

# 1.



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*Stomzfield*, Redding, Connecticut

SABEL'S MOTHER WATCHED HER tie on her hat with the look of intense pride and suppressed doubt that is particular to the mothers of grown daughters. "But Isabel, how *will* you serve Miss Keller tea?"

Her mind on other things, Isabel returned her gaze from the snow salting down outside the frost-etched windows. She took in the snug parlor with its fringed green velvet davenport, its painting of the Pitti Palace in Florence, its rocker turned toward the fire. The King's framed portrait presided over the mantel. He was younger in the photo, roughly handsome, his tornado of hair still dark. He frowned off in the distance in a way that suggested he could see things that mere mortals couldn't. *I Am the Youthful Sage*, he seemed to say. From the opposite wall, in a more recent photograph dated not only by his white hair but by the white suit that he'd taken to wearing two years ago no matter the season, he frowned mischievously: *The Wise Maverick*. On the side table next to the sofa, in a photo snapped with Isabel and friends in Bermuda last spring, he sternly confronted the lens while the rest of them made merry: *The Lonely Genius*. "When had he last looked into a camera and let himself just be Sam Clemens?"

"Miss Keller," Isabel's mother repeated. "How will you serve her tea?"

Isabel stepped into her rubbers next to the door. "She's blind and deaf, Mother, not paralyzed. I'll simply hand her a cup."

"But how will you ask her what she takes in it?"

"Mrs. Macy will sign the question to her in her hand. Or I'll ask her myself. She puts her thumb on your neck, her forefinger on your tongue, and her middle finger on your nose, then listens in that way." "With her fingers all over your face?" Mrs. Lyon pursed her own lips, accentuating the soft pouches on either side of her jaw.

She had been a handsome woman once, with a small sharp nose and large brown eyes like her daughter's. As Georgiana Van Kleek, one of the prominent Hartford Van Kleeks, she had attracted all the best men when she had come out back in '61. No one had been surprised when she won the affection of dashing widower Charles Lyon, a distinguished professor at Columbia University who was as handsome as he was prosperous.

Now she was forced to live through her daughter, who hadn't ever married and who *worked*. It might be modern times, what with people racing around in Oldsmobiles and cranking up phonographs and shouting into telephones, but for a woman of their class to *work* was still a shameful thing. At least Isabel worked for a very famous man—the *most* famous, and the most beloved, too, if you could believe the slogan on the cigar box. "Known to Everyone, Liked by All," indeed. If everyone knew his terrible temper like Mrs. Lyon did, he would not be so very liked, she could tell you that.

Better that the public didn't know. As it was, her daughter's association with him had almost restored Mrs. Lyon's bragging rights to just below the level attainable had Isabel produced a beautiful grandchild, although they fell short of what they would have been had Isabel married a gentleman professor like her own father had been.

The situation could be remedied handily if Isabel would simply *marry* Mr. Clemens. Regardless of his shortcomings, he was ripe for wedlock now that "Livy" (as he had called his sickly wife Olivia, as if she were some gay young thing) had finally succumbed to what-

ever it was that had kept her bound to her bed and quarantined from him for months on end. The ship had sailed for grandchildren, unfortunately Isabel was forty-five, and Mr. Clemens was in his early seventies and looked it but he did have an honorary degree from Oxford in England and was a friend of the English king. If the English king could overlook Mr. Clemens's crude country roots, Mrs. Lyon probably could.

As a good mother, Mrs. Lyon often reminded Isabel of the desirability of a marriage, but with no favorable results so far. Evidently, Isabel had not minded lurking behind the potted palm trees with the servants at the lavish seventieth birthday party at Delmonico's thrown for Mr. Clemens by the Harper publishing crowd, when she should have been sitting right next to him, dining on Lobster Newburg.

Such a waste of potential! Isabel had been brought up to consort with gentlemen far more educated than Mr. Clemens was. "While other little girls were paging through their McGuffeys, Isabel's father had taught her to recite passages from *The Iliad*, after which he would invite her into his study and stand her on his desk so she could entertain his scholarly friends. He had delighted in broadening her mind by taking her overnight to New York to see edifying Broadway plays. It was at such a play that, as a little child, Isabel had placed her hand on Horace Greeley's knee, and the venerable editor of the *Tribune* had *not moved it*. To keep this highly cultured girl waiting by the kitchen door as if she were no better than the Clemenses' surly maid Katy was as wrong as eating roast beef with a fish knife.

"The King says that Miss Keller puts you right at ease about it." Isabel bent down to tug the rubber over the heel of her pump. "It feels quite natural to have her touching your face. And even though she can't hear herself, she has mastered answering with her own voice. I've heard her-it's remarkable."

"I wish you wouldn't call him that!"

Isabel righted herself. "What?"

"The King."

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"Why not?"

"It sounds so-so *subservient*, when you are so much more to him."

The resident pain along the length of Isabel's esophagus flared, as if the organ were being wrung. She plucked up her gloves and the string bag in which she'd brought food to her mother from the big house. "I'm glad that you think so."

"Why don't you stay here and rest? You look so tired." Mrs. Lyon did not add that Isabel had a better chance of securing Mr. Clemens if she appeared well rested and youthful.

"I'm fine." Isabel did not mention that yesterday her doctor had told her to get in bed and stay there until her nerves settled or risk permanent damage to her system.

On the walk back to Storm:field from her house, Isabel tried to settle herself by savoring the view of the deforested hills, paralyzed under a shroud of snow. Razed of all but a few trees lining the road—The King would have a view—his lands, blinding in the midmorning sunshine, spread out as far as one could see. Closer at hand, the shadows of the naked surviving trees striped the white road like the bars of a prison. Frozen drops clung to the rusty bramble leaves poking here and there from their glittering cover. A brook thrashed mutely against its clear lid of ice. Save for the groan of the trees in the wind, the shuffle of her rubbers on the sleigh tracks, and an occasional protest from a small bird, silence reigned.

Here at Stormfield The King would finish his autobiography, the culmination of his career, a project that he had started nearly forty years earlier and, though running thousands of pages, wasn't done yet. He seemed afraid to put it to rest, as if ending the work would be the end of the man. Isabel still could not believe that she had her own little house on the Stormfield grounds, a saltbox that dated back to the Revolution—the Lobster Pot, The King called it, his Christmas present to her. She had not expected to get this house or, indeed, any reward when she had directed the construction and decoration of Storm:field. All she had wanted was to support The King's work and to make him happy, and she believed that every

little detail—the Italian-style loggia with its view of the hills; the Orchestelle player piano set up in the library; the wooden cherubs crouching over the fireplace—did so. Surely she'd outdone his wife. Inside the mansion, Isabel kicked off her galoshes by the front door, shed her coat and hat in the cloakroom off the foyer, and went to the kitchen, which smelled of The King's breakfast of bacon and hotcakes drenched with maple syrup—the only meal of the day he might do more than pick at, unless you counted his nightly dish of radishes.

In the pantry she came upon the new butler, Horace, a raw and gangling eighteen-year-old youth from a local farm. His knobby wrists stuck out four inches beyond his shirt cuffs as he gingerly arranged the tea set upon its silver tray. Isabel would have to tell the new maid to stop boiling his shirts so long. And where was his suit coat? Horace was serving the most famous man in the world, not sex-ing chickens.

He glanced up, the silver creamer cradled in his callused hands, then looked back down quickly. A blush flooded the hollows of his cheeks. He had been unable to meet her eyes since discovering that her bedroom in the big house adjoined The King's.

"Were you able to polish all the silver yesterday?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

She hated how he wouldn't look at her, as if she were some sort of fallen woman. "Are you enjoying your work here? Not everyone has a chance to serve so many interesting guests."

"Yes, ma'am."

Perhaps teasing him would soften him. "You can't say that you didn't like when that pretty actress Billie Burke visited us the other day." Horace opened the lid of the sugar bowl and began to fill it from a paper sack, his face glowing like a horseshoe heating over a blacksmith's fire. An awkward moment passed. "Miss Clara sent word that she is coming, ma'am."

The pressure in Isabel's sternum flared at the mention of The King's daughter. "Did she say when she would arrive?"

"No, ma'am."

"Have Teresa make up Miss Clemens's room, please." She worked on lightening her tone. "Our Clara does insist on fresh linen."

"Yes, ma'am." Horace still wouldn't look at her. Isabel told herself it was because she was his superior and a good two decades older than he was. He probably had difficulty with other adults. Surely that was it. He definitely lacked training in manners. In truth, he made a terrible butler, but since the night of the burglary in September, after which all the servants but the maid Katy had fled, experience was not the most important qualification one needed to join the Stormfield staff. The local farmers said that the staff had bolted because of the burglars, but that wasn't really the reason why. Clara had fired them because of what they had seen, then threatened to ruin them if they talked. They were afraid of her. Rightly so.

Isabel gave him a comrade's smile. "I had better go see if The King is ready to descend."

"Yes, ma'am," he mumbled, her smile wasted.

The smell of bacon accompanied Isabel up the stairs. She was half-way up, the thick strand of coral beads that she always wore thumping against her breast, when the doorbell chimed. She flinched, then chided herself, *Don't be silly. It isn't Clara yet.* At any rate, Clara did not ring; Clara barged in like she owned the place, which she would, as soon as she could shove her father off this mortal coil.

Isabel checked the watch pinned to her shirtwaist. It couldn't be Miss Keller already. Her train wasn't due in to Redding until 3:45, and Giuseppe still had to greet them at the station and bring them back in the sleigh. Another thought froze her footsteps: *Reporters.* They had been showing up lately without Isabel inviting them, hoping for some scandal, and not just because of the burglary. Bully the help all Clara wanted, she couldn't control every wagging tongue in the nation.

Isabel waited while Horace clomped in from the dining room to answer. A man's elegant voice, accented with a whiff of the British Isles, wafted up from the foyer. Relief flooded Isabel's chest: dear

Ralph. As The King's business adviser, Mr. Ashcroft was the head of the Mark Twain Corporation, the company formed to exploit the Twain name, and the only person in the world who began to understand the difficulties Isabel faced in managing The King. Just hearing Ralph's voice soothed her. She turned around to greet him.

A faint metallic clank drifted through the house: tap-tap-tap-TAP. Beethoven's Fifth. The King was knocking on a radiator, his signal for her to come. Ralph would have to wait.

Upstairs, she rapped on The King's door.

"Come in."

She entered, releasing a cloud of cigar smoke. The world's most revered folk philosopher was sitting unselfconsciously on the bed, the hair around his ears damp from his bath. He wore white silk shorts and nothing else.

"You forgot me."

She laughed in spite of herself. Her King could always make her laugh. "No chance of that. I just popped down to the Lobster Pot to see Mother. How is your story coming along?" He liked to work in bed, mornings.

The King's drawl was as unhurried as an African potentate. "Terrible. The well is dried up."

How many times had Isabel heard that in her six and a half years with The King? "Dictating your autobiography usually unsticks you. I'll see if I can get Miss Hobby to return."

"No."

The abruptness of his tone startled Isabel.

More serenely, he said, "I want you to write it down for me." He took a draw on his cigar. "Like we did in the old days."

She glanced at him, then kept going toward the wardrobe. She knew the rules to this game. She kept emotion out of her voice, the hope, the love for him that burned inside her all the way down to her toes. "All right."

Aware that no one else alive had the privilege of such an intimate view of the great man, Isabel took her prerogative of studying

him, albeit from her peripheral vision, as she opened the wardrobe. His head, crowned with a drift of silver and robed with a pelt of mustache that retained some of the orange and black of his youth, seemed overlarge for his body, as if it contained a brain larger than most men's. Beneath that beautiful head, his wiry body had a defiant virility, a scrappy knowingness that thrilled her. The slightly sagging chest flesh beneath its thicket of white curls spoke to her not of age but of his years of worldly experience. At seventy-four, he held himself with the amused confidence that a younger man could only pretend to, a confidence that invited you to let down your guard even though you knew he would not be doing likewise.

She kept her voice neutral. "I heard Mr. Ashcroft downstairs."

The King's response was to teeter his cigar languidly between his fingers.

She took a shirt from the wardrobe and shook it out. From long habit, she inspected the garment, specially made for The King with the button in back of the collar. In one of his autobiographical dictations, The King had recounted the apparently hilarious incident of when he'd discovered the collar buttons missing from three such shirts and, bellowing curses, pitched them out the window of his Hartford home. Isabel had cringed. Too easily, she could imagine his roar and the offending items flapping to the lawn like swans that had been shot, his wrath far out of proportion to such a minor irritant. His shirts, indeed all of the objects scattered around Stormfield, held within them the potential of provoking a similar eruption, mines waiting to be set off by his terrible temper. She didn't know what would cause a man to be so volatile.

She looked up from her inspection. "Should I tell Mr. Ashcroft that you're busy today?"

"Tell Ashie-" He stopped. "Wait a minute, what's your pet name for that English bastard?"

She kept her expression cool as she brought over the shirt. The King himself had dubbed Ralph "Benares," after the holiest city in India, where dying pilgrims went. If Ralph could bring new life to



The King's already robust bank accounts, The King would think him holy, indeed.

"Tell *Brazierres*, "The King drawled scornfully, "to go home." He sucked deeply at his cigar, as if to draw sustenance from it. "Remind me to stop and think next time about hiring an Englishman to promote America's Sweetheart, will you? He creeps around like an English fog."

"Oh, you're America's Sweetheart now?"

He smiled around his cigar. "The Belle of New York, America's Sweetheart-same difference."

"I'll make sure it's on your next playbill."

"My next playbill"he blew out smoke-"will be for my funeral."

"Please. You are outliving us all."

"Not if Halley's Comet has anything to say about it."

Isabel wished he had never read that article in the *Times* about the return of the comet next year. Even before the article came out, he made too much of being born under it, as if it held some kind of magical power over him. It disturbed her that he kept claiming it would take him with it when it soared through the skies in April 1910. He claimed that he and the comet were two "unaccountable freaks"-they came in together, and together they must go out.

"Put on your shirt," she said.

Cigar in teeth, he shrugged on the shirt and turned his back for her to button his collar. She used her wrist to push his hair from his nape-she knew his mane's surprising weight, being the one to wash and rub it dry for him every day-and then fastened his collar. He smelled good, like a scented cake of shaving soap. By day's end, the smell of smoke would sheath him like armor.

"Clara is coming today," she said.

Only the tightening of his jaw indicated that he had heard her. He took his cigar from his mouth and slowly tapped it against the ashtray on the bedside table. "Did you place the telephone call?"

"Yes."

He took a languid puff. "You know, someone could have Wark killed, and who'd ever know who'd done it? Everyone would think that his wife was behind it."

Isabel kept quiet. It was best in these situations to let The King get control of himself on his own. He did not really mean that he would kill his daughter's lover—the man couldn't bear to move a sleeping kitten from the pocket of his billiards table. The reality was that The King himself was the one in danger. He was increasingly suffering from pains in his chest, searing constrictions that would drop him into a chair and blanch his face to the color of an onion panng.

He smoked in silence as she moved on to the rest of his shirt buttons. She was getting his cuff links from the chiffonier when he said, "Miss Keller here yet?"

She returned to him and waited for him to raise his wrist. "We have plenty of time until her train arrives, or I wouldn't have risked going to see Mother."

He watched her poke the stem of a link through a cuff hole. "How is the old dame?"

"Mother? The same."

"I shouldn't call her that. I've got twelve years on her."

"You don't look it."

He kissed her cheek, brushing her with his mustache. "I knew I liked you."

Isabel fastened the link. "Liked?"

Their eyes met. Let him look away first; she wasn't afraid. Let him see her lips, remembering their kisses.

He looked at her mouth, then back up into her eyes. His expression softened into affection.

Before she could respond, he switched hands with his cigar, then raised his other wrist for her to work on. "How long did Miss Keller say she was staying?"

"Three days. She leaves Monday."

"I agreed to that?"

"You asked her to stay ten. Don't worry, I made nice for you."

"Ha. Good. Well, Helen's a sweet girl. Think I should invite her to be one of my Angelfish?"

"Isn't she a little old for that?" Isabel busied herself with his cuff. "Anyhow, I suppose she's occupied with her new book just out."

"I'm going to ask her anyway."

This wasn't about his little club for girls. Who cared about them? They were like daughters to him-better than daughters, he said, because they did not cause him grief. They were not her competition.

"Don't be jealous, Lioness."

"I'm not jealous." She pulled back from him, finished with his sleeves.

"You are. I see it in your mouth."

"I am not jealous."

"Clara says you are."

"Clara is a troublemaker."

"You're damn right about that." He pecked her again on the cheek. "Get my pants."