

Ladylike

"Why are women not permitted to join the clergy?" Ellis asked the father as they refastened their trousers.

"Because jobs are done by those who can do them. And I've never known a woman to know God so well as men do," he replied, plucking a coarse hair from between his teeth.

"Is it women's distance from God then that stifles them?"

"No, it is God's distance from women."

"But... why would God make the lesser sex so privileged?"

"Privileged?" the father gasped, pulling his robe over his shoulders and furrowing his brow. "It is no privilege to be a woman, and it is certainly no privilege to be kept from God!"

"Of course not. But women are not charged with the hard truths of life as men are. They are coddled, not only by God, but their husbands as well," Ellis explained, wiping a speck of semen from his shirt collar. "Awarded every luxury in life without having to work the least bit for it... seems to me, women have quite cleverly secured themselves at the expense of their male superiors."

"Perhaps... but if we did not care for them, they would be too overcome by the brutality of life to continue to live. So, in fact, they are not privileged—they are imbecilic pets, cared for out of necessity."

Ellis bit his tongue and swallowed his point. He suspected women were not as helpless as they seemed. For he had heard of a lady so fair that she could bring any man to his knees. And, as Ellis's present occupation was no more than the duties of a wife, the notion of being a woman fascinated him. After all, his delicate features and boyish voice often saw him mistaken for a woman. Yet, he still struggled and toiled in life simply to scrape by. It was unfair that the fairer sex should receive, for nothing, all that Ellis's endeavors could not produce—feasts, riches and wealth the likes of nobility and kings. And, as Ellis finished dressing himself, his curiosity on the matter got the better of him.

“Father... what do you know of madam Bailie?”

It had been a merry afternoon on the hills above town—the first day of summer. Gay children and frolicking lovers took to the grass with a lustful exuberance not felt since the plague lifted. Kites danced in the wind, tickling the clouds in such a delightful manner it might have made God himself chuckle. And while the townsfolk went blissfully out to play, the young, beautiful, Elisabet Bailie took to investigating a private estate—one treasure at a time.

Gold-trimmed-wallpaper and crystal-ivory-chandeliers were unwanted distractions to Elisabet as she did not have the time to peel the paper or the strength to carry the chandeliers. Instead, she found the currency of her meals sandwiched in jewelry boxes or sprinkled on countertops. If caught she'd spend the rest of her days in jail, or, be hung and awarded to the local mortician for his personal preference. But she would never allow it to come to that—after all, it was her errand in these explorations to find a husband and bring an end to her pilfering. For though, Elisabet was a fine and respected lady, she was now too poor to sustain her reputation, and was thus obliged to rob out of necessity or ease.

Elisabet tapped her fingers along the jewelry box as though she were petting a poodle; licking her lips to taste the tart residue of the strawberry she'd plucked from the pantry. She had managed to limit herself to no more than a few bites of fruit, a wedge of bree, half a baguette, and a set of china wrapped in bed sheets. But, before she could satisfy her appetites further, a noise drew her attention—a man stumbling from room to room, drunk and disorderly.

The man appeared lost and confused until he spotted the bar. Then, with long, uncertain strides he toppled himself forward into a chair, repositioning himself until he was seated upright. Elisabet crept slowly down the hall so that she could have a better look at him, and see, whether or not, he was in fact the owner of the estate she was presently intruding in—a widower who had locked himself away to be eaten by his grief

His wife had been murdered with his little one not three weeks before, and though Elisabet did hesitate to rob from him, she did so only to observe. The man had a sullen tender face and ragged posture—slouched in his chair like the drunkard he'd become. He clung loosely to a decanter, open at his side. His vest had been stained either by consuming or expelling his bodily fluids along with those at the bar before him. He was a complete mess, and exactly what Elisabet had been looking for—so far as the man would know, it would be love at first sight.

The guard dogs were easily distracted by a slab of meat. And, the servants, according to the accounts of the townsfolk, never entered within ten rooms of their master. Ellis, rushed from bush to bush of the expansive garden surrounding the mansion. It appeared meticulously tended to, yet deserted all the same. He looked upon the house contemplating the best entry, eventually deciding on a wall of vines, which he climbed up towards a tiny window.

The mansion was very large. So large, the footsteps and words of it's occupant would echo themselves ten fold before finding her other ear. It was a home often spoken of by the people; one rumored equally for it's walls as it was for it's owner—madam Elisabet Bailie—as fine a lady, and profound a beauty, as there had ever been. But, it was not long ago that a fire ravaged her figure and dignity, forever confining her within the walls of her late husband's mansion. Accompanied now only by silent servants and the haunting memories of all she had lost.

Ellis, however, was far from a lady. And though he did everything in his power to be regarded well by others, it was simply out of his hands—for he was too fair a lad to be treated as a man. And, though, his feminine features did play their part in finding him beds to sleep in, and clients to sleep with, the reward of more than a night's sin was beyond Ellis.

Thus, unable to entrance the wealthy, Ellis found his riches in others keepings—burglarizing households for every scrap of extravagant-wear that would otherwise have eluded him. Though, on this day, he crept through the halls of the Bailie estate not for it's spoils, but for his desire to stumble upon the madam herself; to see what had become of who Ellis would give anything to be.

"I can hear a mouse's heart quicken when it enters the pantry," a voice whispered, as Ellis crept through the halls—frozen in his place by the sound of someone approaching. But though he ducked and twitched his head every which way, there was no one to be seen. "I can hear the bells of the cathedral before they sound and the song of the birds deep in the forest," the voice continued.

Ellis, now afraid that he had been discovered, turned quickly to try and retrace his steps. He no longer desired his curiosity over his life, nor any treasure that would see it forfeit—the voice was getting closer.

"And I most certainly can hear you... whoever you are."

"Sorry, I must have the wrong house," he tried to explain, his voice high and shrill.

"Oh child... I heard your lie slither from your teeth even before you spoke," the voice exclaimed, closer and closer with every breath. "Why did you intrude here today?"

For some foolish jest, or wager placed upon you by someone lacking the nerve to come themselves?... or, perhaps... for me?"

"A mistake is all... one remedied best by my immediate departure."

"A mistake indeed," the voice whispered, a dollop of breath warming Ellis's shoulder. He turned quickly to and away from the figure at his side—a melted woman, the likeness of a prune left under the sun. Her eyes were white and her features barren: an ancient witch so hideous even death would not take her. "All this way and you cannot look upon me?" madam Bailie hissed, taking Ellis by the shoulders and shaking his eyes open. "Isn't this what you came for child? Isn't it!?"

"No!" he cried, thrashing about to break free, but he could not.

"Then, what?! What has brought you here?!"

"I... I..."

"Do you think I wait for guests to sneer at me?!" madam Bailie shouted, bringing her hand down hard on Ellis. "To mock and wound me!" she continued, her voice sinking to despair.

Though stripped of its features, madam Bailie's face still showed signs of human emotion. She was crying—rigid lines of her tears falling from one scarred crevice to the next. And though Ellis suffered blow after blow from her hand, he felt worse for the expression she showed.

"Please, miss!" he begged, now curled into a protective ball on the marble floor. "I was only curious!"

"And I will skin you for it!" madam Bailie shrieked, a tear falling with every agonizing swing of her arm—over and over again. She breathed heavily, gasping for air in between sobs. She had not had a visitor for some time and was now too filled with rage to regard anyone any better than she did herself.

"I only wanted to see the greatest lady there ever was!" Ellis explained, announcing his curiosity in an attempt to end his beating.

His words struck a flicker of life into the pale dead eyes of madam Bailie. She stumbled a step back, as though all the air in her lungs had been stolen. She could in fact hear as well as she claimed to, and had only stopped her assault for the sincerity of Ellis' tone.

"W-what did you say?" she whispered, her lip trembling as she gripped the wall for support.

Stunned, Ellis clutched his bruises and rose to his feet. He looked upon the blind old woman with both pity and admiration. He would not return her blows nor toy with her dignity—it was her council, after all, that he had come for.

"They say 'royalty would kneel to you,'" Ellis exclaimed, recalling the father's words that had led him to her estate. "They say 'men would leave their wives incase they should happen upon you; they say,'" he declared, stopped short by madam Bailie's hand upon his mouth.

"And what do they say of me now?"

"That you are locked away... and no one has seen you."

"And if I allow you to leave... what will your words be?"

"I do not wish to leave," Ellis declared, raising his arms in defense in case she attempted to remove him. "I have come for you; not for the sight of you, or the story of it, but for your council."

"Council? What council could I give?"

"I... I wish to be a lady," Ellis whispered, with barely nerve enough to say his true desire. He had known she was blind, and hoped it enough for him to fool her. But, as he watched the scars on her brow twitch in reaction to his words, he was weary of his own ruse.

"A lady?"

"Yes. I wish to be a lady; to woo a man of wealth so that I need not struggle in life any longer. But... I'm afraid I don't quite know how."

Madam Bailie turned her eyes up toward Ellis's face as though she could truly see him. Her lips parted and sealed three times before she uttered another sound. "In striking you, have I drawn blood or damaged your features?"

"No, madam."

"Come here then," she said, raising her hands to Ellis' face. Her fingers smoothly caressed and tickled every inch of Ellis' head. His hair, long, thick and lustrous had been washed for the occasion. His lips, plump and ripe, had been polished with diluted-

poison so they would blossom to their fullest. And his skin had been soaked, replenished, and, finally, shaved so closely Ellis feared the wind could now pierce him.

“Please be honest.”

“A man is a simple creature,” she replied, closing her eyes and smelling the air. “They are persuaded by beauty, overcome by lust and maddened by desire. It is not your features alone that will win a man, but the manner in which you feature them,” she explained, returning her hands to her side and exhaling a grumbling sigh. A smile cracked along her face as she coughed a giggle. “You are right... you don’t know how to

Continued in The Collection: Volume One
