

# GRENELL

1881

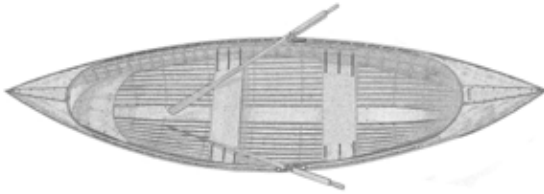
A NOVEL



1881

BOOK 1 IN THE THOUSAND ISLANDS SERIES

Lynn E. McElfresh



River Skiff Press  
Grenell Island, NY

This is a work of fiction.  
While real characters from history are represented,  
their appearance, personalities, mannerisms,  
and dialogue are imagined.

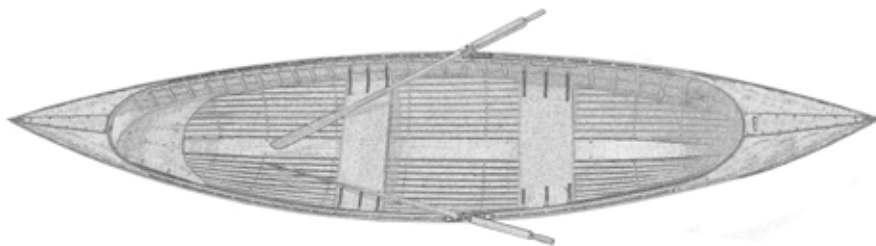
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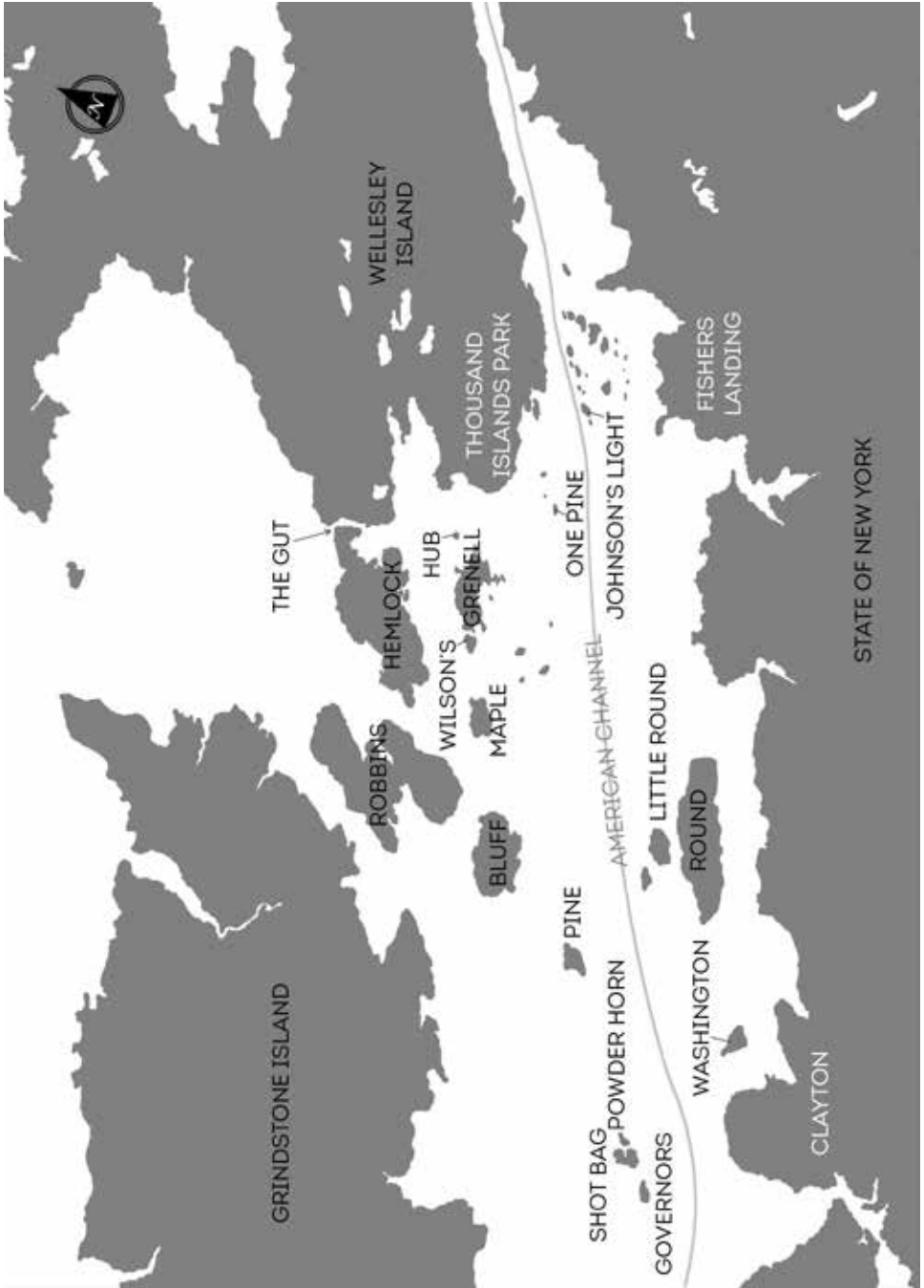


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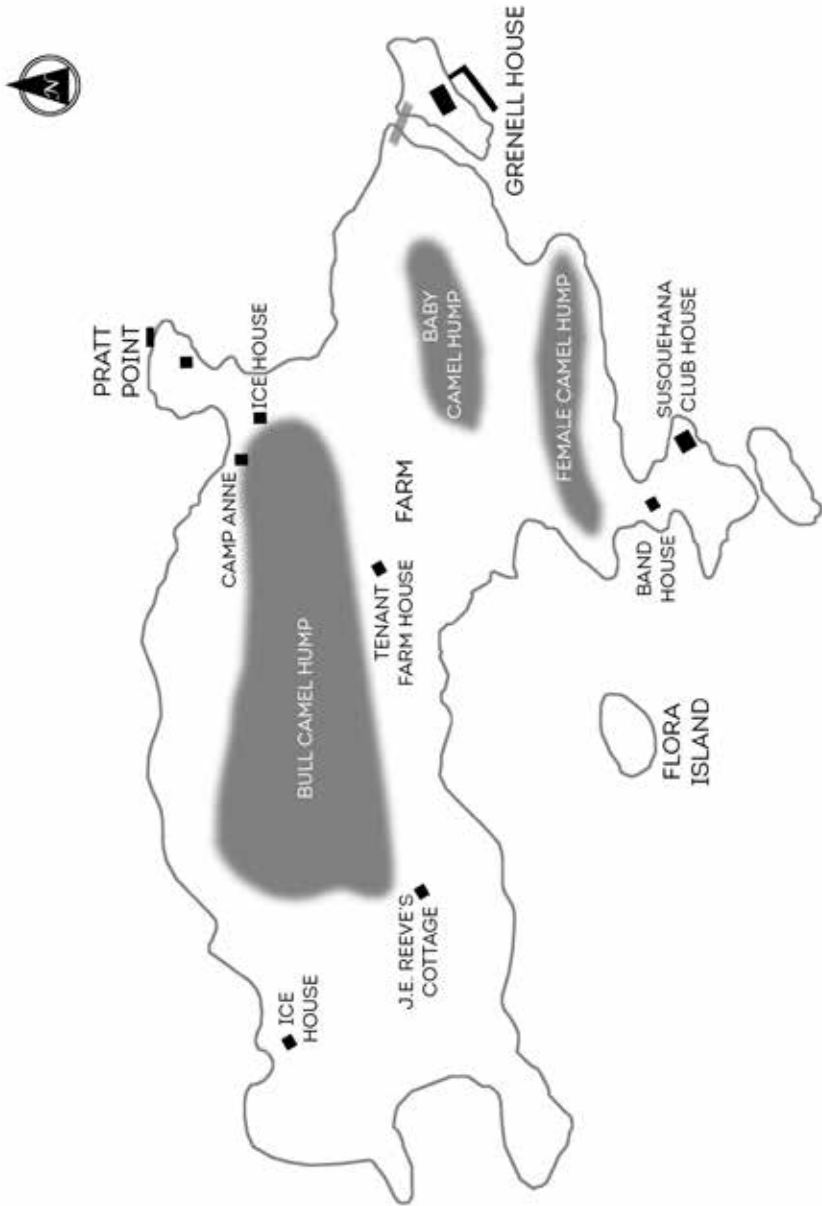
To Uncle Otis, who started it all.



# Thousand Island Region 1881



# Grenell Island 1881





*Saturday, June 11, 1961*

CASTLE ROCK, GRENELL ISLAND, THOUSAND ISLANDS, NEW YORK

The screen door creaked open, and I tiptoed barefoot out onto the deck before the rest of the cottage was awake. I inhaled deeply, feeling the moist, cool air course through my body. Ah! It was going to be a perfect river day.

The St. Lawrence rolled toward the sea—smooth, shimmering and the most loyal blue. Across the water stood Murray Isle; we called it Hemlock Island when I first arrived. Its rocky shores are crowned with pines packed so closely together that they looked almost black.

I took another big breath. That smell. What was it about the smell of the River? I've lived a lifetime of poetry and language but still can't find the words to describe that scent or what it does to me.

Today is our anniversary, the River and me. For eighty summers without fail, I've returned to Castle Rock. I remember standing on this exact spot in 1881 and feeling the same sense of wonder and awe. Through the years, the island has protected, challenged, nurtured and embraced me.

But my story of Grenell Island and its influence on me didn't start here; it started hundreds of miles away in West Philadelphia.

- Lynn E. McElfresh -

*Thursday, June 1, 1881*

CHERRY STREET, WEST PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

I retrieved the great yellow book from its hiding place behind the carved mahogany headboard and hugged it to me. I hadn't had a chance to look at it since I'd arrived home yesterday afternoon, after months away at boarding school.

Our upstairs maid, Bridget, unpacked my Saratoga trunk while I enjoyed Cook's sumptuous welcome home dinner. It was nice to have a maid again. At the academy, I had to unpack my trunk and valises myself. But my heart had thumped when I returned to my room and saw the great yellow book placed prominently on my dresser, out in the open for anyone to see. I immediately stashed it behind the mahogany headboard—just in time, too, as Mother arrived in my room a moment later with an embroidery hoop in her hand.

I sighed. "I thought I was finished with that."

Mother turned toward me with a startled look in her pale gray eyes. "Marguerite, I'm sure I do not like your impertinent tone," she said in a quiet, gentle voice.

I bit my lip.

"Your needlework pictorial will proclaim your obedience, patience and skill to any potential suitor," Mother said with an assuring smile.

How could I forget? Mother had repeated this dictum frequently over my winter break from school when I had spent hours designing and stitching my needlework pictorial. I thought it odd that Mother believed my future as a wife and mother depended solely on this piece of white linen in front of me.

"But, Mother, can't this wait? I've only been home a few hours."

Mother looked deflated, as if I'd stabbed her with my embroidery needle. She shut her eyes as if to gather courage, then said in a soft, whispery tone, "Marguerite, I'm sure the Sisters of Mercy do not allow you to question their teaching."

Instantly, Sister Paulus's angry, red face popped into my memory, and I cringed. I could hear her words, "Miss Hartranft! Stop with your incessant questions! I ask the questions! You are to provide the answers."



Sister Paulus was my religion teacher, a class where we learned by rote the answers to questions in the Baltimore Catechism. We had questions such as, "Why is it necessary to know God?" and "What must we do to save our souls?" Only Sister Veron welcomed questioning, but then she was teaching me about the Socratic method, the art of questioning.

With these thoughts swirling in my brain, I lowered my head and said, "Yes, Mother. Please forgive me."

"You only need to add your name and date. Please complete this as soon as possible so Mr. Grimes can get it framed and hung on the parlor wall in time for. . . Well, as soon as possible."

"In time for what?" I asked.

Mother's pale gray eyes widened. "There it is again. Yet another question."

I sighed. "I'm just curious."

"Curiosity killed the cat."

Mother looked at me for a good long time, approached me, and kissed me on the forehead. "Welcome home, dear," she whispered in my ear. "No embroidery tonight. Or reading either, for that matter. The light is fading, and I don't want you to work by lamplight. It will ruin your eyes." With that, she crossed the floor, placed the embroidery hoop in the chair near the window, and left the room.

There was plenty of sunlight streaming through the window this morning to provide ample light to do needlework, or better yet, read. I walked over to the chair and looked out at the garden below. I love that my room is at the back of the house. Rose and Lily, my sisters, have rooms at the front of the house, where they can watch carriages go up and down Cherry Street. My room is directly above my father's study, and it's a comfort knowing we have the same view.

Father welcomed me home in quite a different way. He asked Bridget to summon me to his study the moment he returned from work.

"I'm so proud of you, Marguerite. Welcome home." He came around the desk and kissed me lightly on the top of my head. "I received a letter from the academy before you arrived." He waved it above his head. "Sister Martinette says your elocution and recitations are the best in the class."

I smiled. "I've had years of listening to you recite poetry to me as an inspiration."

“And . . . Sister Veron says that you excel at Latin. She thinks you have a gift for languages. That’s why she started tutoring you in ancient Greek as well.”

“Oh, Father! Greek is the most interesting language and so musical. Listen! ‘I zografikí éinai siopilí poísi kai i poísi éinai zografikí pou miláei.’ It sounds just like a song, does it not?”

Father chuckled, then smoothed his mustache with two fingers, but I think he was trying to hide a smile. “Whatever does it mean?” he asked.

“It’s a quote from Plutarch, Father. When I heard it, I thought of you. It means, ‘Painting is silent poetry, and poetry is painting that speaks.’”

He smiled broadly at me, and the world felt right.

“I have something for you.” He picked up a book wrapped in brown paper and handed it to me. “Open it.”

I ripped away the brown paper, let it fall to the floor, and admired the heavy, chestnut-brown leather book. The cover and spine were embossed with black-and-gold accents. “Wordsworth,” I said, running my fingers over the curlicue flourishes of his name. “Does it include my favorite?” I asked Father.

“Indeed!” he said, and we launched into reciting “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud.” Our voices drifted out into the garden, Father’s stentorian tones blending with my well-rounded words as we recited the entire poem, inclining our heads toward each other as we intoned the last couplet: “and then my heart with pleasure fills, / And dances with the Daffodils.”

“Oh, Father! Thank you,” I said, giving him a kiss on the cheek. “I will cherish it forever.”

Father asked the gardener to plant hundreds of daffodils against the back garden wall in honor of my favorite poem. I looked out at the garden now, sad that I was not here when the daffodils had bloomed. I picked up the book cover, revealing the marbled endpapers where Father had penned an inscription written in precisely slanted handwriting:

*To my daughter Marguerite at the end of her  
second year at Mater Misericordia Academy. Your  
dedication to your schoolwork fills me with pride.  
Your loving Father*

I flipped to the title page, which read, *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth, With Memoir, Explanatory Notes, Etc.* There was a sketch of Mr. Wordsworth on the frontispiece, protected by a thin tissue covering. I raised the tissue and examined it. Mr. Wordsworth's heart wasn't "dancing with the daffodils" on the day this picture was sketched. His head was inclined down, his right hand on his forehead, resting there as if he had a headache or learned that his favorite hunting dog had died. He looked like a reverend in his black frock coat with its high square collar. A white silk cravat covered his entire neck, the ends fastidiously tied in a bow.

I placed the volume of Wordsworth on the table and exchanged it for the great yellow book. I noted that it was almost daffodil yellow, which suddenly seemed odd since it was titled *Leaves of Grass*. I ran my fingers over Walt Whitman's embossed signature on the cover and paged open to a sketch of Mr. Whitman on the frontispiece, so different from the downcast sketch of Mr. Wordsworth. Mr. Whitman was standing, dressed like a workman. His rumpled shirt was unbuttoned at the neck, revealing a scruff of chest hair. On his head he wore a wide brim hat tilted at a jaunty angle. His sleeves were rolled up as if the artist had interrupted him as he was chopping wood or hauling water. Mr. Whitman had one hand in the pocket of his work pants and the other on his hip in a somewhat defiant pose. His eyes were only slits beneath arched eyebrows, and even though I couldn't make them out clearly, he seemed to be scrutinizing me, daring me to read on.

From the hall, I heard the swish of silk brocade and the creak of Mother's corset. She stopped to say something to Bridget, giving me time to put the great yellow book on the table facedown, spine facing away from the door, and place the Wordsworth volume on top of it. I doubt that Mother knew the difference between Wordsworth and Whitman, but I didn't want to take a chance.

"Oh," said she when she saw me standing there at the window with my hand on the volume of poetry. "I had hoped to find you stitching. Or have you finished your needlework pictorial already?"

"No, I'm sorry. I haven't started it yet," I said as I sat and took the embroidery hoop in my hands.

Her eyes moved to the volume of poetry. "I hope you weren't reading poetry instead of stitching."

“No. . . although I did stop to read Father’s inscription once again.”

“Completing your needlework pictorial represents obedience, patience, and skill,” Mother reminded me as I took up my needle.

When she turned toward the door, I let out a little yelp, and she turned back toward me. “What is it?”

“I pricked my finger,” I said.

I moved the hoop to the side table and raised my hand to examine it. Instantly, a drop of ruby red blood appeared on the tip of the middle finger of my left hand. I rushed to my dressing table, pulled an old handkerchief from the top drawer, and dabbed the drop away. Another one sprang up in its place. I wrapped the handkerchief tightly around my finger and raised my left arm above my head.

“Marguerite, where is your thimble?” Her tone was not quite a rebuke.

I glanced over my shoulder to my bedside table. Mother said nothing, but her sigh said everything. I kept my head raised, my chin parallel to the floor, but lowered my eyes so I could not see the disapproving look on my mother’s face. Mother was so silent that if I couldn’t still see the tip of her silk shoes under the hem of her silk brocade dress, I would have thought she had left the room.

“Do try to finish the needlework this morning. Remember to keep the stitches small and straight.”

I waited until I heard her footsteps fade down the hall, then grabbed *Leaves of Grass*, tiptoed down the servants’ staircase, and escaped out the pantry door to the garden. Trying to be as quiet as possible, I hurried down the gravel path to the back corner of the garden.

Our garden is surrounded by a high brick wall, and each wall is draped with vines: ivy on the north side, clematis on the south, and honeysuckle on the back west wall. The honeysuckle was in full bloom and filled the air with a potent scent and the drone of bees. There were two benches in the back corner of the garden: one in the sun in full sight of the house and the other tucked under a lattice arbor.

I chose the shady corner, drawing my feet up onto the bench, hoping to make myself invisible. No sooner had I read the first line of *Leaves of Grass*—“Come, said my Soul”—than I heard the most curious sound and saw smoke or vapor rising above the back garden wall as if someone were

sending me a smoke signal. I listened intently. I heard the scraping of wood on wood, then an odd sound, like a dragon exhaling. Another puff of smoke rose above the wall.

I have lived all my life on this side of the garden wall and have never seen our neighbor's garden. I've seen Dr. Ashbridge and his daughter from afar, but I do not know them. Mother nods politely when we pass them on the street, then turns away quickly. "They are Quakers," she informs my sisters and me. When I was young, I didn't know what that term meant, but I could tell from Mother's tone, it was something odd, perhaps ominous.

Curiosity got the best of me. I crept from my shaded hiding place, climbed onto the sunny bench, placed the book on the top of the wall, and peeked into the Ashbridges' garden. I still couldn't see what was making the noise or the smoke. So I stood on tiptoe and leaned as far as I could over the top until I saw a white form below me on the other side of the wall.

"*Fántasma*," I said, the Greek word for ghost. "*Uel Sancti?*" I wondered, Latin for "Or Holy Ghost."

The form looked up, and I could see it was a woman in a beekeeper's costume.

"Ah! Thou speaks Greek and Latin, too," she said. "Thy pronunciation is excellent."

I smiled at the beekeeper and said thank you in Greek, Latin, and English.

"I am not a ghost nor a holy ghost. I am Anne Ashbridge."

"Good afternoon," I said with a little curtsy she could not see from behind the wall. "I am Marguerite Hartranft."

"Marguerite, a lovely name. How fitting to meet a Marguerite in a garden. Where did thou learn to speak Greek?"

"Marguerite!"

I turned to see Mother at the head of the garden path. I dropped from the bench and hurried up the path to where she stood waiting.

"Marguerite," Mother said to me, clearly embarrassed, as if she were apologizing to a stranger she had inadvertently jostled into at the market. Although her cheeks remained a brilliant red, her voice returned to a soft, whispery tone, for as Mother has told us many times, a lady is never to

raise her voice. "My apologies for calling out to you so sharply. You have me screaming like a fishmonger in my own garden." She took a breath. "What were you doing peering over the back wall? What if Dr. Ashbridge had seen you ogling at his garden?"

"I saw smoke. I was afraid there was a fire."

Mother looked toward the wall. "Anyone can see that's from a bee smoker. It's probably Miss Ashbridge tending to Dr. Ashbridge's bees. I peeked into your room, hoping your finger had improved, and you were gone. I thought perhaps you stole away to the garden to read poetry."

I looked down, expecting to see the telltale book in my hands, but it wasn't. I fought the impulse to turn and look at the top of the garden wall.

"No, Mother," I said, the lie easily spilling from my mouth.

"We'll see." Mother marched down the garden path, the gravel crunching beneath her determined steps.

I dared not watch. I stood stunned, unable to turn around and face the brick wall, my mind racing to cover the lie I had just told with some tangent truth.

I heard her crunch back. She did not have the book in her hand.

Again, I fought the impulse to turn and look for the yellow book on the brick wall.

Mother stood before me. I slowly raised my eyes to her face. She gave me a grim smile before she spoke. "Marguerite, we've gotten off on the wrong foot. I know you love school and poetry, but home is where you learn what you need to know to be prepared for the life ahead of you. Women are the moral fabric of our society. You must learn self-control."

Father appeared behind Mother. Had he been watching and listening all along? He put his hand on Mother's shoulder, and I saw her tension melt away at his touch.

"Marguerite is supposed to be working on her needlework. Earlier, I found her reading poetry and now I find her in the garden."

"Go back inside, Violette. I will take care of this."

Mother nodded, turned, and walked back to the house.

"Marguerite, your mother thinks I indulge you too much and perhaps I do. The Mater Misericordia Academy is not a finishing school, but I assume the Sisters of Mercy have instilled in you proper Catholic values, including 'thou shall honor your father and mother.' Your father and your

mother.”

I lowered my head and looked at my shoes covered with gravel dust. Father raised my chin until my eyes met his.

“Marguerite, it is one thing to lie to your classmates at school, still another to lie to your parents. But once you start lying to yourself. . .all is lost.”

“I’m sorry, Father.”

“I’m not the one you need to apologize to. Now go inside.”

Did he know? Did he see me come into the garden with the yellow book? Did he hear my lie to Mother? Could he see? Was the yellow book on the brick wall? I glanced back before I went into the house but didn’t see the book on the wall. Had I knocked the book off the wall into the Ashbridges’ garden?

Mother was waiting for me inside. Her face was composed, although her eyes looked tired.

“I’m sorry, Mother,” I said, bowing my head demurely.

“Your sister Rose, now Mrs. Tidwell, is coming for tea. Lily will advise you. She’s waiting for you now in her room.”

I opened my mouth to ask what advice my younger sister could impart to me but thought better of it. Another question would not please Mother.

This was my first full day home, and I was already counting the days until I could return to school.



## CHAPTER *two*

*T*ighter, Bridget! Pull it tighter!” I heard my sister Lily shout as I approached her room.

I knocked at the door, then pushed it open without waiting for a response.

I could see the silhouette of Lily and Bridget behind the dressing screen as Bridget helped Lily lace her corset.

“Lily, lower your voice, please. They’ll hear you out on the street. Worse yet, Mother will hear you, and she’s already in such a state.”

“Marguerite! You’re here! You may go, Bridget. Marguerite will help me dress.”

“Yes, miss,” Bridget said as she turned and left the room.

“Me? Help you?” I asked as I gave the lacing at the back of her corset another tug before tying it. “I was just informed by Mother that you are supposed to be helping me! Since when does a younger sister instruct her older sister? Believe me, I never had occasion to instruct my older sister about anything.”

“No! Rose never needed any instruction, not even from Mother. Rose came out of the womb a perfect lady,” Lily said as she pulled a camisole over her head, careful not to disarrange her hair.

“Since when do you like your corset tight? My! How things have changed! I remember when you cried every time you put one on.”



“I was twelve then. I’m nearly fifteen now, and I rather like my corset. I especially like that the tighter it is laced, the more it fills out my bosom.”

It didn’t appear to me that Lily needed any help in that area. She’d matured since I’d left for boarding school. She’d grown taller, too, but I was still a nose taller than she, and I would always be a year and five months older. Nothing would ever change that.

“Mother told me to help you with your hair.”

“What’s wrong with my hair?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Lily said as she led me to the dressing table bench and motioned for me to sit down. “. . .if you’re a schoolmarm on the prairie. Do you want me to give you curly bangs like mine?” she asked, snipping the scissors menacingly behind me.

“No!”

“You don’t like my bangs? Curly bangs are all the fashion right now.”

“I don’t think curly bangs would suit my type of hair.”

“True,” Lily said, looking at her reflection as she fluffed her curly bangs. “Rose and I have fine, light brown hair from Mother’s side of the family. You have the dark, thick hair from Father’s side of the family. I envy how it hangs in natural ringlets.”

“It seems to have a life of its own, which is why it’s easiest to put it in a tight bun at the nape of my neck. Most the girls at school wear it that way.”

Lily unpinned my hair, unwound it from the tight bun, and let it fall to the center of my back. “So you don’t want bangs. Perhaps a simple French twist with tendrils on either side to soften your face.”

“Maybe,” I said.

She nodded and started brushing my hair.

“According to Mother, you are the true beauty of the family.”

I said nothing, but Lily saw my astonished reaction reflected in the three mirrors of the dressing table and smiled.

“Mother said that Rose is a homely wallflower.”

“What! I can’t imagine Mother saying such a thing. She adores her perfect little Rose.”

Lily threw back her head and laughed. “She most certainly did say it. What’s more,” Lily continued, lowering her voice and raising her eyebrows, “Mother said that I’m cute, pert, and should have no trouble attracting suitors. She admitted that she had been a little worried about me

being too flirtatious when I was younger, but I've honed my social skills as I've matured, and now she says that I'm simply charming."

"She said that to you?"

"No. She said that to Father."

"You were eavesdropping? Lily, a lady never eavesdrops. It's unseemly."

"Wrong," Lily said, bending down and whispering in my ear. "A lady never gets caught eavesdropping."

Mother was right. Lily was charming, even when she was being mischievous. Or maybe especially when she was being mischievous.

"Dare I ask what else you heard?"

"Mother declared that her mission in life is to make sure her daughters marry well. She certainly accomplished that with Rose. An older, mature, established widower like Jacob was the perfect match. I could never marry a man almost twenty years older than I am, but Mother said it was an easy match between Jacob and Rose, because what Rose lacks in beauty and charm, she makes up for in goodness. Rose is a perfect 'Angel in the House,' just what Jacob was looking for."

I sighed. "I think 'Angel in the House' is the only poem Mother can recite."

This poem, written well before the War Between the States, proposed that a true woman's primary purpose was to impart moral guidance to her family and community.

"It does seem to be a guiding force in her life, and she hopes it will be for us, as well. Mother is very worried about you," Lily said as she extended her hand. "Hand me a few hairpins, please."

"Mother has no cause to worry about me. I'm not ready to marry. I still have another year or two of school ahead of me."

"That's precisely why she is worried about you," Lily said as she shoved in another hairpin. "She thinks Father has ruined you—the great beauty of our family—by filling your head with poetry and sending you to that academy."

"Great beauty?"

"Mother is right, you know. You look like a Hungarian princess with ivory skin, pink cheeks, and huge dark eyes," Lily said as she inserted the last of a dozen or more hairpins.

“When did she say all this?”

“That was soon before you came home. Father received the letter about your academic excellence and was bragging about you at dinner. After dinner, they went into the study and. . .”

“And?”

“And. . .the fifth stair past the landing in the servants’ stairway there is a vent. If you sit down on the step you can hear everything just as if you are sitting in the study with them. Well, only if Mother is facing the vent. She speaks so softly because. . .”

“. . .a lady should never raise her voice scarcely above a whisper,” we said in unison, and Lily laughed again.

Father’s poetry recitations and Lily’s laugh are the two things I miss most when I’m away at school—that and Cook’s charlotte russe. Mater Misericordia Academy is not known for sumptuous desserts.

“But be careful of that third step. It creaks horribly.”

“What? I won’t be eavesdropping! Neither should you, Lily. You should be ashamed.”

“But I’m not,” she said as she wound a strand of hair on the side of my face into a tight curl and secured it with two hairpins. “How else would I know?”

“Know what?”

“Know why Mother wants you to be fashionable. She’s sending for the dressmaker next week to start on a new set of clothes for the coming year. I’m sure I could talk Mother into buying hairpieces for your hair, if you would like.”

I made a disapproving face. “No, I’m quite contented with my own hair, thank you.”

“Are you sure? They are the prevailing style.”

“So why am I getting a new set of clothes?”

“The same reason I’m supposed to make your hair more fashionable.”

“For tea with Rose?”

“No, not for Rose,” she said, giggling at my confusion.

“I thought Mother said that Rose was coming for tea today.”

“Oh, dear Marguerite. You don’t know!”

“Don’t know what?”

“If you didn’t always have your nose in a book, you might discover what is happening right around you. Today’s tea is a dress rehearsal for tea next week.”

“And who is coming to tea next week?”

“Mrs. Dillworth.”

“Who?”

“Oh, you must remember Mrs. Dillworth from our parish. She’s only the most fashionable woman at Our Mother of Sorrows. She always wears the grandest hats, the best shoes, and she always always has an umbrella or parasol with her that matches her outfit exactly and never the same one. She must have a room in her house for the sole purpose of storing her parasols and another for gloves and shoes.”

“I can’t say that I have noticed. Besides, at church, we’re supposed to be praying, not gawking at other parishioners.”

“But how could you miss her grand entrance? Mrs. Dillworth doesn’t walk into church: she sashays in as if she were a queen on the way to the throne.”

Lily sashayed across her bedroom with her best queenly airs. I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Lily, not so close to the window! You are only in your camisole.”

“No one can see in.”

I crossed to the window to look out but saw no one on the street.

“Mrs. Dillworth invited Mother to tea last week, and Mother has sent a reciprocal invitation for next week. From what I heard, Mrs. Dillworth has an interest in you as a possible match for her son, Edwin.”

“What?”

“Don’t tell me you don’t remember Edwin, either? You’ll see the Dillworth family in church on Sunday. You can’t miss them. Look for the most handsome young man sitting next to the woman wearing the largest hat.”

I heard horse hooves clapping down the cobblestone street and I looked out the window to see if I recognized the coach. That’s when I saw a young boy walking down Cherry Street. He had a yellow book in his hand. Was that *Leaves of Grass*? What if he were coming here to return it?

“Lily, thank you so much for fixing my hair. I think I’ll see if I can decide on a dress for today’s tea,” I said, rushing from the room.

“I can help if you like,” Lily called after me.

“That would be lovely,” I said, knowing she couldn’t follow me until she put on her dress.

I hurried from Lily’s room, down the front stairs, reached the door, and opened it as the boy was about to ring the bell.

“This is for Miss Marguerite Hartranft,” the lad said, presenting the book to me.

“Ah! Yes! Thank you!” I whispered, smiling at him before I shut the door again as silently as I could.

I choose to tiptoe up the servants’ staircase where I knew I would not encounter Mother. I noted the creaking of the third step, paused at the top step, checked the hall to make sure Mother was not there, then slipped across the hall into my room. I tucked the book under my arm as I turned to slowly, silently close the door behind me. Before I could wedge the book between the headboard and the wall, a white envelope fell out of the book and fluttered to the floor. Bold Greek letters were expertly written on the front.



*W*e were in the parlor when the calash rolled to a stop in front of the house. Lily and I stood back from the window so Rose could not see us. We watched as the coachman helped her alight from the carriage.

Even from this distance, I could see that Rose was thinner than when I had last seen her.

“She’s so thin,” I whispered to Lily.

“You’ve been away a long while.”

“Is she well?”

“Physically.”

I looked at Lily. She gave a little shake of her head as if to say not now.

Mother opened the door before Rose had a chance to ring the bell. Rose curtsied deeply. “Mother,” she said as she rose.

“Mrs. Tidwell,” Mother said in response, nodding affectionately to her daughter.

“Rose!” I said when she stepped over the threshold. I wanted to rush to her, fling my arms around her, and kiss her cheeks, but I didn’t think Mother would approve, so I grabbed both her hands and squeezed them.

“So good to see you.”

“Marguerite, I’ve missed you terribly,” she said with a voice that trembled.

“So nice to see you, Rose,” Lily said.

“Shall we sit?” Mother asked, gesturing to the parlor where the table was set for tea. “So nice to have all three of my daughters at my table. Marguerite, you may continue.”

It was the first time Mother had allowed me to preside over tea. We had two offerings: Darjeeling and oolong. I was to ask about sugar, cream, and lemon, then personally prepare each cup. As I did, Mother droned on about all the details, the always to-do’s and the never to-do’s.

“Mother, this is not my first tea. I know all that,” I said.

“Marguerite. Do not take that tone with me. You’ve been away for months, cramming useless nonsense into that pretty little head of yours. You’ve quite forgotten how to speak to your mother at a tea party, so I might assume you’ve forgotten other tea etiquette as well.”

Lily looked at me with sympathetic eyes.

Rose looked horrified, as if she’d just witnessed an accident and there were mangled bodies lying about. She took a breath to steady herself, then said in a thin, wavering voice, “Etiquette is that rule of conduct which is recognized by polite society, and to which all who desire to be admitted into fashionable circles must submit.”

“Well quoted, Rose,” Mother said, nodding to her eldest.

In his study, Father had three floor-to-ceiling bookcases crammed full of books, but Mother only owned one book, *A Manual of Etiquette for Ladies*, and she quoted from it liberally.

I clamped my lips together. I was learning that to be a lady, an Angel in the House, I would have to learn to say nothing.

Mother spent the rest of our time at the tea table critiquing the size of my bites. I was to take tiny bites but not to look like a rodent nibbling on a block of cheese. I should eat very little, as we wouldn’t want Mrs. Dillworth to think I was a big eater. But I should definitely eat something, because if I didn’t eat anything she might think me unwell or rude. I was not to use my knife to cut the scones. I should take very little clotted cream and avoid the jam altogether. It might stain my teeth or, worse yet, I might drop a dollop on my bodice. So many details. Mother’s endless instruction on comportment at tea was so complicated. Learning the tables of declensions and the conjugation of verbs of ancient Greek was far easier and definitely more logical.

“If we’re not to eat the jam, then why have it on the table at all?” I asked.

Mother slowly turned her head and glared silently at me like a cat preparing to pounce on a mouse.

“Was that a question?” Mother asked.

“I’m only trying to understand. . .” I started.

Mother took a breath, then put her gloved hand on my gloved hand and said, “Such questions may be acceptable in an academic setting, but at a tea table, it sounds impertinent. It is not your place to question time-honored customs. Please curb your impulse to question everything. You do not need to understand. You need only to listen and obey.”

Mother rang the bell, and the downstairs maid Maggie came in to clear the table. Normally, tea lasted only for as long as there was tea in one’s cup; then the tea party guest would rise and leave. Once the tea service was cleared, I suggested that Rose, Lily, and I go for a walk in the garden.

“I’m so happy to see you, Rose. How are things on Mulberry Street?”

Rose’s small thin lips twisted into a little knot, and she burst into tears. “I miss my home—forgive me—my childhood home—this wonderful house on Cherry Street. I miss Mother. I miss my name. You and Lily are the only ones who call me Rose any more.”

We sat on the garden bench closest to the house as Rose sobbed. Lily held one hand, and I held the other.

“But we’re only a short carriage ride away,” I said. “You can come visit us every day if you wish.”

“Mother says it would be best to visit only once a week,” Rose sniffed, her small frame trembling. I handed my handkerchief to her, and she dabbed her eyes.

“Jacob isn’t cruel to you, is he?” I asked.

Lily shared a wide-eyed look with me over Rose’s head and mouthed, “Mr. Tidwell.”

“No, not at all,” Rose protested. “*Mr. Tidwell* is very tender and kind. But I’m to be in charge of the house, and Cook has been there almost as long as I’ve been alive. I’m afraid the staff does not like me as much as the late Mrs. Tidwell, and his sons don’t like me at all. Thankfully, both are at boarding school most of the year.”

I took my cue from my younger sister, who seemed to know how to



handle situations like this far better than I. Lily rubbed Rose's hand and patted her back.

"If I only had a baby," Rose said, after a long silence. "If I had a baby, then I would have a purpose in the house, but I received my monthly package this morning."

The thought was so distressing to Rose that it brought another deluge of tears.

Mother appeared at the door and motioned for us to come inside.

"Come, Rose," Lily said, offering her hand to the sobbing Rose and helping her to her feet.

"Girls, you may go to your rooms now. You have your needlework to complete."

Mother took charge of Rose and led her back to the parlor.

Lily brought her embroidery hoop to my room, and we sat by the window and stitched.

"She's quite homesick," Lily said. "I think Rose would be here every day if Mother would allow it."

"I had no idea. Her letters have mentioned nothing of being homesick."

"Mother sent her to live with Aunt Evelyn and Uncle Henry for two months before the wedding, hoping her stay there would prepare her for life away from Cherry Street, but apparently it didn't."

"I forgot about that," I said.

"That's because you were away. You've been at boarding school more than you've been at home the last two years. You won't be homesick when you marry."

"I suppose not," I said. Life at school was full of classes, assignments and books. If I had to sit in an empty house with nothing to do but wait to be in the family way, I might go out of my mind.



*I* gave the note one final read-through, then wrote, “Yours truly,” and signed the letter with the great flourish of my Christian name—*Marguerite*. I put the dip pen on the pen rest and pushed the rocker blotter over the signature to dry the ink.

I pulled the envelope from the yellow book and ran my fingers across the bold Greek letters, which meant “an invitation.” A tingle ran town my spine as I pulled the letter from the envelope to read it again. The letter was in English, written with neat but cramped handwriting, inviting me to a symposium where I could meet Walt Whitman. The thought made me dizzy every time I re-read the letter.

The letter explained that someone had cancelled at the last minute, so I was invited to fill in, because I was a “woman of letters.”

Me! Someone thought I was a scholar.

“No trunks, please! Carpetbags and valises only. We will be rustivating on Grenell Island, on the River St. Lawrence, Thousand Islands, New York. Do hope thou can join us.” It was signed, Anne Ashbridge (Beekeeper).

After I’d finished my needlework pictorial and Lily left my room, I started on my letter to Nora, my schoolmate from Mater Misericordia Academy. Nora was the one who had given me *Leaves of Grass*. Nora said she was giving me the book because of Mr. Whitman’s uniquely American

poetic voice, but I suspect that Nora was less interested in Mr. Whitman's poems than she was in the notoriety of the book. *Leaves of Grass* was considered quite scandalous when it was first published. That was nearly thirty years ago, and while the volume has grown in esteem in the interim, I'm sure the sisters of Mater Misericordia Academy and perhaps even my father—a true lover of poetry—would not approve of all of Mr. Whitman's subject matter.

Father certainly wouldn't approve of me traveling unescorted. Mother would be disinclined to let me attend the symposium on the basis of the wardrobe list alone. Miss Ashbridge had been very specific as to what I should bring: simple daytime dresses, walking dresses and leather boots. "No fancy hats," she wrote, "as it is quite windy on the river. Straw hats are more appropriate." Then she added "many of us will be going without a hat." Really? Without hats?

Hat or no hat, from the moment I read the invitation, I knew I had to attend, but my parents would object. I quickly dashed off a note to Nora, explaining my predicament. If I were able to get the letter in the afternoon post, Nora would receive it in next morning's post, and I might receive a response in tomorrow's afternoon post. Nora only lived across town.

When I was sure the ink was dry, I began folding the heavy sheet of writing paper into an envelope. Once finished, I broke off a piece of blue sealing wax from the traveling writing cabinet that Father had given me when I left for school. Next to my collection of miniature books, my writing cabinet was my most cherished possession.

I struck a match, lit the burner, and held the melting spoon over it, and began to melt the sealing wax. I always chose blue sealing wax for my letters to Nora, as she was my true blue friend from school.

"What is that smell?" Mother asked with a note of alarm.

I poured the sealing wax from the melting spoon onto the envelope and pressed it flat with my *M* stamp.

"I'm just sealing a letter for Nora," I said.

I knew the true reason Mother was here, so before she could ask, I said, "It's finished. It's stretched out on the bed."

"Oh!" she said as if it were the biggest surprise of her life. She quickly quelled her excitement and replaced it with, "We'll see."

She bent over the needlework then picked it up and took it to the

window so she could scrutinize it in the light.

The wax had cooled and solidified so I flipped the envelope over, dipped my pen in the inkwell, and tap-tap-tapped the pen against the edge of the inkwell to remove excess ink. Then, I wrote *Miss Nora Huffington* on the front of the envelope and carefully penned her address underneath as Mother flipped my needlework pictorial to the backside so she could inspect the knots.

I took the rocker blotter and pressed it across the front of the letter before I handed it to Mother, who had returned the needlework to the bed.

“I would like it posted this afternoon, if that is possible.”

“I will arrange it, but first we must talk about your needlework.”

I stood and faced my mother, waiting for her verdict.

“It is beautiful. I’m very proud of you. I wasn’t sure about all the trees along the edges, but now that it’s finished I find the design to be clever, and the poem you chose for the center is wonderful, although bible verses are more customary. The entire arrangement is tasteful, and the needlework is superb. Even the knots in the back are uniform and not too big.”

My tense lips broke into a smile.

“We have two days before hostessing the tea party for Mrs. Dillworth. I would like you to study this book.” She handed me the dreaded *A Manual of Etiquette* by A Lady, an apt pseudonym. The author was so much of “a lady” that she would never be crass enough to use her own name. A real lady would never reveal that she was cunning enough to write a book, so her identity must remain a secret. A conundrum so cleverly concealed.

“Yes, Mother,” I said dutifully. “I’ll start reading it right now.” It was my first full day home, and I’d already learned that complaining would not get me anywhere. Day by day, would I become more compliant? That is a question I dared not ask.

“And since you like poetry, I included a little poem in the front.”

I took out the poem and read it. It was a short ditty titled, *In Company*, which instructed one what not to do in the company of others with horrible rhymes like:

- Lynn E. McElfresh -

*All whispering, giggling, squinting shun,  
Don't turn your back on any one.*

Or, worse yet, this one:

*Nor twirl your hands, nor hit your toes—  
Nor hum a tune—nor pick your nose—*

If Mother truly understood my passion for poetry, she would never present me with this. The clumsy rhymes were an affront to my senses. I willed myself not to recoil in disgust but instead, put on a pleasant smile. It was the first time today that Mother hadn't harangued me for some misstep or misdeed, and it would be lovely to have a whole day of pleasing Mother, though I couldn't imagine that I could keep this up for much longer.

"It's lovely. I shall commit it to memory. Thank you, Mother." The words sounded sincere and pleasant, but they left a tinny taste in my mouth.

Mother took the needlework and left the room. I pulled the chair close to the window for better light and started reading. The sooner I finished this book, the sooner I could read *Leaves of Grass*. As I read, my father's words echoed in my head: "once you start lying to yourself, all is lost."



The clock on the mantel ticked loudly. *Tick. Tick. Tick.* Waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

Father winds the clock every Sunday morning after breakfast, but Mother had Maggie wind the clock this morning and check the time to make sure it was set perfectly.

Mother was as tense as a piano wire about to snap. Poor Bridget and Maggie. They had conducted a spring cleaning of the house only weeks before, but Mother made them do it all again: carpets beaten, floors scrubbed, furniture polished with beeswax and lemon balm oil until the wood gleamed. This morning, the windows were opened at dawn, and strings of dried lemon and orange rinds were hung in each open window to ensure the air inside our home would smell fresh.

My needlework had been quickly and expertly framed by our handyman, Mr. Grimes, and was hanging on the wall in the parlor.

*Tick. Tick. Tick.* The mantel clock continued counting the tension in the air.

Finally, we heard a carriage approach. The hoofbeats of a stately pair of Morgan horses matched the ticking of the mantel clock. The carriage, a regal-looking landau with dark blue taffeta roller curtains, stopped in front of our house. The coachman jumped down, opened the carriage door,

and offered the woman inside a gloved hand. Mrs. Dillworth descended from the carriage, paused to open her parasol, then proceeded to our door. As Lily had predicted, the parasol precisely matched her gown.

“Places, everyone,” Mother announced. Maggie smoothed her apron, and Mother adjusted Maggie’s cap, though it didn’t need it. “Not too close to the window, girls. We don’t want to appear too eager.”

The bell rang and Mother put her hand on Maggie’s arm to indicate that she should wait and not fling the door open until we were all in our places. Mother hurried into the parlor, where it would seem like she was nonchalant, at ease, and not at all a frenzy of nerves. Then she nodded to Maggie to open the door.

“Here she comes,” Lily whispered to me. “This could be your future mother-in-law.”

I shot Lily a startled look. “We are a long way from thinking about that!”

“Are we?” Lily asked, lifting her eyebrows and smirking playfully.

The hat came through the door first, though I wasn’t certain that it would clear the door. It was larger than the one she had worn to church last Sunday and the same deep midnight blue silk as her gown. The right side of her hat soared skyward in a graceful arch. The topmost part was festooned with loops of a lighter blue ribbon nestled amongst wispy, blue-dyed ostrich plumes. Mrs. Dillworth handed her parasol to Maggie as Mother went to greet her.

“Welcome to our home. Do come in.”

Mother introduced us. Mrs. Dillworth looked at each of us and nodded as we curtsied.

“What a beautiful bouquet of daughters you have,” she said, turning to Mother.

“Thank you. Shall we sit?” Mother blushed and motioned toward the tea table in the center of the room.

Mrs. Dillworth moved toward the table but paused and surveyed the room, assessing each object, drinking in every detail.

I looked to Mother and then to Lily. Neither seemed shocked at this breach of etiquette. A *Manual of Etiquette* clearly stated that one was not to appear to take too much notice of the decorations of a room, but the etiquette book also said not to draw attention to the faux pas of others, so I

said nothing.

Mrs. Dillworth sat down at the table. For a moment I was distracted by her towering, unwieldy hat, which was so big that it made the rest of our parlor seem small. In a calm voice, I asked Mrs. Dillworth if she would prefer Darjeeling or oolong. I managed to pour the tea, ask all the right questions, and serve it to her without any disaster. Mother's tea was next. While I prepared tea for Rose, Lily, and myself, Mother and Mrs. Dillworth talked about people from *Our Mother of Sorrows*. Mother had heard that Mrs. Myrtle was ill. Mrs. Dillworth reported that Mrs. Trayton was going to accompany her husband when he went to Chicago on business.

I'm afraid I wasn't listening intently because I was concentrating on all the musts and must-nots as I served myself a scone with clotted cream, then focused on taking tiny bites, though I wasn't very hungry. Suddenly, I realized that Mrs. Dillworth was the only one talking. She was talking about hats, shoes, and parasols, not hers but what everyone was wearing in church last Sunday.

*A Manual of Etiquette* did not specifically mention this subject, but I was fairly certain that talking about what people were wearing and whether they were in style or not was not the sort of thing that was considered proper. But perhaps I had missed something. Perhaps Mother had asked about fashion as the dressmaker is coming next week.

Mrs. Dillworth said something about Mrs. Butler's shabby hat and Mrs. Faraday's outmoded frock, but when she turned her sharp critique to Mrs. Spencer, my ire rose.

"Oh, but probably the most ragamuffin family is the Spencer family. I don't think Mrs. Spencer has had a new hat this decade—and her shoes! Did you see the shoes she was wearing on Sunday?"

Mrs. Spencer is the mother of a dear childhood friend. She is the sweetest woman.

"Mr. Hartranft owns a shoe manufactory company, does he not?" Mrs. Dillworth continued.

"My husband manufactures boots predominately and a few styles of men's shoes. He does not fabricate fashionable ladies' shoes," Mother replied.

"But being in the shoe industry, I would think you would agree that



her shoes need to be replaced. Wouldn't you agree, Marguerite?"

Stunned that I had been asked such a ridiculous, insensitive question I simply responded, "Ένα παπούτσι είναι ένα παπούτσι." Greek for "a shoe is a shoe."

Mrs. Dillworth looked quizzically at me. "Pardon?"

I responded. "Calceus est A calceus." Latin for "a shoe is a shoe."

For some reason, she seemed to understand the Latin and looked delighted. "Oh, how charming. French is such the rage. I wish I could speak French. I've thought about hiring a tutor but haven't made it a priority."

"That was not French. It was first Greek, then Latin. French would be une chaussure est une chaussure."

"Lovely. Your daughter is very clever. Quite a talent. Perhaps I should hire her as my tutor." Mrs. Dillworth smiled at Mother, then at me.

Mother did not reply. She looked frozen, as still as a statue.

"The tea has been lovely, but my cup is empty, and it is time for me to take my leave," Mrs. Dillworth said.

"Please, before you go, you must see Marguerite's true talent," Mother said, suddenly thawing from her icy silence. "She has just finished this needlework pictorial. It is her own design."

At Mother's invitation, Mrs. Dillworth stood and moved in front of the needlework. Her hat was so tall and wide that it shaded the pictorial from the light, and she had to tilt her head back in order to see it.

"Yes. Very nice," she said.

"The trees are all trees from our garden, and the house pictured is our home. The quote in the middle, cleverly stitched in the shape of a tree, is from one of Shakespeare's poems," Mother informed Mrs. Dillworth.

"Actually," I said, "It is a quote from *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene 1: "Our life. . . finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything.""

"As I like it?"

"*As You Like It*. It's a play by William Shakespeare."

"Clever one, isn't she?" Mrs. Dillworth said, nodding toward me as she looked at Mother.

Mother rang the bell, Bridget came in to clear the tea table, and Maggie retrieved Mrs. Dillworth's parasol. We walked Mrs. Dillworth and

- Grenell 1881 -

her hat to the door and said our good-byes. In an instant, she was gone, and the house was silent except for the clatter of teacups and the *tick tick* of the mantel clock.

Mother whirled on her heel and glared at me.

“Marguerite,” she said, her tone sharp, “go to your room and stay there until your father comes home.”