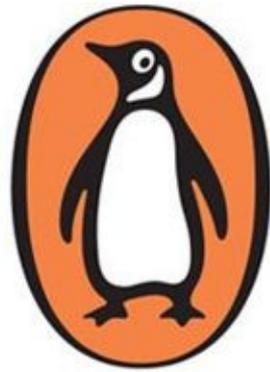


The
**CHEMICKAL
MARRIAGE**

A NOVEL

G.W. DAHLQUIST

with THE GLASS BOOKS OF
THE DREAM EATERS



Penguin

G. W. DAHLQUIST
The Chemickal Marriage

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THE CHEMICKAL MARRIAGE

G. W. Dahlquist is a novelist and playwright. When he fell asleep during a snowstorm, his first book, *The Glass Books of the Dream Eaters*, came to him in a dream. This is his third novel. Originally from the Pacific Northwest, he now lives in New York.

By the same author

The Glass Books of the Dream Eaters
The Dark Volume

Prefatory Note

The Chemickal Marriage finishes a story begun in *The Glass Books of the Dream Eaters* and continued in *The Dark Volume*. However much this present book may stand apart as a discrete narrative, a few notes regarding what has come before may prove useful.

Celeste Temple, a plantation heiress from the West Indies of twenty-five sharp years, her engagement to Roger Bascombe summarily terminated without explanation, found herself in the position, some three days later, of shooting him dead in a sinking dirigible. Mr Bascombe had joined a mysterious cabal (funded jointly by the financier Robert Vandaariff and the munitions magnate Henry Xonck) whose control of the nation was scuttled, along with the dirigible, by the very unlikely alliance of Miss Temple, the criminal assassin Cardinal Chang and Captain-Surgeon Svenson of the Macklenburg Navy, a foreign spy.

When these three escaped the wrecked airship, they thought their enemies vanquished: the Comte d'Orkancz, inventor of the blue glass, had been run through with a sabre; Francis Xonck had been shot; Harald Crabbé had been stabbed; and the Contessa di Lacquer-Sforza had leapt to her death. Betrayed by these supposed underlings, Henry Xonck and Robert Vandaariff had already fallen prey to blue glass, their minds wiped clean, their bodies animal husks.

However, the dying Comte had been alchemically preserved, his memories captured in a glass book by a resilient Francis Xonck, who was unaware of how mortality would taint its contents. Xonck and the Contessa, the latter evidently a swimmer, hurried to recover the threads of their plot, even as Temple, Svenson and Chang raced to forestall them. All parties were met by a new cabal, an alliance of former underlings who understood the power of the blue glass, if not the science behind it, and stood determined to defy their former masters. At the Xonck factory in Parchfeldt, all parties convened for the infusion of the Comte's corrupted memories into the body of Robert Vandaariff, seeking at a stroke to command the one man's science and the other's fortune. Once resurrected, however, the pawn overcame his ignorant masters, deliberately provoking an inferno in which, once more, many lives were lost.

That night Miss Temple escaped the burning factory, only to see Cardinal Chang and Doctor Svenson cut down before her eyes. In the woods, Miss Temple met up with Elöise Dujong, the Doctor's love, and Francesca Trapping, the seven-year-old heir to the Xonck fortune. But the Contessa caught them in the dark, stealing the girl and the

dark volume, leaving Elöise dead and Miss Temple only half alive, but determined for revenge.

One

Antagonist

Miss Temple eyed the clock with a characteristic impatience, for she much despised lateness in others. She pulled the green clutch bag onto her lap, aware that sorting its contents had become a ritual, as if she were some old woman with a set of clacking beads.

A purse of money. A notebook and an all-weather pencil. Matches. A beeswax-candle stub. Two handkerchiefs. A sewn cloth pouch of orange metal rings. Opera glasses. A small black revolver whose recoil did not spoil her aim (she had practised on empty bottles in the hotel cellar and could nearly hit them). Ammunition. Gold.

She had paid Pfaff well. If he did not come, she was betrayed. Or – Miss Temple pursed her lips – Mr Pfaff was dead.

Miss Temple cinched the green bag shut. The clock's silver bell chimed the half-hour. She called to her maid: 'Marie, my travelling jacket.'

Five weeks had passed since her return, five weeks spent wholly on revenge.

It had taken Miss Temple two days to regain the city from the wilds of Parchfeldt Park. The Contessa's metal-bound case had not cracked her skull, and the wound on her forehead had eased its throbbing by the time she reached the canal and slept a few hours in the cover of its reeds. Tentative fingers told her the gash had gummed to a tolerable scab, and she walked for hours, dizzied but no longer sickened, to the Parchfeldt railway head, where she finally boarded a coach to Stopping Station, into the heart of the city.

She had gone back to the Hotel Boniface, for her enemies would find her no matter where she hid – she must visit her banker, she must have clothes, she must hire violent men, all of which would draw the notice of any diligent foe. When she arrived at the hotel's doors, filthy, bloodied and after a fortnight's absence, the staff said nothing apart from a single polite inquiry as to whether she required a doctor before a bath was drawn or whether, preparatory to either, she might prefer a meal.

She huddled naked in the copper tub until the water went tepid. A maid stood deferentially in the dressing-room doorway with fresh towels, nervously glancing between the dull face of the soaking woman and the sharp knife Miss Temple had insisted stay within reach, atop a wooden stool. Dressed enough to have a doctor

examine her, Miss Temple had kept the weapon in her lap. The white-whiskered man applied a salve and bandage to her forehead, frowned at the fading weal of a bullet above her ear and left a powder to aid her sleep. Miss Temple ate two slices of buttered bread, stopping at the first flicker of nausea. She dismissed the maid, locked the corridor door and wedged it with a chair, did the same for the door of her chamber and curled into bed, the blade under her pillow like a snake in wait beneath a stone.

She slept for three hours before her fears rose up to wake her. She lay in the dark. Chang. Svenson. Elöise. Their deaths could not be undone.

Her survival felt like a betrayal, and every small comfort arrived with a sting. Yet Miss Temple had withstood such stings all her life. The next morning she made her first list of everything she ought to do and found herself filling two diligent pages. She set down the pen and wiped her nose. In truth it was simpler to keep one's heart a stone. She rang for breakfast and a maid to curl her hair.

She sent to her aunt in Cap-Rouge, requesting the return of Marie (of her own two maids, the one who could read), and then spent the day – making a point to be accompanied by footmen from the Boniface – attending to her most basic needs: bank, clothes, weapons and, most important of all, news.

She did not fear for her immediate safety. When her train had arrived, the platforms of Stopping Station were no longer thick with dragoons. Brown-coated constables had been posted to manage the openly hostile crowds of travellers, but their only charge was to maintain order, not search for potential fugitives. Nowhere had she seen posters offering a reward for her capture, or for that of any of her former companions.

She scoured the newspapers, but found only a standard refrain of imminent crises: the Ministries paralysed, the Privy Council in disarray, business at a standstill. For Miss Temple, this was excellent: the more the world was hampered, the freer she would be to act. She sallied out, a hotel footman to either side, gratified by the frayed tempers that seemed to catch at every inconsequential jostle.

Her journey that first morning did not stretch to any destination she might deem provocative – that is, she did not venture near the St Royale Hotel, the Foreign Ministry, Stäelmaere House, the Macklenburg diplomatic compound or the Hadrian Square residence of Colonel and Mrs Trapping. All these places might have become bolt-holes for enemies that still lived. When the Contessa's spies found her at the Boniface, all well and good. She would not be so vulnerable.

And if her other great enemy had survived the destruction at the Parchfeldt factory? Miss Temple had last glimpsed Lord Robert Vandaariff face down in a pool of black slime, about to be swarmed by an angry mob ... yet had he lived? It would be a fool who assumed otherwise.

Miss Temple paused (the scarlet-coated footmen halted obligingly with her) at the cobbled road's sudden descent, gazing at a district of the city she had never visited. One footman cleared his throat.

‘Shall we turn along the avenue, miss?’

Miss Temple strode ahead, down to the river.

Cardinal Chang had mentioned it once, and the detail – a proper name from his secret life – had taken Miss Temple’s mind with the attractive force of a silver buckle to a magpie. When she stood in the street outside the Raton Marine, she was unprepared for the surge of tenderness that filled her heart. The tavern lay in a nest of filthy streets, with the buildings to either side tipping like old drunkards. The people in the street, openly staring at the finely dressed young woman with two liveried servants, seemed to Miss Temple like humanity’s bilge, beings who could scarcely take two steps without leaving a stain. Yet in this place Cardinal Chang had been *known* – these ruins were his world.

Again the footman cleared his throat.

‘Wait here,’ said Miss Temple.

A scattering of men sat outside the tavern at small tables – sailors, by the look of them – and Miss Temple passed through to the door without a glance. Inside, she saw the Raton Marine had been fitted out to serve a broad clientele – tables near the windows with light enough to read, and tables in shadows even the brightest morning would not pierce. A staircase led to a balcony lined with rooms for rent, their open doors draped with an oilcloth curtain. Her nostrils flared in imagining the reek.

Perhaps five men looked up from their drinks as she entered. Miss Temple ignored them and approached the barman, who was polishing a bowlful of silver buttons with a rag, depositing each finished button with a *clink* into another bowl.

‘Good morning,’ said Miss Temple.

The barman did not reply, but met her eyes.

‘I have been directed here by Cardinal Chang,’ she said. ‘I require a competent man not averse to violence – in fact perhaps several – but one to start, as soon as is convenient.’

‘Cardinal Chang?’

‘Cardinal Chang is dead. If he were not, I should not be here.’

The barman looked past her shoulders at the other men, who had obviously overheard.

‘That’s hard news.’

Miss Temple shrugged. The barman’s gaze flicked at the bandage above her eye.

‘You have money, little miss?’

‘And I will not be cheated. This is for your *own* time and attention.’ Miss Temple set a gold coin on the polished wood. The barman did not touch it. Miss Temple set down a second coin. ‘And *this* is for the man *you* would recommend for my business, taking into account that it is Cardinal Chang’s business as well. If you knew him –’

‘I knew him.’

‘Then perhaps you will be happy to see his killer paid in kind. I assure you I am most serious. Have your candidate present this coin at the Hotel Boniface, and ask for

Miss Isobel Hastings. If he knows his work, there will be more in its place.’

Miss Temple turned to the door. At one of the tables a man had stood, unshaven, with fingerless gloves.

‘How’d he get it, then? The old Cardinal?’

‘He was stabbed in the back,’ said Miss Temple coldly. ‘Good day to you all.’

Two restive days went by before the coin was returned. In that time Miss Temple’s headaches had gone, her maid had arrived (bearing a querulous letter from her aunt, thrown away unanswered), and she had begun regular practice with a newly purchased pistol.

The newspapers said nothing of the Duke of Stäelmaere’s death, and thus no official appointment of a new head for the Privy Council, though the Council Deputy, a Lord Axewith, had assumed a prominence simply through his regular denials of irregularity. No word of Robert Vandaariff. No word of the Parchfeldt battle. No mention of the Contessa di Lacquer-Sforza. No one called round at the Boniface to arrest Miss Temple. It was as if the Cabal’s machinations had never taken place.

Miss Temple had taken another room on a lower floor for business dealings, ignoring the attendant overtones of impropriety. She knew that to the staff of the Hotel Boniface she had become an eccentric, tolerated as long as each breach of decorum was plastered over by cash. Miss Temple did not care. She installed herself on a sofa, the clutch bag on her lap, one hand inside the bag holding her pistol.

A footman knocked to announce a Mr Pfaff. Miss Temple studied the man who entered, and did not offer him a chair.

‘Your name is Pfaff?’

‘Jack Pfaff. Nicholas suggested I call.’

‘Nicholas?’

‘At the Rat.’

‘Ah.’

Jack Pfaff was at most a year older than Miss Temple herself (a ripe, unmarried twenty-five). His clothing had at one time been near to fashion – chequered trousers and an orange woollen coat with square buttons – as if he were a young fop fallen to poor times. Miss Temple knew from his voice that this was not the case, and that the clothes represented an impoverished man’s desire to climb.

‘You can read? Write?’

‘Both, miss, quite tolerably.’

‘What weapons do you possess – what *skills*?’

Pfaff reached behind his back and brought out a slim blade. His other hand slipped to an inner pocket and emerged with a set of brass rings across his fingers.

‘Those are nothing against a sabre or musket.’

‘Am I to fight soldiers, miss?’

‘I should hope not, for your sake. Are you *averse* to killing?’

‘The law does prohibit the practice, miss.’

‘And if a man spat in your face?’

‘O goodness, I would step away like a Christian.’ Pfaff raised his eyebrows affably. ‘Then again, most incidents of face-spitting can be laid to drink. Perhaps it would be more proper to cut a spitting man’s throat, to spite the devil inside.’

Miss Temple did not appreciate trifling. ‘Why does this Nicholas consider you fit for my employ?’

‘I am skilled in opening doors.’

‘I requested no *thief*.’

‘I speak broadly, miss. I am a man who finds *ways*.’

Miss Temple bit back a tart remark. A man like Pfaff, now unavoidable, must be met with intelligence and a smile.

‘Did you know Cardinal Chang?’

‘Everyone knew him – he cut a rare figure.’

‘You were his friend?’

‘He would on occasion allow a fellow to stand him a drink.’

‘Why would you do that?’

‘You knew him, miss – why would I *not*?’ Pfaff smiled evenly, watching her bag and the hand within it. ‘Perhaps you’ll enlighten me as to the present business.’

‘Sit down, Mr Pfaff. Put those things away.’

Pfaff restored the weapons to their places and stepped to an armchair, flipping out his coat-tails before settling. Miss Temple indicated the silver service on a table.

‘There is tea, if you would have some. I will explain what I require. And then you – with your *doors* – will suggest how best it can be done.’

Miss Temple soaked again that night in the copper tub, auburn hair dragging like dead weeds across the water. Her thoughts were stalled by fatigue, and the sorrow she strove to avoid loomed near.

She had told Mr Pfaff only enough to start his work, but his mercenary trespass of the roles formerly occupied by Chang and Svenson left Miss Temple feeling their absence. Even more troubling, close conversation with Pfaff had awakened, for the first time since leaving Parchfeldt Park, the spark of Miss Temple’s blue glass memories. It was not that Pfaff himself was attractive – on the contrary, she found him repellent, with brown teeth and coarse hair the colour of dung-muddled straw – but the longer he had remained in her physical proximity, the more she felt that dreaded bodily stirring, like a stretch of invisible limbs too long asleep.

In the copper tub, Miss Temple took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, inching herself towards the brink of her fears. In her struggle against the Cabal, she had exposed herself to the contents of two blue glass books. The first had been deliberately compiled by the Contessa di Lacquer-Sforza as an opium den of pleasure and violence. Staring into its swirling depths, Miss Temple had experienced the bright, hot memories of innumerable lives – in *her* thoughts and in *her* limbs – and Miss Temple’s literal

virtue became a mere scrap of protest before the debauchery she had known. Ever since, this book's contents had lurked beneath her thoughts, and a glimpse of skin or smell of hair, a mere rustle of cloth, could call forth pleasures sharp enough to drop Miss Temple to her knees.

The second book had contained the memories of but a single man, the Comte d'Orkancz, preserved in blue glass by Francis Xonck aboard the sinking airship in the very moment the Comte's life bled away. The great man's mind had been captured, but the contaminating touch of death had corrupted its character, twisting the aesthete's discrimination into a bitter disdain for life. Miss Temple's glimpse of this second book had left her gasping, as if her throat had been coated with rancid tar. Ignorant of the tainted nature of these memories, the remaining factions of the Cabal had convened at the Xonck Armaments works at Parchfeldt and agreed between them to infuse the book's contents into the emptied mind of Robert Vandaariff – hoping at a stroke to regain the Comte's alchemical knowledge for their use as well as take control of Vandaariff's fortune, the largest in the land. Resurrected in Vandaariff's body, the Comte, despite his unbalanced soul, had quickly triumphed over his former servants: Mrs Marchmoor, Francis Xonck, Charlotte Trapping and Alfred Leveret were all dead. Only the Contessa had survived to stand against him ... only the Contessa and Miss Temple.

At Parchfeldt Miss Temple had received her own revelation. As she walked through the factory, she had suddenly *known* the task of each machine. However poisonous, her touch of the Comte's memories had provided insights into his science. If Robert Vandaariff did still live, it was possible that Miss Temple – throughout her life indifferent to any study – could anticipate the Comte's dire imagination.

Stunned by grief, both books had lain dormant in Miss Temple's mind, just long enough for her to hope they might remain so. But now, prompted by the unsightly yet provocative vision of Pfaff's tongue dabbing at his cup rim for a drop of tea, they had returned. Naked and alone, Miss Temple knew she must make herself mistress of these wells within her, or forever be their slave.

She sank deeper, until the water touched her chin, and extended one leg so her pale foot dangled, dripping. She listened for Marie, heard nothing and settled her hips with a squirm. The fingers of her right hand grazed the hair between her legs, teasing the skin beneath. Miss Temple shut her eyes, willing her thoughts to a place she had never allowed herself, apart from the one impulsive moment in the darkness of Parchfeldt, the rash action she was sure had been the ruin of them all. She had kissed Cardinal Chang. She had felt his lips on hers, had pressed her tongue into his mouth, had thrilled at his firm grip upon her body. Miss Temple's left hand traced circles across her inner thigh as the fingers of her right slipped further down, stroking her arousal to a glow. She frowned against the press of blue glass memories, pursuing her own private need, the slicking quickness beneath her dipping fingers. A flick of bile from the Comte's memories – she swallowed it back and bit her lip, concentrating. Chang had pushed her away, arching his back as the Contessa's blade struck home – she

opened her legs to imagine him between them, pulling his sweet weight onto her body. Her thumb swirled a tight circle and she gasped, ignoring another chorus of lurid incident inside her, cleaving again to Cardinal Chang. He had carried her shivering body from the sea after the sunken airship – she sank two fingers deeper still – he had cradled her, nearly naked, white with cold. She pushed her foot against the tub, holding her desire firm, cutting through the noise in her mind like a ship through the foam on the sea. She knew he was dead, even as the remembered strength of his legs drove her deliciously near the breaking of an almost painful wave. She knew she was alone, even as the crest of pleasure finally spilt, flushing her breast like a bird's – opening her heart as it had never been in life, and thrusting it beyond the living world.

She slept more deeply that night, waking after five hours instead of three. With a determined grunt Miss Temple rolled onto her front, face deep in her pillow, her fingers digging beneath her body. This time it was easier to keep the foreign memories away – perfumed seraglio, church confessional, the back of a jouncing wagon – each banished by a fierce deployment of her memories of Chang. When she again lay spent, the pillow moist with her hot breath, Miss Temple began to sob. She wiped her nose on the edge of her pillowcase. Another hour of fitful dozing and she rose, pushing the hair back from her puffy eyes.

She was still at her writing table in her shift when Marie entered hours later, a box tied with ribbon in her arms.

‘Sent from downstairs, miss – and just in time for your day ...’

At Miss Temple's curt nod, the maid set the box on the bed, pulling apart the paper inside to reveal a new pair of ankle boots, the leather dyed dark green. Her old pair had been placed in the wardrobe, split and scuffed by too many perils to name. She hiked up her shift as Marie fitted both feet in turn. Miss Temple flexed each arch and felt the bite of hard, new leather. She crossed to her pillow and flipped it up, revealing the knife. With a satisfying ease the blade slid into the lean sheath the shoemaker had – under protest – stitched inside her right boot. She dropped the shift and caught Marie's troubled expression.

‘Stand up, Marie,’ she snapped. ‘Tea first, then ask what fruit is fresh.’

Mr Pfaff sent four more men to the Boniface for her scrutiny – ex-soldiers, discharged from colonial duty – jobless men inured to following orders and unafraid to fight. As the men stood towering above her in a line, Miss Temple imagined how the Contessa would serve each a special smile, applying a delicate adhesive of desire to their purchased loyalty. Miss Temple was not ugly – if her face was too round, her limbs were well formed and she bore a complete set of bright teeth – but she wanted no piece of these men's desire. She gave them money, her grey eyes coldly fixing theirs as the coins were taken.

With a pang she remembered her pact with the Doctor and the Cardinal. But she did not want to be encumbered – her heart could bear employees, but no longer allies. To

Pfaff and his men she was a source of money. They could have no great opinion of her character – and with no ready way to prove herself otherwise, she did her best not to despise them in return.

Three of the new men were sent out of the city to gather news: Mr Ramper to the factory at Parchfeldt, Mr Jaxon to Tarr Manor (whose quarry had provided the Cabal with raw indigo clay) and Mr Ropp to Harschmort House. The fourth and most presentable, Mr Brine – late Corporal Brine, 11th Territorial Fusiliers – Miss Temple kept near her at the Boniface, with the firm proviso that he never enter her private rooms unless requested, nor on any occasion – requested or no – insinuate himself with Marie.

Mr Pfaff himself brought a steady stream of information. The Contessa had not returned to the St Royale. Harald Crabbé's widow still occupied their home, as Roger Bascombe's mother remained sole resident of her son's. The homes of Leveret and Aspiche were quite empty apart from servants. Xonck's rooms had not been touched. Of all the addresses on Miss Temple's list, only one had received any sort of return. Confirmed by several witnesses, Charles and Ronald Trapping had been delivered home by two uniformed dragoons.

As Pfaff helped himself to a seat, Miss Temple passed him another page from her stack of papers. 'The Comte's house in Plum Court – it appears derelict, but the rear garden held a greenhouse where he worked. Also the art dealer that exhibited the Comte's paintings. And then the Royal Institute. If Vandaariff is alive –' She sighed. 'How can there be *no* word whether the richest man on three continents has died?'

'Soon now,' Pfaff chuckled indulgently. 'Once Mr Ropp returns from Harschmort –'

'The Royal Institute,' continued Miss Temple. 'Since every one of the Comte's laboratories was destroyed, he may have sought other facilities. Also, he will need particular supplies to rebuild – and in such quantities that must reveal the effort.'

'An excellent stratagem.'

'It is, actually,' said Miss Temple.

Pfaff stood with a smile, and called to Mr Brine, who sat impassively on an upholstered stool. 'Keeping the mistress safe, then, Briney?'

To Miss Temple's disgust, both of Mr Brine's cheeks flushed pink.

Cramming her hours with tasks brought welcome exhaustion that served to insulate her grief. In the night she cleaved to Chang, but through her days, passed in a world that so assailed Miss Temple's senses, he was gone. It was a widening divide she fought to ignore.

Mr Ropp did not return. Pfaff speculated the man had received better work elsewhere, or given himself over to drink with his advance wages. When Mr Jaxon delivered his report from Tarr Manor (the house occupied by Roger Bascombe's cousin and her young son, the quarry empty and unguarded), Pfaff sent him – at Miss Temple's insistence – after Ropp to Harschmort, this time with instructions to approach Robert Vandaariff's mansion cautiously on foot, through the dunes.

The longer she waited the more the Boniface felt like a prison. Without revenge to shape her character, doubt gnawed at Miss Temple's mind. Her efforts had been directed against Robert Vandaariff – since, as master of the blue glass, he represented the greatest threat. Yet the Contessa was Miss Temple's primary enemy – her *nemesis* – and had eluded her altogether. The woman had fled Parchfeldt with the glass book that held the Comte's memories. She had also captured young Francesca Trapping. Heiress to the Xonck Armaments fortune, the child offered the Contessa brutal leverage over Vandaariff.

Miss Temple had promised Francesca safety. Would her present efforts prove any less bankrupt?

Miss Temple emerged from the cellar of the Boniface, her gloved hand smelling of gunpowder, and returned to her rooms by way of a rear staircase, ascending just in time to see Mr Pfaff and Mr Ramper, returned from Parchfeldt, proceed rapidly past.

'Tell me *exactly*,' whispered Pfaff. 'And are you sure he was there, not just some mucker from the train?'

Ramper, taller than Pfaff by a good five inches, stopped where he was and leant very close to Pfaff. Pfaff did not flinch.

'He was in a brown coat,' snarled Ramper, 'looked like he'd been living rough – but no poacher, no woodsman and no farmer. He was watching the gate.'

'How do you know he wasn't some gypsy, sniffing out salvage?'

'Why would a gypsy follow me through the woods? Or take the same train?'

'Then why didn't you damn well take him?'

'I thought if I followed him I could find out who he was.'

'And?'

'I told you – once I got past the constables –'

'He was gone. *Superb*.'

'No one would go to that ruin without a reason – the *same* damned reason I had.'

Ramper raised a hand to knock on Miss Temple's door, but Pfaff caught it mid-air.

'Not a word,' Pfaff hissed. 'The factory, yes, but not this ... *figment*. We don't scare the mistress.'

Miss Temple emerged from the stairwell, grinning broadly.

'There you are, Mr Pfaff,' she called. 'And Mr Ramper – how good to see you safely returned.'

Pfaff spun round, his hand darting instinctively behind his coat. He smiled in greeting and stepped aside so Miss Temple might reach her door.

Mr Ramper had not entered the Parchfeldt factory itself. The gate was barred and strongly guarded. The grounds outside were pitted with artillery craters, but he saw no bodies. The white walls were blackened by flame. The machines inside – if they remained – were silent, and the smokestacks on the roof were cold.

Miss Temple asked if he had examined the canal. He had: there was no traffic to be seen. She asked if he entered the woods to the east. Mr Ramper described the shell holes and fallen trees amongst the stone ruins. Without noticeable tightness in her voice, Miss Temple asked if he had found any bodies *there*. Mr Ramper had not.

She poured more tea before turning to Pfaff.

‘After a reasonable period of refreshment, of course – I will have Marie fetch brandy – Mr Ramper will direct his efforts to these *machines*. If they have been moved, then surely someone with knowledge of the canals can confirm it. If they have been repaired, then an inquiry to the Xonck Armaments works at Raaxfall may help us, for it is there the Comte’s devices were made.’

‘The works at Raaxfall are shut down,’ said Pfaff. ‘Hundreds of men without a wage.’

‘Mr Ramper – the men guarding the factory, did they wear green uniforms?’

Ramper looked at Pfaff before responding. ‘No, miss. Local men for hire, it seemed.’

‘The Xonck factory had its own small army,’ Miss Temple explained. ‘Perhaps they have accompanied the machines.’

Pfaff considered this, then nodded to Ramper, who stood.

‘Do wait for your brandy, Mr Ramper. Mr Pfaff, what of the Royal Institute?’

Pfaff smiled, and rubbed his hands in a gesture Miss Temple was sure he’d copied from the stage. ‘No one’s let it spill, but there’s money in the air. I’ve found a glassworks by the river, apparently turning away work – I’m off tonight to see why.’

‘Then let us speak this evening, when you have returned.’

‘I will not return until quite late.’

‘No matter.’

‘The hotel staff will not admit me.’

‘Mr Brine will wait in the lobby – it is the simplest thing.’ She turned brightly. ‘Mr Ramper, perhaps you will finish this plate of biscuits – one dislikes their persistence in a room. And, Mr Brine, if you would come with me – I believe Marie has explained there is a fault with the lock on my window.’

Mr Brine obligingly followed Miss Temple to her chamber, pointedly averting his eyes from her bed as he advanced to the window. He turned, his face quite wilfully blank, at the sound of her closing the door behind them.

‘There is little time, Mr Brine,’ she whispered. ‘When Mr Ramper leaves the hotel, I want you to follow him.’ Brine opened his mouth to speak, but Miss Temple waved him to silence. ‘I am not interested in Mr Ramper. My fear is that his brown-coated man did not lose him at all, but has followed him *here*, and will follow him away. Say nothing to *anyone*. Exit through the rear of the hotel – I will send you on an errand. If Mr Ramper is under scrutiny, follow this brown-coated person as best you can. Is that clear?’

Brine hesitated.

‘Silence is a provocation, Mr Brine.’

‘Yes, miss. But what if the fellow wants you? If I’m gone, you’ll be alone.’

‘Not to worry.’ Miss Temple patted her clutch bag with a smile. ‘I have only to imagine the man a brown glass bottle and I will pot him square!’

She did not have to fashion an excuse for Mr Brine to leave after all, for when they reappeared Pfaff himself sent Ramper and Brine on their way, expressing a desire to speak to ‘the mistress’ alone. Once the door closed, Pfaff reached into an inner pocket and removed a green cheroot, wrapped tight as a pencil. He bit off the tip and spat it into his teacup.

‘I trust you do not object?’

‘As long as you do not foul the floor.’

Pfaff lit the cheroot, puffing until the tip glowed red.

‘We have not spoken of Cardinal Chang.’

‘Nor will we,’ replied Miss Temple.

‘If I do not know what he did in your employ, I cannot succeed where he failed –’

‘He did not *fail* in my *employ*.’

‘However you paint it. The Cardinal’s dead. I do not care to join him. If my questions intrude on delicate matters –’

‘You overreach yourself, Mr Pfaff.’

‘Do I? The Cardinal, this doctor – how many others? You are perilous company, miss, and the less you make it plain, the more I am inclined to *nerves*.’

‘You have spent your time investigating *me*,’ said Miss Temple with a start, knowing it was true.

‘And learnt enough to wonder why a sugar-rich spinster took up with foreigners and killers and disappeared for a fortnight.’

‘*Spinster?*’

Pfaff rolled ash onto a white saucer. ‘If a woman can look past the Cardinal’s scars, what business is that of mine? We all shut our eyes in the dark.’

Miss Temple’s voice dropped to an icy snarl. ‘I will *tell* you your business, Mr Pfaff – and if I choose to straddle twenty sailors in succession in St Isobel’s Square at noon, it is nothing you need note. I have paid you good money. If you think to defy me, or if you think I care a whit about your leers or the threat of scandal, you have made a very grave mistake.’

Only then did Pfaff realize that Miss Temple’s hand was in her bag and the bag now tight against his abdomen. Very slowly, he raised both hands and met her eyes. He grinned.

‘It seems you’ve answered me after all, miss. Forgive my presumption – a fellow acquires worries. I understand you now quite well.’

Miss Temple did not shift her bag. ‘Then you are for the glassworks?’

‘And will send word, however late the hour.’

‘I am obliged to you, Mr Pfaff.’

In a show of bravado she dropped her bag onto the side table and snatched the last tea biscuit, snapping it between her teeth. Pfaff took his leave. When she heard the door close, Miss Temple sighed heavily. Her mouth was dry. She spat the biscuit back onto the plate.

Miss Temple looked up at the clock. She still had time. She found Marie in the maid's little room, mending buttons, and explained what to tell Mr Pfaff on the unlikely chance that Miss Temple did not return. When Marie protested this idea, Miss Temple observed that the thread Marie was using did not exactly match the garment. After Marie had promised for the third time to relock and bar the door behind her, Miss Temple tersely allowed that the girl might avail herself of a glass of wine with supper.

The corridor was empty, and Miss Temple met no other guest on her way to the kitchen. Ignoring the looks of the slop boys and tradesmen, she walked to the corner, peered into the street, saw no obvious spy and hurried from the hotel, keeping her head low. At the avenue Miss Temple hailed a carriage. The driver hopped down to help her to her seat and asked her destination.

'The Library.'

Miss Temple had never been in the grand Library before – it held no more natural attraction than a barrelworks – and in its stiff majesty she saw a monument to a high-minded struggle interminably waged by others. She approached a wide wooden counter, behind which stood waxy, bespectacled men whose dark coats were dappled with grey finger-swipes of dust.

'Excuse me,' Miss Temple said. 'I require information.'

A younger archivist stepped to serve her, eyes dipping down the front of her dress. The counter drew a line just below her breasts, making it appear, to Miss Temple's chagrin, that she had juttred herself forward.

'What information is that, my dear?'

'I am searching for a piece of property.'

'Property?' The archivist chuckled. 'You'll want a house agent.'

On his upper lip swelled a pale-tipped pimple. Miss Temple wondered if he would pop it before next shaving, or leave the work to his razor.

'Do you keep property records?'

'By law we collect all manner of records.'

'Including property?'

'Well, depending on what exactly you want to learn –'

'Ownership. Of *property*.'

The archivist grazed her bosom one last time with his eyes and sniffed diffidently.

'Third floor.'

The third-floor clerk was on a ladder when Miss Temple found him, and she pitched her question loud enough to hurry him down in haste to lower her voice. He marched her to a wide case of black leather volumes.

'Here you are. Property registers.' He turned at once to go.