

THREE SISTERS

Science, Philosophy and Faith

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‘THE medieval divines’, I was reading, ‘strenuously resisted the profane philosophers who seemed to threaten the most cherished traditions of Christianity; however, the revolutionaries of yesterday are the respectabilities of tomorrow, and the aristotelean schoolmen themselves were to be the first to bear the brunt of the attack from the new scientific humanists, who...’—It was not the book, nor yet the chapter on *Faith, Philosophy and Science*, one would choose for reading on a wet afternoon, still less after the brown windsor, mock cutlets with vapourish potatoes and khaki cabbage, topped by stewed pears and custard—all the *Bishop and Mermaid* at Barminster can rise to in these days. But it had to be reviewed. Still, I was not sorry for the distraction when three women were shown into the lounge.

They had that look of perennial middle age, of making for fifty but not a year beyond, presented by women who have never thought of marrying and who have occupied themselves with a routine without anxiety about a wage. Despite their differences, for one was stocky and bustling, the second vaguely rounded and languid, and the third rather angular and restrained, there was a family resemblance between them, elusive yet unmistakable: the set of eyebrow or cheekbone perhaps, or a similar air of faint and well-bred insolence, the hint that they could never find themselves in circumstances to ask for permission. They might have been in their own drawing-room; they glanced at me with incurious interest as though I were of a piece with the leatherette armchair in which I was sunk.

It came to me they must be the three daughters of the old general over at Puddle Porcorum; the waiter over breakfast had been telling me about them. What a regular terror Miss Eudoxia was at badgering the County Council about the drains and another district nurse—that must be the energetic one, in thick tweeds and stout shoes, with a felt hat firmly pressed down on wiry well-set curls. Wheezing with private laughter, he had recounted an involved story of Miss Sophia going into the smoke-room and

twiddling with the radio to find the Third Programme while three commercials were waiting for the racing results, and how they helped her unasked and cheerfully, and put off settling their debts until the paper next morning. I could imagine those good coarse men being victimised by her soft ineffectiveness, for that must be the one in the dove-grey filmy clothes, but with so many of them that the grecian sandals could only be guessed at. The third must be Miss Fidelia, who had been ever so kind when his wife was ill; she was the eldest and tallest, with bands of white at throat and wrists relieving the severity of a long black costume, so firm as never to look either in or out of fashion. She wore Wellington boots, but somehow they did not look so incongruous as they must sound: they gave her the air of a huntress. I decided she would be my choice if I were cast away on a desert island, though Miss Sophia would fuss less, while if one were to be stranded for a short time, then Miss Eudoxia would be your man.

She spoke first, and her voice was brisk and high. 'You know, Fiddy, I could quite well have mended it myself.'

'True, Doxy, true', replied her sister in a more soothing intonation and lower key, 'but you will recollect how Sophy abominates draughts and the damp. We'll do very well in here, out of the rain. The man promised he would soon have it done, and he'll bring it round, and then you can drive us home to papa.' It seemed that the eldest still kept the habit of command, though the youngest looked the manager.

They made their way across to the round table in the corner opposite, where in a fluted rosewood frame a large steel engraving—of a cloudy-haired pre-raphaelite matron leaning against an oak-tree, her eyes shielded by one hand while a letter fluttered from the other, with two sympathetic swans on a balustraded lake looking the other way—faced a maplewood framed print of an elongated Pyrrhus the First winning the Derby in 1846. They settled themselves down and spread out their parcels. Miss Sophy unwound various long wraps; she had been changing her books at the library, they looked weighty, but she had not been able to resist a large glossy fashion magazine. Miss Doxy had been to the ironmonger's among other places; obviously she adored gadgets, and she also gave the impression of buying things that rather cancelled out, such as DDT and ant-eggs, tins of enamel and stuff to get it off. Miss Fiddy put down an unwrapped bottle labelled

with a brand of monastic tonic-wine, but now holding a greenish fluid that might be anything from cooking oil to embrocation.

A pack of cards lying on the bamboo occasional caught Miss Doxy's eyes. She leant across and, picking them up, began idly to build a tower. 'What shall we play?' she asked.

'Snap!' surprisingly breathed Miss Sophy. Her voice was husky, full of harmonics: yes, her charm, if absent-minded, was greater than that of the others.

'Snap, indeed—you always want that', remarked Miss Doxy quite kindly, 'but why, I don't know, for you never win at *that*, do you now? for you don't see in time, and you come in late, and anyhow you can't shout. What do you say, Fiddy?'

'Well', observed Miss Fiddy, 'there's always patience.'

'Anti-social', replied Miss Doxy. 'Let's play', she paused, and blushed slightly, 'let's play Strip Jack Naked—you know, Beggar my Neighbour; you know, four for an ace, three for a king, two for a queen, one for a jack, and the joker kom voo voolay. Now what shall we play for: Pennies?'

'Love', murmured Miss Sophy.

'Matchstalks,' decided Miss Fiddy. 'No, I know what. The winner can read aloud to papa this evening.' She added, I thought rather primly, 'That will be a forfeit for winning, a mortification.'

'Poor papa!' exclaimed Miss Doxy—one imagined that, more than her sisters, she had to pull herself together about him. 'Let's hope he doesn't want *Paradise Lost*; he says it reminds him of some correspondent fellah writing up from the base what happened at the front, and he remembers quite well that it wasn't really like that at all. Well, well, off we go,' and she dealt three hands.

It was clear again that she had the habit of taking the lead, but also wanted the support of her sisters. As they played the wind sighed outside and the rain ran down the window-panes and the room grew darker. Flick-flick went the cards; Miss Doxy picking them up, tusslery and worrity like a bird pecking at worms on a lawn; Miss Sophy casting with slow elegance; both of them too intent to notice that Miss Fiddy was musing withdrawn from the play, gently tapping on the table the two cards remaining in her hand. Miss Doxy seemed to win nearly every trick, and the table in front of her was soon covered with cards; at first in neat stacks, but presently piled and drifting like leaves at the end of the garden-path, and even floating to the floor, so that often she was

forced to bend down to pick them up, which made her speech rather breathless. And still they played on, flick-flick went the cards, and strange it was that Miss Sophy's few cards never seemed to diminish. Where did they come from? From her voluminous draperies when Miss Doxy was not looking: I watched her closely, but could not detect her sleight-of-hand. The ingenuousness of her countenance dispelled the suspicion that she was a sharper. Nevertheless I remembered the commercial gentlemen, and my old uncle's warning flashed into my mind: 'Never trust a man who shaves his cheekbones, or a woman who looks meek.' Flickest-flickest went the cards; 'My trick, I think', Miss Doxy would say, and 'Yes, of course', Miss Sophy would answer.

But finally Miss Doxy's tone sharpened. 'My trick, I—good gracious, what a lot of cards I seem to have! Sophia, dear', she said reproachfully, 'you do know, don't you, that in this game you use only one pack?'

'Do you, Eudoxia?' replied Miss Sophy. 'Of course, how silly of me, I remember now your telling me that before, but I always forget.'

'Well, well,' complained Miss Doxy good-humouredly, 'there'll be no end if we go on like this. Fiddy, wake up; you have two cards left, so join in now and we'll play the two last rounds and finish. What is it the men say at the end? Yes, I know; double and quits.'

'Quibble and doubts,' trilled Miss Sophy absurdly.

'Divils and quotes,' capped Miss Fiddy, matching her tone. All three giggled, or almost: it must have been some family joke.

Miss Doxy laid down the ace of spades.

'One, two, three, and the king of diamonds', replied Miss Sophy.

'One, two, and the queen of hearts', responded Miss Fiddy.

Miss Doxy covered the pile; 'One, the jack of spades. Now Sophy, you'll be lucky if you can beat that.'

Miss Sophy played the jack of clubs, and made as though to collect her winnings. Miss Fiddy stayed her with a gesture, and played her last card.

It was the joker, the joker-takes-all. At that moment there was a flash and a crash; my head was jerked down and up, and the page swam back and cleared before me—'who', I read, 'were to lay the foundations of our modern civilisation to which religious credulity and idealist abstraction alike are... etc., etc.'