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OXFORD

• 1911 •

0 500 1000
Scale in feet



THE 'SCRIPTORIUM'

The 'Scriptorium',
Sunnyside



OXFORD UNIVERSITY
PRESS

- 1 Blackwell's Bookshop
- 2 Christ Church College
- 3 Queen's Lane Coffee House
- 4 Radcliffe Infirmary
- 5 St John's College
- 6 St Mary Magdalen Church
- 7 Trinity College

RIVER CHERWELL

UNIVERSITY PARKS

BANBURY ROAD

WOODSTOCK ROAD

Somerville
College

Esme's House

Oxford
University
Press

WALTON STREET

cemetery



BODLEIAN LIBRARY

Christ Church Meadow



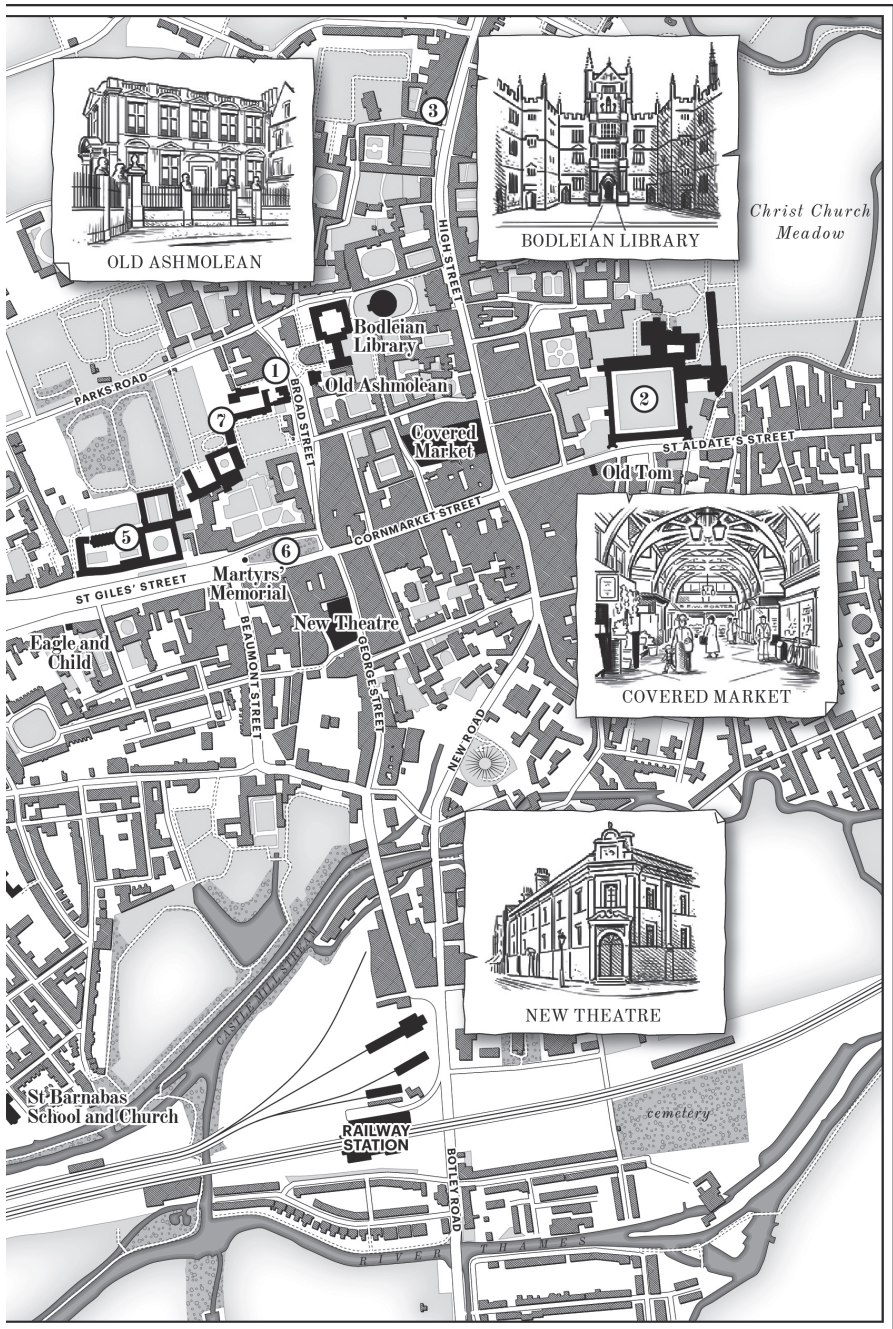
OLD ASHMOLEAN



COVERED MARKET



NEW THEATRE



PROLOGUE

February 1886

Before the lost word, there was another. It arrived at the Scriptorium in a second-hand envelope, the old address crossed out and *Dr Murray, Sunnyside, Oxford*, written in its place.

It was Da's job to open the post and mine to sit on his lap, like a queen on her throne, and help him ease each word out of its folded cradle. He'd tell me what pile to put it on and sometimes he'd pause, cover my hand with his, and guide my finger up and down and around the letters, sounding them into my ear. He'd say the word, and I would echo it, then he'd tell me what it meant.

This word was written on a scrap of brown paper, its edges rough where it had been torn to match Dr Murray's preferred dimensions. Da paused, and I readied myself to learn it. But his hand didn't cover mine, and when I turned to hurry him, the look on his face made me stop; as close as we were, he looked far away.

I turned back to the word and tried to understand. Without his hand to guide me, I traced each letter.

'What does it say?' I asked.

'*Lily*,' he said.

'Like Mamma?'

‘Like Mamma.’

‘Does that mean she’ll be in the Dictionary?’

‘In a way, yes.’

‘Will we all be in the Dictionary?’

‘No.’

‘Why?’

I felt myself rise and fall on the movement of his breath.

‘A name must mean something to be in the Dictionary.’

I looked at the word again. ‘Was Mamma like a flower?’ I asked.

Da nodded. ‘The most beautiful flower.’

He picked up the word and read the sentence beneath it. Then he turned it over, looking for more. ‘It’s incomplete,’ he said. But he read it again, his eyes flicking back and forth as if he might find what was missing. He put the word down on the smallest pile.

Da pushed his chair back from the sorting table. I climbed off his lap and readied myself to hold the first pile of slips. This was another job I could help with, and I loved to see each word find its place among the pigeon-holes. He picked up the smallest pile, and I tried to guess where Mamma would go. ‘Not too high and not too low,’ I sang to myself. But instead of putting the words in my hand, Da took three long steps towards the fire grate and threw them into the flames.

There were three slips. When they left his hand, each was danced by the draught of heat to a different resting place. Before it had even landed, I saw *lily* begin to curl.

I heard myself scream as I ran towards the grate. I heard Da bellow my name. The slip was writhing.

I reached in to rescue it, even as the brown paper charred and the letters written on it turned to shadows. I thought I might hold it like an oak leaf, faded and winter-crisp, but when I wrapped my fingers around the word, it shattered.

I might have stayed in that moment forever, but Da yanked me

away with a force that winded. He ran with me out of the Scriptorium and plunged my hand into the snow. His face was ashen, so I told him it didn't hurt, but when I unfurled my hand, the blackened shards of the word were stuck to my melted skin.



Some words are more important than others – I learned this, growing up in the Scriptorium. But it took me a long time to understand why.

PART ONE

1887-1896

Batten-Distrustful

May 1887

Scriptorium. It sounds as if it might have been a grand building, where the lightest footstep would echo between marble floor and gilded dome. But it was just a shed, in the back garden of a house in Oxford.

Instead of storing shovels and rakes, the shed stored words. Every word in the English language was written on a slip of paper the size of a postcard. Volunteers posted them from all over the world, and they were kept in bundles in the hundreds of pigeon-holes that lined the shed walls. Dr Murray was the one who named it the Scriptorium – he must have thought it an indignity for the English language to be stored in a garden shed – but everyone who worked there called it the Scrippy. Everyone but me. I liked the feel of *scriptorium* as it moved around my mouth and landed softly between my lips. It took me a long time to learn to say it, and when I finally did nothing else would do.

Da once helped me search the pigeon-holes for *scriptorium*. We found five slips with examples of how the word had been used, each quotation dating back little more than a hundred years. All of them were more or less the same, and none of them referred to a shed in the back garden of a house in Oxford. A *scriptorium*, the slips told me, was a writing room in a monastery.

But I understood why Dr Murray had chosen it. He and his assistants were a little like monks, and when I was five it was easy to imagine the Dictionary as their holy book. When Dr Murray told me it would take a lifetime to compile all the words, I wondered whose. His hair was already as grey as ash, and they were only halfway through B.



Da and Dr Murray had been teachers together in Scotland long before there was a Scriptorium. And because they were friends, and because I had no mother to care for me, and because Da was one of Dr Murray's most trusted lexicographers, everyone turned a blind eye when I was in the Scriptorium.

The Scriptorium felt magical, like everything that ever was and ever could be had been stored within its walls. Books were piled on every surface. Old dictionaries, histories and tales from long ago filled the shelves that separated one desk from another, or created a nook for a chair. Pigeon-holes rose from the floor to the ceiling. They were crammed full of slips, and Da once said that if I read every one, I'd understand the meaning of everything.

In the middle of it all was the sorting table. Da sat at one end, and three assistants could fit along either side. At the other end was Dr Murray's high desk, facing all the words and all the men who helped him define them.

We always arrived before the other lexicographers, and for that little while I would have Da and the words all to myself. I'd sit on Da's lap at the sorting table and help him sort the slips. Whenever we came across a word I didn't know, he would read the quotation it came with and help me work out what it meant. If I asked the right questions, he would try to find the book the quotation came from and read me more. It was like a treasure hunt, and sometimes I found gold.

'This boy had been a scatter-brained scapegrace from his birth.' Da read the quotation from a slip he had just pulled out of an envelope.

'Am I a scatter-brained scapegrace?' I asked.

'Sometimes,' Da said, tickling me.

Then I asked who the boy was, and Da showed me where it was written at the top of the slip.

'Ala-ed-Din and the Wonderful Lamp,' he read.

When the other assistants arrived I slipped under the sorting table.

'Be quiet as a mouse and stay out of the way,' Da said.

It was easy to stay hidden.

At the end of the day I sat on Da's lap by the warmth of the grate and we read *'Ala-ed-Din and the Wonderful Lamp'*. It was an old story, Da said. About a boy from China. When I asked if there were others, he said there were a thousand more. The story was like nothing I had heard, nowhere I had been, and no one I knew of. I looked around the Scriptorium and imagined it as a genie's lamp. It was so ordinary on the outside, but on the inside full of wonder. And some things weren't always what they seemed.

The next day, after helping with the slips, I pestered Da for another story. In my enthusiasm I forgot to be as quiet as a mouse; I was getting in his way.

'A scapegrace will not be allowed to stay,' Da warned, and I imagined being banished to Ala-ed-Din's cave. I spent the rest of the day beneath the sorting table, where a little bit of treasure found me.

It was a word, and it slipped off the end of the table. When it lands, I thought, I'll rescue it, and hand it to Dr Murray myself.

I watched it. For a thousand moments I watched it ride some unseen current of air. I expected it to land on the unswept floor, but it didn't. It glided like a bird, almost landing, then rose up to somersault as if bidden by a genie. I never imagined that it might land in my lap, that it could possibly travel so far. But it did.

The word sat in the folds of my dress like a bright thing fallen from heaven. I dared not touch it. It was only with Da that I was allowed to hold the words. I thought to call out to him, but something caught my tongue. I sat with the word for a long time, wanting to touch it, but not. What word? I wondered. Whose? No one bent down to claim it.

After a long while I scooped the word up, careful not to crush its silvery wings, and brought it close to my face. It was difficult to read in the gloom of my hiding spot. I shuffled along to where a curtain of sparkling dust hung between two chairs.

I held the word up to the light. Black ink on white paper. Eight letters; the first, a butterfly B. I moved my mouth around the rest as Da had taught me: O for orange, N for naughty, D for dog, M for Murray, A for apple, I for ink, D for dog, again. I sounded them out in a whisper. The first part was easy: *bond*. The second part took a little longer, but then I remembered how the A and I went together. *Maid*.

The word was *bondmaid*. Below it were other words that ran together like a tangle of thread. I couldn't tell if they made up a quotation sent in by a volunteer or a definition written by one of Dr Murray's assistants. Da said that all the hours he spent in the Scriptorium were to make sense of the words sent in by volunteers, so that those words could be defined in the Dictionary. It was important, and it meant I would get a schooling and three hot meals and grow up to be a fine young lady. The words, he said, were for me.

'Will they all get defined?' I once asked.

'Some will be left out,' Da said.

'Why?'

He paused. 'They're just not solid enough.' I frowned, and he said, 'Not enough people have written them down.'

'What happens to the words that are left out?'

'They go back in the pigeon-holes. If there isn't enough information about them, they're discarded.'

‘But they might be forgotten if they’re not in the Dictionary.’

He’d tilted his head to one side and looked at me, as if I’d said something important. ‘Yes, they might.’

I knew what happened when a word was discarded. I folded *bondmaid* carefully and put it in the pocket of my pinny.

A moment later, Da’s face appeared under the sorting table. ‘Run along now, Esme. Lizzie’s waiting for you.’

I peered between all the legs – chairs, table’s, men’s – and saw the Murrays’ young maid standing beyond the open door, her pinafore tied tight around her waist, too much fabric above and too much fabric below. She was still growing into it, she told me, but from under the sorting table she reminded me of someone playing at dressing-up. I crawled between the pairs of legs and scampered out to her.

‘Next time you should come in and find me; it would be more fun,’ I said, when I got to Lizzie.

‘It’s not me place.’ She took my hand and walked me to the shade of the ash tree.

‘Where is your place?’

She frowned, then shrugged. ‘The room at the top of the stairs, I s’pose. The kitchen when I’m helping Mrs Ballard, but definitely not when I ain’t. St Mary Magdalen on a Sunday.’

‘Is that all?’

‘The garden, when I’m caring for you – so we don’t get under Mrs B’s feet. And more and more the Covered Market, ’cos of her cranky knees.’

‘Has Sunnyside always been your place?’ I asked.

‘Not always.’ She looked down at me, and I wondered where her smile had gone.

‘Where did it used to be?’

She hesitated. ‘With me ma and all our littluns.’

‘What are littluns?’

‘Children.’

‘Like me?’

‘Like you, Essymay.’

‘Are they dead?’

‘Just me ma. The littluns was taken away, I don’t know where. They was too young for service.’

‘What’s *service*?’

‘Will you never stop asking questions?’ Lizzie picked me up under the arms and swung me round and round until we were both so dizzy we collapsed on the grass.

‘Where’s my place?’ I asked as the dizziness faded.

‘The Scrippy, I guess, with your father. The garden, my room and the kitchen stool.’

‘My house?’

‘Course your house, though you seem to spend more time here than there.’

‘I don’t have a Sunday place like you do,’ I said.

Lizzie frowned. ‘Yes, you do, St Barnabas church.’

‘We only go sometimes. When we do, Da brings a book. He holds it in front of the hymns and reads instead of singing.’ I laughed, thinking of Da’s mouth opening and closing in imitation of the congregation, but not a sound coming out.

‘That’s nothing to laugh at, Essymay.’ Lizzie held her hand against the crucifix I knew rested beneath her clothes. I worried she would think badly of Da.

‘It’s because Lily died,’ I said.

Lizzie’s frown turned sad, which wasn’t what I wanted either.

‘But he says I should make up my own mind. About God and Heaven. That’s why we go to church.’ Her face relaxed, and I decided to get back to an easier conversation. ‘My best place is Sunnyside,’ I said. ‘In the Scriptorium. Then in your room, then in the kitchen when Mrs Ballard is baking, especially when she’s baking spotted scones.’

‘You’re a funny little thing, Essymay – they’re called fruit scones; the spots are raisins.’

Da said Lizzie was no more than a child herself. When he was talking to her, I could see it. She stood as still as she could, holding her hands so they wouldn’t fidget, and nodding at everything with barely a word. She must have been scared of him, I thought, the way I was scared of Dr Murray. But when Da was gone, she’d look at me sideways and wink.

As we lay on the grass with the world spinning above our heads, she suddenly leaned over and pulled a flower from behind my ear. Like a magician.

‘I have a secret,’ I told her.

‘And what would that be, me little cabbage?’

‘I can’t tell you here. It might blow away.’

We tip-toed through the kitchen towards the narrow stairs that led to Lizzie’s room. Mrs Ballard was bent over a flour bin in the pantry and all I saw of her was her very large behind, draped in folds of navy gingham. If she saw us, she’d find something for Lizzie to do and my secret would have to wait. I put a finger to my lips but a giggle rose in my throat. Lizzie saw it coming, so she scooped me into her bony arms and trotted up the stairs.

The room was cold. Lizzie took the coverlet off her bed and laid it on the bare floor like a rug. I wondered if there were any Murray children in the room on the other side of Lizzie’s wall. It was the nursery, and we sometimes heard little Jowett crying, but not for long. Mrs Murray would come soon enough, or one of the older children. I tilted my ear towards the wall and heard the baby’s waking noises, little sounds that were not quite words. I imagined him opening his eyes and realising he was alone. He whimpered for a while, then cried. This time it was Hilda who came. When the crying stopped, I recognised the tinkle of her voice. She was thirteen,

like Lizzie, and her littlest sisters, Elsie and Rosfrith, were never far behind her. When I sat on the rug with Lizzie, I imagined them all doing the same on the other side of the wall. I wondered what game they might play.

Lizzie and I sat opposite each other, legs crossed, knees just touching. I raised both hands to begin a clapping game, but Lizzie paused at the sight of my funny fingers. They were puckered and pink.

‘They don’t hurt any more,’ I said.

‘You sure?’

I nodded, and we began to clap, though she was too soft with my funny fingers to make the right sound.

‘So, what’s your big secret, Essymay?’ she asked.

I’d almost forgotten. I stopped clapping, reached into the pocket of my pinny and pulled out the slip that had landed in my lap earlier that morning.

‘What kind of secret is that?’ asked Lizzie, taking the slip in her hand and turning it over.

‘It’s a word, but I can only read this bit.’ I pointed to *bondmaid*. ‘Can you read the rest for me?’

She moved a finger across the words, just as I had done. After a while, she handed it back.

‘Where did you find it?’ she asked.

‘It found me,’ I said. And when I saw that wasn’t enough, ‘One of the assistants threw it away.’

‘Threw it away, did they?’

‘Yes,’ I said, without looking down, even a little bit. ‘Some words just don’t make sense and they throw them away.’

‘Well, what will you do with your secret?’ Lizzie asked.

I hadn’t thought. All I’d wanted was to show it to Lizzie. I knew not to ask Da to keep it safe, and it couldn’t stay in my pinny forever.

‘Can you keep it for me?’ I asked.

‘I s’pose I can, if you want me to. Though I don’t know what’s so special about it.’

It was special because it had come to me. It was almost nothing, but not quite. It was small and fragile and it might not mean anything important, but I needed to keep it from the fire grate. I didn’t know how to say any of this to Lizzie, and she didn’t insist. Instead, she got to her hands and knees, reached under her bed and pulled out a small wooden trunk.

I watched as she drew a finger through the thin film of dust that covered the scarred top. She wasn’t in a hurry to open it.

‘What’s inside?’ I asked.

‘Nothing. Everything I came with has gone into that wardrobe.’

‘Won’t you need it to go on journeys?’

‘I won’t be needing it,’ she said, and released the latch.

I placed my secret in the bottom of the trunk and sat back on my haunches. It looked small and lonely. I moved it to one side, and then to the other. Finally, I retrieved it and cradled it in both hands.

Lizzie stroked my hair. ‘You’ll have to find more treasures to keep it company.’

I stood, held the slip of paper as high as I could above the trunk and let go, then I watched it float down, swaying from side to side until it came to rest in one corner of the trunk.

‘This is where it wants to be,’ I said, bending down to smooth it flat. But it wouldn’t flatten. There was a lump under the paper lining that covered the bottom of the trunk. The edge had already lifted, so I peeled it back a little more.

‘It’s not empty, Lizzie,’ I said, as the head of a pin revealed itself.

Lizzie leaned over me to see what I was talking about.

‘It’s a hat pin,’ she said, reaching down to pick it up. On its head were three small beads, one on top of the other, each a kaleidoscope of colour. Lizzie turned it between her thumb and finger. As it spun, I

could see her remembering it. She brought it to her chest, kissed me on the forehead then placed the pin carefully on her bedside table, next to the small photograph of her mother.



Our walk home to Jericho took longer than it should, because I was small and Da liked to meander while he smoked his pipe. I loved the smell of it.

We crossed the wide Banbury Road and started down St Margaret's, past tall houses standing in pairs with pretty gardens and trees shading the path. Then I led us on a zigzagging route through narrow streets where the houses were tightly packed, one against the other, just like slips in their pigeon-holes. When we turned into Observatory Street, Da tapped his pipe clean against a wall and put it in his pocket. Then he lifted me onto his shoulders.

'You'll be too big for this soon,' he said.

'Will I stop being a littlun when I get too big?'

'Is that what Lizzie calls you?'

'It's one of the things she calls me. She also calls me *cabbage* and *Essymay*.'

'*Littlun* I understand, and *Essymay*, but why does she call you *cabbage*?'

Cabbage always came with a cuddle or a kind smile. It made perfect sense, but I couldn't explain why.

Our house was halfway down Observatory Street, just past Adelaide Street. When we got to the corner, I counted out loud: 'One, two, three, four, stop right here for our front door.'

We had an old brass knocker shaped like a hand. Lily had found it at a bric-a-brac stall in the Covered Market – Da said it had been tarnished and scratched, and there'd been river sand between the fingers, but he'd cleaned it up and attached it to the door on the

day they were married. Now, he took his key from his pocket and I leaned down and covered Lily's hand with mine. I knocked it four times.

'No one's home,' I said.

'They will be soon.' He opened the door and I ducked as he stepped into the hall.



Da set me down, put his satchel on the sideboard and bent to pick the letters off the floor. I followed him down the hall and into the kitchen and sat at the table while he cooked our dinner. We had an occasional maid come three times a week to cook and clean and wash our clothes, but this wasn't one of her days.

'Will I go into service when I stop being a littlun?'

Da jiggled the pan to turn the sausages then looked across to where I sat at the kitchen table.

'No, you won't.'

'Why not?'

He jiggled the sausages again. 'It's hard to explain.'

I waited. He took a deep breath and the thinking lines between his eyebrows got deeper. 'Lizzie is fortunate to be in service, but for you it would be *unfortunate*.'

'I don't understand.'

'No, I don't suppose you do.' He drained the peas and mashed the potatoes, and put them on our plates with the sausages. When he finally sat at the table, he said, 'Service means different things to different people, Essy, depending on their position in society.'

'Will all the different meanings be in the Dictionary?'

His thinking lines relaxed. 'We'll search the pigeon-holes tomorrow, shall we?'

'Would Lily have been able to explain *service*?' I asked.

‘Your mother would have had the words to explain the world to you, Essy,’ Da said. ‘But without her, we must rely on the Scrippy.’



The next morning, before we sorted the post, Da held me up and let me search the pigeon-holes containing S words.

‘Now, let’s see what we can find.’

Da pointed to a pigeon-hole that was almost too high, but not quite. I pulled out a bundle of slips. *Service* was written on a top-slip, and beneath that: *Multiple senses*. We sat at the sorting table, and Da let me loosen the string that bound the slips. They were separated into four smaller bundles of quotations, each with its own top-slip and a definition suggested by one of Dr Murray’s more trusted volunteers.

‘Edith sorted these,’ Da said, arranging the piles on the sorting table.

‘You mean Aunty Ditte?’

‘The very same.’

‘Is she a lexi—, lexiographa, like you?’

‘Lexicographer. No. But she is a very learned lady and we are lucky she has taken on the Dictionary as her hobby. There’s not a week goes by without a letter from Ditte to Dr Murray with a word, or copy for the next section.’

Not a week went by when we didn’t get our own letter from Ditte. When Da read them aloud, they were mostly about me.

‘Am I her hobby too?’

‘You are her goddaughter, which is much more important than a hobby.’

Although Ditte’s real name was Edith, when I was very small I struggled to say it. There were other ways to say her name, she’d said, and she let me choose my favourite. In Denmark she would be called Ditte. Ditte is sweeter, I sometimes thought, enjoying the rhyme. I never called her Edith again.

‘Now, let’s see how Ditte has defined *service*,’ Da said.

A lot of the definitions described Lizzie, but none of them explained why *service* might mean something different for her and for me. The last pile we looked at had no top-slip.

‘They’re duplicates,’ Da said. He helped me read them.

‘What will happen to them?’ I asked. But before Da could answer, the Scriptorium door opened and one of the assistants came in, knotting his tie as if he had only just put it on. When he was done it sat crooked, and he forgot to tuck it into his waistcoat.

Mr Mitchell looked over my shoulder at the piles of slips laid out on the sorting table. A wave of dark hair fell across his face. He smoothed it back but there wasn’t enough oil to hold it.

‘*Service*,’ he said.

‘Lizzie’s in service,’ I said.

‘So she is.’

‘But Da says it would be unfortunate for me to be in service.’

Mr Mitchell looked at Da, who shrugged and smiled.

‘When you grow up, Esme, I think you could do whatever you wanted to do,’ Mr Mitchell said.

‘I want to be a lexicographer.’

‘Well, this is a good start,’ he said, pointing to all the slips.

Mr Maling and Mr Balk came into the Scriptorium, discussing a word they had been arguing about the day before. Then Dr Murray came in, his black gown billowing. I looked from one man to another and wondered if I could tell how old they were from the length and colour of their beards. Da’s and Mr Mitchell’s were the shortest and darkest. Dr Murray’s was turning white and reached all the way to the top button of his waistcoat. Mr Maling’s and Mr Balk’s were somewhere inbetween. Now they were all there, it was time for me to disappear. I crawled beneath the sorting table and watched for stray slips. I wanted more than anything for another word to find me. None

did, but when Da told me to run along with Lizzie my pockets were not completely empty.

I showed Lizzie the slip. ‘Another secret,’ I said.

‘Should I be letting you bring secrets out of the Scrippy?’

‘Da said this one is a duplicate. There’s another one that says exactly the same thing.’

‘What does it say?’

‘That you should be in service and I should do needlepoint until a gentleman wants to marry me.’

‘Really? It says that?’

‘I think so.’

‘Well, I could teach you needlepoint,’ Lizzie said.

I thought about it. ‘No thank you, Lizzie. Mr Mitchell said I could be a lexicographer.’

For the next few mornings, after helping Da with the post, I’d crawl to one end of the sorting table to wait for falling words. But when they fell, they were always quickly retrieved by an assistant. After a few days I forgot to keep an eye out for words, and after a few months I forgot about the trunk under Lizzie’s bed.

April 1888

‘Shoes?’ Da said.

‘Shiny,’ I replied.

‘Stockings?’

‘Pulled up tight.’

‘Dress?’

‘A bit short.’

‘Too tight?’

‘No, just right.’

‘Phew,’ he said, wiping his brow. Then he took a long look at my hair. ‘Where does it all come from?’ he muttered, trying to flatten it with his big, clumsy hands. When red curls sprang between his fingers, he made a game of catching them, but he didn’t have enough hands. As one lock was tamed, another escaped. I began to giggle, and he threw his hands in the air.

Because of my hair, we were going to be late. Da said that was fashionable. When I asked him what *fashionable* meant, he said it was something that mattered a lot to some and not at all to others, and it could be applied to everything from hats to wallpaper to the time you arrived at a party.

‘Do we like to be fashionable?’ I asked.

‘Not usually,’ he said.

‘We’d better run, then.’ I took his hand and dragged him along at a trot. We were at Sunnyside ten minutes later, just a little out of breath.

The front gates were decorated in As and Bs of every size, style and colour. Colouring my own letters had kept me quiet for hours in the previous week, and I was thrilled to see them among the As and Bs of all the Murray children.

‘Here comes Mr Mitchell. Is he fashionable?’ I asked.

‘Not at all.’ Da held out his hand as Mr Mitchell approached.

‘A big day,’ Mr Mitchell said to Da.

‘A long time coming,’ Da said to Mr Mitchell.

Mr Mitchell kneeled down so we were face-to-face. Today there was enough oil in his hair to keep it in place. ‘Happy birthday, Esme.’

‘Thank you, Mr Mitchell.’

‘How old are you now?’

‘I turn six today, and I know this party isn’t for me – it’s for *A and B* – but Da says I can have two pieces of cake anyway.’

‘Only right.’ He pulled a small packet from his pocket and handed it to me. ‘You can’t have a party without presents. These are for you, young lady. With any luck you’ll be using them to colour the letter C before your next birthday.’

I unwrapped a small box of coloured pencils and beamed at Mr Mitchell. When he stood up, I saw his ankles. He wore one black sock and one green.

A long table was set up under the ash, and it looked exactly as I’d imagined. There was a white cloth covered with plates of food and a glass bowl full of punch. Coloured streamers hung in the branches of the tree and there were more people than I could count. No one wanted to be fashionable, I thought.

Beyond the table, the younger Murray boys were playing tag, and the girls were skipping. If I went over, they would invite me to play – they always did – but the rope would feel awkward in my hand, and when I was in the middle I could never keep the rhythm. They would encourage, and I would try again, but there was no fun for anyone when the rope kept stalling. I watched as Hilda and Ethelwyn turned the rope, counting the turns with a song. Rosfrith and Elsie were in the middle, holding hands and jumping faster and faster as their sisters sped up. Rosfrith was four, and Elsie was just a few months older than I was. Their blonde plaits flew up and down like wings. The whole time I watched, the rope never stalled. I touched my own hair and realised Da’s plait had come loose.

‘Wait here,’ said Da. He walked around the crowd towards the kitchen. After a minute he was back, Lizzie at his heels.

‘Happy birthday, Essymay,’ she said, taking my hand.

‘Where are we going?’

‘To get your present.’

I followed Lizzie up the narrow stairs from the kitchen. When we were in her room, she sat me on the bed and reached into the pocket of her pinny.

‘Close your eyes, me little cabbage, and hold out both hands,’ she said.

I closed my eyes and felt a smile spread across my face. A fluttering danced across my palms. Ribbons. I tried not to let the smile fall; there was a box of ribbons beside my bed, overflowing.

‘You can open your eyes.’

Two ribbons. Not shiny and smooth like the one Da had tied around my hair that morning, but each was embroidered on its ends with the same bluebells that were scattered across my dress.

‘They ain’t slippery like the others, so you won’t lose them so easy,’ Lizzie said as she started pulling her fingers through my hair. ‘And I think they’ll look very nice with French plaits.’

A few minutes later, Lizzie and I returned to the garden. ‘The belle of the ball,’ Da said. ‘And just in time.’

Dr Murray stood in the shade of the ash, a huge book on the small table in front of him. He tapped a fork on the edge of his glass. We all went quiet.

‘When Dr Johnson undertook to compile *his* dictionary, he resolved to leave no word unexamined.’ Dr Murray paused to make sure we were all listening. ‘This resolve was soon eroded when he realised that one enquiry only gave occasion to another, that book referred to book, that to scratch was not always to find, and to find was not always to be informed.’

I tugged on Da’s sleeve. ‘Who is Dr Johnson?’

‘The editor of a previous dictionary,’ he whispered.

‘If there’s already a dictionary, why are you making a new one?’

‘The old one wasn’t quite good enough.’

‘Will Dr Murray’s be good enough?’ Da put a finger to his lips and turned back to listen to what Dr Murray was saying.

‘If I have been more successful than Dr Johnson, it has been owing to the goodwill and helpful co-operation of many scholars and specialists, most of them men whose time is much occupied but whose interest in this undertaking has led them willingly to place some of it at the Editor’s service, and freely to contribute of their knowledge to the perfection of the work.’ Dr Murray began to thank all the people who had helped compile the words for *A and B*. The list was so long my legs began to ache from standing. I sat down on the grass and started pulling up blades, peeling back the layers to reveal the tenderest green shoots and nibbling on them. It was only when I heard Ditté’s name that I looked up, and soon after that I heard Da’s and those of the other men who worked in the Scriptorium.

When the speech was over and Dr Murray was being congratulated, Da walked over to the volume of words and lifted it from where it rested.

He called me over and made me sit with my back against the rough trunk of the ash. Then he put the heavy volume in my lap.

‘Are my birthday words in it?’

‘They certainly are.’ He opened the cover and turned the pages until he reached the first word.

A.

Then he turned a few more pages.

Aard-vark.

Then a few more.

My words, I thought, all bound in leather, the pages trimmed in gold. I thought the weight of them would hold me to that place forever.

Da put *A and B* back on the table, and the crowd swallowed it up. I feared for the words. ‘Be careful,’ I said. But no one heard.

‘Here comes Ditte,’ said Da.

I ran towards her as she came through the gates.

‘You missed the cake,’ I said.

‘I would call that perfect timing,’ she said, bending down and kissing me on the head. ‘The only cake I eat is Madeira. It’s a rule and it helps keep me trim.’

Aunty Ditte was as wide as Mrs Ballard and a little bit shorter. ‘What is *trim*?’ I asked.

‘An impossible ideal and something you are not likely to have to worry about,’ she said. Then she added, ‘It’s when you make something a little smaller.’

Ditte wasn’t really my aunt, but my real aunt lived in Scotland and had so many children she didn’t have time to spoil me. That’s what Da said. Ditte had no children and lived in Bath with her sister, Beth. She was very busy finding quotations for Dr Murray and writing her history of England, but she still had time to send me letters and bring me gifts.

‘Dr Murray said you and Beth were prolific contributors,’ I said, with some authority.

‘Prolific,’ Ditte corrected.

‘Is that a nice thing to be?’

‘It means we have collected a lot of words and quotations for Dr Murray’s dictionary, and I’m sure he meant it as a compliment.’

‘But you haven’t collected as many as Mr Thomas Austin. He is far more prolific than you.’

‘Prolific. Yes, he is. I don’t know where he finds the time. Now, let’s get some punch.’ Ditte took my good hand and we walked towards the party table.

I followed Ditte into the crowd and became lost in a forest of brown and plaid broadcloth trousers and patterned skirts. Everyone wanted to talk to her, and I made a game of guessing who the trousers belonged to each time we stopped.

‘Should it really be included?’ I heard one man say. ‘It’s such an unpleasant word that I feel we should discourage its use.’ Ditte’s hand tightened around mine. I didn’t recognise the trousers, so I looked up to see if I would recognise the face, but all I could see was his beard.

‘We are not the arbiters of the English language, sir. Our job, surely, is to chronicle, not judge.’

When we finally came to the table under the ash, Ditte poured two glasses of punch and filled a small plate with sandwiches.

‘Believe it or not, Esme, I haven’t travelled all this way to talk about words. Let’s find somewhere quiet to sit, then you can tell me how you and your father are getting on.’

I led Ditte to the Scriptorium. When she closed the door behind her, the party went quiet. It was the first time I’d been in the Scriptorium without Da or Dr Murray or any of the other men. As we stood on the threshold, I felt all the responsibility of introducing Ditte to the pigeon-holes full of words and quotations, to all the old dictionaries and reference books, and to the fascicles, where the words were first

published before there were enough for a whole volume. It had taken me a long time to learn how to pronounce *fascicle*, and I wanted Ditte to hear me say it.

I pointed to one of the two trays on the small table near the door. ‘That’s where all the letters go that are written by Dr Murray and Da and all the others. Sometimes I get to put them in the pillar box at the end of the day,’ I said. ‘The letters you send to Dr Murray go in this tray. If they have slips in them we take them out first, and Da lets me put them into pigeon-holes.’

Ditte rummaged around in her handbag and produced one of the small envelopes I knew so well. Even with her there beside me, the neat and familiar slant of her writing brought a tiny thrill.

‘Thought I’d save the cost of a stamp,’ she said, handing me the envelope.

I wasn’t sure what to do with it without Da giving directions.

‘Are there slips inside?’ I asked.

‘No slips, just my opinion on the inclusion of an old word that has the gentlemen of the Philological Society a little flustered.’

‘What is the word?’ I asked.

She paused, bit her lip. ‘It’s not for polite company, I’m afraid. Your father would not thank me for introducing you to it.’

‘Are you asking Dr Murray to leave it out?’

‘On the contrary, my darling, I’m urging him to put it in.’

I placed the envelope on top of the pile of letters on Dr Murray’s desk and continued with my tour.

‘These are the pigeon-holes that hold all the slips,’ I said, waving my arm up and down the nearest wall of pigeon-holes, then doing the same for other walls around the Scriptorium. ‘Da said there would be thousands and thousands of slips and so there needed to be hundreds and hundreds of pigeon-holes. They were built especially, and Dr Murray designed the slips to be the perfect fit.’

Ditte removed a bundle, and I felt my heart beat. ‘I’m not supposed to touch the slips without Da,’ I said.

‘Well, I think if we’re very careful, no one will know.’ Ditte gave me a secret smile, and my heart beat faster. She flicked through the slips until she came to an odd one, larger than the rest. ‘Look,’ she said, ‘it’s written on the back of a letter – see, the paper is the same colour as your bluebells.’

‘What does the letter say?’

Ditte read what she could. ‘It’s just a fragment, but I think it might have been a love letter.’

‘Why would someone cut up a love letter?’

‘I can only assume the sentiment was not returned.’

She put the slips back in their pigeon-hole and there was nothing to show that they had ever been removed.

‘These are my birthday words,’ I said, moving along to the oldest pigeon-holes where all the words for A to Ant were stored. Ditte raised an eyebrow. ‘They’re the words Da was working on before I was born. Usually, I’ll pick one out on my birthday and Da will help me understand it,’ I said, and Ditte nodded. ‘And this is the sorting table,’ I continued. ‘Da sits right here, and Mr Balk sits here, and Mr Maling sits next to him. *Bonan matenon*.’ I looked to see Ditte’s reaction.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘*Bonan matenon*. That’s how Mr Maling says hello. It’s Speranto.’

‘Esperanto.’

‘That’s right. And Mr Worrell sits there, and Mr Mitchell usually sits there, but he likes to move around. Do you know he always wears odd socks?’

‘How would you know that?’

I giggled again. ‘Because my place is under here.’ I got on my hands and knees and crawled under the sorting table. I peeked out.

‘Is it, indeed?’

I almost invited her to sit with me, then thought better of it. ‘You’d need a trim to fit under here,’ I said.

She laughed and held out her hand to help me out. ‘Let’s sit in your father’s chair, shall we?’

Every year, Ditte would give me two gifts on my birthday: a book and a story. The book was always a grown-up one with interesting words that children never used. Once I’d learned to read, she would insist I read aloud until I came to a word I didn’t know. Only then would she begin the story.

I unwrapped the book.

‘*On – the – Origin – of – Species*,’ Ditte said the last word very slowly and underlined it with her finger.

‘What is it about?’ I turned the pages looking for pictures.

‘Animals.’

‘I like animals,’ I said. Then I turned to the introduction and began to read. ‘*When on board H.M.S Beagle ...*’ I looked at Ditte. ‘Is it about a dog?’

She laughed. ‘No. H.M.S. *Beagle* was a ship.’

I continued ‘... *as a ...*’ I stopped and pointed to the next word.

‘*Naturalist*,’ Ditte said, then sounded it out slowly. ‘Someone who studies the natural world. Animals and plants.’

‘*Naturalist*,’ I said, trying it out. I closed the book. ‘Will you tell me the story now?’

‘What story would that be?’ Ditte said, looking bewildered, but smiling.

‘You know.’

Ditte shifted her weight in the chair, and I manoeuvred myself into the soft sling between her lap and shoulder.

‘You’re longer than last year,’ she said.

‘But I still fit.’ I leaned back, and she wrapped her arms around me.

‘The first time I saw Lily, she was making cucumber-and-watercress soup.’

I closed my eyes and imagined my mother stirring a pot of soup. I tried to dress her in ordinary clothes, but she refused to take off the bridal veil she wore in the photograph by Da’s bed. I loved that picture more than all the others because Da was looking at her and she was looking straight at me. The veil will end up in the soup, I thought, and smiled.

‘She was under the instruction of her aunt, Miss Fernley,’ Ditte continued, ‘a very tall and very capable woman who was not only secretary of our tennis club, where this story takes place, but headmistress of a small private ladies’ college. Lily was a student at her aunt’s school, and the cucumber-and-watercress soup was apparently on the syllabus.’

‘What is *syllabus*?’ I asked.

‘It is the list of subjects you learn about at school.’

‘Do I have a syllabus at St Barnabas?’

‘You’ve only just started, so reading and writing are all that’s on your syllabus. They’ll add subjects as you get older.’

‘What will they add?’

‘Hopefully something less domestic than cucumber-and-watercress soup. Now, may I continue?’

‘Yes, please.’

‘Miss Fernley had insisted that Lily make the soup for our club lunch. It was awful; everyone thought so, and some even said it out loud. I’m afraid Lily may have overheard, because she retreated to the club-house and busied herself with wiping tables that didn’t need wiping.’

‘Poor Lily,’ I said.

‘Well, you might not think so when you hear the rest of the story. If it wasn’t for that awful soup, you might never have been born.’

I knew what was coming and held my breath to hear it.

‘Somehow, your father managed to empty his bowl. I was dumbfounded, but then I watched him take that bowl into the kitchen and ask Lily for a second helping.’

‘Did he eat that too?’

‘He did. And between mouthfuls, he asked Lily question after question, and her face went from that of a shy and awkward girl to a confident young woman in the space of fifteen minutes.’

‘What did he ask her?’

‘That I can’t tell you, but by the time he’d finished eating, it was as if they had known each other all their lives.’

‘Did you know they would get married?’

‘Well, I remember thinking how fortunate it was that Harry knew how to boil an egg, because Lily was never going to like spending too much time in the kitchen. So, yes, I think I did know they would get married.’

‘And then I was born and then she died.’

‘Yes.’

‘But when we talk about her, she comes to life.’

‘Never forget that, Esme. Words are our tools of resurrection.’

A new word. I looked up.

‘It’s when you bring something back,’ Ditte said.

‘But Lily will never really come back.’

‘No. She won’t.’

I paused, trying to remember the rest of the story. ‘And so, you told Da you will be my favourite aunt.’

‘I did.’

‘And that you will always take my side, even when I’m troublesome.’

‘Did I say that?’ I turned to look at her face. She smiled. ‘It’s exactly what Lily would have wanted me to say, and I meant every word.’

‘The end,’ I said.

April 1891

At breakfast one morning, Da said, ‘The C words would certainly cause consternation considering countless certifiable cases kept coming.’ It took me less than a minute to work it out.

‘*Kept*,’ I said. ‘*Kept* starts with a K not a C.’

His mouth was still full of porridge; I was that quick.

‘I thought throwing in *certifiable* might have tricked you,’ he said.

‘But that must start with a C; it’s from the word *certain*.’

‘It *certainly* is. Now, tell me which quotation you like best.’ Da pushed a page of dictionary proofs across the breakfast table.

It had been three years since the picnic to celebrate *A and B*, but they were still working on the proofs for C. The page had been typeset but some of the lines had been ruled out, and the margins were messy with Da’s corrections. Where he’d run out of room, he’d pinned a scrap of paper to the edge and written on that.

‘I like the new one,’ I said, pointing to the scrap of paper.

‘What does it say?’

‘*To certefye this thinge, sende for the damoyzell; and then shal ye know, by her owne mouthe.*’

‘Why do you like it?’