Opening Extract from...

Miss Garnet's Angel

Written by Salley Vickers

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For Grace Fredericks, with love and gratitude

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The peculiar charm and poetry of The Book of Tobit has endeared it to artists through the ages; many people will have seen paintings of the boy carrying a fish, accompanied by a dog and an angel, without recognising the source of these images.

In my retelling of the tale I have retained certain anachronistic features of the original, but the variations – imaginative reconstructions of the story's sources – are my own, and for those I must take responsibility. To the anonymous author, or authors, however, I most gratefully acknowledge my debt.

Salley Vickers

'If some people really see angels, where others see empty space, let them paint the angels . . .'

JOHN RUSKIN

I
EPIPHANY

1

Death is outside life but it alters it: it leaves a hole in the fabric of things which those who are left behind try to repair. Perhaps it is because of this we are minded to feast at funerals and it is said that certain children are conceived on the eve of a departure, lest the separation of the partners be permanent. When in ancient stories heroes die, the first thing their comrades do, having made due observances to the gods, is sit and eat. Then they travel on, challenging, with their frail vitality, the large enigma of non-being.

When Miss Garnet's friend Harriet died, Miss Garnet decided to spend six months abroad. For Miss Garnet, who was certainly past child-bearing years and had lost the only

person she ever ate with, the decision to travel was a bold one. Her expeditions abroad had been few and for the most part tinged with apprehension. As a young woman straight from college she had volunteered, while teaching the Hundred Years' War, to take a school party to Crécy. On that occasion she had become flustered when, behind her back but audibly, the boys had mocked her accent and had intimated (none too subtly) that she had brought them to France in order to forge a liaison with the large, sweating, white-faced coach driver.

'*Mademoiselle from Armentières*,' they had sung hilariously in the back of the coach. '*Mademoiselle from Armentières. Hasn't had sex for forty years!*' And as she had attempted to convey to the coach driver the time she considered it prudent to start back for Calais, wildly and suggestively they had chorused, '*Inky pinky parley vous!*'

The experience had left its mark on Miss Garnet's teaching as well as on her memory. Essentially a shy person, her impulses towards cordiality with her pupils, never strong in the first place, were dealt a blow. She withdrew, acquired a reputation for strictness, even severity, and in time became the kind of teacher who, if not loved, was at least respected. Even latterly, when in terms of pupils' taunts *Mademoiselle From Armentières* would be considered very small beer, no member of Miss Garnet's classes ever thought publicly to express a view about her intimate life.

Julia Garnet and Harriet Josephs had lived together for more than thirty years. Harriet had answered Julia's advertisement in the National Union of Teachers' monthly journal.

'Quiet, professional female sought to share small West London flat. No smokers. No pets.'

Harriet had been, in fact, the only person to respond to the advertisement, which had not prevented Julia from giving her what her friend later described as 'a toughish interview'. 'Honestly,' Harriet had used to say, on the few occasions when together they had entertained friends, 'it was worse than the time I tried to get into the Civil Service!'

Generally Harriet had laughed loudly at this point in a way her flat-mate had found irritating. Now Miss Garnet found she missed the laugh just as she missed Stella, Harriet's cat. The prohibition against pets had been relaxed seven years earlier when late one night after choir-practice Harriet had been followed from the station by Stella. Stella, then an anonymous black kitten with a white-starred throat, had waited all night on the stairs outside the front door of their fourth-floor flat, whereupon, on finding her, the soft-hearted Harriet had fed the kitten milk. After that, as Julia had observed, there was 'no getting rid of the animal'.

Alongside the two school teachers Stella had grown into an elderly and affectionate creature but it was Harriet to whom the cat had remained attached. Two days after they had both retired (they had arranged the events to coincide in order, Harriet had suggested, that the New Year could see them setting off on 'new feet') Julia returned from the shops to find her companion, apparently asleep, stretched out upon the sofa, her romantic novel face down on the carpet. Later, after the doctor and then the undertaker had been, Stella

disappeared. Julia had placed milk outside first the flat door and then, worry making her brave the neighbours' ridicule, downstairs by the main entrance to the block. The milk she left outside was certainly drunk but after a few days she was forced to accept that it was not Stella drinking the milk but, more likely, the urban fox who had been seen rootling in the communal dustbins.

Perhaps it was not just the loss of Stella, but also her incompetence in the face of it – so soon after losing Harriet – which finally determined Miss Garnet's abrupt decision. She and Harriet had made plans – or rather Harriet had – for it must be said that, of the two, she was the more given to planning. ('Flighty' was sometimes her companion's name for Harriet's tendency to cut out advertisements from the *Observer* for trips to faraway and exotic places.) Harriet's (now permanent) flight had rendered the plans pointless; a kind of numbness had dulled Miss Garnet's usual caution and she found herself, before she was quite aware what was happening, calling in on one of the numerous local estate agents which had sprung up in her locality.

'No worries, Mrs Garnet, we'll be able to rent this, easy,' the young man with the too-short haircut and the fluorescent mobile phone had said.

'*Miss* Garnet, it's Miss,' she had explained, anxious not to accept a title to which she felt she had never managed to rise. (There had never been any question of Miss Garnet being a Ms: her great-aunt had had some association with Christabel Pankhurst and the connection, however loose, with

the famous suffragette had strengthened Miss Garnet's views on the misplaced priorities of modern feminism.)

'*Miss*, I'm sorry,' the young man had said, trying not to laugh at the poor old bird. He'd heard from Mrs Barry, the caretaker, that there had been another old girl living with her who had just died. Probably lezzies, he thought.

Miss Garnet was not a lesbian, any more than Harriet Josephs had been, although both women had grown aware that that is what people sometimes assumed of them.

'It is very vexing,' Harriet had said once, when a widowed friend had opined that Jane Austen might have been gay, 'to be considered homosexual just because one hasn't been lucky enough to marry.'

'Or foolish enough,' Julia had added. But privately she believed Harriet was right. It would have been a piece of luck to have been loved by a man enough to have been his wife. She had been asked once for a kiss, at the end-of-term party at the school where she had taught History for thirty-five years. The request had come from a man who, late in life, had felt it was his vocation to teach and had come, for his probationary year, to St Barnabas and St James, where Miss Garnet had risen to the position of Head of the History Department. But he had been asked to leave after he had been observed hanging around the fifth-form girls' lockers after Games. Julia, who had regretted not obliging with the kiss, wept secretly into her handkerchief on hearing of Mr Kenton's departure. Later she plucked up courage to write to him, with news about the radical modern play he had been directing. Mr Maguire, Head

of English, had had to take over – and in Miss Garnet's view the play had suffered as a consequence. Timidly, she had communicated this thought to the departed Mr Kenton but the letter had been returned with 'NOT KNOWN AT THIS ADDRESS' printed on the outside. Miss Garnet had found herself rather relieved and had silently shredded her single attempt at seduction into the rubbish bin.

'Where you off to then?' the young estate agent had asked, after they had agreed the terms on which the flat was to be let (no smoking, and no pets – out of respect to Stella).

Perhaps it was the young man's obvious indifference which acted as a catalyst to the surprising form she found her answer taking – for she had not, in fact, yet formulated in her mind where she might go, should the flat prove acceptable for letting to Messrs Brown & Noble.

Across Miss Garnet's memory paraded the several coloured advertisements for far-flung places which, along with some magazine cuttings concerning unsuitable hair dye, she had cleared from Harriet's oak bureau and which (steeling herself a little) she had recently placed in the dustbin. One advertisement had been for a cruise around the Adriatic Sea, visiting cities of historical interest. The most famous of these now flashed savingly into her mind.

'Venice,' she announced firmly. 'I shall be taking six months in Venice.' And then, because it is rarely possible, at a stroke, to throw off the habits of a lifetime, 'I believe it is cheaper at this time of year.'

*

It was cold when Miss Garnet landed at Marco Polo airport. Uncertain of all that she was likely to encounter on her exotic adventure she had at least had the foresight to equip herself with good boots. The well-soled boots provided a small counter to her sense of being somewhat insubstantial when, having collected her single suitcase with the stout leather strap which had been her mother's, she followed the other arrivals outside to where a man with a clipboard shouted and gestured.

Before her spread a pearl-grey, shimmering, quite alien waste of water.

'Zattere,' Miss Garnet enunciated. She had, through an agency found in the *Guardian*'s Holiday Section, taken an *appartamento* in one of the cheaper areas of Venice. And then, more distinctly, because the man with the clipboard appeared to pay no attention, 'Zattere!'

'*Si, si, Signora, momento, momento*.' He gestured at a water-taxi and then at a well-dressed couple who had pushed ahead of Miss Garnet in the shambling queue. '*Prego*?'

'Hotel Gritti Palace?' The man, a tall American with a spade-cut beard, spoke with the authority of money. Even Miss Garnet knew that the Gritti was one of the more exclusive of Venice's many expensive hotels. She had been disappointed to learn that a Socialist playwright, one whom she admired, was in the habit of taking rooms there each spring. Years ago, as a student teacher, Miss Garnet had, rather diffidently, joined the Labour Party. Over the years she had found the policies of succeeding leaders inadequately representative of her idea of socialism. Readings of first Marx and

then Lenin had led her, less diffidently, to leave the Labour Party to join the Communists instead. Despite all that had happened in Europe over the years she saw no reason now to alter her allegiance to the ideology which had sustained her for so long. Indeed, it was partly Venice's reputation for left-wing activity which had underpinned her novel notion to reside there for six months. Now the long plane flight, the extreme cold rising off the grey-green lagoon waters and the extremer fear, rising from what seemed more and more like her own foolhardiness, joined force with political prejudice.

'Excuse me,' Miss Garnet raised her voice towards the polished couple, 'but I was first.' As she spoke she lost her footing, grazing her leg against a bollard.

The woman of the couple turned to examine the person from whom these commanding words had issued. She saw a thin woman of medium height wearing a long tweed coat and a hat with a veil caught back against the crown. The hat had belonged to Harriet and although Miss Garnet, when she had seen it on Harriet, had considered it overdramatic, she had found herself reluctant to relegate it to the Oxfam box. The hat represented, she recognised, a side to Harriet which she had disregarded when her friend was alive. As a kind of impulsive late gesture to her friend's sense of the theatrical, she had placed the hat onto her head in the last minutes before leaving for the airport.

Perhaps it was the hat or perhaps it was the tone of voice but the couple responded as if Miss Garnet was a 'somebody'. Maybe, they thought, she is one of the English aristocracy

who consider it bad form to dress showily. Certainly the little woman with the delicately angular features spoke with the diction of a duchess.

'Excuse us,' the man spoke in a deep New England accent, 'we would be honoured if you would share our taxi.'

Miss Garnet paused. She was unaccustomed to accepting favours, especially from tall, urbane-mannered men. But she was tired and, she had to own, rather scared. Her knee hurt where she had stupidly bashed it. And there remained the fact that they had, after all, pushed in front of her.

'Thank you,' she spoke more loudly than usual so as to distract attention from the blood she feared was now seeping observably through her thick stocking, 'I should be glad to share with you.'

The American couple, concerned to undo any unintentional impoliteness, insisted the water-taxi take Miss Garnet to the Campo Angelo Raffaele, where the apartment she had rented was located. Miss Garnet had chosen the address, out of many similar possibilities, on account of the name. Devout Communist as she was, there was something reassuring about the Angel Raphael. She found the numerous other saintly figures, whose names attach to Venice's streets and monuments, unfamiliar and off-putting. The Angel Raphael she knew about. Of the Archangels of her Baptist childhood, Gabriel, Michael, Raphael, the latter had the most appeal.

The water-taxi drew up at shallow broad stone steps,

covered in a dangerous-looking green slime. Miss Garnet, holding back the long skirts of her coat, carefully stepped out of the boat.

'Oh, but you have hurt yourself!' cried the American woman, whose name, Miss Garnet had learned, was Cynthia.

But Miss Garnet, who was looking up, had caught the benevolent gaze of an angel. He was standing with a protective arm around what appeared to be a small boy carrying a large fish. On the other side of the angel was a hound.

'Thank you,' she said, slightly dazed, 'I shall be fine.' Then, 'Oh, but I must pay you,' she shouted as the boat moved off down the *rio*. But the Americans only waved smiling and shouted back that it could wait and she could pay what she owed when they all met again. 'Look after that leg, now,' urged the woman, and, 'Come to our hotel,' boomed the man, so loudly that three small boys on the other side of the canal called out and waved too at the departing boat.

Miss Garnet found that the departure of the newly met Americans left her feeling forlorn. Impatient with what seemed a silly show of sentimentality in herself, she caught up her suitcase and her hand luggage and looked about to get her bearings. Above her the angel winked down again and she now took in that this was the frontage of the Chiesa dell'Angelo Raffaele itself, which lent its name not only to the *campo* but also, most graciously, to the waterfront before it.

'*Scusi*,' said Miss Garnet to the boys who had crossed the brick bridge to inspect the new visitor, 'Campo Angelo

Raffaele?' She was rather proud and at the same time shy of the '*Scusi*'.

'*Si, si*,' cried the boys grabbing at her luggage. Just in time Miss Garnet managed to discern that their intentions were not sinister but they wished merely to earn a few lire by carrying her bags to her destination. She produced the paper on which she had written the address and proffered it to the tallest and most intelligent-looking boy.

'*Si, si!*' he exclaimed pointing across the square and a smaller boy, who had commandeered the suitcase, almost ran with it towards a flaking rose-red house with green shutters and washing hanging from a balcony.

The journey was no more than thirty metres and Miss Garnet, concerned not to seem stingy, became confused as to what she should tip the boys for their 'help'. She hardly needed help: the suitcase was packed with a deliberate economy and the years of independence had made her physically strong. Nevertheless it seemed churlish not to reward such a welcome from these attractive boys. Despite her thirty-five years of school teaching Miss Garnet was unused to receiving attentions from youth.

'Thank you,' she said as they clustered around the front door but before she had settled the problem of how to register her thanks properly the door opened and a middle-aged, dark-haired woman was there greeting her and apparently sending the boys packing.

'They were kind.' Miss Garnet spoke regretfully watching them running and caterwauling across the *campo*.

'*Si, si, Signora*, they are the boys of my cousin. They must help you, of course. Come in, please, I wait here for you to show you the apartment.'

Signora Mignelli had acquired her English from her years of letting to visitors. Her command of Miss Garnet's mother tongue made Miss Garnet rather ashamed of her own inadequacies in Signora Mignelli's. The Signora showed Miss Garnet to a small apartment with a bedroom, a kitchen-living room, a bathroom and a green wrought-iron balcony. '*No sole*,' Signora Mignelli waved at the white sky, 'but when there is . . . ah!' she unfolded her hands to indicate the blessings of warmth awaiting her tenant.

The balcony overlooked the *chiesa* but to the back of the building where the angel with the boy and the dog were not visible. Still, there was something lovely in the tawny brick and the general air of plant-encroaching dilapidation. Miss Garnet wanted to ask if the church was ever open – it had a kind of air as if it had been shut up for good – but she did not known how to broach such a topic as 'church' with Signora Mignelli.

Instead, her landlady told her where to shop, where she might do her laundry, how to travel about Venice by the *vaporetti*, the water buses which make their ways through the watery thoroughfares. The apartment's fridge already contained milk and butter. Also, half a bottle of *syrop*, coloured an alarming orange, presumably left by a former occupant. In the bread bin the Signora pointed out a long end of a crusty loaf and in a bowl a pyramid of green-leafed clementines. A

blue glass vase on a sideboard held a clutch of dark pink anemones.

'Oh, how pretty,' said Miss Garnet, thinking how like some painting it all looked, and blushed.

'It is good, no?' said the Signora, pleased at the effect of her apartment. And then commandingly, 'You have a hurt? Let me see!'

Miss Garnet, her knee washed and dressed by a remonstrating Signora Mignelli, spent the afternoon unpacking and rearranging the few movable pieces in the rooms. In the sitting room she removed some of the numerous lace mats, stacked together the scattered nest of small tables and relocated the antiquated telephone – for, surely, she would hardly be needing it – to an out-of-the-way marble-topped sideboard.

The bedroom was narrow, so narrow that the bed with its carved wooden headboard and pearl-white crocheted coverlet almost filled it. On the wall over the bed hung a picture of the Virgin and Christ Child.

'Can't be doing with that,' said Miss Garnet to herself, and unhooking the picture from the wall she looked about for a place to store it. There were other pictures of religious subjects and, after consideration, the top of the ornately fronted wardrobe in the hallway seemed a safe spot to deposit all the holy pictures.

Going to wash her hands (in spite of the high cleanliness of the rooms the pictures were dusty) she found no soap and made that a reason for her first shopping expedition.

And really it was quite easy, she thought to herself, coming out of the *farmacia* with strawberry-scented soap, because Italian sounds made sense: *farmacia*, when you heard it, sounded like pharmacy, after all.

After three days Miss Garnet had become, surprisingly (for she was unused to forming new habits), familiar with the neighbourhood. She shopped at one of the local greengrocers who spoke English, where the stacked piles of bright fruits and vegetables appeared, to an imagination nourished among the shops of Ealing, minor miracles of texture and colour. At the husband and wife grocers, the parmigiano cheese and the wafer-sliced prosciutto made her stomach rumble in anticipation of lunch and at the bakers she dithered almost frivolously over whether to buy one of the long crusty loaves which must be consumed within a day's span or the olive-bread, doughy and moist, which lasted if wrapped tight in a polythene bag.

Miss Garnet had not, so far, done more than wander around the neighbourhood and sleep. Before her departure she had gone to Stanfords of Covent Garden where she had purchased a learned-looking book, *Venice for Historians* by the Reverend Martin Crystal, MA (Oxon.). A brief survey suggested the content was sensibly historical and in view of the MA (Oxon.) she was prepared to overlook the title of 'Reverend'. But when with a sense of sober preparation she opened the Reverend Crystal, on more than one occasion she found herself falling asleep. She was rather ashamed of this new tendency

for sleeping: nine or ten hours a night and, in addition, often a doze in the early afternoon, but nothing worked to abate it. In an effort to rise at eight, she set her alarm and woke at ten to find, defiant in half-sleep, she had depressed the switch to turn the ringer off. After that she succumbed to the narcolepsy and allowed it to overtake her.

It was after one such heavy afternoon doze that Miss Garnet woke to voices in the *campo* outside. Pulling on a cardigan she went to the window. A procession. Children running, singing, blowing squeakers like rude tongues and toy trumpets; mothers with babies in their arms and older children in pushchairs. Amid them, magnificent in scarlet, blue and gold, walked three crowned kings.

One of the kings turned back towards her window and she recognised him. It was the tallest of the three boys who had helped her on the first day. She had half looked for the boys since. Seeing one of them now gave her her first sense of belonging. The boy-king smiled and waved up at her and she tried to open the window to the balcony. But, oh how maddening, it was stuck. She wrestled with the catch, pulled and wrenched, swore quite violently and had torn her thumbnail before she heaved her way outside and onto the balcony.

But the procession had left the *campo* and the last edges of it were already trailing over the brick bridge which crossed the Rio dell'Angelo Raffaele.

'Damn, damn, damn.' Miss Garnet was almost in tears at the disappointment of having missed the spectacle. She

wondered if she ran downstairs at once and across the square after them all whether she could perhaps catch up with the colourful parade. But she felt fearful of making a fool of herself.

The loss of the procession produced a sudden drop in Miss Garnet's mood. She had been proud of her acquisition of local information which had produced a competence she had not foreseen. The regular, easy trips to the shops had begun already to create for her a stability, a base which had taken thirty-five years to build in Ealing. But now, the image of the smiling scarlet-robed boy, who had conducted her so courteously to Signora Mignelli's, threatened that security. Miss Garnet was not given to fancifulness but she felt almost as if the boy had picked up a stone from the dusty floor of the *campo* and hurled it deliberately at her. The laughing and chattering of the locals had about it the sharp ring of exclusion. It was not, she was sure, that they intended to exclude her – the few days Miss Garnet had already spent were sufficient to establish that these were not excluding people – but that she was entirely ignorant of what was of real importance to them. The event that had passed so vividly over the bridge had some meaning, to be sure, but what that meaning was remained a blank to her.

There was no refuge in a return to the soft, sagging bed from which she had recently awakened. She had slept too much already and the heavy-limbed lethargy, which had become familiar and acceptable, was replaced by a different quality of heaviness. Unpractised at introspection Miss Garnet

nevertheless began to suspect she might be missing Harriet. The faint insight stirred a desire for physical activity.

Miss Garnet, who had been enjoying what Harriet would have called 'pottering about', had so far not ventured beyond the area around the Campo Angelo Raffaele. But now she felt it was time to assert her position as visitor. It was naive to pretend, as she had been doing, that in so short a space of time she had somehow 'fitted in'. She was a foreigner, after all, and here principally to see and learn about the historic sights of Venice.

The light afternoon was filled with mist, and Miss Garnet hesitated a moment before taking down Harriet's hat. 'A third of body heat is lost through the head,' her father, a fund of proverbial wisdoms, had used to say. It was cold and Harriet's hat, with its veil, might, after all, prove serviceable. Glancing at the looking-glass in the tall yellow wardrobe she gained a fleet impression of someone unknown: the black-spotted veil falling from the sleek crown acted as a kind of tonic to her herringbone tweed. The once unfashionably long coat, bridging the gap between one well-booted and one veiled extremity, had somehow acquired a sense of the stylish rather than the haphazard.

Miss Garnet was the reverse of vain but the sight of herself framed in the speckled looking-glass boosted her spirits. She felt more fortified against the sudden sweeping sense of strangeness which had assailed her. Taking from the bureau drawer the map of Venice she had purchased along with the Reverend Crystal, she unfolded it to plot a route.

But where to start? The glint of introspection which had just been ignited began to illuminate an insecurity: her parochial tendencies had been born of timidity, rather than a natural aptitude with the new locality. For all its apparent clarity she found the map bewildering. One location alone had any resonance for her: the Piazza San Marco, Venice's focal point. At least she knew about that from her teaching of history. She would go to the Piazza, from where the doges had once set out to wed the seas with rings.

Miss Garnet had chosen one of the further reaches of the almost-island-which-is-Venice to stay in and from this remoter quarter the walk to the Piazza San Marco takes time. Despite Signora Mignelli's instructions Miss Garnet did not yet feel equal to experimenting with the *vaporetti* and besides, exercise, she felt, was what was called for. She walked purposefully along the narrow *calle* which led down to the Accademia (where, the Reverend Crystal promised, a wealth of artistic treasure awaited her). At the wooden Accademia bridge she halted. Ahead of her, like a vast soap bubble formed out of the circling, dove-coloured mists, stood Santa Maria della Salute, the church which breasts the entrance to Venice's Grand Canal.

'Oh!' cried Miss Garnet. She caught at her throat and then at Harriet's veil, scrabbling it back from her eyes to see more clearly. And oh, the light! 'Lord, Lord,' sighed Julia Garnet.

She did not know why she had used those words as she moved off, frightened to stay longer lest the unfamiliar beauty

so captivate her that she turn to stone, as she later amusingly phrased it to herself. But it was true it was a kind of fear she felt, almost as if she was fleeing some harrowing spectre who stalked her progress. Across another *campo*, then over bridges, along further alleys, past astonishing pastries piled high in gleaming windows, past shops filled with bottled liquor, alarming knives, swathes of patterned paper. Once she passed an artists' suppliers where, in spite of the spectre, she stopped to admire the window packed with square dishes heaped with brilliant coloured powders: *oro, oro pallido, argento, lacca rossa* – gold, silver, red, the colours of alchemy, thought Miss Garnet, hurrying on, for she had read about alchemy when she was teaching the Renaissance to the fifth form.

At the edge of the Piazza she halted. Let the spectre do its worst, for here was the culmination of her quest. Before her stood the campanile, the tall bell-tower, and behind it, in glimmering heaps and folds, in gilded wings and waved encrustations, emerged the outline of St Mark's. People might speak of St Mark's as a kind of dream but Miss Garnet had never known such dreams. Once, as a child, she dreamed she had become a mermaid; that was the closest she had ever come to this.

Measuring each step she walked across the Piazza. Although still afternoon the sky was beginning to darken and already a pearl fingernail clipping of moon was appearing, like an inspired throwaway gesture designed to point up the whole effect of the basilica's sheen. Reaching the arched portals Miss

Garnet stopped, wondering if it was all right to go on. But it must be, look there were other tourists – how silly she was, of course one didn't have to be a Christian to enter and inspect a renowned example of Byzantine architecture.

Inside the great cathedral before her a line of people shuffled forward. Above her, and on all sides, light played and danced from a million tiny surfaces of refracted gold. A dull smell of onions disconcertingly filled her nostrils. What was it? Years of sweat, perhaps, perfusing the much-visited old air.

There appeared to be a restriction on where one might walk, for barriers and ropes were prohibiting entrances here, blocking ingress there. 'But why are *those* people allowed?' queried Miss Garnet. For there were men and women but mostly, it must be said, the latter, moving into the great interior space from which the swaying line of visitors was debarred. She stopped before an official in navy uniform. '*Vespero*?' he enquired and '*Si, si*,' she found herself replying for whatever it was she was not going to be shut out a second time that day.

The official detached the wine-coloured rope from its catch and ushered the Signora in the black veil through. 'Look, it's our little duchess,' Cynthia Cutforth exclaimed to her husband. 'She's joining the service, she must be a Roman Catholic. See how cute she looks in her veil.'

But Miss Garnet was oblivious to all but the extraordinary surroundings in which she now found herself. Silver lamps burned dimly in the recesses. Above her and on all sides

loomed strange glittering mosaic figures, in a background of unremitting gold. A succession of images – lions, lambs, flowers, thorns, eagles, serpents, dragons, doves – wove before her startled eyes a shimmering vision, awful and benign. Like blood forcing a route through long-constricted arteries a kind of wild rejoicing began to cascade through her. Stumbling slightly she made her way to a seat on the main aisle.

There was a thin stapled book of paper on the seat and picking it up she saw '*Vespero Epifania*'. Of course! Epiphany. How stupid she had been. January the sixth was the English Twelfth Night when the Lord of Misrule was traditionally abroad and one took down one's Christmas decorations to avert ill luck. But here, in a Catholic country, the journey of the Magi, who followed the star with their gifts for the baby who was born in the manger, was still celebrated. That was the meaning of the three kings who had graced the Campo Angelo Raffaele that afternoon.

Later, as Miss Garnet emerged from the service the crescent moon had vanished from the sky and instead a lighted tree was shining at the far end of the Piazza. Along the colonnades, which framed the square, hung lavish swags of evergreen, threaded and bound with gold and scarlet ribbon. They do not bother to avert ill luck here, thought Miss Garnet as she retraced her way home. There was a peace in her heart which she did not quite understand. But, as she paced unafraid towards the Campo Angelo Raffaele she understood enough not to ask the meaning of it.

*