Whistling Psyche

Sebastian Barry*

Characters

Dr Barry

Miss Nightingale

WHISTLING PSYCHE

The waiting-room of a Victorian train-station, fine cast-iron struts and medallions, a row of red-plush seats against the panelled wall, framed prints set into it, travellers' scenes of Egypt, England, Ireland, Africa, Queen Victoria, a long mirror, etcetera, but the edges of the room fraying into the evocative decrepitude of a graveyard monument, wax flowers, twisted lead, long-dried bunches of withered flowers. There is quietness as ill-befits a train-station, and music runs along like confident rats.

A fine clock shows ten minutes after two.

There enters a figure, old, very small for a man, in a fine, dark uniform. There is a helpful moonlight on the features, and on his plumed three-cornered hat. The face is anxious enough in this privacy. Barking of dog off. The voice is sharp and high. The uniform is that of an Inspector General of Army Hospitals, in the mid nineteenth century. But if this place has a time, it is around 1910. The figure pauses at the doorway and whistles back out into the dark, waits a moment.

DR BARRY: You will not need to be told, I am sure, of the beauties and exactitudes of the poodle. For no animal, nor hardly human either, exists on such a plane of delicacy. (*A moment)* I have spent my whole life travelling, and I am not surprised to find myself here. It is familiar. A pleasant waiting-room, undoubtedly in England, by the sheen and the exactitude of it. *(A moment*) My poodles have all been Psyches. I named the first Psyche, and could think of no reason not to give the same ticket to the second, and the

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third, for truly that ethereal animal is an image of my own human soul. *(Looks about at the room, steers towards a chair)* I have an odd sense of having been here before. Not just once, but many times. Perhaps indeed it is not so pleasant. Is Nathaniel to hand? Sitting patiently in the third class waiting-room? And where is poor Psyche? (*A moment*) It lessens the misery of a small death, to take up with a new creature at least of the same name. So that I might go out into the walled garden at night in the clean filth of the darks and call that same important name, *Psyche, Psyche,* whistling my eternal dog through the boles of the orange trees. Of course I speak of my old home in Cape Town. And be at the cake shop to buy the same little cakes that I might lay some small offering of delight at the altar of her nature, which is all delight. (*Takes off the hat, and sits, the chair emphasising how small the person is.)* No poodle ever drew breath that was not an entrancement of thankfulness. There have not been many humans who on their passing have aroused in me a desire to replicate their presence by giving their names to another, even if that were possible, even if humans were to be purchased as handily as dogs, as indeed in those southern parts of Africa in my time was still more than possible, being in truth a staunch trade of the Cape and carried on by good British men, though under new names. But it was all the same thing. In fact a new human was easier got now I think of it, for I never received a poodle that had not aged three months already by the time she reached my arms, trembling and sweating with love on the Cape Town shore, as the ship bearing that bundle of fur and veritable twigs for legs, and the heart of a lion produced by nature in miniature, hove into view from its eternity of a voyage from old England. Thus bringing to me again Psyche, renewed and familiar. Two Psyches long I was in Cape Town, and I am sure there were many that wished heartily I had only lasted myself but half a dog.

(A moment)

A waiting-room, a fragment of a house, where no one lives, set down upon a platform… I think of that strange orange light under the orange trees, in that high-walled garden, near the mysterious African sea. The period of my life I can with justice call happy. Myself in the big wooden house, the linens on my bed as stiff as sails, my little dog Psyche making a frolic of the heat. And my servant Nathaniel arranging all things with his domestical genius, buffing both house and master till we shone. I think of the bewildered natives, the sick and the mad, and the bewildered people of the colony, also sick and mad, in different ways and manners. There was only myself to stand between, to raise the black madman and drive back the white, the one rattling in his given chains, the other in the chains of his own invention, the horror of the climate, the shortness of a English creature's life there, the elemental emergency of the continuous sun. But that I am that other sort of creature, neither white nor black, nor brown nor even green, but the strange original that is an Irish person, I might have had more kin with those suffering whites. But my heart, my white heart blackening secretly with age, was with the soiled

lunatics that cried out like large owls in the bright asylums, as if the endless sunlight was hurting their eyes, their souls. And the stumped lepers, and the heathen with livers boiled in makeshift drink, all the delirium tremens of the outcast and the forsaken, were in the upshot my purpose and my marvels. For in them only could I see the weaving of God, if God, that poor shaky character, there might be – in them only the origin of philosophy and the destinations of medicine. And I was a young army doctor, in the great muddled wool-basket of Empire. *(A moment)* Good beginnings may have bitter ends. And I am of a mind that all I did, all I accomplished against the odds that clerks and administrations and their officials like to throw in the way of the tentative walk of progress, is as nothing now, no memorial to my days exists, no record of my intense and sometimes loving labours. Because I did not so much serve the civilized man and woman in their starchy trappings, but mostly applied myself to the despised and lonesome of the world, and there is no medal, preferment or honour to be got from such. It is a painful curiosity to me that a life of some seventy years can register so lightly in the annals of humankind. To the degree that such a life might blow off the page of the historian's manuscript like a shard of feather from his quill, before ever his ink recorded my efforts and monuments, even if such monuments are merely the prayers of destitute men recording that one time in their existence a single person in good clothes thought their welfare was worth more than a cavalry horse. *(Takes out a thin black cheroot)* And more curious to me still that a person of the light character of Florence Nightingale, (*strikes a lucifer*) the heroine of the Crimean war, (*lights cheroot*) might now be remembered as if she were a royal personage, when I, that took the same interest as she in drains and cleanliness, and that twenty and thirty years before her, am consigned to a footnote of Imperial oddities.

Now there enters a woman in her eighties, tall, serene like a monarch of shadows. She wears a long blue skirt and starched blouse, with a rich Turkish-looking jacket, all swirls of dark blue and dark red. She has a strong, clear face, her hair pulled back tight, with a richness in it, a confident brushstroke. She carries a few little books in a ribbon, and a small wooden box. She is as confident as a child in its own room. She looks at the clock, checks it against her own watch.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: To the second. Perfectly in accord. (*To Dr Barry)* Good evening. *(She finds a seat and sits pragmatically. Dr Barry pays no heed to her. Looking at Dr Barry*) He is very small. He does not wish to see me. I do not think I know him, resplendent as that uniform is. He does not like a woman to be travelling alone, to be sharing something with his masculine nature, even if it is just a room – this elegant little room. (*She tries again)* Good evening. Do you think it will rain again? It has been raining all July, and it is a very terrible business. (*Dr Barry studiously smoking.)* No, he will not speak. He would rather pollute his surroundings. *(Looking about.*) An anteroom? A waiting-room? It is apt.

(A moment)

DR BARRY: I hear something low and mean, like a broken music, like a nagging voice. But I cannot see where it comes from. *(Getting up and pacing up and down, smoking viciously)*

Is it to my shame that I was born in the county of Cork in Ireland, in the year – many dark years ago? I am a creature of shadowed origin, in that my place of birth is insecure, dark, and better so. Cork constitutes itself in part of the best lands of Ireland, fat cows graze there, with fattening udders swinging gently, cows that are crazy in the afternoons to be driven back down the gradual hills, for to be relieved of that milk. They are musical cows, those cows of lower Munster, lowing with increasing panic as the sun fires down sumptuous and golden to the earth, like a religious queen, and comical, in that their panic is characteristic and easily allayed, so they are not tragic souls. That was the bucolic choral singing of my early babyhood, and in my heart at two or three was drawn the country maps, country places and country sounds and doings, when we would throw ourselves on the pleasant and easily-given mercy of relations, who at the time ate with the plenty of princes and the disregard of millionaires. Because the land threw her bounty in their laps. And so things went on, plain and ordinary enough, until that hunger and pestilence leaped forth upon the same green fields with fang of wolf and embrace of bear, somewhere around 1810 or 12, when famine became the urgent lamenting of our history, and changed all things. The landed people turned their gaze inward because outward upon the white roads of Ireland and in the mudded huts so like unto those later that I found in the rural plethoras of Africa, limbs withered to sticks and stenches of misery and terminality amassed themselves so that any possible scales of landlord and labourer were quite broken, and a bleak nightmare beyond words took the place in the book of life where once these old colonists and native rich had tried by the grace of their Gods and the wilful toil of their minds and limbs to make a rural idyll in their inherited fields. These means and ambitions were routed utterly by calamity, and hearts and souls of those with plenty withered just as surely if more invisibly as the real and true limbs of the destitute and poor. And in that change I think I trace the beginnings of my true story. For necessary then to all Irish persons was subterfuge and subtle guiles, things not unknown to me now and long since, things ever carried before the spectacle of my private story like obliterating lights. But wherever in the world I have found a version of Ireland, a palimpsest of that once-easy kingdom, I have striven again to create that old balance and medium among destroyed and enmired peoples, as if by my qualities and doctoring abilities I might restore to the earth a true translation of the ancient text of Ireland's happiness, however forlorn in the attempt, even however foolish and by civilized people reviled for my instincts and dreams. For nothing is more discommoding to the general stability and luxuries of accommodated folk than the spectre of change and the sword of reform, that cuts through not only the noisome horrors of what happens in the dank margins of things, but also inevitably the sweet-scented calicoes and poetries and philosophical affectations and religious contentments of the officers and high servants of a long-established and increasingly encushioned empire. (*A long moment*) Perdition is my due, for I am – I do not know, I do not know. Oh that I might have some sudden confidante, but that is not likely now.

Barking of dog. Turns head and looks towards the door expectantly. Nothing. Crushes out the cheroot underfoot, sits again.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: He seems anxious about that dog. Perhaps it is his darling. An animal, though not destined for God's heaven, may yet seem sometimes greater than a mere person. I myself once loved a little owl, Athena. She was like a tiny god, a tiny idol I suppose, as neat and square as a soap-stone statue, and she would have fitted in the palm of my hand, had I ever subjected her to that indignity. It is not easy to itemise the attractions of a little owl. She was the size of a clerical partridge – if you will allow me the metaphor, for she was so like a small, squat parson in a sort of dancing suit – but sometimes I fancied the intertwining notions of the universe itself passed through her mysterious skull. One morning watching her I thought of the hill of the skull, Golgotha itself, in Jerusalem, and had the oddest inner vision of three tiny crosses, with Christ between flanked by his famous criminals. It is not healthy to see Christ crucified on the head of an owl. And Athena was older than that, as old as the goddess she was named for, goddess of the state, of the city, of the power, goddess of doing and artifice, even yes of war, a goddess of many uses, immortal in her day but finite, finished now. My little beastie, as creatures go so silent, unasking, sufficient unto herself, elegant but plump, pretty but grotesque, one in number but numberless, an image, an idea representing the million Platonic owls of the earth, sounding over the marshes and stirring the dreams of poets and farmers. Little Athena, that required nothing but a feed of mice and a thimble of water. When I was called to go to the Crimea, in that great excitement and sudden preparation, Athena was put in an attic to be safe out of the way, and when all the baggage left, she was forgotten for a few days, and died there of hunger and silence. My sister brought her to me and put her in my hand, like a tuppenny bag of salt, that the kitchen air has got into and made hard and damp. My poor little beastie. For her I cried. I do not for a moment imagine you think me a person that has cried often.

A moment, then in growing vexation.

Unless it was from sheer misery – the vexation of being denied the arena of my calling. And it was denied me because of course it was a strange calling. A nurse in my good mamma's day was a poor fallen type, heavy with fat and evil intent, consuming jars of noisome beer, neglecting her charges – women who themselves were abandoned to the sanitary horrors and terminal, dark corridors of the hospital itself, a place where visions became black and the depravity and the hopelessness of a sort of end of earth took hold on everyone. A nurse was the creature of that place, taking colour, cloth, and manners from it, her soul, like the walls, running with sweaty moulds. So I, the daughter of wealthy people, with our five houses, our acres of carpets and lawns, our peacocks and our pride, could only fling the howling demons of fear and outrage into those cushioned domains. And they strove to hold me, to wrap me in the same dailysome rictus that held them, they would rather me stretched upon a third couch, like my sister and mother,

prostrated by good fortune and rich food in those soundless mansions when Victoria was but a girl like me. So that they turned me into a wraith, a revenant unto myself, a coiling, crazed version of who I was, a bad likeness, an hysteric, a weeper, a fool, a philosopher of idleness, who could not eat, who could not speak except in dreams, where I raged against fine dresses, and cursed myself roundly like a soldier. And I bore those wounds gracelessly, and would not have balms put on them, because cure there was none. Ravenous, strangely, wandering the house ravenous, and not able to eat as I say because, it was not food I needed, but something widening, something seething and guiding, like a Bethlehem star, to bring me back into the world of birth and death, not that horrible stifle of a life, that smothering, mothering place where I mouldered, all loved and admired and understood and as good as dead. (She has been almost shouting. Glances at Dr Barry, who pays her no heed.)

A moment.

DR BARRY: Lonesome. (*A moment*) Ever thus. It might well be asked what conditionality of being kept me at a distance from my fellows. For why I was forever watching the passing show of life as if from a platform of my own, alone like a grandee without equal. There were times when I have come close to my fellow man, as close as a person can get in fact without entering one of the portals of the body. For I rescued in childbirth the wife of an important nabob, with spread of orchards and levees of working men, and a fear in his heart as he watched indifferent nature storm against the frame of his wife, as she strove to bring her baby into the darkened world. Swift as a swift itself, as it enters its little nest of clay, my hand with its blade as sharp as sea-grass, cut into that grand wife, lifted her astonishing child from her belly, where it lay in the first gifts of water and peace, gave the hollering creature to my starchy nurses, sliced the amazing chord that binds the two musics of mother and offspring, and placed back the ruptured folds of skin, and stitched that important lady together again, quickly, quickly, because infection rushes in like invisible water. She kept her privileged life, and the baby throve, and was given my name for a name, the sweetest reward I ever got for my labours. And at the christening in the opposite of such haste, I held the little lamb, thinking on its plight inside the womb, some unknown warnings sounding there, with the urgency of threatening death. I held it in my official arms, not betraying by my face for a moment my intense pleasure, feeling in my own innards an answering joy, as if I had brought this girl myself out into the tricky light. With immense frowns I felt that soft sparrow in her blankets rimmed with gold, beating like a bird, vibrating like a drum. Its mother gazed at me with open gratitude, the father in his mighty clothes talked to me as if I were a sort of God, who though queer and small to look at, was in a true guise as expansive and important as the sun. Otherwise and in more usual times I was forced by lonesome facts too sore to set out, to keep my distance from my fellow Christians like a dog dubious of the teeth of its own kind.

A turn of light, music. Goes to the door, whistles. Stares *out gloomily. Miss Nightingale gives up on engaging Dr Barry, gets up, looks at the pictures, and examines in particular a portrait of Victoria on the wall.*

MISS NIGHTINGALE: She touched on everything but remained untouched. Victoria. She saw the passing greatness of poets and painters, ministers prime and minor, chancellors and neurotic dukes, and everything was done for her, through her, and of her, as if her true offspring were liberties and progress, like the children of a Virgin queen. My, my. In Scotland where I talked with her, she was both everything ordinary and magical, there was an absolutely silent music that attended her, of great courses and profound decisions, a sense of ordering everything not by sleight of hand, but by some impossible reach of insight and empathy. If she was surrounded by those gossiping courtiers, ninnies and nonentities, ever the expanse of her mind was filled with the important urgencies of the day, and I noticed the strangeness of that, even how she fretted, and seemed to worry herself that she might not do the right thing, how it overwhelmed her for moments in sequence, so that she became silent, and had the look of a panicking animal. As though the effort of empire were like a terrible illness that smote the mind. And it seemed to me the mere things on her table, the knick-knacks and objects, of a curious domestic or imperial cast, were heavy, chosen for their heaviness, because she wished them to anchor her down, keep her table from floating away on her, born aloft by the gasses of doubt and danger, flying her out across the Thames, across the Irish Sea, down to Africa and Asia and the Arab worlds, all her subjects below labouring, suffering, dancing, singing, imploring her to keep her mind on the eternal question that reduces us all, what to do, what to do. (*Dr Barry looks back as if catching a trace of these words.*) So that because of that essential grace in her nature she listened to me when I brought her my account of Scutari, and my understanding of the failure of the medical systems then destroying her armies. She listened with the eyes of a queen and the heart of a common woman. She didn't tell me what to think, or resist in any way, or defend her high officers in the manner they tended to do themselves. So therefore, because she believed me, she elected to think as I did, and transferred my own thoughts to her vigorous mind and made them her own, and acted out of them thereafter as if her name in that respect was Nightingale.

DR BARRY: Did I hear the detestable word Nightingale?

MISS NIGHTINGALE: I wonder all the same what is the story of this old creature, talking to himself in his bitter little tones? Like the sharpest of lemonjuice in a sweet dish. Mr Witherchops. Why is he here with his eyes as black as liquorice, muttering viciously to himself? He may be grotesquely injured in the mind, by scenes of ferocious carnage too dark and drenched with blood to have kept his sanity. I should feel perhaps something for this old wretch. Or interrogate him professionally? Soothing music is a great balm to the mad. I know what I will do. (*She raises the little box she brought in*

with her). I will calm the poor fellow with this. Yes. *(She opens the box and it begins to play a tune. She holds it up towards Dr Barry helpfully.)*

A moment. The moonlight toiling. Tin music.

DR BARRY: In the machineries of empire there may well reside compassion hidden like a gem in mud, but I have not seen much evidence of that glitter. The urgent histories of our times tell us again and again of the great mission of Christendom, expressly and momently to go to the plight of the heathen sunken in his philosophical slime. They speak elegantly of the spiritual horrors of little naked nations that have had the arrogance and rudeness to run their own paltry affairs inside the barriers of mountains and deserts, without the gentle and civilizing guidance of that remarkable creature near kin to an angel, the European person willing to risk health and life to go out upon a colony and draw his pay so often merely for the dereliction of duty – to lend his healthful influence, should he happen to be a doctor, by confining himself to his handsome house, as if his expertise were an artful wind that might drift out over his orchards and his roses, and heal the sick and the lame by a magic far more unlikely than a heathen dance.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: True, true, and doubly true, but are you not, little sir, one of those very doctors, to judge by your mighty garb, and your extraordinary hat?

DR BARRY: The officers of empire sit in their houses and then when they can do no better, visit each other's gold and resplendent houses by polite, if sometimes ironic, rota. It is those other lowly beings, the merest servants within empire, our soldiers, our canal diggers, our labourers sent out to infect the native with this burdensome activity of labouring, that perform the true work and meet the actual dangers. So you will conclude immediately that it is these noble souls, so selfless and so inconsiderate of their own health – who if they take refuge in cheap alcohols yet suffer the murderous delirium tremens for their pains, or end up in the madhouse crying out for their hurt heads to be healed – you will say that it is these lovely souls that empire strives to honour and nurture. By this fashion we effect it: soldiers in barracks without clean air or linen, with the foulest slop for food without vegetable or fruit, who die in their thousands of diseases rather than of wars, who come out to dark places with their bright English and Irish and Scottish faces, and endarken there and die without help or hindrance or pity from any powerful man.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Halleluya, sir. I echo you.

DR BARRY: I saw in Jamaica whole companies of men depart this earth, from lack of an open window in a barracks, a decent drain, or a single apple. It is little it would seem for a governor to suffer the awful death tolls of the solders in his districts, who writhe

and cry out in agony, despair and die, and though this may trouble the human dreams of him that steers such worthless hearts, what a brave, gay face the governor shows in the evenings at parties and levees, wearing the golden uniform and the plumed hat with an admirable show of courage and endurance.But that is the wisdom of authority, to remove itself from pestilence and work. For work, especially the work of an empire, is deadly and done to a short song. Yet it is oddly true that a suffering man shows oftentimes grace. You may tend a tormented lunatic that in some sudden instance exhibits a redeeming gentleness of soul. For shining out of ruined people are the remnant parts that ill luck and short rations and indifference cannot destroy. Even the direst madman in his last extremes may for a moment calm and look at you with the fiercest love, as if in your face he sees for that moment an amalgam of the people he has loved, undoubtedly in better times, and in the broken mirror of your features spies his lost lovers, his father, his mother and his kin, if it should so happen they were gentle to him and looked on him with the especial notice of those that could describe his characteristics like vivid poets, like the very Shakespeares of his individual life. And in that glance is the purpose of this earth's journey, if any purpose there is, and when priests and ministers blithely invoke the soul, perhaps they have oftentimes forgotten that the greatest soul ever seen upon the earth belonged to a wandering vagabond half-mad with memory and mission that preached what seemed a ludicrous fallacy of a religion, and thought his own low-born body, the mere thrown-together limbs of the son of a provincial carpenter, would be the saving of mankind if expressed in biscuit form and taken once a week at a gathering of like-minded fools.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Oh, this is dark. There is scandal here. There is creeping changes, and apostasy unchecked, and a crossing over. And I admire it.

DR BARRY: For these views I may add I was distrusted, diminished, and at last dismissed.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: You do not surprise me.

DR BARRY: I attempted to cross over those immense barriers, those mountains of obscurating philosophies and one-sided histories, that separate the likes of myself from such souls without acknowledged stories or importances. What assisted me in this flight from position and all the usual structures, mental and actual, of grandeur, was I should think the strange mixture of scenes observed throughout my babyhood in Ireland, where the dividing line between opulence and cold cries of hunger was sometimes only a meagre hedge, or that ironical construct known as a ha-ha, where a falling ditch invites an illusion of connection between a genteel lawn and a plethora of struggling fields. Those visions of childhood were more deeply poetical to me than the satirizing of one even so great as Alexander Pope, who loved nothing better than an antithesis to point up the horror of difference in society, though mine was a poeticality without the usual

recourses of that trade, since it lacked pastoral easiness and was utterly devoid of harmony. Rather it was a jangling of destructed metres, the cries and the worse silences of those that hunkered in weeping cabins, and the laughter and polite, useless talk that passed the strange Irish time for the grandees of Cork, though some of them it is true were loveable and astute.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: This is horribly familiar and unfamiliar in the same breath. These are thoughts that afflicted me too, mutatis mutandis. But to think them is one thing – to speak them out, even in this strange place, is an epilepsy of misdemeanour! And yet, and yet…

DR BARRY: This is the haziest part of my recollection, in that I have been driven in my mind to befog and becurtain such early days that lacked an ambiguity proper to my status now, yet out of that dampening mist and forceful if cloudy horror rose my proper character, with eyes so open they wept in the sunlight, and heart so sered it could do no other than prompt a lifetime of resistance and revolution. Whether I effected anything, or turned any system over that was irredeemably hostile to the happiness of the madman and the sick, or the entire lack of happiness I should say, is a question that would haunt me if I did not acknowledge to myself, though it is written in no history and brought me nothing but an absence of advancement and eventually a dark old age, that according to my lights, cold and frightening Irish lights though they may have been, I raised a cry for the helpless; and when my cry went unheeded, largely, I set to to put a poultice on the sores of the leper by my own hands, and tried to manufacture a balm of circumstance for those souls like blasted gardens that were in residence in the foul imperial residences of the mad.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Evil opinions, but I must confess, they have a dark undertow of truth in them, and I cannot entirely refute them. Alas, poor Victoria. This is a suspect, singular, and weirdly irreducible person, and I should… But let me wind the box again. (*She holds up the box).*

DR BARRY: My poor mother was a woman called Mrs Bulkley and you will feel a secret surprise when I call her so and cannot retrieve her familiar name, nor that more dear and secret name by which a child calls for its mother. My father is a dark blank, and if my mother spoke of him, the news and chronicle of his existence lodged nowhere in my childish head. I think I believed as a child that I had sprung wholesale from my mother without interference from any other agent, like a bleak little angel or an accident, like food drops from the mouth of an ancient, because he has neither teeth nor strength to keep it in. I fell I thought from my mother's mouth like a mumbled crumb, and grew at her side in some solemn and inexplicable manner, until the day I found my legs, and could trot beside her as we moved in increasing panic from kin to kin. As it was in once-

resplendent houses that we found brief havens, such places as groan with the weight of rain in their old walls, and whose costly trappings feed the secret night-time rats, there was always a room of shelves with the ingredients of a magnificent education never looked at and never opened on its walls, for my people were a people that would nod towards learning as a fine mystery, but not stain their natural minds with reading, and it was the dashes across the countryside on huge muscled hunters that intoxicated them, and the eating of great meals when there was the money to invent them, and the zealous marrying of fortune to fortune no matter the ugliness of the bride or the horrible stricken features of the bridegroom. Nevertheless it was in those mildewed and mouldering rooms that I stole my education, so that at the age of eleven I was preposterously over-read, and knew the long history of the world better than aught else. Humanisticly roaming in the old woods of Tacitus, in the courts of Cicero, and the happy miseries of Catullus, I became a freakish child that no Irish drawing-room certainly could understand, for I would not speak of geldings and mares and stallions, but metres, empires, and Horation irony, so that my every word was contemplated as a horror and a sort of devilish manifestation. Indeed and I do believe at this distance those poor simple Irish squires and their wives must have thought I was speaking in the tongues of Babel, or the drivel of the mad. (*Miss Nightingale attentive.*) My mother Mrs Bulkley kept me by her so I suppose I can assume she bore some feeling for me, although I do not remember her expressing it in particular, in the manner of, *I do love you, my dear*, or the like, that people depend on in their memories as the foundations of their fortitude in the long watches of adulthood with all its attendant hopelessness and diminishment. For how soon it is we lose the wings of childhood and begin to stand shriven and cold in the alleyways of the earth with wingless backs.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Plato based his philosophy on the soul, my mother on the sofa. Indeed she based herself on it. She wished my sister Parthenope and myself to do likewise. The three of us on three rafts amid the enervating flotsam and jetsam of our great riches. She wished to be allowed to lie, and to be inserted at length into the maw of death, horizontally, like a letter into a letterbox.

A moment.

DR BARRY: When my mother could no longer ignore the growing fact that the kinspeople upon whom we descended with all the grandeur of field mice were persisting in increasing desolation of spirit and destitution of purse, her panic proportionately increased. She resolved at last to bring us to London where her brother, at least in her own mind, existed in some state of abundance and fame. Certainly even I knew the splendour of his reputation, in that he was held by the nations in general to be an adornment to English painting, the fact of his origin in Cork perhaps not purposefully underlined. Be that as it may, this strange person was grievously loved by many of the great minds of those days, the foolish Goldsmiths and the monumental Johnsons, all

those men that in my childhood gave lustre and meaning to being alive in this world, giving worth to the celestial candle of the soul guttering in the decrepitudes of evident things by their powers of poetry, painting, and posturing.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: This remnant person may not deign to speak to me, but he is a philosopher.

DR BARRY: Be that as it may, my uncle James was identifiable as a sort of visionary of both women and Catholics, in that he had inserted both in his monumental paintings without the usual attendant ironies and idealisations or reductions. What we did not know then was that he had impoverished himself in the process, ironically principally in the creation of that vasty series before which mortals wondered and quailed, the Progress of Culture in the rooms of the Royal Society of the Arts. As for the progress of my mother and myself, we made a cruel crossing, she in her tattered silks and cloak, me in my whittled outfit like a miniature or a smudge of hers, so that I must have appeared to those living people of England, in those lost days, as her shadow, her double, traipsing onto the bleak barren ship that plied between the islands. The heart is changed by the journey across England, and although on a map there does not seem too great a distance between Southampton and London, yet the visions and practicalities of that country alter many things in the clock of an Irish soul. The part that is familiar dismays, the poverty of the under-people and all their ways, and the new things, the grandeur of the things that are rich, strangely appal, as if there is something unnatural and uncanny about such raging wealth. In Ireland the people may consider themselves ill-served by their masters. But England is far worse, for the tremendous arrogance of the ruling lords is visited upon their own kin and kind, in essence, and nowhere is this more unseemly and bizarre than that revelatory journey though the bitter edges of London, the great ribbons and ropes of her streets, the toothless Leviathan of poverty that lies across everything, like a very whale itself issuing forth no discernible cry, yet producing the semblance of a terrible music. But how clean the cloths of the rich, how costly, how rinsed and scrubbed their houses, to such a degree that even at twelve I could sense the cowering in my mother's spirit as she advanced upon her brother's house, where I am sure she expected to be deluged by the force of his possessions. Yet in the upshot we came on a strange skeletal dwelling, a sort of provisional place, with many stories and rooms certainly, but every one empty and cold.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: This is quite a lengthy history and I am afraid I must sit down again if I am to hear you out. Please do not think it disinterest on my part. I am after all close to ninety years of age. (*She retreats to her place, sits gratefully. Dr Barry seemingly unaware.)*

DR BARRY: My uncle stood in a kind of admirable rage at the top of his steps, as if the coming of his sister were yet another in his catalogue of daily catastrophes, the horror

of this Tuesday. He cried out to us in his addled voice, like a creature caught in an iron tooth, that he had not one bite of cheese to feed himself, and slept on his bare floors. He looked or rather glanced hysterically at myself, as if I were the bloom of leprosy or the carbuncle of the plague, or a sprite of doom and misery from the stories of his Irish childhood. He did not kiss his sister, he recoiled from her in a windy grandeur of dismay. My mother, as was her habit in these habitual humiliations, wept at my side, but silent as a stone, her tears nearly forced inward behind her cheeks by her horror and self-shame. To stand in a London street being repulsed by her own brother was to her the highest point of our ruin. And we were as surely driven back as if his hatred were an army, and all that evening wandered those streets, feeling like ghosts of ourselves. In the fresh limits of the small hours we found the strange solace of a district of the Thames, and sat there in a little genteel park, where there were seats for the nursemaids and nannies in the English daytimes, and for the first and last time in my life my mother clutched me to her and stroked my hair, whether as comfort to me or to herself, or both, I could not tell, and in that sudden anguish of ironical delight, did not ask, for fear of disturbing that unexpected bird of mothering.

A moment. The little music.

I do not know how it happened, but patrons of my uncle, hearing the story perhaps even from his own lips, were horrified on his behalf. If he did not have an affrighted soul, they posited one on his behalf. Small boys were sent over London to find us, and perhaps never would, except that a deluge fell on London that day, and my mother sat on beside the river without moving us to shelter, a woman of some smartness with a young consort, in the silver lines of rain, a conspicuous enough sight to arouse the suspicions of a running boy inspired by the promise of two shillings for his pains. And so we were rescued and brought to the house of a General Miranda, whose middle name I still carry in remembrance of that remarkable gentleman. With that miraculous Irishman Edmund Burke and the strange Lord Buchan, he comprised a trinity of patronage for my eccentric uncle. Comfortable of stature, he was one of those beings contented only with a certain epicality of life. The domestic engulfed him and made him fearful. He was a kind of hero of freedom in his native South America, and indeed in later years died there splendidly for that cause. As my mother made no progress of any sort in the following months, eventually the poor soul was placed in an asylum, as it was thought in those days for her own good and safety. I lay in my bed in the General's house and hoped it was so, that my mother might have found refuge from her hopeless distresses in such a dark and blackened place. I never saw her again.

A moment. Miss Nightingale closes the lid of the music-box with a snap. She is drifting asleep.

The general was left then with the puzzle of what to do with me. By a curiosity of history it so happened that he was greatly interested in the freedom not only of South America, but that other country so long in chains of habitude and contempt, the lost fields of womanhood. If he had incarcerated my mother Mrs Bulkley, he would it seems liberate me like the serf of a terrible empire, or a slave of received understanding. He knew of course that I had a head of some unusual brightness, thanks to those dilapidated libraries of Ireland. My hands were thin-fingered and strong, and perhaps better for his plan, I was rather unusual and angular in face, with sharp features that could translate easily enough into the realm of another sex. And so adding everything up, and being a military man himself, he arranged to send me in young man's clothing to Edinburgh, to read to be an army doctor. I was only just thirteen. He can be regarded therefore as the author of myself. He gave me my names, James for my uncle, Miranda his own addition, and my poor mother's maiden name to round the invention off. As I say these things it suddenly strikes me as remarkable enough that I do not remember now my original name, so complete was the General's authorship. As that male jacket closed over my chest, and those trousers engulfed my thin legs, some other hidden blanket suffocated the fire of a conventional future, where it might be I would have enjoyed the love of another human person and the boon of children born in the shelter of that love. The garb of a girl was taken from me, item by item, and my wardrobe of dresses, stockings and privy garments, scant though it was, discarded forever. And another far stranger future began, where I was a creature in disguise among the open landscapes of the empire.

A moment. The music-box is loosened from Miss Nightingale's sleeping fingers. It starts to fall, she wakes to catch it.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Oh! Forgive me, I slept. An old woman sleeps everywhere. It is grotesque. And by God's good heart, I was listening, listening. Oh, the frustration of it. This man has suffered. He finds himself alone. But no more than myself. I suppose he would take no interest in my story, as being the history of a privileged and wealthy person, and English into the bargain. Mothers and babies were his topic. When my kindly Sir Harry Verney wished to marry me, I thought I could not complete my moral character in such circumstances. Though I loved him well enough, and more. And that was a kind of death. Motherhood I know nothing of. All my will was bent on – fame? Forgive me do if I speak of the filth of fame but there is nothing in it that can improve the heart or appease the general derelictions of being alive. And that is all I will say for the fame that my peculiar life has brought me. Fame is proper to the dead, let them warm themselves with it in the frigid graves. Let it be something to ease the waits of eternity, till the last trumpet sounds out across the bleak and blackening stars, rousing the buried souls of all the diminished shires. Let the grounds open with a harvest of the forgotten great, their skulls like Irish potatoes, wreaked by the famines of fame. (*She*

laughs to herself) Some months back they came with a medal in a box and laid it on my lap. I could not speak to the matter. They looked down at me kindly, and explained in slow phrases what it was, the Order of Merit bestowed on me by our king. Pityingly they stared, they knew I was befuddled in my mind and by senility sentenced. They smiled at me as if I were a child, the more to be valued now because my wits were gone. But the words were hiding in my tongue, my room became a bell-jar of infinitely deep design, the ocean of ordinary life seemed dim and vast, I could not swim up to them in their vigour and certainty, but faintly signalled, faintly drifted, like a tiny mollusc without eyes or soul.

A moment.

But in my days of vigour, before age put her hand upon me, satirising my former self, I had the gallop and reach of a giraffe. (*To Dr Barry's back.*) You may think that a ludicrous comparison, and that I intend to mock myself by it. But I urge you when next you can to gaze on that wonderful creature. She can do no other but reach higher than her fellow creatures, she is strangely comely and slender, maidenlike, but large as a dream, an animal stretched out and altered in the most fantastical manner. So you see I intend to give myself a compliment by conferring on myself the emblem of that beast. The troops advanced on Alma, covering those Crimean slopes with the harvest of the dead. They cried out in anguish, their fellows prosecuted the advance, and all England wondered that such men, with such low repute, could manifest such courage. The Light Brigade made its historied charge, those gallant men calling out to the enemy like veritable lovers, their swords held high, six hundred horses beneath them, trying to cross the sere terrain. And the greater fragment of that company was destroyed, right onto the enemies' guns they threw themselves, and bullets removed their exigencies and their dreams of life. In the aftermath it is said even the opposing Russian gunners stood amazed, and did not know whether to weep or wonder, and did both. Scores upon scores of horses without their riders now grazed the bloodied swards in a vision of agricultural hell. And it was not this extraordinary instance of the courage of British men that was my salvation, but the thing that happened next. Better to be a Frenchman in that murderous time, with their excellent hospital in Constantinople, but our own establishment in Scutari was the dark fate of our wounded men. And because the terrible news of that place of wrenching death reached England, by mercy of the correspondent of the Times, there was an outcry among the normally inert people, and it so happened that I was asked with the urgency of despair to go out there with a troop of nurses. My moment was arriving with the strange fanfare of a thing long desired and I reached out to meet it. The trenches were now dug under Sebastopol, the releases and dramas of conventional battle was over, the troops filled the trenches, and something disgraceful and dismaying began its reign. No provision had been made for supplies to feed the men, winter clothes to protect them were unprovided, and it was as if no one on this dear earth existed to rectify the matter. There were no battles now and the generals were paralysed and annulled. Quartermasters

wrote their forms and the forms were countersigned and nothing happened except a typhoon endlessly turning of paperwork, and that could not feed the troops. Because there was nothing at the end of the chain except the leaping bear of hunger and disaster. A fearsome winter froze those bleak domains. The wounded were daily embarked in ships across the bay to Scutari, where we found the hospital intended to receive them, a fine old place from the outside with four majestic towers. Inside were corridors and long rooms without ending, the men, roaring and calling, dying and rotting where they had been deposited, in rows of beds tightly pressed together. By a calculation of the hospital, its size, and the number of beds, I quickly judged that there were in effect fully four miles of them, four miles of British men, Scottish, Irish, English and Welsh, in dank rooms without air, and in every room were two great vats where the urine and the faeces of the soldiers were put, and the first thing that met us when we entered was the wild broken music of that stench, wedded to the gross heavy smell of gangrenes and other suppurations. To this sensate music was added the extraordinary music of human pain, the bellowing, the cursing, the crying. It was to this that the army had sent those soldiers that had put such wonder and pride in British hearts. Little filthy tales were circulating. Everything was rumour and fancy. But I think it was true that those very horses since so honoured by the metres of Tennyson went quite without fodder, and thinned and famished and died everyone, to the eternal disgrace of this country. Some froze where they stood, like mocking statues. For not a blade of straw or grain of oats was there for them, their wounds also were ignored in the bleak dullness of official minds. I would tell you, if you were only listening, that the reason why such disasters befell the Light Brigade was because the two commanders, an Irish grandee and his English brother-in-law, could not agree, by dint of old histories could not be friends, could not even communicate by underlings, let alone speak to one another, were both too petty in their minds to… But no, let me not adapt an Irish song to an English tune. Perhaps it is that the gift of the mind of those that rule, in England or anywhere, is to engender miseries! Often and often I think of those horses, I know not why, thinning and famishing in the dark aftermath of the most famous and revered action in the annals of that war. But at any rate – the Turkish orderlies would not empty the vats of excreta, so when they were full they overflowed, sending their writhing tides along the rooms. Rats frolicked in the corners, thinking a wonderful charnel house had been created for their enrichment, as indeed it had. Never did doctor or other officer go near the men, once a soldier was wounded he was of no account, because in those times a soldier was nigh equal a mere beast, being considered to be the refuse in the first instance of society, the dullards and the drunkards of every British town, London, Dublin, Belfast and Glasgow, and the very detritus of the countryside. In that at least we were united, England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland! And I and my women could do nothing but wait till we were asked to intervene. The doctors in charge were in a black state of rage and despair. They were in fear of losing their positions and did not understand the outcry in England and what it meant for them. A terrible time ensued where we were witness to impossible pains, as peculiar choleras swept the wards, very like to that famine fever in Ireland that

took pauper and prelate alike. The doctors were like cooks boiling cabbages till they were green slime, everything was late and nothing was soon. I examined the drains as was my wont and interest and was astounded to discover that the outflow of the system had long blocked up, so that every effluent, every noisome and poisonous seeping, merely added itself to a vast core of similar discharges, and then spread out through the very stones and mortar of the hospital, rising back up through the building like a murderous rain, and its gasses and hissing vapours poured down through vents and orifices back onto the long, doomed rows of men. We were killing our men ourselves, not by the bullets of the Russians or the Turks, but we were bringing them to death by the blithe ignorances and lethal dither of those official men. It was in that waiting time, before we were allowed our way…

Breaking in.

DR BARRY: I do not know what time it is. It is dark out there among the platforms. I can hardly see them. In the distance gas burns in the lamps along some lonesome streets of Empire. I wish some happenstance could rescue me. What time is my train? Where is it bound? From whither comes it? What station of the English night is this? A person tells stories because he does not wish the wave of silence to drown him. (*A moment. Dr Barry is agitated.*) Lonesomeness is built on the shore of madness, the cure for it is the great stretching sea of dementia itself. Let me without further delay tell you the story of the fate of that delightful man, Major Barnes. Who came out to the colonies with a fervour I recognized in that he was one of those who loved the earth and her beauties, whether savage or civil, and though of a dark unhappy nature in himself, yet could feel much comfort from the grand explosions that were our Cape Town sunsets, and though he wept as I did myself to see the little dark-skinned babies washed up on the tides of the town beach, little scraps not needed by their needy mothers, girls themselves only puppies in a world of brutal dogs, though he wept did Major Barnes, yet he put himself passionately to his engineering works, raising interesting edifices all about the environs of Cape Town, bridges with little Venetian-looking towers at either end, beautiful canals of delicately trimmed stones that brought good water out to heat-parched farms. The governor, just as he was by me, was innately disturbed by the energy of this man, and yet at the same time gave way to him, and tried to supply the great sums of money that Major Barnes required and often for the turning of Cape Town into what he called a perfected paradise. Major Barnes was a small person with much fat all about himself and a red face from the quantities of Scottish beverages that he was wont by his depressive nature to find solace in, he was really an ugly little creature and wore his uniform in a way that suggested strongly that the seamstress and tailor had despaired of his unusual shape. Yet he was a hero in my eyes, and he would drive me out in his carriage to see his latest marvel, whether it might be a neat square lighthouse on some murderous point, or a section of the land made verdant and Edenic by his marvellous knowledge of water. Would he had been able to stick to water, and take refreshment in his achievements. But Major Barnes was a gentleman

running on the spot, and after some years passed his mind descended into alcoholic delirium and he was incarcerated in the town asylum. Once there all trace of position and elevation soon departed, I am sure. It so happened that it was some months before I was able to go and see him, indeed I would have thought him quite safe among the mercies of that institution, given the transformations he had effected in that far from perfected paradise of the city. But no, what I found astonished me, and brought home again to my heart what a cheat and an actor madness is, for instead of my clumsy, podgy major, I found in a filthy cell a thin dark creature without clothes or sense, raving in a corner and eating the mortar from between the ancient walls like it was sweetmeats. No one had thought to clean him, as I suppose would have been a twice-daily task, in that poor Major Barnes had no qualms now but to defecate freely like a beast of the fields and pissed like a donkey where he might at that moment stand. On his face was attached a vicious red beard, and it seemed to me also that the body hair that he may have been afflicted with in ordinary life, had also begun to grow, so that he presented himself as a human being gone almost over the verge of bestiality. What the governor, if he had ever thought of setting his shining boot inside the asylum, which he never did, would have thought of his clever major now, I do not know. More horribly still his arms were tied harshly behind him so that he might not do himself injury, and so he ate the mortar with his bare face, snatching at the stuff with his teeth, like a dog. Naturally I spoke to him, to see if in the miasmas of his mind there might not be a remnant island of sense, but there was not. (*Walking up and down in agitation*) I ordered him to be washed as often as required, his cell kept clean, his little window opened to the light outside, a loose gown to be given him and replaced as often as he tore it, and his arms freed. I gave him for three days the best-looking of the attendants, to read to him from the books I found at his quarters, in particular the adventures of *Gil Blas,* and this she did, and at the end of the three days when I visited, he no longer roamed and raved, but did his business in a pot like any other mortal, and though could not speak sense, yet whistled and sang while the girl read out to him those chapters so interesting to him. And this regime I was anxious to apply to all those inmates that might find succour in it, and asked the governor for money that might effect it, and this he supplied readily, when I described to him the horror that Major Barnes endured. So that the major, even in his diminished and ruined state, yet brought a change upon the wastes of that building, and even in madness caused to be brought in a breeze of beauty and relief, as if he might by force of the fineness of his soul, throw a tincture of paradise into the cauldron of that hell. When I left Cape Town some time after of course I was informed by my remnant spies that the asylum soon reverted to its former condition, its darkness, its filth, and its neglect. The windows were sealed up again, and its sad inmates returned to the manners and hours of horror. And the officers of that asylum were allowed to return to their murderous idleness, and all was right with the world of empire, in all its hopelessness and eternity.

A moment.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: That is very true, all of it, but as I was trying to say, it was in that waiting time, before we were allowed our way –

Breaking in again.

DR BARRY: Every medical officer may have duties to which he cannot attend. Distance, a lack of roads, catastrophes, ravines, may bar his progress out to various afflicted peoples. And these impediments become enshrined as tradition, and so things go on, in the general chronicle of neglects.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: I just wished, I simply desired, to finish what I was saying –

DR BARRY: One such was a sorry place called with some ironical flair Heaven and Earth, a leper colony sited deep within the back districts of the Cape. Long realms of high trees, plunging rivers, long snakes, seemed reasons enough to leave those lepers to their own devises, attended as they were by three permanent staff, displaced Germans of some kind in this case. But it is not in my nature to allow the story of such a place to go on unmolested by my presence, and it would be difficult to forget the abysm of sorrow and simple human pain that I saw there when first I penetrated those convenient trees. The three attendants, low slovenly people all, lived some distance from their care in a low flat wooden house, and the children of the lepers attended them there as servants, and I believe worse, and when they showed at length the signs of their parents' disease, were ejected back into the maelstrom of the colony and abandoned. The parents, with their stumpy arms and bruises, their noses rubbed off by reason of their skins being entirely insensate and indifferent to blows and knocks, as if their skin alone were blind in the blaze of day, were like the drawings of artists constantly being rubbed out by mildews and time, God's mastery of line and dignity made inept by that fearsome affliction.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: (*Plaintively)* I just wished to finish. I think I am your senior by some years. No one could be as old as I. You should listen. I am perhaps accustomed to being listened to.

DR BARRY: There were young women there of incomparable beauty and youthful grace, cast down in the deeps of sorrow by that slow erasure and extinction, and they knew that many years of horror stretched ahead.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Even in my senility, I am sure you should listen.

DR BARRY: Nothing whatever had been done for these ruined souls, their limbs were decked in rags, their wounds untended and their needs unknown.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Senility, so-called.

DR BARRY: With what heavy reluctance those three Germans put themselves to their tasks. I ordered by my unavoidable authority the entire sprucing out of that encampment, and the proper dressing of the people, and the education of the afflicted young, so that they might have a music of the imagination to help them bear their hopeless fates. And I begged the governor of the colony to allow me release the children with no signs of leprosy, that they might be placed back carefully in the town, with gentle choosing among the blacks, but this it seemed raised only thoughts of nightmare and death in such minds. I did smuggle out one lovely boy and placed him in secret in my own orange grove, in a little neat hut, and for many years he lived there, and tended the trees with great exactitude, and that was a fine person I named Jim, not so much after myself but my uncle, the painter, that was a man as I have said as neglectful of his dress as any depressed German in an African forest, but also with a mind of colour and form so magnificent that all who knew him at least allowed him their admiration and their love, if he didn't bite back that love with his tongue as bitter as aloes. For in his composure of that orchard, in the clipping and pruning back of trees and the watering of those thirsty oranges, my own Jim was a perfect artist and in league with the suspicions and intimations of God. Meanwhile I would surprise betimes my three Germans, who of course were anxious that some morass would swallow me up or a new posting obliterate me, so that they could return to their whiskies and cards in their low house and let the lepers in their care be damned.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: That is very beautiful, about the boy Jim, I will allow.

A moment. Very privately, intimately.

DR BARRY: It is not beyond my notice, the rumours that have bedevilled me all my life. I know I was called the little wife of the governor (*Miss Nightingale puzzled*) – all these dark things I know. It would insult me and insult you not to declare it. And who I am talking to, in this imperial darkness? (*A moment*.) There is something provocative of rumour about a person locked in mystery, a person that can dance and talk and amuse and yet seek no mate, with a uniform of incomparable neatness and exactitude, and small I suppose for an army man, and a voice of some troubled timbre, who is brave and can penetrate into districts of desolation like a pilgrim that knows no dimness of soul, who can carry themselves in the company of governors and paupers equally, and I suppose most tellingly, needs no one else except a poodle and a fine heart like Nathaniel at their side, that excites not only story and the mealy mouths of gossip, but also I think, and I fear to exaggerate though it strikes me as true, a kind of hidden lust. As if to possess such a person would be a kind of obscene ravishment, as if to imagine unclothing me, revealing me, opening me like a parcel hidden long underground, like a box said to

contain jewels and deeds that will make the discoverer rich as Croesus, would be in effect to be driven mad with passion and then launched to a new pitch of sanity by its wild satiety. Certainly there were women in those lost colonies of the world, in Cape Town rooms polished and golden, that seemed hardened by my presence, and stood before me, now and then even taller than myself, with a kind of obvious surrender and prayer. As if they wished me to carry them elsewhere, indeed to some mysterious Elsewhere with a capital E, where things would be as we desired them in our simpler heart that endures all the sophistications of society, where they would with due worship undo my buttons, so trim with ivory, and unlace my boots, so black and bright with Nathaniel's care, and find beneath all these fine things a body as crisp as an angel, the skin as white as last fires, the sex as fierce and gentle as a philosophy that would undo and explain the meaning of the world in one moment. The sex as rare as some tight metal from the deepest earth, that would somehow impale them and be impaled in one moment. And in that queer moment of ravishment I would destroy their social natures so that they issued forth into the imperial streets at dusk redeemed and at last elevated beyond the strictures of sin. All these matters I read in those drawn faces, women who would soon wither so cruelly in those ironical suns, and without a doubt die before their time and lie in the English bone – yards so plentifully supplied. Christ of their desires I could never be, yet in those hours where I danced and talked and regarded their cold passionate faces, there was a sort of lonely marriage, separation and death, repeated ad finitem as long as youth was mine.

A moment, dirtied stream of music. Miss Nightingale looks amazed by these confessions. She gathers herself.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Well, if you are quite finished, strange Mr Witherchops, strange, startling Mr Witherchops, I will finish *my* story – Yes, it was in that waiting time, before we were allowed our way, and I could start to spend the thirty thousand pounds of monies I had been able to raise and gather and bring with me, and send my own man into Constantinople where he, far beyond the frozen powers of the army itself, was able to find thousands of items of clothing for the men, for half of them lay in their beds quite naked to the day, and blankets, and all the necessities of mere breathing life – well, it was in that waiting time, that absurd, bizarre and unwonted time, that one day I was crossing the great inner court of the hospital, the sun teeming on my head, and I was stopped in my progress by an officer on a high black horse. Or at least it seemed high, because the man himself had fully the figure of a dwarf, or a strange reduced figure in a fairytale, a sort of miniature personage that even a circus would not scorn to advertise, not unlike (*indicating Dr Barry*), but well I will not insult you. And this was a person of obvious rank, not one of the doctors as I discovered later in charge at Scutari, but someone visiting the sites of disaster as the idle do in a time of furlough. His eyes found me with the hunger of a merciless hawk, and his high squeaking tones bid me quite brutally to halt, and he launched himself into a vile tirade of abuse, something about the nature of

my dress, the fact that my head was bare and unprotected from the sun, that I wore no jacket or coat, that I was a disgrace and a defamation to the place. Perhaps at first he thought I was one of those low nurses, but soon he was adding my name into the abuse, as if he was full of the borrowed fright and loathing of his fellow doctors, to see the vision of a meddling woman brought out to correct their horrible regimes at the behest of the British parliament, and could not but delight in discharging his hate and his distaste. Never in my life had I met such a hardened person, even in the army, and I stood in the beating sunlight and gazed up at him, truly as if he were so odd and unexpected an apparition that we did not share the same sphere on this earth. I am sure he was one of those evilly ignorant men, who by their customs and practices had brought the army of England to this awful pass. He looked like a very demon, a mere creature, and was shrivelled and shrunken in his rather gorgeous uniform, his pitiless, spite-haggard features as sharp as blades, his skin white as a peeled apple under the sharp two-sided hat. Grotesque, ill-mannered, or worse quite mannerless, low-born and bizarre, dressed up as a gentleman the way an actor of no ability might be, far too spic and evilly span, with collar cutting into his hen's neck like two white knives, as if he was committing suicide with his shirt, and those little anger-tight patent shoes, all daggerlike too and dolefully shining, and running behind his high pinched horse, a little black dog with hair seemingly growing out of its very eyeballs, barking in hysteria, and a dejected African serving man trotting after like a shadow, and a goat, which to his credit I believe he brought with him to benefit from the good qualities of its milk. I was told afterwards, when he died at length some, some sixty years ago, that this indescribable person was actually in origin a woman. What do you think of that?

A moment, a few moments. Their faces looking out.

DR BARRY: Memory turns upon small points. Of course I am as old as the Cork hills of my childhood. Two things like the two sides of a sixpence: on one side the face of Napoleon. In his last days on St Helena, I was recommended to him as a fine young doctor, and was readying myself for the voyage to him. It excited me greatly in prospect to attend such as flame of Europe's history, though time and her ironies had dampened down that fire. It moved me to think of a person so great, albeit the enemy of England so long and so grievous, might now languish in sickness and dread of death on that island where nothing, not even history, happened. But before I could set out, the dark news of his death reached me. My effects were unpacked again with a philosophical regret.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: That is very remarkable. (*A bell tolls in the distance. It strikes the hour of three. Miss Nightingale takes up her little bible and reads in it.)*

DR BARRY: On the other face of that little sixpence peers out the features of that supposed reformer, Florence Nightingale. (*Miss Nightingale glances up.)* She did no

more than I had been doing for thirty years, and that without changing out of her skirts. At the height of the Crimean War, her criticisms of the army hospitals there brought me to inspect them. I felt bound to defend things as they were, which was not my wont. I could not sing her song. Perhaps I was wrong. But something about her enraged me, what I cannot say. One day crossing the parade-ground on my black stallion, I spied a self-important woman crossing in the close midday heat, with only a scrap of a bonnet on her head. All about milled the dark soldiery. I knew that it was her. Something unpleasant and inexplicable seized me. I began to berate her, fixing her there before all those rough hearts and souls, crying down at her for risking that deluge of sun and heat, against the clear regulations. Moving about a male place as if she had the God-given right to move there, independent and austere. Maybe as she looked up at me she thought me a hardened savage, a mere puff of military stricture on a horse more sensible than its rider. I gave her the blackguarding of her life and kicked my horse onward. I do not know what possessed me, except it was rage so sore and wild and resentful, it near stopped my old throat like a collapsing mine. She had not had to change out of her skirts to be the personage she was, and she was young then still, and used her pretty face to get her way with drains and bandages.

Miss Nightingale has risen to her feet, her arm raised.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: You, you, it is you! All this time, listening to you! Rapscallion! You Irish blackguard! What horror is this that I find myself here at the edge of perdition, in this lonely room, in these realms of loneliness where great engines converge, coming up out of Gloucester and down from the Lakes, seeing from their windows quite different country, meeting at last at the station, the spread of yards and sidings like wings, like an angel fallen to the earth, that I, a notable personage, should be cloistered by this garrulous, opinionated, seditious midget! (*A moment, Dr Barry heaped in his sorrows*) And yet, and yet, I know his story now. Not just the ditch of rumour and gossip, which after all I have often decried. The strange uncle, the books, the tragic mother. Well, I wish, I demand of myself to be enraged by you, to discipline you, to bring you to heel, you Irish mongrel. But… Humanity… Truth… A solitary soul, a lonely heart. (*A moment)* But are you not dead these many, many years? And when you died, was your name not mired in a filthy story?
Dr Barry rises stiffly and goes to the door. Light there turning.

DR BARRY: I am nothing, it is true. A filth, a darkness. My own history hurts me. It is all despicable, horrible. No God could consider me, or to His heaven admit me. (*A moment)* It is true I was the lover of the governor, but it is hard for me to describe the nature and pattern of that love. The governor was one of those familied men who nevertheless have an ardent and indeed verdant impulse towards other men. He sought to possess me as a kind of miniature man, a slight thing who nevertheless showed a force and authority in that world, a contradictory person of both balsa-wood and iron.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Well, I am glad now you would not address me. You are an affront to any kind of company.

DR BARRY: He was a man of entirely noble birth, and while infected with many of the lassitudes of his class and position, pursued his other need with urgency and success. For myself I will say his face was a welcome star and his form an intoxicating suggestion of delight. You hate me now?

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Hate? If I were a magistrate, I would imprison you, like one of those lusting aesthetes, to sew mail-sacks, to break stones for your sins!

DR BARRY: It was a dark night of that far African place, when I attended him in the luxury of candlelight in his en-cushioned rooms, for some concocted complaint, that he put his arms about me, and kissed my un-kissed mouth.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Oh, please, please do not recount these foul matters, keep them to yourself. Please!

DR BARRY: All the bitterness of my life, the constraint, the secrecy and the harm, fled away, and I stood up against his greater self like a long dog, a sweet lion, and took his kiss with gratitude. He put me on his bed and fumbled his member towards me, and I naturally opened my flies and took him to me. Perhaps he was astonished to find his member sink down into some soft hot place, but he did not betray that surprise, but caressed me and pulsed his seed into me. Then I put order again on my clothes and he got back into his regal bed and I administered to his supposed ailment. We did not speak a word. Then trembling and half-entranced I walked out into the pungent darkness, walking home between the high walls of those imperial gardens, happy as I had never been nor was again. Three times more I lay with the governor, him expressing nothing but joy, always hurried and half brutal half gentle like a man seems to be. Then in the town appeared a foul notice, a sort of author-less libel, that called me the little wife of the governor, and raised a dampened down furore of gossip and scandal in the city. For weeks I went out about my official affairs with a dread of the world, yet forcing myself to keep a severe face and say nothing. Of course my connection and love was broken, and never again did we lie together, the governor and myself. And yet I will say it was a pure and absolute love, though indeed he was wed, it was a strange love without English or history, existing instead in a realm of story and dream. Of course I must relate with a hard mercilessness towards my own soul that some months later I was horrified to identify in myself a pregnancy, and saw swelling on my slim belly the unmistakable sign, and at length felt tiny elbows and knees as I thought dancing out against my skin. I took myself away on leave to a close island, with only Nathaniel and Psyche, intending to bear the child and have it somehow cared for by other persons, but

truly I had no good plan. By a ferocious irony my little one was born dead, in a terrible night of pain and muddle, my good Nathaniel as tender and strong as any midwife, labouring in the shame and mystery of his master. (*Miss Nightingale moved against her will*) I think he thought I was a demon of another earth, a creature from the stories of his childhood in the Hibernian realm of Jamaica, but because he loved me as a servant, he did what was asked of him, without question or reproach. The little chap was born dead, I listened for his heartbeat myself in the languor of that final exhaustion. I wept as a mother for the loss and Nathaniel in silence wrapped the little corpse in fresh linens, and bore him down to the margins of the sea, and assigned him to the warm African waters, in mercy, secrecy and love. The milk that came and hurt my breast seemed also to assail my very heart, and I wept in my darkness, and I wept.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: (*After a little, simply*) I nearly understand you. (*A moment)* I would not marry Sir Harry, I could not in truth, because of desolations that seemed to stretch like impassable lands before me, I could not embrace him, I could not lie, one to one, like those knights and their ladies on the ancient tombs, my feet could not go forward to that, it was as if I were an inhabitant of some Italian town all heavy with its saints and churches, and some great fall of snow had come down in the night, and now as I travelled the roads my boots could get no grip, and the lights of the candled town shone down across the gripped plain and mocked me, and I was not able to be a woman in that guise, but a soldier of medicine certainly, a woman that could climb the Matterhorn on a Sunday, but not be a visitor to the bosky hills of human love.

A moment.

Poor Harry in his grief said I should have been born a man, because I was like a man and worse than a man, in my ambitions.

Miss Nightingale rises and peers at a print of an Egyptian pyramid on the wall. She touches it.

You have stirred my head in mysterious ways, my dear Mr Witherchops, if I may still call you that. I did my great deed at Scutari, but was a person alone. Childless, without Harry, and alone. A woman should not need the confirmation, affirmation, of a mere marriage. Nor the bloody wars of childbirth. (*A moment*) And yet such hardship of soul it brought me. In all honesty, to confess that fact... The confusion almost unto madness. Apostasy! My dear Mr Witherchops, you are in the halfpenny place there. I was that wreckless woman who spent twenty years inventing her own religion! To give it to the working people of England, that was my thought. To reform the army hospitals, yes, and then to cry out to the very heavens, and invent a remedy for all English souls. What really moved me I hardly know. My body just a curtain of rotted cloth. My heart a crumbling wafer. Oh, Mr Witherchops, whoever and whatever you are, we are not so

entirely unlike. (*A moment*) And some time later I sat in the temple of Karnak and felt the dance of my life was done. I did not say it to myself, I felt it as an essence both evil and good seeping through the walls of myself. It is by far the ugliest building in the ancient world that I have seen, its huge and silly columns ponderously rising, its blunt unchristian tones. But I liked it, surprised myself by liking it. It had no purpose now but to excite fat tourists expensively suffering the pagan echoes and the dysenteries of Egypt. So it was rather apt in a roundabout way. I was alone, it was the edge of evening, when travellers return to their gilded lairs. The guides had brought them back with their smiling, mirthless faces. All noises were gone, and only the sunlight remained, dazed and ragged between the massive stones. A small bird, stripped these centuries of his sacred attribute, stabbed at the remnants of poisonous picnics. I was alone with the bird, the rearing temple, and the vanished purpose. I gathered my skirts against my skin, and a sudden feeling of worthlessness and strange disaster filled me. What was to come after what had been, after transforming that screaming hospital in Scutari in sixteen weeks into a relative haven of cleanliness and good drains? The heroic mathematics that had been gathering around my life, had twisted and turned, its numbers tumbling in the ether, and had offered an equitable result. I was grateful for that of course. But not so deep in that mathematics had been a self tormenting voice quite silenced by action, a horrible understanding of my own evil that had torn at all solace and peace of mind. Now I feared, without the obstacle of some great future effort, some other Scutari that would rescue me, I would be returned to the suffering. I was so horrified at the prospect my brow began to sweat, and then my arms and legs, my back seeped into my clothes like blood, I was drenched by terror. The bird flew up. Now standing in its place was a golden man, with brow as clear as a child's, his large hands stretched out towards me, dressed in a gown with the blue of shells. It seemed to me in my fear and sudden love that he was asking me to do his work, without that hope of reputation. He didn't speak of course, he looked at me with those unfearing eyes, the kindest eyes I ever saw, and the sickles of light in those eyes were like two ancient moons. Long drawn planes of light made his face as if perpetually moving, his beauty so keen and dry passing through me like a regiment of modest prayers. This was not like that time when I was a girl of seventeen, when I heard the voice of God, also asking me to do his work. This was a vision of clear reality. Here was the figure of all our lives, our explicator, the emperor of souls, slain by his own people, the purposeful man. I whispered to myself, he exists, he existed, it is all plain and true, there is a purpose in the world beyond the great turning and turning of the generations, the seed of man ploughed back, and man springing forth again, those circles and cycles I had stood out of, as if balanced on the rim of nothing. The book of life seemed after all to contain my pitiful name, I would look down at length at close of day and read it there before I passed for good or ill into the bleak eternity of waiting. Such peace overwhelmed me in that silly pagan place. And yet he had chosen well. Suddenly that strange temple seemed lovely too, framing his gentle limbs, transformed his holiness and perfection into an architectural prayer. I could not

move, I could not speak, it seemed like freaks of silver light were streaming from my eyes. The lights coiled and gathered around him. Something terrific and awful occurred beyond my knowledge and understanding. We were not betrothed, not wedded, but some great idea was present, so that it seemed all of Egypt echoed with its wordless meanings. The darkening monuments with their moaning ruins. The long speckled bird that now returned. The sky glistening with flung fragments of lost colour. The dying earth in the gathering night.

She comes down quite close to Dr Barry. They stand almost hand to hand.

DR BARRY: (*In pain*) This is my body now, that has caused me such an adventure of evasion and alone-ness. It was my hope that in my last days at least there would be a perfect secrecy, a silence as of death, but maybe attended by some latter ease. There was none of that. My heart fulminated against my fate, my memory brooded on the wrongs done against me, the preferment withheld, the lack of signs from my sovereign that I had served these kingdoms well in the strange gardens of the empire. It may be that I did not. My vanity seemed to tell me that by railing against the mires and boglands of things as they were, I was bringing new lustre to the story of these islands. Perhaps it was not so. For the hearts of kings and queens, if cold and queer, at least are grateful. And I was not shown gratitude. I linger because I cannot leave while my only legacy is whispered spite and scandal. I wish I were a person in an age when my achievements might be seen as mighty things, that would not reduce my remnant life to a miserable scurry of rumour and disgust. Even last night as I lay dead – or perhaps it only seems like last night, and this limbo has the timeless time of hell, perhaps it was a week, a year, or fifty years – the dirty Irish nurse from down the street came in to lay me out, stripping the nightdress from my morbid limbs, her breath no doubt if I could have smelt it inflammable with alcohol. A stray light would have sent flames issuing forth from her ancient mouth like a veritable dragon. For fifty years no one had seen me put on my clothes, much less take them off, not even a Nathaniel. Only a Psyche had seen such hard matters. Oh dull, white nightdress given to man to wear! What was I to her, only a dead doctor of no repute, a mere streak of Englishman in an austere lodging in the endless city of London. It was as if my fate decreed that it would be one of my own countrymen, or countrywomen, who would pick over my lifeless bones, and rub them down with a grubby cloth, and reach down to plug my poor orifices against the foul leaks of death. Oh how she did murmur and even delight to find me out, to finger the blue stretch-marks on my old belly, to spy out that little lonesome cleft that gave her such surprise. How smugly she informed my lovely doctor, a man of such discretion he never touched my person with finger or instrument, and who was my deepest friend in my last extremity. And she asked for money to keep my secret and he gave her some silver coins. They did not stay her mouth. And so my story is reduced to this, a drunken old woman fumbling in the parts of a helpless, dead personage, and anything I did to redress the unforgivable

imbalances of this pretty world is as nothing, swallowed up in the Leviathan of this revelation. And so though I long to go, I cannot go, for there is no approbation, no love of monarch or mortal, to release me. Here I abide as the mourner of myself, as the rememberer of my own heart, waiting in this waiting-room, even the desperate celebrator of an imprisoned soul. I would knock upon the earth and cry, like Chaucer's old pilgrim man, *Lovely mother, let me in* – but she cannot take me, she will not take me, with so much cruel history blowing round my ruined head.

Psyche barking, but her barking fading away. Hooting of the little owl now.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Athena? Calling again in this living world? (*A moment*) No, of course not, not in this living world. Of course, I see what it is – I am dead. No matter. Well, well, I cannot mourn myself. Let the leaf blow from the great tree. Victoria herself grew old, her divinity was assailed, old Father Death folded her in his coats and drew her away. Am I not soon to follow? Of course. To creep up on your ninetieth year is a creeping only, we the old are the babies without futures, we are the tragic bairns, as the Scottish soldiers used to say, of the shadowing world. We slip away into that nameless place where science, philosophy, religion and art have never convincingly penetrated. It is the realm of spirit, I suppose, or of nothing, and if the spirit we may hope and pray some majesty of the breathing earth still maintains, some noble collaboration of verdant hills, with seams of rills sounding throughout, and the company of whoever may have passed the rigorous gates of that putative St Peter. Will Dante speak to me in tongues, Lucretius expound the rainbow and the owl, will those noble friends of my days, Herbert Spenser who nobly slaved to fulfil for me the behest of my visionary Christ, take my hand again, great Benjamin Jowett explain again Plato's chariot of the mind, the horse of reason pulling against the horse of instinct, or Sir Harry Verney trick me into being photographed a second time by the celestial camera of souls that will show our true contour and our inner worth? I pray they might. I do not know why I have been sent to this place to hear out this ruined creature, who is so lost, so mired in himself, or herself, she cannot hear me. How long must she linger? Or myself? And, it strikes me, to annotate that thought, has she been waiting all these sixty years, for someone like me, who disdained her, to hear her heart? Or is it the weight of sins that keeps us both, or was one needed to free the other? I would gladly let her go. If by my will, my understanding, my listening, I might do it. Then will the voice of my God issue forth from a divine face made visible at last? And will I wonder in the halls of God, and know some hidden things, my heart sing with the plenty of the blessed, and my memory feel only the echoing remnants of my mortality, and wonder therefore how goes it with the world of living beings, how satiate with wars, how pressing on for peace? I do not know of course. Into the fiery pit I may be thrown myself, for my petulance, my impropriety, and my faith. God may have the sanction of a father. He alone must judge. If to the fiery pit I must descend, may he grant me a moment to glimpse His face, and to think again on all that I have seen, and understand before the closing of the doors the purpose of our journeys and the meaning of our prayers.

A moment. The two. She goes back and fetches her music-box, opens it.

DR BARRY: Despite official resistance to my reforming nature, I must allow I reached high rank in my progress through that imperial army. Inspector General of Army Hospitals. How the spirit of General Miranda must smile, to witness from the halls of death the triumph of his thirteen year-old protégéé. Not just a woman, but an Irish woman, not just as Irish woman, but a Catholic to boot. How easily I entered that supposed male world of difficulty and challenge, and brought recalcitrant officialdom to heel, and played my part. But in the upshot I must confess, it seems a hollow victory. Perfection is not contained in fine careers, alas, but in the quality of love a pilgrim soul may show. And high quality of human love is rare. And indeed no matter what we say and show, no matter even if love is gained or given, all things pass away, histories, sparrows, importances and countries, empires and the knots and miniatures of families. The clocks disprove us all, and even we, immortal in our chosen clothes, will pass in a moment of gentle or violent grief from the realm of ordinary to-ing and fro-ing, to a final completeness of darkness. We will be remembered for better or ill until even our rememberers follow us into that same and utter blankness. Our shirts and socks, our umbrellas, our snuff-boxes and our combs, will scatter after us like things in an explosion. Crack of floor will take the comb, some future wind will blow out the brolly, and it will be thrown like a ruined black-bird into the welcoming midden. We will lie in the earth as snug and forgotten as the mummified mice under the hearthstone. It is God's mercy. Time will close over our passage, the little eddy we made across the pond of daily life, until it will be as if we had never lived. This is why no one creature, no emperor or pauper, has an especial importance. This is why humanity itself is but a laughable storm of leaves and ash. This is why every man's story is the whisper of God. This is why we are redeemed at last, because nothing else can be done for us. Worn out, erased, breathless and disdained by the merriments of tomorrow, we will cry out for forgiveness and be forgiven, for God takes each and every one and makes him new, returns him to the crisp clear lines of the original mould, relieves him of his heavy sins, and in His wise mercy lets him go into that strange eternity where there is no earthly story and no human song. To that mercy now my heart calls out. I pray, I pray for that.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: *(Quietly)* If I can intercede, you shall have it. I will bombard the government of heaven, assault the ministries of angels, on your behalf. It will be my task.

Leak of dawnlight from above, like a sacred painting. Light from behind binds them. The fringes of decrepitude displacing the waiting-room, framing them. A whole music, a rescuing music. There is the quality of a daguerreotype about them – a strange marriage, an unexpected couple. The owl calling softly. Their nearest hands just touching, perhaps by accident. And the dark retrieves them.

Finis