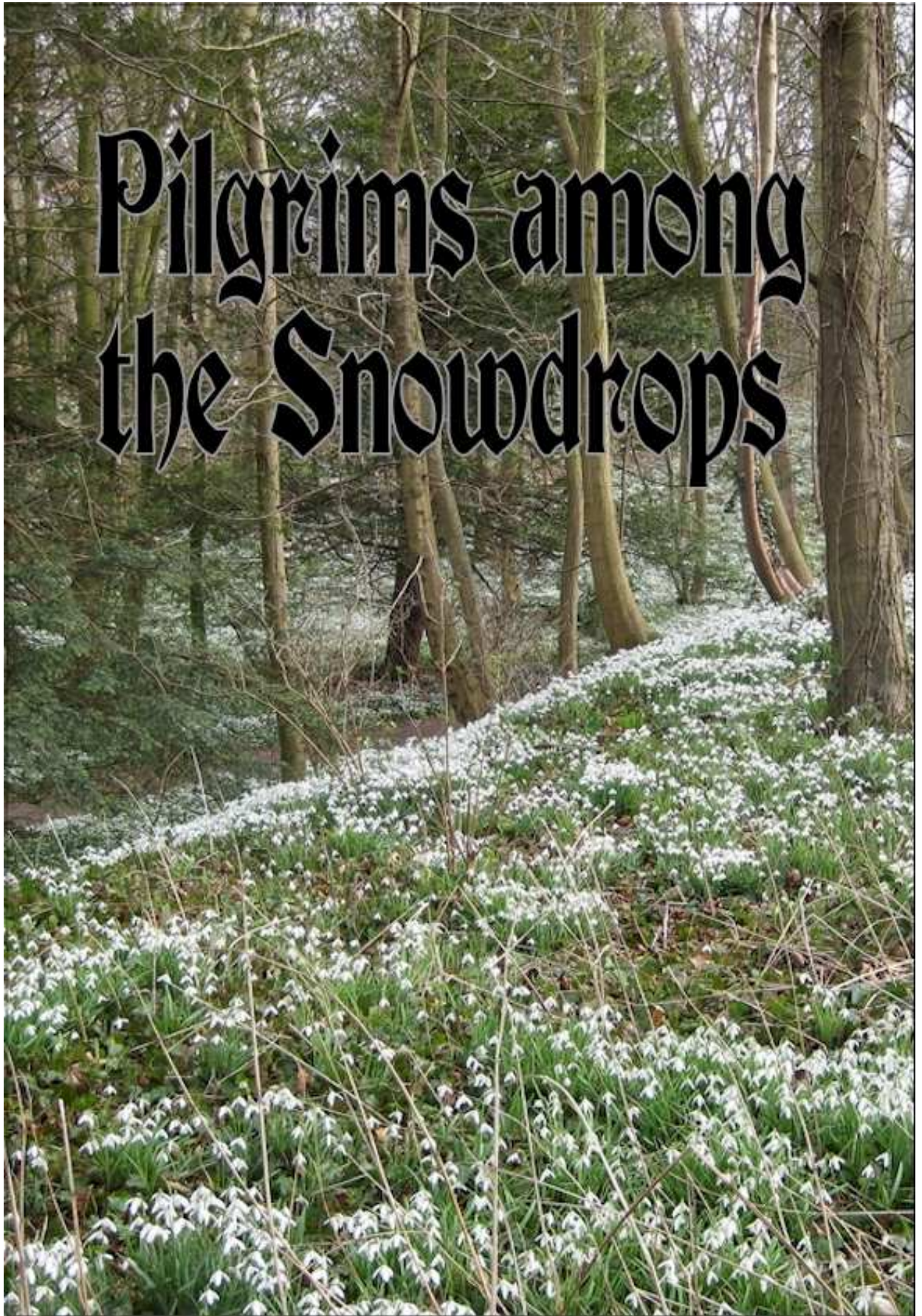


Pilgrims among the Snowdrops



PILGRIMS AMONG THE SNOWDROPS

We sat down opposite the old woman at the refectory table. It was February, we had just arrived at the Anglican Hospice, and we were the only Pilgrims in this bare, draughty room. Seeing her sitting there, determination in every line of her body, I would rather have gone somewhere else, but these were the only places laid, and it would have looked rude. She was bulky for her age, wrapped in a thick, army-style coat and wearing a shapeless green velvet hat under which vigorous strands of grey hair struggled to be free.

Waiting until my mother and I were seated, she fixed us with a steady gaze, addressing us in a heavy, Germanic accent.

“I come today from London. Where you from?” My mother began a reply, but the old woman had no concept of North British geography and cut through my mother’s ramblings to return to familiar ground:

“Haf you been in London? It is terrible now, with the dirt and the rubbish in the streets. Always I am writing letters about it to the council. And the children everywhere. And the people who will not work. They say there is no work, but there is always work if you will look for it. They stay at home and they have the children and they expect the state to pay for them. No one should have children if they cannot support them. You find it so, yes?”

I felt my temperature rising. She was treading on thin ice - I had brought up two children on state handouts. But I didn’t want to get into an argument about something so close to home. I briefly defended the jobless and left it at that. Next minute she was off on another topic:

“What do they do for the old people? I am eighty-six. They gif all this money to the young people and do nossing for us. For instance, what they do for you?” She spoke directly to Mother, perhaps judging her an easier target. Mother, confused, thought she was being asked to account for her weekly finances. But at the mention of a husband the old woman butted in:

“Your husband is alive?” she sounded surprised. She must have taken my mother for a widow. “Marriage is so beautiful, is it not?” she asked. “The other day I saw an old couple holding

hands in the street. That is wonderful, after all those years, to be so much in love that they hold hands. You find it so, yes?"

She was looking at me for an answer, but my private feeling was that any couple holding hands in the street had probably only just met. Getting no answer she turned to Mother again.

"To have a man who loves you, that is the greatest blessing in life, is it not?" Mother only smiled and nodded, making me glad I had not spoken. I knew she was often upset by my cynicism. "Your husband, he loff you, yes?" she continued, Mother nodding more vigorously now. The old woman's opinion accorded with her own view of marriage, that of a blessed state.

"A man of your own, to gif you whatever you want," continued our companion. "He looks into your eyes and he knows what you want before you even know it yourself, and he goes and buys it for you. Is that not so?" Incredibly, my mother was still nodding, though my father, the meanest man alive, expected reimbursement from the housekeeping if he so much as bought a loaf of bread on his way home from work, and had certainly never been in the habit of dashing out to buy amusing trinkets from Fattorini and co, to please his lady wife.

Where did this old woman get her crazy ideas from, I wondered. She was intelligent, you could see that in the high arched brow, the imperious nose, the quick, alert eyes that missed nothing. Even if her own marriage had been happy, she had lived long enough to be aware that this was not the norm. I began to suspect she was playing games with us.

"Oh, a man is necessary in this life!" she sighed. Now she had me. I could not let this one pass!

"I don't think so," I said.

"Oh yes, a man IS necessary," she repeated firmly. "You are only unhappy because you have no husband."

"I've had three husbands," I said, "and any amount of lovers, and I can tell you I don't NEED any of them." This produced a satisfactory silence, and we managed to eat our meal in peace.

Mother was laughing as we went up to our rooms.

"You certainly fit her up," she said, "She didn't know what to say to you."

I was not in the habit of taking holidays with my mother, for whom I harboured a hearty dislike, but in this case Dad, who studied archaeology after he retired, had gone off to look at ruins

in Crete, and Mum didn't want to go with him. She hated flying, but she hated history even more, her idea of a holiday being to lie in a deckchair on the beach at Scarborough. She'd gone to Greece with him once, after extreme persuasion, and said she'd enjoyed it.

"Will you go again?" I asked her when she came back,

"No thank you," she said, "I've seen 'abroad' now, I don't need to go again."

Dad offered to pay, if I would take her away somewhere. She wanted to go to Scarborough. Even though it was hardly deckchair weather, it was her idea of heaven at any time of year. But I saw this as an opportunity to return to Walsingham, which I had discovered by chance on a cycling holiday the previous year, 1983. The whole village is dedicated to the Virgin Mary, who appeared to the Lady of the Manor in 1061. I went there with a heavy heart, and a problem I thought could never be solved. I had no faith, and did not ask for help, but it was given, and by a miracle everything was made right¹. Since that time I had become spiritually open, and my development was accelerating rapidly. I remembered how someone had said to be sure and come at snowdrop time, they are spectacular, and stretch for miles through the woods. It was February. There would be snowdrops. Even with Mother along, I knew I'd get something from the experience.

We spent a couple of nights in Cambridge with Bertie, one of my jazz cronies who often invited me down. It had almost got to the point where I was considering marriage, but, to my surprise, Mother did not like him. On the surface he was everything a mother ought to want for her daughter - handsome, single, solvent, with a good job and no bad habits - but she said there was something 'not right' about him. I have to say I felt the same. He ticked the boxes but did not stir the heart.

After seeing the sights of Cambridge, we continued on to Walsingham, and booked in at the Anglican hospice with its lovely name, Star of the Sea. To my relief, only singles were available, so I did not have the embarrassment of sharing with her. The rooms were warm enough, if a little sparse, as befits the

¹ see my forthcoming book, *A Bit on the Blind Side*, Vol2 of my autobiography

pilgrim ethos, but the refectory was as cheerless and unwelcoming as a Sunday school tearoom.

At breakfast next morning our adversary was ready with a new approach.

“Always when I was a child I wanted to see my sister’s breasts,” she announced loudly, “and she would never show me. I wanted to see, because she had pear breasts and I had apple, and I wanted to know what apple was like. But I never did know.”

We received this startling revelation in silence. It hardly seemed the topic for a breakfast table. I dared not look at my mother. God knows what she was thinking!

“You know, once I was climbing a tree to get some apples, and a young boy passed by and he called, ‘Hey, Missis.’ I turned round and he said, ‘You’ve got nice titties,’ and he ran off. What do you think of that?” We studiously chewed on our eggs and bacon and declined to say what we thought.

“I wonder if it will rain today?” she said next, a remark which we felt we could safely answer.

We went out to explore the shrines and shops. There wasn’t much else in the village. I had never accepted organised religion, but what happened to me here had changed my life, and I wanted to see what its effect on Mother, who claimed to be religious, would be.

We went into the shrine and I showed her where she could buy candles and where to light them. I told her to sit quietly and let the stillness speak to her, but she was restless and kept wanting to move. Several times we glimpsed the old woman ahead of us, and took evasive action.

“She’s a bit much, isn’t she,” ventured Mother, who reckons to speak ill of no one.

On the second morning, our fellow guest decided on an in-depth discussion of the plays of Shakespeare. I tried to blot her out, but she aimed her questions directly at me and it was difficult. Overcome by exasperation, I said,

“Please don’t speak to me any more. I like to be quiet at breakfast.” No one said much after that. I could tell Mother was dying of embarrassment.

Mum went to the hairdresser after breakfast and I went to my room, where I spent the morning drawing. It was both therapeu-

tic and relaxing. I found myself thinking about my daughter's reaction when I said I was bringing Mum here.

"You're mad," she said. "You know you don't get on. You'll row all the time and you'll hate it."

"No I won't," I said, "miracles happen at Walsingham, don't forget." It would indeed be a miracle if I suddenly found I could get on with Mother, after a lifetime of dislike. We'd never had a big falling out or anything, she has her life and I have mine, and they don't meet at any point. Neither of us has anything in common with the other.

After a couple of hours with the felt pens and paper, a craving for coffee overcame me and I went downstairs to a little sitting room where guests could make their own drinks. There was a heavy glass door at the foot of the stairs and I could see the old woman sitting with her back to me. I knew she hadn't heard me, and for a minute I thought of going back and taking an alternative route, along the top corridor and down the other stairs, bypassing her. But that would be mean-spirited. She hadn't done me any harm. I pushed the door open and walked in.

She didn't look up. Her stick was by her side and she held a book up to the light. I realised she was going to allow me to walk past her without speaking, and I felt ashamed of my behaviour at breakfast.

She was probably lonely. She was here on her own, with no one to talk to. No wonder she tried so hard at mealtimes. I stopped in front of her and she looked up. Her eyes were extraordinary. I felt she was looking right into me, and at the same time I kept nothing of myself back.

"I'm sorry I'm so bad-tempered in a morning," I said. "Please forgive me for being rude."

"Oh no, I too am sorry. I am a silly old woman and I talk too much, and I say things which are nonsense. But you have tears in your eyes."

"It's the light," I said, "it hurts my eyes."

"You are so pretty in that red scarf," she said, "like a gypsy with it tied that way, almost like someone from my own country. Sit down a little. You have time?" I felt I owed her the time, and sat down. She leaned forward and put a hand on my knee. She looked at my stained fingers.

"You write?"

“Yes, I write,” I said, “but just now I was painting.”

“What you write?”

“Whatever comes into my head. Poetry. Stories.”

“You write stories? Then you write about me. I tell you of my life.” Eighty-six years could take some time to relate, I thought, as I settled myself to listen.

“My mother was a midwife employed by the government. We lived in a little town on the Austrian/Hungarian border, and she was the only midwife there. The people who were rich paid her, and the government paid for the poor people. She had to walk far into the mountains to deliver the babies, sometimes a walk of two hours, then sitting up all night, and walking back two hours again. Then my father, who was a passionate man, wanted a woman - of course! A man wants a woman, doesn't he? And she was tired, so she give him cold shoulder.

“We had a servant, an ugly little thing, like a stick, while my mother was a beautiful, strong woman, but my father used to creep up to the attic and lie with the servant. One night my mother got all of us children out of bed and made us climb the stairs to the attic, and she banged on the door and said, ‘Come out, I know what you are doing, and your children are all crying out here!’

“We did not know what was going on, of course, but we knew there was something wrong, our father in the servant's room! Then we heard commotion - he was climbing out of the window! So she made us all rush outside and we stood on the lawn and we were crying - ‘Oh Father, oh Father, what are you doing?’ We were shocked to see him in his night shirt, climbing down outside the house. Our mother was screaming - ‘See, children! See your Father climbing out of his own house!’

“After that the servant went, and our father went drinking each night, and came home shooting his pistols, and we all had to get out of the way. Everyone would jump out of the windows and go and hide in the bushes until he had no ammunition left. One day, he was going to shoot my mother, and I flung myself in front of her and said, ‘Don't shoot! Oh, don't shoot Mummy!’ - but there are these kind of problems when a woman gives a man cold shoulder, isn't it? I did not understand it then, of course.

“I wasn't allowed to talk to boys. If they just see me hanging on the gate talking to a boy they take me in and they beat me.

Oh, those beatings! And afterwards they would say, 'Come and give your Mother a kiss and tell her you love her.' Can you imagine that? They beat you and then they want you to tell them you love them. Would you love them? No, I do not think it.

"I wanted to see the world and I had to earn my living. My mother took me to the station and cried many tears, but I could not kiss her. To this day I cannot kiss anyone because it reminds me of the beatings. I was twenty-three and a virgin. The only advice my mother gave me was not to go near any men. I thought it was her own unhappy experience made her say that. I knew nothing of men.

"I went as a trainee housekeeper to a hotel in Switzerland. I was very frightened. All my life up to then I had lived at home. The hotel manager was a tall, handsome man with dark moustaches. He was very kind to me, a young girl away from home for the first time. I looked on him as a father, until one evening I ended up in his bed. I don't know how it happened, we had a meal together in the restaurant. It was part of my job to eat with him, you know, and there was wine, but I was used to wine. It has always puzzled me how it happened, but there I was in his bed. And it was quite nice - I was surprised - no pain, nothing. After that I was in his bed every night.

"Then a woman came to the hotel. I don't know how, but I knew there was something. Perhaps it was the way he looked at her. It made me very unhappy. Sometimes I would wake up and he wouldn't be there, then one night I woke up just as he was going out of the door. I don't know what made me. I know it was wrong, perhaps it was the memory of my own father, but I got up and followed him. I saw him go to the woman's room and tap on the door and she let him in. I didn't know what to do. I stood outside the door, I couldn't leave. Then I heard the woman screaming and moaning - I didn't know what it was. I made no noise when with him. I thought he was killing her and I banged on the door and shouted for help and people came running. I collapsed and was taken to my room. Then I was ill for a long time, and he did not come and see me, not once, though he never said I must leave the hotel.

"When I was a little better, a friend of his came to visit me and said he would take me in his car for a little air. I hadn't been out of my room for months and I was so pale. This friend, I

knew him for he came to the hotel often, was a millionaire. But I did not think of that. I only thought of him as a kind friend. He would send flowers and chocolates and every afternoon he would take me to drive in his car.

“Then he asked me what I was going to do. I could not talk about my future. I would always break down and cry if anyone mentioned the job I ought to be doing. This time he let me cry for a while, then he continued to talk to me. ‘You won’t get better,’ he said, ‘until you leave here. If you would let me help you, I can find you somewhere to stay and you can begin to plan your future.’

“I knew he was speaking sense. I ought not to stay in the hotel when I was not working. I knew they had been good to let me stay all that time, but I didn’t understand why my employer had not been to see me. His friend was silent on that point.

“The next week I moved into a small apartment overlooking a pleasant, quiet street. There were trees on each side, and across the road a small park with a lake. The millionaire came every day as before. Now when we went out, he took me to walk round the shops. He would say, ‘Isn’t that a pretty dress? Let me buy it for you.’ I knew he had plenty of money and that it didn’t matter to him what it cost, but I knew it was wrong to accept this from him. Of course, I didn’t think about who was paying for the apartment! Perhaps in a way I thought my old employer was paying. Sometimes, when he was leaving, the millionaire would kiss my hand, but if he ever put his arms round me and tried to kiss me on the lips I would cry and he would shake his head sadly and go away.

“One day, the millionaire said he wanted me to be his mistress. He pointed out how patient he had been, but that he couldn’t be patient for ever. I must share his bed, or he would not come and see me any more. Now I felt even more betrayed, for I had thought he was my friend. He told me that my rent was paid for the next month, that if I wanted to return to my home he would pay for me to go, but that he would not come to see me any more.

“After he had gone I cried more than ever, but I did nothing. When the landlady asked me for money for rent, I went and sold some of my clothes. When I had nothing left but one suit she came to my room and asked me what I was going to do. I could

not stop crying, so they sent me to the hospital, and then I think they must have sent for my parents, for my mother came and took me away. She never asked me any questions.

“But I could not stay at home. There were many brothers and sisters and I must earn my keep. In the hospital I had met a dancer, and when I went home she wrote to me and offered to train me to join her troupe. It was folk dances you know, with beautiful costumes. I became very good and went all over the world. I was in Cyprus when the British were there. You think the British were so good? I will tell you what they did. I was dancing in a Club, for Officers you know, and many of them came just to see me. I was beautiful in those days, though I didn't know it. I had long, thick hair, black and wavy. It hung down below my waist, and I had beautiful breasts and figure. I did not always look like now. The ordinary soldiers were not allowed in the Club, but they would come and hang around the door, which was kept open for the heat, and they would watch us, too.

“I lived in a house where there were four of us women. There was a Turkish woman and her daughter, a girl of fourteen, and there was a woman whose husband was away on service. The British came to our house and said that we must all go once a week, with the prostitutes, to the British doctor to be examined. Can you imagine how we wept in that house, what distress we were in? The Turkish woman, who must veil herself in the street so men could not look at her, her daughter a virgin, the respectable married woman and I, who only had one man in my life. There was no appeal. If we did not submit to the doctor, we were not allowed to stay, and I could not work in the Club. You think that is good, to do that to respectable women? I spit on the British!

“After that, I took a lover. What was the use of keeping myself clean and then having to undergo all this? I took a lover and life was easier, but one day my periods stopped and I said to him, ‘What shall I do?’ He took me to a doctor, and there in the surgery - there was blood everywhere. My girlfriend who was with me couldn't stand it, she had to go out. That was the first of many times. I had to work, I had to dance, we travelled all over the world, and if I had a child - no work - my lover would not stay with me - I knew that.

“And all this time I was travelling and working, I could not save money. Always my sisters were writing to me, ‘Oh, we have no money, we are starving here.’ And I sent them all the money I could. I kept nothing.

“In one place I was in, a friend confided to me that her periods had stopped, but she swore to me that she had been with no man. We went to a doctor together and that was when I found out that travelling can stop your periods, not only babies. So I never knew how many times I went through that for nothing. So many visits to doctors, so much blood spilt.

“And when I went home at last, after many years, because I was ill, I had to pay for a room in a hotel, because they said they had no room for me in the house. And my sisters were so poor that every time they went out they had to have a new dress, while I went everywhere in the same old clothes.

“But now your mother is coming - I hear her steps. This is not for her ears.” She picked up her book and turned to the window again, and I went out with my coffee cup.

That afternoon I took my mother to the House of the Little Sisters. They have a room they keep just for prayer - white-washed walls, bare wood floor, benches round the walls. In the centre is a long, plain table with a large Bible, and in front of it on the floor a sheepskin, where a baby Jesus lies next to a pot of fresh flowers.

There is peace in this room, and for the first time I felt that my mother was not restless. She was happy just to sit with her thoughts. Freed of worrying about her, I let my own thoughts wander.

After a while, I felt someone urging me to take my mother’s hand. I recoiled from the thought. I couldn’t remember the last time I touched her. In Cambridge Bertie took her hand with a perfectly natural gesture as we crossed a busy street, and in that moment I knew I couldn’t have done it.

But the Voice in my head was insistent.

“Don’t look down, and don’t look at her,” it said. “I’ll guide you. Just stretch out your hand and hers will be there.”

In the end I couldn’t see what I had to lose, and I did as the Voice suggested. My hand closed on a hand, strangely small and cold. I could feel worn bones beneath loose skin. I folded my warm fingers around it. She let it lie, passive, unresponsive in

my hand. But this moment was more tremendous than anything that had ever happened to us. That we were touching was a miracle. We sat, I don't know how long, until I became conscious that she wanted to leave. Then I turned and for the first time looked at her. Tears were running down her face. Neither of us said anything, but hand in hand we walked, through woods carpeted in snowdrops, back to the Pilgrim hospice.

In the refectory, the old woman was waiting, her velvet hat askew, her old coat hanging open - and there were new arrivals. We were able to watch, amused, as she began her attack.

"Today I saw the House of the Quakers," she addressed them.

"Oh, but there aren't any Quakers in the village," someone objected.

"Yes, there are Quakers," she said firmly, "someone pointed out the house to me. They are witches, you know. Yes," her voice rose, drowning muttered protests, "I know this because they hang a lamp outside the door, to show they are witches. Someone told me this in London. There are many witches there."

I looked up and caught the gleam in her eyes, and I saw, not a ridiculous old woman, but a dark, proud girl with imperious features, her thick hair hanging to her waist, swaying gracefully, while men with greedy eyes watched through a half-open door a beautiful life that never came to flower.

Geraldine Murfin-Shaw

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