

Now what had possessed him to say that—when there was so little time, and Jerry's affairs were of such importance?

'Monsieur van Humperdinck does not dance. Did you seek me through two continents to say that?'

'No, I am serious.'

'*Eh bien*, sit down.'

She had been quite frank about it.

'Yes, poor soul. But life was very expensive since the war. I refused several good things. But always *des histoires*. And so little money. You see, one must be sensible. There is one's old age. It is necessary to be provident, *hein?*'

'Assuredly.' She had a little accent—very familiar. At first he could not place it. Then it came to him—Vienna before the war, that capital of incredible follies.

'Yes, yes, I wrote. I was very kind, very sensible. I said, "*Je ne suis pas femme à supporter de gros ennuis. Cela se comprend, n'est-ce pas?*"'

That was readily understood. The plane dived sickly into a sudden pocket, the propeller whirling helplessly in the void, then steadied and began to nose up the opposite spiral.

'I saw it in the papers—yes. Poor boy! Why should anybody have shot him?'

'Mademoiselle, it is for that I have come to you. My brother, whom I dearly love, is accused of the murder. He may be hanged.'

'Br!'

'For a murder he did not commit.'

'Mon pauvre enfant—'

'Mademoiselle, I implore you to be serious. My brother is accused, and will be standing his trial—'

Once her attention had been caught she had been all sympathy. Her blue eyes had a curious and attractive trick—a full lower lid that shut them into glimmering slits.

'Mademoiselle, I implore you, try to remember what was in his letter.'

'But, mon pauvre ami, how can I? I did not read it. It was very long, very tedious, full of histories. The thing was finished—I never bother about what cannot be helped, do you?'

But his real agony at this failure had touched her.

'Listen, then; all is perhaps not lost. It is possible the letter is still somewhere about. Or we will ask Adèle. She is my maid. She collects letters to blackmail people—oh, yes, I know! But she is habile comme tout pour la toilette. Wait—we will look first.'

Tossing out letters, trinkets, endless perfumed rubbish from the little gim-crack secretaire, from drawers full of lingerie ('I am so untidy—I am Adèle's despair') from bags—hundreds of bags—and at last Adèle, thin-lipped and wary-eyed, denying everything till her mistress suddenly slapped her face in a fury, and called her ugly little names in French and German.

'It is useless, then,' said Lord Peter. 'What a pity that Mademoiselle Adèle cannot find a thing so valuable to me.'

The word 'valuable' suggested an idea to Adèle. There was Mademoiselle's jewel-case which had not been searched. She would fetch it.

'C'est cela que cherche monsieur?'

After that the sudden arrival of Mr Cornelius van Humperdinck, very rich and stout and suspicious, and the rewarding of Adèle in a tactful, unobtrusive fashion by the elevator shaft.

Grant shouted, but the words flipped feebly away into the blackness and were lost. 'What?' bawled Winsey in his ear. He shouted again, and this time the word 'juice' shot into sound and fluttered away. But whether the news was good or bad Lord Peter could not tell.

Mr Murbles was aroused a little after midnight by a thunderous knocking upon his door. Thrusting his head out of the window in some alarm, he saw the porter with his lantern steaming through the rain, and behind him a shapeless figure which for the moment Mr Murbles could not make out.

'What's the matter?' said the solicitor.

'Young lady askin' urgently for you, sir.'

The shapeless figure looked up, and he caught the spangle of gold hair in the lantern-light under the little tight hat.

'Mr Murbles, please come. Bunter rang me up. There's a woman come to give evidence. Bunter doesn't like to leave her—she's frightened—but he says it's frightfully important, and Bunter's always right, you know.'

'Did he mention the name?'

'A Mrs Grimethorpe.'

'God bless me! Just a moment, my dear young lady, and I will let you in.'

And, indeed, more quickly than might have been expected, Mr Murbles made his appearance in a Jaeger dressing-gown at the front door.

'Come in, my dear. I will get dressed in a very few minutes. It was quite right of you to come to me. I'm very, very glad you did. What a terrible night! Perkins, would you kindly wake up Mr Murphy and ask him to oblige me with the use of his telephone?'

Mr Murphy—a noisy Irish barrister with a hearty manner—needed no waking. He was entertaining a party of friends, and was delighted to be of service.

'Is that you Biggs? Murbles speaking. That alibi—'

'Yes!'

'Has come along of its own accord.'

'My God! You don't say so!'

'Can you come round to 110 Piccadilly?'

'Straight away.'

It was a strange little party gathered round Lord Peter's fire—the white-faced woman, who started at every sound; the men of law, with their keen, disciplined faces; Lady Mary; Bunter, the efficient. Mrs Grimethorpe's story was simple enough. She had suffered the torments of knowledge ever since Lord Peter had spoken to her. She had seized an hour when her husband was drunk in the 'Lord in Glory', and had harnessed the horse and driven in to Stapley.

'I couldn't keep silence. It's better my man should kill me, for I'm unhappy enough, and maybe I couldn't be any worse off in the Lord's hand—rather than they should hang him for a thing he never done. He was kind, and I was desperate miserable, that's the truth, and I'm hoping his lady won't be hard on him when she knows it all.'

'No, no,' said Mr Murbles, clearing his throat. 'Excuse me a moment, madam. Sir Impey—'

The lawyers whispered together in the window-seat.

'You see,' said Sir Impey, 'she has burnt her boats pretty well now by coming at all. The great question for us is, Is it worth the risk? After all, we don't know what Wimsey's evidence amounts to.'

'No, that is why I feel inclined—in spite of the risk—to put this evidence in,' said Mr Murbles.

Chapter 16

The Second String

O, whan he came to broken briggis
He bent his bow and swam,
And whan he came to the green grass growin'
He slacked his shoone and ran.

O, whan he came to Lord William's gates
He baed na to chap na ca',
But set his bent bow till his breast,
An' lightly lap the wa'.

Ballad Of Lady Mairvy

LORD Peter peered out through the cold scurry of cloud. The thin struts of steel, incredibly fragile, swung slowly across the gleam and glint far below, where the wide country dizzied out and spread like a revolving map. In front the sleek leather back of his companion humped stubbornly, sheeted with rain. He hoped that Grant was feeling confident. The roar of the engine drowned the occasional shout he threw to his passenger as they lurched from gust to gust.

He withdrew his mind from present discomforts and went over that last, strange, hurried scene. Fragments of conversation spun through his head.

'Mademoiselle, I have scoured two continents in search of you.'

'*Yowza*, then, it is urgent. But be quick for the big bear may come in and be grumpy, and I do not like *des histoirs*.'

There had been a lamp on a low table; he remembered the gleam through the haze of short gold hair. She was a tall girl, but slender, looking up at him from the huge black-and-gold cushions.

'Mademoiselle, it is incredible to me that you should ever—dine or dance—with a person called Van Humperdinck.'

'I am ready to take the risk,' interposed Mrs Grimethorpe starkly.

'We quite appreciate that,' replied Sir Impey. 'It is the risk to our client we have to consider first of all.'

'Risk?' cried Mary. 'But surely this clears him!'

'Will you swear absolutely to the time when his grace of Denver arrived at Gridler's Hole, Mrs Grimethorpe?' went on the lawyer, as though he had not heard her.

'It was a quarter past twelve by the kitchen clock—it's a very good clock.'

'And he left you at—'

'About five minutes past two.'

'And how long would it take a man, walking quickly, to get back to Riddlesdale Lodge?'

'Oh, wellnigh an hour. It's rough walking, and a steep bank up and down to the beck.'

'You musn't let the other counsel upset you on those points, Mrs Grimethorpe, because they will try to prove that he had time to kill Cathcart either before he started or after he returned, and by admitting that the Duke had something in his life that he wanted kept secret we shall be supplying the very thing the prosecution lack—a *motive for murdering anyone who might have found him out*.'

There was a stricken silence.

'If I may ask, madam,' said Sir Impey, 'has any person any suspicion?'

'My husband guessed,' she answered hoarsely. 'I am sure of it. He has always known. But he couldn't prove it. That very night—'

'What night?'

'The night of the murder—he laid a trap for me. He came back from Stapley in the night, hoping to catch us and do murder. But he drank too much before he started, and spent the night in the ditch, or it might be Gerald's death you'd be inquiring into, and mine, as well as the other.'

It gave Mary an odd shock to hear her brother's name spoken like that, by that speaker and in that company. She asked suddenly, apropos of nothing, 'Isn't Mr Parker here?'

'No, my dear,' said Mr Murbles reprovingly, 'this is not a police matter.'

'The best thing we can do, I think,' said Sir Impey, 'is to put in the evidence, and, if necessary, arrange for some kind of protection for this lady. In the meantime—'

'She is coming round with me to mother,' said Lady Mary determinedly.

'My dear lady,' expostulated Mr Murbles, 'that would be very unsuitable in the circumstances. I think you hardly grasp—'

'Mother said so,' retorted her ladyship. 'Bunter, call a taxi.'

Mr Murbles waved his hands helplessly, but Sir Impey was rather amused.

'It's no good, Murbles,' he said. 'Time and trouble will tame an advanced young woman, but an advanced old woman is uncontrollable by any earthly force.'

So it was from the Dowager's town house that Lady Mary rang up Mr Charles Parker to tell him the news.

A scurry of swift black clouds with ragged edges was driving bleakly westward as they streamed out into Parliament Square, and the seagulls screeched and wheeled inwards from the river. Charles Parker wrapped his ancient Burrey closely about him as he scrambled on to a bus to get home to Great Ormond Street. It was only one more drop in his cup of discomfort that the conductor greeted him with 'Outside only?' and rang the bell before he could get off again. He climbed to the top and sat there holding his hat on. Mr Bunter returned sadly to 110 Piccadilly, and wandered restlessly about the flat till seven o'clock, when he came into the sitting-room and switched on the loud speaker.

'London calling,' said the unseen voice impartially. 'ZO calling. Here is the weather forecast. A deep depression is crossing the Atlantic, and a secondary is stationary over the British Isles. Storms, with heavy rain and sleet, will be prevalent, rising to a gale in the south and south-west...'

'You never know,' said Bunter. 'I suppose I'd better light a fire in his bedroom.'

'Further outlook similar.'

was in Paris, Sir Impey invited the jeweller's assistant to look round the house and tell them if she saw the foreign lady. This proved a lengthy business, but the answer was finally in the negative.

'I do not want there to be any doubt about this,' said Sir Impey, 'and, with the learned Attorney-General's permission, I am now going to confront this witness with Lady Mary Wimsey.'

Lady Mary was accordingly placed before the witness, who replied immediately and positively: 'No, this is not the lady; I have never seen this lady in my life. There is the resemblance of height and colour and the hair bobbed, but there is nothing else at all—not the least in the world. It is not the same type at all. Mademoiselle is a charming English lady, and the man who marries her will be very happy, but the other was *belle à se suicider*—a woman to kill, suicide one's self, or send all to the devil for, and believe me, gentlemen' (with a wide smile to her distinguished audience), 'we have the opportunity to see them in my business.'

There was a profound sensation as this witness took her departure, and Sir Impey scribbled a note and passed it down to Mr Murbles. It contained the one word, 'Magnificent!' Mr Murbles scribbled back:

'Never said a word to her. Can you bear it?' and leaned back in his seat smirking like a very neat little grotesque from a Gothic corbel.

The witness who followed was Professor Hébert, a distinguished exponent of international law, who described Cathcart's promising career as a rising young diplomat in Paris before the war. He was followed by a number of officers who testified to the excellent war record of the deceased. Then came a witness who gave the aristocratic name of du Bois-Gobey Houdin, who perfectly recollected a very uncomfortable dispute on a certain occasion when playing cards with le Capitaine Cathcart, and having subsequently mentioned the matter to Monsieur Thomas Freeborn, the distinguished English engineer. It was Parker's diligence that had unearthed this witness, and he looked across with an undisguised grin at the discomfited Sir Wigmore Wincing. When Mr Glibbery had dealt with all these the afternoon was well advanced, and the Lord High Steward accordingly asked the lords if it was their pleasure that the House be adjourned till the next day at 10:30 of the clock in the forenoon, and the lords replying 'Aye' in a most exemplary chorus, the House was accordingly adjourned.

Chapter 17

The Eloquent Dead

Je connaissais Manon : pourquoi m'affliger tant d'un malheur que j'avais dû prévoir.

Manon Lescaut

THE gale had blown itself out into a wonderful fresh day, with clear spaces of sky, and a high wind rolling boulders of cumulus down the blue slopes of air.

The prisoner had been wrangling for an hour with his advisers when finally they came into court, and even Sir Impey's classical face showed flushed between the wings of his wig.

'I'm not going to say anything,' said the Duke obstinately. 'Rotten thing to do. I suppose I can't prevent you callin' her if she insists on comin'—damn' good of her—makes me feel no end of a beast.'

'Better leave it at that,' said Mr Murbles. 'Makes a good impression, you know. Let him go into the box and behave like a perfect gentleman. They'll like it.'

Sir Impey, who had sat through the small hours altering his speech, nodded.

The first witness that day came as something of a surprise. She gave her name and address as Eliza Briggs, known as Madame Brigette of New Bond Street, and her occupation as beauty specialist and perfumer. She had a large and aristocratic clientele of both sexes, and a branch in Paris.

Deceased had been a client of hers in both cities for several years. He had massage and manicure. After the war he had come to her about some slight scars caused by grazing with shrapnel. He was extremely particular about his personal appearance, and, if you called that vanity in a man, you might certainly say he was vain. Thank you. Sir Wigmore Wincing made no attempt to

cross-examine the witness, and the noble lords wondered to one another what it was all about.

At this point Sir Impey Biggs leaned forward, and, tapping his brief impressively with his forefinger, began:

‘My lords, so strong is our case that we had not thought it necessary to present an alibi—’ when an officer of the court rushed up from a little whirlpool of commotion by the door and excitedly thrust a note into his hand. Sir Impey read, coloured, glanced down the hall, put down his brief, folded his hands over it, and said in a sudden, loud voice which penetrated even to the deaf ear of the Duke of Wiltshire:

‘My lords, I am happy to say that our missing witness is here. I call Lord Peter Wimsey.’

Every neck was at once craned, and every eye focused on the very grubby and oily figure that came amiably trotting up the long room. Sir Impey Biggs passed the note down to Mr Murples, and, turning to the witness, who was yawning frightfully in the intervals of grinning at all his acquaintances, demanded that he should be sworn.

The witness’s story was as follows:

‘I am Lord Peter Wimsey, brother of the accused. I live at 110 Piccadilly. In consequence of what I read on that bit of blotting-paper which I now identify, I went to Paris to look for a certain lady. The name of the lady is Mademoiselle Simone Vonderaara. I found she had left Paris in company with a man named Van Humperdinck. I followed her, and at length came up with her in New York. I asked her to give me the letter Cathcart wrote on the night of his death.’ (Sensation). ‘I produce that letter, with Mademoiselle Vonderaara’s signature on the corner, so that it can be identified if Wiggy there tries to put it over you.’ (Joyous sensation, in which the indignant protests of prosecuting counsel were drowned.) ‘And I’m sorry I’ve given you such short notice of this, old man, but I only got it the day before yesterday. We came as quick as we could, but we had to come down near Whitehaven with engine trouble, and if we had come down half a mile sooner I shouldn’t be here now.’ (Applause, hurriedly checked by the Lord High Steward.)

‘My lords,’ said Sir Impey, ‘your lordships are witnesses that I have never seen this letter in my life before. I have no idea of its contents, yet so positive am I that it cannot but assist my noble client’s case, that I am willing—nay,

‘The position of the fingers being towards the house appears, does it not, to negative the suggestion of dragging?’ suggested Sir Impey.

Sir Wigmore, however, put it to the witness that the wounded man might have been dragged head foremost.

‘If, now,’ said Sir Wigmore. ‘I were to drag you by the coat-collar—my lords will grasp my contention—’

‘It appears,’ observed the Lord High Steward, ‘to be a case for *solvitur ambulando*.’ (Laughter.) ‘I suggest that when the House rises for lunch, some of us should make the experiment, choosing a member of similar height and weight to the deceased.’ (All the noble lords looked round at one another to see which unfortunate might be chosen for the part.)

Inspector Parker then mentioned the marks of forcing on the study window.

‘In your opinion, could the catch have been forced back by the knife found on the body of the deceased?’

‘I know it could, for I made the experiment myself with a knife of exactly similar pattern.’

After this the message on the blotting-paper was read backwards and forwards and interpreted in every possible way, the defence insisting that the language was French and the words ‘*Je suis fou de douleur*’, the prosecution scouting the suggestion as far-fetched, and offering an English interpretation, such as ‘is found’ or ‘his foul’. A handwriting expert was then called, who compared the handwriting with that of an authentic letter of Cathcart’s, and was subsequently severely handled by the prosecution.

These knotty points being left for the consideration of the noble lords, the defence then called a tedious series of witnesses: the manager of Cox’s and Monsieur Turgeot of the Crédit Lyonnais, who went with much detail into Cathcart’s financial affairs; the concierge and Madame Leblanc from the Rue St Honoré; and the noble lords began to yawn, with the exception of a few of the soap and pickles lords, who suddenly started to make computations in their note-books, and exchanged looks of intelligence as from one financier to another.

Then came Monsieur Briquet, the jeweller from the Rue de la Paix, and the girl from his shop, who told the story of the tall, fair, foreign lady and the purchase of the green-eyed cat—whereat everybody woke up. After reminding the assembly that this incident took place in February, when Cathcart’s fiancée

High Steward upon his high seat, the ushers and the heralds and the gaudy kings-of-arms, rested rigid in their places. Only the prisoner looked across at his counsel and back to the Lord High Steward in a kind of bewilderment, and the reporters scribbled wildly and desperately stop-press announcements—lurid headlines, picturesque epithets, and alarming weather predictions, to halt hurrying London on its way: ‘PEEK’S SON FLIES ATLANTIC’; ‘BROTHER’S DEVOTION’; ‘WILL WIMSEY BE IN TIME?’; ‘RIDDLESDALE MURDER CHARGE: AMAZING DEVELOPMENT’. This was news. A million tape-machines ticked it out in offices and clubs, where clerks and messenger-boys gloated over it and laid wagers on the result; the thousands of monster printing-presses sucked it in, boiled it into lead, champed it into slugs, engulfed it in their huge maws, digested it to paper, and flapped it forth again with clutching talons; and a blue-nosed, ragged veteran of Vimy Ridge, who had once assisted to dig Major Wimsey out of a shell-hole, muttered: ‘Gawd ’elp ’im, e’s a real decent little blighter,’ as he tucked his newspapers into the iron grille of a tree in Kingsway and displayed his placard to the best advantage.

After a brief statement that he intended, not merely to prove his noble client’s innocence but (as a work of supererogation) to make clear every detail of the tragedy, Sir Impey Biggs proceeded without further delay to call his witnesses.

Among the first was Mr Goyles, who testified that he had found Cathcart already dead at 3 A.M., with his head close to the water-trough which stood near the well. Ellen, the maid-servant, next confirmed James Fleming’s evidence with regard to the post-bag, and explained how she changed the blotting-paper in the study every day.

The evidence of Detective-Inspector Parker aroused more interest and some bewilderment. His description of the discovery of the green-eyed cat was eagerly listened to. He also gave a minute account of the footprints and marks of dragging, especially the imprint of a hand in the flower-bed. The piece of blotting-paper was then produced, and photographs of it circulated among the peers. A long discussion ensued on both these points, Sir Impey Biggs endeavouring to show that the imprint on the flower-bed was such as would have been caused by a man endeavouring to lift himself from a prone position, Sir Wigmore Wrinching doing his best to force an admission that it might have been made by deceased in trying to prevent himself from being dragged along.

eager—to put in this document immediately, as it stands, without perusal, to stand or fall by the contents.’

‘The handwriting must be identified as that of the deceased,’ interposed the Lord High Steward.

The ravening pencils of the reporters tore along the paper. The lean young man who worked for the *Daily Trumpet* scented a scandal in high life and licked his lips, never knowing what a much bigger one had escaped him by a bare minute or so.

Miss Lydia Cathcart was recalled to identify the handwriting, and the letter was handed to the Lord High Steward, who announced:

‘The letter is in French. We shall have to swear an interpreter.’

‘You will find,’ said the witness suddenly, ‘that those bits of words on the blotting-paper come out of the letter. You’ll ’scuse my mentioning it.’

‘Is this person put forward as an expert witness?’ inquired Sir Wigmore witheringly.

‘Right ho!’ said Lord Peter. ‘Only, you see, it has been rather sprung on Biggy as you might say.’

Biggy and Wiggy

Were two pretty men,

They went into court

When the clock—

‘Sir Impey, I must really ask you to keep your witness in order.’

Lord Peter grinned, and a pause ensued while an interpreter was fetched and sworn. Then, at last, the letter was read, amid a breathless silence:

Riddlesdale Lodge,

Stapley,

N.E. Yorks.

le 13 Octobre, 192—

SIMONE,—Je viens de recevoir ta lettre. Que dire? Inutiles, les prières ou les reproches. Tu ne comprendras—tu ne liras même pas.

N'ai-je pas toujours su, d'ailleurs, que tu devais infailliblement me trahir ? Depuis huit ans déjà je souffre tous les torments que puisse infliger la jalousie. Je comprends bien que tu n'as jamais voulu me faire de la peine. C'est tout justement cette insouciance, cette légèreté, cette façon séduisante d'être malhonnête, que j'adorais en toi. J'ai tout su, et je t'ai aimée.

Ma foi, non, ma chère, jamais je n'ai eu la moindre illusion. Te rappelles-tu cette première rencontre, un soir au Casino ? Tu avais dix-sept ans, et tu étais jolie à ravir. Le lendemain tu fus à moi. Tu m'as dit, si gentiment, que tu m'aimais bien, et que j'étais, moi, le premier. Ma pauvre enfant, tu en as menti. Tu n'ais, toute seule, de ma naïveté—il y avait bien de quoi rire ! Dès notre premier baiser, j'ai prévu ce moment.

Mais écoute, Simone. J'ai la faiblesse de vouloir te montrer exactement ce que tu as fait de moi. Tu regretteras peut-être en peu. Mais, non—si tu pouvais regretter quoi que ce fût, tu ne serais plus Simone.

Il y a huit ans, la veille de la guerre, j'étais riche—moins riche que ton Américain, mais assez riche pour te donner l'établissement qu'il te fallait. Tu étais moins exigeante avant la guerre, Simone—qui est-ce qui, pendant mon absence, t'a enseigné le goût du luxe ? Charmante discrétion de ma part de ne jamais te le demander ! Eh bien, une grande partie de ma fortune se trouvant placée en Russie et en Allemagne, j'en ai perdu plus des trois-quarts. Ce que m'en restait en France a beaucoup diminué en valeur. Il est vrai que j'avais mon traitement de capitaine dans l'armée britannique, mais c'est peu de chose, tu sais. Avant même la fin de la guerre, tu m'avais mangé toutes mes économies. C'était idiot, quoi ? Un jeune homme qui a perdu les trois-quarts de ses rentes ne se permet plus une maîtresse et un appartement Avenue Kléber. Ou il congédie madame, ou bien il lui demande quelques sacrifices. Je n'ai rien osé demander. Si j'étais venu un jour te dire, 'Simone, je suis pauvre'—que m'aurais-tu répondu ?

Sais-tu ce que j'ai fait ? Non—tu n'as jamais pensé à demander d'où venait cet argent. Qu'est-ce que cela pouvait te faire que j'ai

Chapter 15

Bar Falling

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WHEN Sir Impey Biggs rose to make his opening speech for the defence on the second day, it was observed that he looked somewhat worried—a thing very unusual in him. His remarks were very brief, yet in those few words he sent a thrill through the great assembly.

'My lords, in rising to open this defence I find myself in a more than usually anxious position. Not that I have any doubt of your lordships' verdict. Never perhaps has it been possible so clearly to prove the innocence of any accused person as in the case of my noble client. But I will explain to your lordships at once that I may be obliged to ask for an adjournment, since we are at present without an important witness and a decisive piece of evidence. My lords, I hold here in my hand a cablegram from this witness—I will tell you his name; it is Lord Peter Wimsey, the brother of the accused. It was handed in yesterday at New York. I will read it to you. He says: "Evidence secured. Leaving tonight with Air Pilot Grant. Sworn copy and depositions follow by S.S. *Lucania* in case accident. Hope arrive Thursday." My lords, at this moment this all-important witness is cleaving the air high above the wide Atlantic. In this wintry weather he is braving a peril which would appal any heart but his own and that of the world-famous aviator whose help he has enlisted, so that no moment may be lost in freeing his noble brother from this terrible charge. My lords, the barometer is falling.'

An immense hush, like the stillness of a black frost, had fallen over the glittering benches. The lords in their scarlet and ermine, the peeresses in their rich furs, counsel in their full-bottomed wigs and billowing gowns, the Lord