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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Words in My Hand**

Written by Guinevere Glasfurd

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*To live well you must live unseen.*

René Descartes, letter to Mersenne, April 1634

AMSTERDAM, 1635

## Ice

I TURNED ABOUT the room, toe to toe, making the smallest circle. What I wanted was not there. His clock, his papers, his quill glass: cleared away, gone. I had seen this room empty before and had not minded; now it only magnified my loss. I did not want a coin, or token, or keepsake. I wanted words, some note – but there was none. He'd gone without taking his leave. He'd taken what was his with him.

I lifted the sheets he'd kicked down the bed, the mattress cold under my hand. *Even nothing has a shape*, I thought. *It is what was, what could have been.*

'Helena?' Mr Sergeant called from downstairs, with a sharpness I'd not heard before. 'Helena?'

I curled my fingers into my palm.

'Helena!' Louder, this time, something brittle in him, something about to break.

I grasped the banister, steadied myself, and went downstairs. I blinked back tears and wiped my eyes with the side of my hand. Below, the front door stood open; all the heat had gone from the house. I walked across the tiles I had cleaned yesterday. I did what I always did – went on tiptoe so I would not leave a mark. Then I stopped. I could see the Limousin outside with Mr Sergeant, waiting. I pressed my feet flat to the floor, raised my head, carried on walking

and did not look down. When they saw me approach, they parted and stepped to one side. Neither said a word. There was no need – I knew what they were thinking.

The driver adjusted the bridle, then pitched my bundle onto the carriage roof. ‘Only feathers in there?’ he joked, still looking, not blinking.

The horses shuffled and champed on their bits. I bowed my head and climbed in, closing the door behind me with a click. On either seat lay a folded blanket and on the floor a wicker basket with food: apples, two large loaves of bread, a cheese, some cured meats – enough for two or three days, perhaps more. Too much food. The sight of it made me feel sick.

The driver addressed the Limousin. ‘We will make Amersfoort first, then Apeldoorn. Deventer is no more than a day further on, if the route is clear. The IJssel is all ice. With this winter . . .’ He shook his head. ‘You would do better to wait.’

The Limousin snorted. ‘Some things won’t wait.’

I glanced up as the Limousin climbed into the carriage and settled himself opposite. He smelled of tobacco and wine; a sour, unwashed smell from the night before.

‘Deventer?’ I tried to keep the panic out of my voice.

He took a blanket and laid it across his knees, and motioned at me to do the same. I took the other blanket, unfolding cold over my lap; it sank through my skirts into my legs. I turned to look for Mr Sergeant as the carriage lurched forwards, but he had gone. And then I saw it was ended. There was no going back. The loss stopped my breath.

The Limousin crossed his arms and turned his face to

one side, the grey light flat on his cheek. He must have felt my look because his gaze flicked back.

‘What?’

‘Aren’t we going to Leiden?’

‘Leiden?’ His laugh was knowing, his mouth pulled into a smile almost.

‘I don’t have anyone in Deventer. The Monsieur knows that.’

He inspected his fingernails, or his knuckles maybe, and shook his head at some private thought.

‘Limousin, *please*, you’re mistaken.’

‘No mistake. The Monsieur made no mention of Leiden. We’re going to Deventer.’

He looked at me and his look said, *I know what there is to know*. This carriage made him keeper, lord, master. His gaze hardened and slid to my stomach.

His legs lolled apart. I tucked my legs up against the seat but his knees knocked against mine as the carriage threaded its way out of the city.

Deventer. I tried to place it in my mind, but the map I pictured dissolved at the edges, the roads and canals faded into a blank. Sickness welled up in me and burned my throat. I lunged forwards and grabbed at the door.

‘Let me out!’

The Limousin pulled my fingers away from the handle. ‘Sit back. *Sit back.*’

He pushed my shoulder with the flat of his hand. He was stronger than he looked. The skin around his mouth had whitened; red spots pricked his cheeks.

‘All you have to do is sit there and be still.’

I rubbed my shoulder where he had pushed me. Prinsengracht passed by, the view squeezed into a small square of window. A thin light fell on the shuttered-up houses; window after window, blank and cold, blind to me. The carriage began to gather speed. Each house we passed took us further from Westermarkt. To see the city slip away like this was more than I could bear. Deventer, Deventer, Deventer, Deventer: the word beat into my head with the clatter of hooves.

‘What will I tell my mother!’ The words were out before I could stop them. I covered my face with my hands and the tears I had held back all morning tipped from my eyes. My breath came in sobs.

The Limousin stared out of the window, unblinking, as if pained by my tears and crying. ‘We will pray for your forgiveness, Helena.’

I squeezed my eyes tight shut and clasped my hands together as he began to pray. But I did not know this prayer of his. I moved my mouth, trying to form words I did not know, shaping sounds I had never heard.

*‘O Vierge des vierges, ma mère, à toi ce que je viens; devant toi je suis le pécheur repentant . . . Ne méprises pas mes prières, mais ta miséricorde entends et réponds-moi . . .’*

*God forgive me, God forgive me, God forgive me . . .*

When I looked up again, we were out of the city. I clutched my stomach.

*Oh God, Monsieur, what will become of us?*



AMSTERDAM, 1634

## Books

I NOTICED HIM in glances – the heavy ribbons on his shoes; the curve of his shoulder; his black, black eyelashes. I noticed his hands, delicate and smooth, fingers stained with ink. A writer's hands, smaller than mine. Pale hands that made me want to hide my rough hands away.

He had a way of touching his mouth, resting a finger against his lips as he thought, in no hurry to speak. I had to be careful not to stare, not to catch his attention. I knew better than to disturb him. I'd heard him shout at his valet, the Limousin, when he went in unannounced. I did not want to be shouted at. But how to be quiet and make it all still when the water pump squeaked and the windows rattled? Even a clean sheet, when I shook it across the bed, made a horrible *crack*. It made me wince. The more I winced, the noisier it seemed, this terrible hurdy-gurdying at the heart of Mr Sergeant's house. I went everywhere on tiptoe, afraid I'd trip on my shadow.

Betje wanted to know all about him, the Monsieur. He's French, I told her. Her eyes widened, then narrowed, and when she couldn't get anything more from me, she nipped me hard. *Monsieur*, she said, in a way that made us tip forwards and laugh.

In the two years I had been with Mr Sergeant, I had not known a lodger like him. He was different, even before he arrived. Lodgers always stayed in one of the rooms at the back. Those rooms faced north. Even on the brightest day, the light felt pinched in. Being in there was like peeping out at the day from under a blanket.

Some weeks before he arrived, and to be sure the Monsieur would be ‘properly accommodated’, Mr Sergeant had come with me to look at the rooms – something he never involved himself with. It was the first inkling I’d had that the Monsieur deserved more, better, than previous lodgers; that something of Mr Sergeant’s reputation was tied up with this man.

He humphed up the stairs, not used to so many at once. ‘Our French guest is a thinking man, Helena. He needs quiet, somewhere to work. He was quite specific on that, *une chambre tranquille*, or *tranquette* or *trompette* or something. Then there is his manservant – *the valet* – he will need a room too.’

A valet? Who’d heard of such a thing? I didn’t know if it was the effort of the stairs, or all those French words, but Mr Sergeant had to stop to catch his breath. There’d be a lot more huffing and puffing before the day was done.

He swung open the door and went in. ‘Oh dear,’ he said, when he saw what was there. ‘Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear.’

I drew my shawl around my shoulders. The room had been shut for months. He looked as though he had bitten into a lemon, having expected peach.

I didn’t know what he hoped for: that the room be miraculously swagged with velvet and satin, and the bed piled high

with a half dozen duck-down pillows, pillows he did not have? I could not imagine anyone being able to think other than dark thoughts in here. The gloominess drew in like fog. I was sure it was foggy in France too, but that was no reason to make our new lodger relive the experience daily.

Father had travelled. He'd told me what France was like. He went for weeks at a time, on a trading ship to Bordeaux. He brought my mother a yellow shawl – said he'd had it spun from sunshine he'd found in a French field. It was her favourite and she wore it until the day he did not return. Then she folded it away, and the sun seemed to slip away with it too.

Mr Sergeant turned on one heel and led the way out to the larger room at the front of the house where he kept his books. He had so many – too many for me to count. There were books in trunks and baskets, books tied in bundles, books spilling from boxes – some even on shelves, but there were not shelves for them all.

I squinted against the brightness. Mr Sergeant blew out his cheeks; he rocked back on his heels, then centred his weight. His frown lifted as a thought revealed itself and he tapped my forehead with his knuckles.

'Gloom is not conducive to good thinking, Helena. Monsieur Descartes shall have this room; valet and books at the back.'

I nodded, too surprised to say anything. When I had suggested moving the books before, he had always said no, these books *deserved* this room.

'All we need now is for them to finish that church and be done with that racket.'

*Bang, bang, crack* went hammers on stone outside as if to underline his point. A roar went up as a plank fell from a scaffold.

He tutted. 'Who would have thought God's work could be so noisy? I'd not have this on Herengracht.'

Mr Sergeant wishing for a house on Herengracht would be like me wishing for a tulip on my birthday. Merchants lived on Herengracht. Booksellers lived where they could. But I liked Mr Sergeant's house; it was tucked away down a side street and faced an open square. There had been a market here until it was announced a church would be built. Westerkerk. It was the finest church in Holland. Work still continued on its outside and around the square.

I still couldn't decide whether Mr Sergeant's house leaned to the left, or the windows leaned to the right. Not long after I arrived, I had stood on the pavement and tilted my head one way then the other, as if that would help set it right. Mr Sergeant had laughed when he saw me. He had gout and walked with a limp. What a funny pair they made – this tall, lopsided Dutch house and this round, limping English man – neither with a straight line between them.

Once the front room had been cleared of books and the arrival date confirmed, Mr Sergeant wasted no time in sharing his news. When Mr Veldman came by, he was hardly through the door before Mr Sergeant was on him. They were rivals in the book-selling trade, not that I heard either admit it.

Mr Veldman specialised in travel books and maps, books of the world, he called them, and Mr Sergeant in poetry and moral tracts of an 'edifying nature'. But when Mr Veldman called a latest acquisition a 'tittle-tattle tale of dubious literary merit', Mr Sergeant refused to entertain him again until a quantity of brandy had been provided to ease the hurt and erase the insult. *We'll see whose tail has been tattled*, he said, taking a long, slow sip. In the end, the jug was emptied and Mr Sergeant sound asleep in his chair, snoring.

Mr Veldman shrugged off his cape as he took in Mr Sergeant's news. 'Descartes, *the* Descartes? Are you mad?'

Mr Sergeant ignored him. 'I am flattered, I admit.'

'You heard about his previous lodgings? The time not spent at the abattoir was time spent cutting up creatures – in his room. Some not even dead.'

Mr Sergeant swallowed. 'Helena, a drink for Mr Veldman.' He looked as though he needed one himself.

I folded Mr Veldman's cape over my arm and went to fetch the tray from the dresser.

'Yes, well,' Mr Veldman continued, clearly enjoying himself, 'you can imagine . . .'

I steadied the glasses on the tray. Mr Sergeant had paled.

'And,' he added, shaking his head as if telling a cautionary tale, 'he throws animals out of the window – live animals, that is. All in the name of his *method*.'

'Well,' said Mr Sergeant, 'Lord Huygens thinks he is brilliant. That is enough for me.'

Mr Veldman covered his eyes, as though shading them, then let his hand fall. 'Dazzling. Perhaps we could arrange a *soirée* with the brilliant Descartes?'

‘A soirée?’ Mr Sergeant shifted from one foot to the other. ‘I expect Monsieur Descartes will be preoccupied. Almost certainly. Very busy.’

Mr Veldman arched his eyebrows at the refusal. He took a glass from the tray. ‘He’s an avowed Catholic, you know.’

Mr Sergeant waved the remark away. ‘Tolerance is all. We two should know that. What he does in his own time is his affair.’

‘I’d like to know what he thinks of Galileo, but no matter. I doubt he will publish, not now.’

‘Patience, Veldman, patience. There is more to the man, I believe.’

Mr Veldman laughed. ‘*Impatience*, more like, and arrogance, and ambition. A temper too, I’ve heard.’

Mr Sergeant took a sip from his glass, then cleared his throat. ‘It will be an honour to have him here. With me.’

‘I defer to your judgement on these matters – as always.’ He made a small bow.

‘I think you are jealous, Veldman,’ Mr Sergeant teased.

Mr Veldman laughed once more. ‘You must allow an ageing man his small jealousies now and then.’ He held the glass up to the light. ‘Very pretty,’ he said, looking through it at me.

‘Come, Mr Veldman, if jealousies are what please you, let me show you what I have brought from Utrecht.’

Mr Sergeant steered Mr Veldman towards his study. When the door had closed, I took the glasses away to wash them. Mr Veldman’s glass I washed twice.