of green-eyed ladies wishing they were in your shoes.’

Thank God I can’t play Whist. I bob my head and rush upstairs to find Flora.

If alchemy is the art of turning inferior metal to gold, then here, my love mutates into a phoenix. At her gentle beckon, the flames jovially roar to life. They enlighten her autumnal curls, making her the closest thing I could imagine a divine presence to be. At the sudden floorboard creak, she whips around wielding the poker.

‘Elsie, you almost made a ghost of me!’ she breathlessly scolds, but I detect the quiver of relief.

‘I’m sure that blazing sword is rather intended for another,’ I jest, gesturing at the hooked iron bar.

She douses it before lowering it into the stand. The hiss perfectly echoes our feelings. ‘How can I pour you wine in the presence of that oaf?’

‘My darling, I have no intention of accepting his proposal. Think of it as a poorly written comedy. Think of him as one of Wilde’s characters strutting about like a peacock spouting nonsense.’

Flora giggles at the image. Those laughs are a restorative balm on any day. ‘I suppose he’ll present you with some extravagant gift that I could never hope to buy you even if I eternally toiled in Paradise.’

I scoff as I do internally whenever I receive a calling card from a potential suitor. ‘Please, I once had to endure a lecture length tale of Humphrey’s quest to find me the finest bouquet in all of Covent Garden Market. How the blisters he gained made him as lame as an unshod horse.’ I limp towards her.

She squeals in mock horror. ‘I bet he bought the cheapest bunch. Covent Garden is not where your circles would usually travel to purchase flowers. A private florist would be more appropriate.’

‘Sweetheart, that’s not even half of it. I spied him from my window pilfering Mr Digby’s Forget-Me-Nots!’

Her mouth is agape at the revelation. ‘What a trickster! Thankfully, you’re a sharp pin to stick past his bluff.’ She steps closer. ‘Still, I can’t help but worry about the outcome of this luncheon.’

‘Flora, he knows nothing about my heart. For example, if I asked him how I like my baths, he’d stare as if he’d been struck by the moon. Yet, you would answer?’

Without missing a beat, she recites, ‘Lavender sprigs and water warm enough to chase away the chill from your bones, but not enough to scald.’

‘And if I were to ask, what’s my favourite breakfast?’

‘Simple and light. Toast with a sprinkle of cinnamon or sugar in the winter. Strawberry jam in the summer.’

Her melodic voice makes my chest swell with love. I adore how she effortlessly chimes my preferences. ‘How do I like to spend an evening?’

‘I dare not give the truth air. What if someone hears?’

I press up against her body. Those breasts are softer than any feather pillow I could ever hope to rest my head upon. She is the reason I make it through a mind-numbing day. I’d endure anything to be her wife. Though this world would never permit such a bond.

‘Elsie, what if someone sees?’ she barely whispers. Her skin blanches to that of an angel mushroom. Such a beautiful name for something so deadly.

‘Damn their eyes and Gaia’s! If they are so repulsed by love, then I have no need of their admiration or acquaintanceship. Let them shred my reputation to ribbons. I’ll live out my days and nights in silky lace, cuddled between your intoxicating thighs.’

Flora giddily sweeps me off my feet. Once she lowers me, we kiss as if the ticking of the grandfather clock is signalling our impending demise. Breathless, we cup each other’s faces. I could sketch each mole and her smile lines blindfolded. No blemish is unknown. Her

scars from miraculously surviving smallpox as an infant simply flood my heart and soul with gratitude. The speckles are sparrow-like. What a woman.

‘Elsie, where would we live?’

That voice itself a wedding bell. ‘I’d live in a shoebox sized room if it I meant I could spend every waking moment at your side.’

We go to kiss. The sound of footsteps repels us. ‘Miss Harrison, apologies, but Lord Humphrey is expecting your company.’

Like a taxidermist tightly sewing up their carcass, I stitch a smile. ‘Thank you, tell him I’ll be down in half an hour. I must change into something more suitable.’ I send Elsie a wink before dashing up the corridor.

Grinning, I detect her dainty footsteps not far behind.