

## **A God Facing Both Ways – Chapter 1**

**By Heather Douglass**

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At the point of knocking, Quentin pulled back his hand. The door was dark stained, with two plain panels and a transom overhead. It could not have looked more unspecified; it might have been the entrance to anything. And the house, the adjoining houses, the wrought iron fences and the trees growing from their spaces allotted in the pavement were fully the antithesis of extraordinary. All except him—he was the anomaly—yet for the trouble he'd taken no one knew. That was how he wanted it. The penalty he paid was that occasionally, when there wasn't the need to concentrate, he'd grasp how mundanely he went about doing the unbelievable, and his motor functions would short circuit. He recovered quickly enough, for there was no point hesitating. It was done. Maybe it had been done already, before he was born, a concept all good time travellers doubtless grasped, and maybe he would eventually. He put his knuckles back on the door, struck the wood twice, and a butler opened.

“Good afternoon, sir,” the servant said.

“Good afternoon. I have documents for the barrister,” Quentin repeated the passwords, “from Messrs. Horton & Armitage.”

For this information he was indebted to a barber he met only an hour ago on Regent Street. For all his research, he failed to discover any material concerning the internal rituals of Edwardian brothels. In other matters of period etiquette he was versed: he knew never to look back in the street, nor remove his coat when making morning calls nor eat anything with his hands except bread, celery and fruit. He had drilled himself in pre-decimal currency. He'd poured over newspapers on microfiche and paid a costume designer to replicate the clothes.

Knowing rules was key; it would make him less conspicuous. And rules must apply, even in a whore's house. But in the end he had to give up, since he had no idea how long his doorway to the past might stay open. He consoled himself with the thought that prostitutes probably saw and heard everything there was to see and hear. Little would surprise them. A brothel, by coincidence, was no bad place to start.

The butler offered to take his hat and coat, and he removed these carefully to appear a man accustomed to service. Then he was left alone a while to admire the décor in the hall and presently the madame came. They talked of the weather and his health as if they'd just been introduced at some polite gathering. He told her he was an American visiting London on business. She asked what he would have to drink.

She had to repeat the question. Ironic, that the subject he should overlook entirely was alcohol. Which mixed drinks were in fashion circa 1906? He probably knew enough to guess but caught off guard he could think of none. Madame would stock all the spirits: whisky, brandy, cognac. But it was early afternoon, and he hoped to visit several houses of ill repute before the day was done. He asked for beer and hoped it wouldn't taste bad.

She invited him to come with her from the hall into an empty parlour and through another door, behind which was a pair of rooms divided by a drawn curtain. To get from the entrance to the bar they would need to cross the entire space from corner to corner. Flanking their way on both sides were dark satin couches, and each couch held a woman.

His appearance in the doorway caused communal stir. Conversation halted briefly, only to revive in sighs, titters and murmurs. He made out words like 'tender', 'charming' and 'prize', though he never caught a mouth open; all faces seemed to present him with the same mute smile. And then they grew restless on their couches.

Hands slipped and slithered along the upholstery or toyed with a piece of dress. They wore copious amounts of fabric, lace and curls of semi-transparent silk, ribbon and tating and metallic thread. Each outfit accumulated on the body in layers; one woman peeled back the skirt from her ankle to reveal a millefeuille of petticoats. It was just as well he hadn't come for sex. He would have no idea how to remove the clothes.

The house mistress kept him waiting there, to let the display have its full effect. Then she led him into their midst. The women inclined his way like flowers to the sun, called out endearments, tried to catch and hold his glance as he passed. Someone slid a finger into his half closed hand and tickled. He reached the bar with more internal electricity than expected, given the incredible nature of his situation and the scent of bodies less deodorised.

Madame went behind the counter and took down a glass. "You're in luck, sir," she said, "with no one else arrived you have your pick. My only reserve tonight is Rose, third from the door on your right. She's asked for."

She pulled the beer and put it down in front of him. "Who might it be, then?" she asked.

He didn't know but assumed he was permitted to turn and have a second look. He moved his eyes from couch to couch, trying to evaluate who would be most suitable, while the whores intensified their appeals. Décolletage heaved forward; high collars came unbuttoned. The girl of many petticoats parted her legs and drew up all her satiny froth between her thighs.

He felt blood leave his brain and the self-spoken arguments for one female or the other disconnected and jumbled. It had been a long time. Cause and effect awareness flickered and dimmed like a loose connection, though thankfully it never

managed to blackout the fear of disease. For a moment he thought he might have to pick one at random; he could not see a way to hold his resolve while he struggled to remember what that was.

Then he saw her. Sitting behind the one called Rose, something about her pose was languid beyond allure, as if the furniture had made the decision for her. Rouge had been applied but not blended, leaving little clown circles on her cheeks. The colour clashed with her carrot hair. She gave him brief attention, which was to say her eyes paused on their way to the other side of their sockets. An arm lay dead weight on her lap. Watching her, the sexual mechanism cooled. He could think again, and eventually he realised she could be exactly what he wanted.

“Who is that,” he asked, “on that side second from the door?”

“Delia,” said the mistress, tersely.

“Delia,” he repeated. The nearest couches heard him. One woman took a fan out of a tortoiseshell case, opened it halfway, but did not use it. Someone behind her did the same, and behind her. Within moments the seduction operation faltered; the flirtations slowed up or ceased.

“You’re quite sure, sir?” mistress asked.

“I am,” he replied. Meanwhile, the fan telegraph had informed everyone but his intended, who stayed exactly as she was, save that her head wobbled.

Madame leaned over the counter to whisper. “I’ll introduce you to her,” she suggested, “if you find she isn’t to your liking, just excuse yourself to bring your glass to the bar.” He agreed. He felt sorry to embarrass the proprietress, as she obviously had standards. Her face, as she led him to the couch, was pincushion tight. The whores either looked away or watched the procession with slightly parted lips, fans at the ready.

“Delia,” the mistress put a hand on her shoulder. Delia jerked, swallowed, and strained her mouth and eyes to open wider. The effort sent her into a fit of blinking.

“This is Mr. Rochester.”

He bowed. “A pleasure to meet you.”

“And you, sir,” she replied. Her accent was Irish and he thanked his luck for allowing him to guess correctly. Then he joined her on the couch, blathered some nonsense about having been in county Cork only that Easter. Delia just smiled; he could not fault the smile, though her blinking continued. He asked her about herself. If the answer required more than a single word she took some time locating them. They came up her throat with small bubbles that fell over her teeth, halted on her curled tongue and then seemed to float away. Her neck would tip back as if she searched for them on the ceiling. He managed to learn she came from Kerry but couldn’t make out the name of the village.

He asked what her father did. Madame was still on his mind; he wondered if she wanted some signal, a nod or wink, to assure her of his satisfaction. But she had left the room by some other way. Delia went silent. To reanimate her, he said her name quietly; all she did was lick her lips and leave her tongue out. He counted to thirty in hope, but she was back in Ireland if anywhere. He feared this might happen. No other man had arrived to dilute the attention he felt like a spotlight on his back, no other man to show him exactly what one did next.

The whore named Rose turned on her couch to face them. “Dee-dee,” she reached out and pinched one rouged cheek, “you silly dreamer. I don’t know why you’d want to, when there’s a flight of fancy sitting right beside you.” Then she smiled at Quentin. While they both waited to see if Delia would be roused by that call, Rose asked, “Did you find Cork a pleasant place?”

“I did.”

“I was a baby when we left,” she went on. “The way mother told it, we went away from paradise -- all green and birds singing.”

“Not like London.”

“No,” she shook her head. “But I don’t mind the city. Well,...I could do without the fog, couldn't we all?”

They laughed together, but it was a shallow duet. Her eyes shone, what with trying so hard to make the best of it, and he was disguising regret. Rose could be the real source of the information he needed so badly, and she was lucid, amiable. If he’d known the rules of brothels, there might have been some polite way to engage her without infringing on her reserved status, a casual remark such as, “You know, you remind me so much of an Irish girl I knew...”

“Heifer,” cried Delia, suddenly empowered with speech. Rose beamed, and patted her arm.

“What’s that, dear?”

Delia began a story about her father’s heifer. Initially Quentin understood it was brown, or perhaps she forgot to mention a second animal. At any rate the subject creature became spotted as the narrative went on. He didn’t listen to the words so much as assess her pace and clarity. She did improve with each sentence. When she neared the end, exclaiming, ‘the worst of it was,’ her dead arm lifted to make a gesture. Then she closed her eyes tight, and though her lips continued to move they didn't make sounds. She stayed that way a full minute.

Rose shook her. Delia roused herself, hiccupped, and resumed the heifer story from its beginning. It said something for how drunk she was that she didn’t

notice her how furiously her colleague fanned herself to cool the hot embarrassment of it all.

At that moment Madame came from the hallway with a second customer. Rose could not have looked more relieved. “My dear Uncle Walter,” she exclaimed. She left her couch to go to him, embraced and kissed him. When she told him there was champagne in the house tonight, thank goodness, he chuckled. “There is sparkle, and there is sparkle, my pet,” he said, and kissed her hand. Some of the women cooed. “We’ll taste the better first, and then we’ll drink.” He offered Rose his arm and they went out together.

That was how it was done. Thus instructed, Quentin leaned close to Delia, who was still finding her way through another sentence, and asked, “Shall we go?” She burst from her seat like he’d released a catch, thumped him so hard he dropped his glass. He smiled in spite the pain. He got up, took her flabby arm in his and steered her to the door. They left the room more slowly than he would have liked, but she could walk, and took the stairs admirably. She seemed to know when her balance would fail and hesitated, leaning hard on him. He decided not to tax her more and said nothing until they reached the second floor landing and came, at last, to her room.

The decorator, who'd done commendable work downstairs, had forgotten this space. The housemaid certainly avoided it: the grate was dull and the floor felt gritty. Wallpaper seams curled apart and the single curtain panel didn't cover the window. The entire area looked about six foot square, with a bed, a wardrobe and a mirror. There was no place for Delia to hide her bottles, so they stood in a row along one wall.

A new smell hit him. Edwardian atmosphere—coke, sweat, damp and smoke—took effort to breathe. It clogged his nostrils and stained his handkerchiefs.

With luck he hoped to reach a point where he could remain indoors without feeling queasy. But this stink went straight to the pit of his stomach and stirred the contents. He pressed his wrist to his nose and breathed the aftershave he'd daubed there for that purpose.

“Mind if I keep me dress on?” she asked.

“No,” he took a deep whiff of perfume. “No, in fact that would be best. Delia...I think I'd better tell you the real reason I chose you.”

Delia didn't reply, just shuffled to the bed and sat down. She bent over; he presumed she was untying her boots. “I want to ask a question. Nothing difficult, you understand,” he said, “and nothing improper. It's just that I'm...I'm...looking...”

Thank goodness he remembered to swear in his head. With an almighty grunt, Delia took the hem of her dress with its legion of petticoats and threw it over her head. The force of this thrust knocked her back on the mattress and she lay still, with her ankles crossed but her dimpled knees parted.

“Delia?”

He thought he saw movement under the petticoats.

“Delia...” then he had to turn away. His eyes could not help but be drawn to the sore between her legs and the unthinkable connection between it and the smell. He breathed more perfume from his wrist and when he heard snoring from the bed he concluded that the unbelievable had finally met the absurd. He could say or do anything and it really wouldn't matter.

“Delia, I don't suppose you'd happen to know a woman called Bianca? I'm looking for—no, wait—she might not be called that yet. You might know her as Nola Larmour. She was a prostitute; where she worked exactly I'm not sure. Or she might not be. What I mean is, at some point she had a bit of luck and worked her way into

theatre. She's...uh, dark Irish, you know, with the Spanish blood that makes her look swarthy and exotic. She's said to be sharp, very charming. She can dance and sing and speak French; she fools people into thinking she's better born than she is. How she got where she did in the end, I suppose."

Delia snorted, blubbered. He clicked his tongue, and pulled out the list of addresses the barber kindly gave him. It was no use; he'd have to try sober ones. They'd be furious when they realised he wanted them for other reasons, but he could think of no other way.

"You'd remember Bianca, if you met her," he said. He put a sovereign over the mouth of an empty bottle and left.

## **END OF CHAPTER 1**