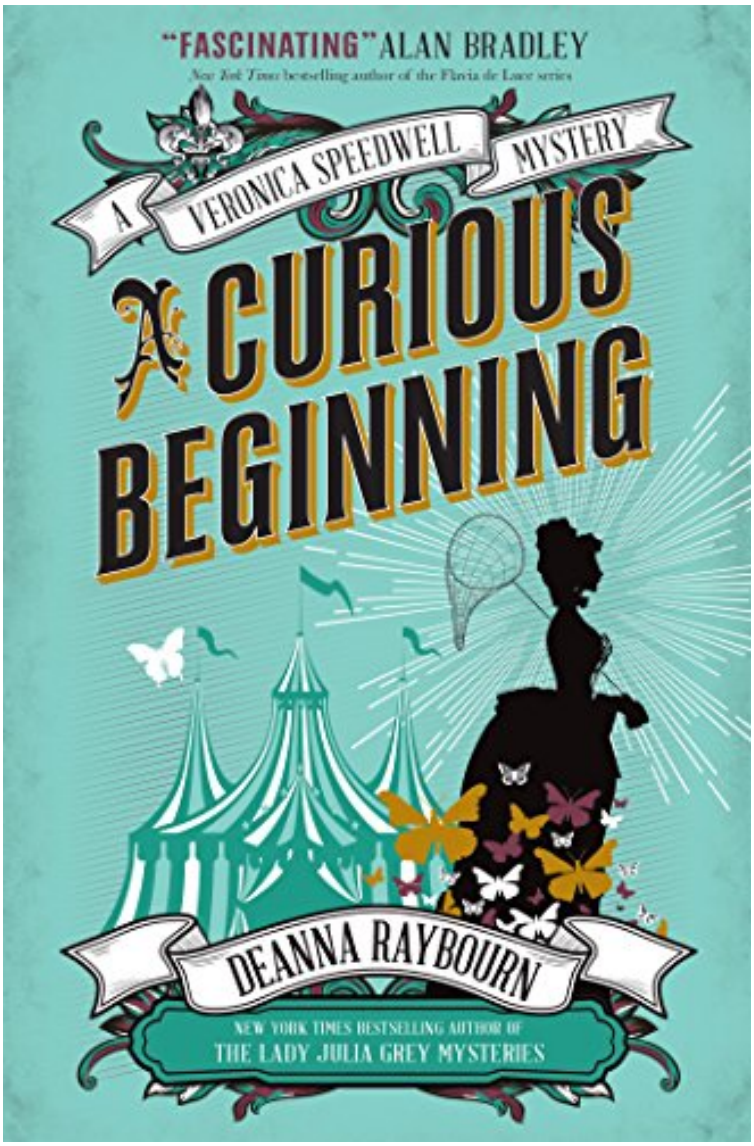
A Veronica Speedwell Mystery - A Curious Beginning



Par Deanna Raybourn
*audiobook | *ebooks | Download PDF | ePub | DOC*

Dtails sur le produit Rang parmi les ventes : #32554 dans eBooksPubli le: 2015-10-02Sorti le: 2015-10-02Format: Ebook Kindle

(Mobile library) A Veronica Speedwell Mystery - A Curious Beginning

Par Deanna Raybourn : A Veronica Speedwell Mystery - A Curious Beginning before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Veronica Speedwell Mystery - A Curious Beginning:

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurLondon, 1887. Veronica Speedwell intends to embark upon the journey of a lifetime. But fate has other plans. When Veronica thwarts her own abduction with the help of an enigmatic German baron, he offers her sanctuary in the care of his friend Stoker - a reclusive and bad-tempered natural historian. When the Baron is murdered, Veronica and Stoker are forced to go on the run from an elusive assailant, wary partners in search of the villainous truth.ExtraitCHAPTER ONEJUNE 1887I stared down into the open grave and wished that I could summon a tear. Violent weeping would have been in exceedingly

poor taste, but Miss Nell Harbottle had been my guardian for the whole of my life, and a tear or two would have been a nice gesture of respect. The vicar murmured the appropriate prayers, his voice pleasantly mellow, his tongue catching softly on each s. It was the first time I had noticed the lisp, and I only hoped Aunt Nell would not mind. She had been quite exacting about some things, and elocution was one of them. I slipped my dry handkerchief into my pocket with a sigh. Aunt Nells death had been neither sudden nor unexpected, and the warmth of our affection had been tepid at best. That her death removed my last attachment to childhood did not unduly alarm me as I stood in the quiet churchyard of Little Byfield. In fact, I was aware of a somewhat disconcerting feeling of euphoria rising within me.As if to match my mood, the breeze rose a little, and on it fluttered a pair of pale wings edged and spotted with black. Pieris brassicae, I murmured to myself. A Large Garden White butterfly, common as grass, but pretty nonetheless. She darted off in search of an early cabbage or perhaps a tasty nasturtium, free as the wind itself. I knew precisely how she felt. Aunt Nell had been the final knotted obligation tying me to England, and I was unfettered once and for all, able to make my way in the world as I chose.The vicar concluded his prayers and gestured to me. I stepped forward, gathering a clump of earth into my gloved palm. It was good earth, rich and dark and crumbling.Rather a waste, I murmured. It would make for an excellent garden. But of course it was a garden, I realized as my gaze swept over the gravestones arranged in neatly serried rowsa garden of the dead, the inhabitants planted to slumber peacefully until they were called to rise by the trumpet of the Lord. Or so the vicar promised them. It seemed a singularly messy undertaking to me. To begin with, wouldnt the newly risen be frightfully loamy? Shaking off the fanciful thought, I stepped forward and dropped the earth. It struck the lid of the coffin with a hollow thud of finality, and I brushed off my gloves.There was a touch at my elbow. My dear Miss Speedwell, the vicar said, drawing me gently away. Mrs. Clutterthorpe and I would be very pleased if you would come to the vicarage and take some refreshment. He smiled kindly. I know you did not wish for any formal gathering, but perhaps a cup of tea to warm you? The wind is brisk today.I had small wish to take tea with the vicar and his dull wife, but accepting was easier than thinking of a reason to refuse.The vicar led me through the lych-gate and onto the path that led to the great, shambling rectory. He was burbling on like a talkative brook, no doubt reciting from a lesson he had been taught in seminaryComforting Thoughts for the Newly Bereaved, perhaps. I gave him a polite half smile to indicate I was listening and carried on with my thoughts. Whatever they might have been, they were diverted instantly by the curious sensation that we were being watched. I turned to look behind and saw a figure at the lych-gate, tall and beautifully erect, with the sort of posture a gentleman acquires through either generations of aristocratic breeding or enthusiastic beatings at excellent schools. There was something foreign about his mustaches, for they were exuberant, long and sharply waxed into elegant loops, and even at a distance I could detect the slender slashes of old scars upon his left cheek. A German, then, I decided. Or perhaps Austrian. Such scars were unique to the Teutons and their bloodthirsty habit of marking each other with saber tips for sport. But what business did a Continental aristocrat have that required him to lurk near the graveyard of so nondescript a village as Little Byfield?I turned to put the question to the vicar, but as I did, I saw a flicker of movement and realized our visitor had slipped away. I thought no more about him, and in a very short time I was seated in the stuffy drawing room of the vicarage, holding a cup of tea and a plate of sandwiches. With the effort of packing up the cottage, I had not always remembered to eat in the hours following Aunt Nells death. I diligently applied myself to two plates of sandwiches and one of cake, for the vicarage employed an excellent cook.The vicaress raised her brows slightly at my prodigious appetite. I am glad you feel quite up to taking some nourishment, Miss Speedwell.I did not reply. My mouth was full of Victoria sponge, but even if it had not been, there seemed no polite response. The vicar and his wife exchanged glances, significant ones, and the vicar cleared his throat.My dear Miss Speedwell, Mrs. Clutterthorpe and I naturally take a very keen interest in the welfare of everyone in the village. And while you and your aunt are relative newcomers among us, we are, of course, most eager to offer you whatever assistance we can at this difficult time.I took a sip of the tea, pleased to find it scalding hot and properly strong. I abhorred weakness of any kind but most particularly in my tea. But the vicars pointed reference to newcomers had nettled me. True, Aunt Nell had moved to the little cottage in Little Byfield upon Aunt Lucys death only some three years past, but English villages were terminally insular. No matter how many socks she knitted for the poor or how many shillings she collected to repair the church roof, Aunt Nell would always be a newcomer, even if she had lived among them for half a century. I felt a flicker of mischief stirring and decided with Aunt Nell gone there was no need to suppress it. She was not my aunt.The vicar blinked. I beg your pardon.Miss Nell Harbottle was not my aunt. It was a title she claimed for the sake of

convenience, but we were not kin. Miss Harbottle and her sister, Miss Lucy Harbottle, took me in and reared me. I was a foundling, orphaned and illegitimate, to be precise.The vicaress sat forward in her chair. My dear, you speak very frankly of such things.Should I not? I asked as politely as I could manage. There is no shame in being orphaned, nor in that my parents were unmarriedat least no shame that ought to attach to me. It was an accident of birth and nothing more.Another significant exchange of glances between the vicar and his wife, but I pretended not to notice. I realized my views were exceedingly unorthodox in this respect. We had moved from town to town as I grew, and in every village, no matter how peaceful and pretty, there was always someone to wag a tongue and pass a judgment. The fact that my surname was different from my guardians had always excited suspicion, and it was never long before I heard the whispers alluding to the sins of the fathers being visited on the children, occasionally from Aunt Nell herself. Aunt Lucy had been my champion. Her warm affection had never wavered, but the constant moves had frayed Aunt Nells nerves and soured her temper. She used to watch me as I grew, her expression wary, and in time that wariness deepened to something not unrelated to dislike. With Aunt Lucy watching over me, Aunt Nell seldom dared to give tongue to her feelings, but I understood she was quite put out by my excellent spirits and rude good health. I think she would have found it far more just if I had suffered from a crooked back or spotty complexion to mark me as the product of sin. And yet I knew her resentments stemmed from being excluded, being marked out as a subject of gossip by the very Christian folk into whose bosom she longed to be gathered. Folk like the Clutterthorpes.I am afraid we did not have the pleasure of knowing Miss Harbottles sister, the vicar began.I recognized an inducement to talk when it was offered and swallowed my mouthful of cake to oblige him. Miss Lucy Harbottle died some three years ago. In Kentno, I am mistaken, I said, tipping my head thoughtfully. It was in Lancashire. That was after we lived in Kent.Indeed? You seem to have lived in very many places, the vicaress commented, only the slight pursing of her lips suggesting that it might not be in the best of taste to change ones house almost as often as one changed ones shoes.I shrugged. My guardians did not care to stay long in one place. We moved frequently, and I have been fortunate to live in most corners of this country.The pursed lips pushed out a little further. I cannot like it, Mrs. Clutterthorpe pronounced roundly. It is not right to uproot a child in so cavalier a fashion. One must provide a stable home when one is bringing up a young person. Mrs. Clutterthorpe, who had no children of her own, was given to such pronouncements. She was also very fond of issuing directives on how children ought to be weaned, fed, toileted, and taught their letters. Her husband might have learned to ignore her declarations, but being comparatively new to the village, I had not.I considered the vicaress with the same detachment I might study a squashed caterpillar. Really? I found it perfectly ordinary and quite useful, I said at last.Useful? The vicars brows rose quizzically.I learned to converse with all sorts of people under many and various circumstances and to depend upon no one but myself for entertainment and support. I gained self-reliance and independence, qualities which I must now rely upon in my present situation.His brows relaxed. Ah, you bring me to the point of this discussion, he said in some relief.Before he could continue, the vicaress cut smoothly across him. My dear, no doubt you will think us meddlesome, she began, leveling me with a look that dared me to do so, but the vicar and I are most concerned about your welfare.I swallowed the last of the cake and dusted my fingertips of crumbs. That is very good of you, I am sure, Mrs. Clutterthorpe. But I can assure you I have my welfare entirely in hand.Mr. Clutterthorpe looked a trifle startled, but his lady was not so easily cowed. She gave me a thin smile. I am sure you think so. Young ladies, she said, with a slight emphasis on the word young to show she did not really mean it, do not always know best. You must permit us to guide you with the benefit of our years and wisdom.I glanced at Mr. Clutterthorpe but found no succor there. He had applied himself to a fish-paste sandwich as if it were the most interesting thing he had ever seen. I did not blame him. It seemed to me the shortest way to an easy life for him was by capitulating to his wife at every possible opportunity.As I said, Mrs. Clutterthorpe, I have made arrangements.The vicar looked up, his expression pleased. Oh, so you are settled, then? Did you hear, Marjorie? We need not worry about Miss Speedwell, he finished with a jovial smile directed to his spouse.Her lips thinned. Whatever arrangements Miss Speedwell has made, I am sure she will be quick to alter them when she learns of my conversation with Mr. Britten this morning, she said with an air of satisfaction. Mr. Britten is a farmer with substantial property, very prosperous, she told me. And since the death of poor Mrs. Britten, he is in sore need of a wife for himself and a mother for his little ones. You would be mother of six!I tilted my head and regarded her thoughtfully as I considered my reply. In the end, I chose unvarnished truth. Mrs. Clutterthorpe, I can hardly think of any fate worse than becoming the mother of six. Unless perhaps it were plague, and even then I am persuaded a few disfiguring buboes and possible

death would be preferable to motherhood.She went white for a moment, then deeply red. In his chair, the vicar was choking gently into a handkerchief, but when I rose to offer assistance, he waved me aside with a genial hand.Mrs. Clutterthorpe recovered herself, gripping the arms of her chair so tightly I could see the bones of her knuckles through the papery skin. I have heard you are fond of a jest, and I think it amuses you to shock respectable folk.I spread my hands and adopted a disingenuous expression. Oh no, Mrs. Clutterthorpe. I never mean to shock anyone. It simply happens. I have a dreadful habit of speaking my mind, and it isnt one I look to curb, so you must see that your suggestion of marriage to this Mr. Britten is quite unsuitable.It is not the suggestion which is unsuitable, she countered coldly. I have thus far overlooked the rumors which have come to my ears regarding your behavior whilst abroad, but if you insist upon utter frankness, let us have it.I gave her a smile of devastating politeness and answered her in my sweetest tone. What rumors, Mrs. Clutterthorpe?Her high color, almost faded, heightened again, mottling her complexion. She darted a glance at her husband, but he bent swiftly to fuss with his shoe buttons, hiding his face. A decent lady would not speak of such things, she replied, clearly relishing the chance to do exactly that.But you have introduced them into the conversation, I pointed out gently. So let us be candid. What rumors?Very well, she burst out. I have it on good authority that during your trip to Sicily you behaved immorally with an American traveler. She scrutinized me from head to heels, condemnation in her eyes. Oh yes, Miss Speedwell, we have heard of your indiscretions. You are fortunate that Mr. Britten is willing to overlook such shortcomings in a potential wife.I bared my teeth in a wolfish smile. And who told him of them? Never mind, I think I can guess. I rose and collected my gloves. The vicar leaped to his feet and I extended my hand. Thank you for your kindness during my aunts illness. I shall not see you again. I am off this very afternoon upon my next adventure.He dipped his head conspiratorially. More butterflies? he asked.What else?He shook my hand, but before I could make my escape, Mrs. Clutterthorpe thrust herself to her feet and launched a fresh attack.You are a foolish, impetuous person, she said stoutly. You cannot mean to go friendless into the world and spurn the prospect of an excellent marriage to a man who will look past the indelible stain of your iniquities.I am quite determined to be mistress of my own fate, Mrs. Clutterthorpe, but I do sympathize with how strange it must sound to you. It is not your fault that you are entirely devoid of imagination. I blame your education.Mrs. Clutterthorpe stood with her mouth agape, lips moving silently.I stepped past her, then turned back as I reached the hall. Oh, and you might tell your sourcesit wasnt an American in Sicily. It was a Swede. The American was in Costa Rica.CHAPTER TWOAs I walked down the path towards Wren Cottage, I found my step was very light indeed. I owed the Clutterthorpes a debt of gratitude, I reflected. I had been feeling a little dull after the long, gloomy months of Aunt Nells decline, but the visit at the vicarage had cheered me greatly. I was always on my mettle when someone tried to thwart mepoor old Aunt Nell and Aunt Lucy had learned that through hard experience. I had been an obstinate child and a willful one too, and it did not escape me that it had cost these two spinster ladies a great deal of adjustment to make a place for me in their lives. It was for this reason, as I grew older, that I made every effort to curb my obstinacy and be cheerful and placid with them. And it was for this reason that I eventually made my escape, fleeing England whenever possible for tropical climes where I could indulge my passion for lepidoptery. It was not until my first butterflying expedition at the age of eighteena monthlong sojourn in Switzerlandthat I discovered men could be just as interesting as moths.It was perfectly reasonable that I should be curious about them. After all, I had been reared in a household composed exclusively of women. Friendships with the opposite sex were soundly discouraged, and the only men ever to darken our door were those who called in a professional capacitydoctors and vicars wearing rusty black coats and dour expressions. Village boys and strapping blacksmiths were strictly off-limits, and when a splendid specimen presented itself for closer inspection, I behaved as any good student of science would. My first kiss had been bestowed by a shepherd boy in the forest outside Geneva. I had hired him to guide me to an alpine meadow where I could ply my butterfly net to best effect. But while I pursued Polyommatus damon, he pursued me, and it was not long before the diversions of kissing took the place of butterflies. At least for the afternoon. I enjoyed the experience immensely, but I was deeply aware of the troubles I might encounter if I were not very careful indeed. Once back in England, I made a thorough study of my own biology, andarmed with the proper knowledge and precautions and a copy of Ovids highly instructive The Art of LoveI enjoyed my second foray into formal lepidoptery and illicit pleasures even more.Over time, I developed a set of rules from which I never deviated. Although I permitted myself dalliances during my travels, I never engaged in flirtations in Englandor with Englishmen. I never permitted any liberties to gentlemen either married or betrothed, and I never corresponded with any of them once I returned home. Foreign bachelors were my

trophies, collected for their charm and good looks as well as attentive manners. They were holiday romances, light and insubstantial as thistledown, but satisfying all the same. I enjoyed them enormously whilst abroad, and when I returned from each trip, I was rested and satiated and in excellent spirits. It was a program I would happily have recommended to any spinster of my acquaintance, but I knew too well the futility of it. What was to me nothing more than a bit of healthful exercise and sweet flirtation was the rankest sin to ladies like Mrs. Clutterthorpe, and the world was full of Mrs. Clutterthorpes.But I would soon be past it all, I thought as I stooped to snap off a small sprig of common broom. Its petals glowed yellow, a cheerful reminder of the long, sunny summer to comea summer I would not spend in England, I reflected with mingled emotions. At the start of each new journey I felt a pang of homesickness, sharp as a thorn. This trip would take me across the globe to the edge of the Pacific, no doubt for a very long time. I had passed the long, chilly spring months at Aunt Nells bedside, spreading mustard plasters and reading aloud from improving novels while I dreamed of hot, steaming island jungles where butterflies as wide as my hand danced overhead.My daydreams had been a welcome distraction from Aunt Nells querulous moods. She had been by turns fretful and sullen, irritated that she was dying and disgusted that she was not quicker about it. The doctor had dosed her heavily with morphia, and she was seldom truly lucid. Many times I had caught her watching me, her lips parted as if to speak, but as soon as I lifted a brow in inquiry, she had snapped her mouth closed and waved me off. It was not until the last fit had come upon her, suddenly and without warning, that she had tried to speak and found she could not. Robbed of speech, she tried to write, but her hand was weak, stiff with the apoplexy that had stilled her tongue, and she died with something unsaid.No doubt it was a reminder to pay the milk, I said, tucking the broom into my buttonhole. But I had seen to the dairy bill as quickly and efficiently as I had done everything these past months. Accounts with the doctor, butcher, and baker had all been settled. The rent on the cottage was paid through the end of the quarter on Midsummer Day. Most of the furnishings had been carted away and sold, leaving the few pieces that had come with the cottagea couple of chairs, a kitchen table, a grievously worn rug, and a poorly executed still life that looked as if it had been painted by someone with a grudge against fruit. All of the Harbottle personal effects and the last of my carefully mounted butterflies had been sold to fund my next expedition.All that remained to be done was to take up my small carpetbag and leave the key under the mat, provided I could find the key, of course. Folk in the village were remarkably relaxed about things like keysand waiting for invitations, I realized as I reached the doorstep. For the cottage door stood ajar, and I had little doubt one of the village matrons had availed herself of my absence to call with a cake or perhaps a meat pie for my supper. Aunt Nell had not been popular enough to warrant attendance at her funeral by the inhabitants of Little Byfield, but an eligible spinster would bring them all out en masse, bearing sponge cakes and consolationor worse, unattached sons for my perusal. A daughter-in-law with competent nursing skills was a tremendous coup for an elderly widow, I reflected with a shudder. I pushed open the door, prepared to do my duty and offer tea, but the greeting died upon my lips. The front room of the cottage was a ruin, the carpet littered with broken bits from the wreckage of a cane chair. The only paintingthe indifferent still lifehad been slashed, its frame reduced to splinters, and the cushions of the window seat had been torn open, goose down still floating lazily upon the air.My gaze fixed upon the drifting feathers and I realized that whoever had done this thing must have done so within the last few minutes. Just then, a slight scraping noise came from the kitchen. I was not alone.Thoughts winged through my mind almost too quickly to grasp. The open door stood behind me. I had made no noise. Escape would be a simple matter of turning on my heel and slipping silently out the way I had come. Instead, my hand reached out of its own accord to the umbrella stand and took up the sword stick I had purchased in Italy.My heart surged in anticipation. The sword stick was a sturdy piece, made of good, stout hardwood. I pressed the button, releasing the sheath, and the blade came free with a silky murmur of protest. The edge of the blade was dull, for it had been some years since it had been sharpened or oiled, but I was pleased to see the end was still alarmingly pointed. I must thrust rather than slash, I reminded myself as I crept towards the kitchen.A flurry of other noises told me that the intruder had not yet fled and, furthermore, had no notion of my presence. I had the element of surprise, and armed with that and my sword, I flung open the door, giving a very good impression of what I imagined a Maori battle scream might sound like.Instantly, I realized my mistake. The fellow was enormous, and it occurred to me then that I had overlooked the essential precaution of taking the measure of ones opponent before launching an attack. He was well over six feet in height, and the breadth of his shoulders would have challenged the frame of any door. He wore a tweed cap pulled low over his features, but I discerned a gingery beard and an expression of displeasure at the interruption.To my surprise, he did not use

his size to his advantage to overpower me. Instead he turned to flee, upending the long deal table to throw a barrier between us. The most cautious course of action would of course have been to let him go, but caution held little charm for me. My rage was roused at the sight of the ruined cottage, and without any conscious decision on my part, I gave chase, vaulting over the table and following him down the garden path. His was the advantage of size, but mine was the advantage of terrain; I knew it and he did not. He followed the stone path to the bottom of the garden where the road passed by. I turned hard to the left and made straight for the hedge, plunging into a gap and emerging, breathless and beleafed, just as he passed by. I reached a hand and grasped him by the sleeve, yanking hard.He whirled, his eyes wide with surpriseand panic. For a heartbeat he hesitated, and I lifted the sword stick.What is your business at Wren Cottage? I demanded.He darted a glance to the end of the road, where a carriage stood waiting. That glance at the conveyance seemed to decide him. I brandished the sword stick again, but he simply reached out, batting the blade aside with one thick hand while he grabbed my wrist with the other. He gave a sharp twist and I cried out, dropping the stick.He began to drag me towards the carriage. I dug in my heels, but to no avail. My slender form, though athletic and supple enough for purposes of butterflying, was no match for this fellows felonious intent. I lowered my head and applied my teeth to the meatiest part of his hand, just above the seat of the thumb. He howled in pain and rage, shaking his hand hard, but would not loose me. He put his other hand to my throat, tightening his grip as I bore down with my teeth like a terrier upon a rat.Unhand her at once! commanded a voice from behind. I glanced over my shoulder to see the Continental gentleman from the lych-gate. He was older than I had thought; at this distance I could see the lines about his eyes and the heavy creases down each cheek, the left crossed with his dueling scars. But he drew no sword against this miscreant. Instead, he held a revolver in his hand, pointing it directly at the fellow.Devil take her! the intruder growled, shoving me hard away from him and directly into the gentlemans arms. My newfound champion dropped the revolver to catch me, setting me on my feet again with care.Are you quite all right, Miss Speedwell? the gentleman inquired anxiously.I made a low sound of impatience as the villain reached the end of the road and vaulted into the waiting carriage. The horses were swiftly whipped up and the carriage sprang into motion as if the very hounds of hell were giving chase. He is getting away!I think perhaps this is a good thing, was my companions gentle reply as he pocketed his revolver.I turned to him, noticing for the first time that his brow was bleeding freely. You are hurt, I said, nodding towards his head.He put a tentative finger to the flow, then gave me a quick smile. I am rather too old to be dashing through hedges, he said with a rueful compression of the lips. But I think it is not so serious as my other hurts have been, he told me, and my gaze flicked to his dueling scars.Still, it ought to be cleaned. I took a handkerchief from my pocket, not one of those ridiculous flimsy scraps carried by fashionable females, but a proper square of good cambric, and pressed it to his face.I smiled at him. This was rather more adventure than I had expected in the village of Little Byfield. Thank you for your timely interference, sir. I was prepared to bite him to the bone, but I am glad it proved unnecessary. I did not much care for the taste of him, I added with a moue of displeasure.Miss Veronica Speedwell, he murmured in a voice thick with the accents of Mitteleuropa.I am. I believe you have the advantage of me, sir, I said.Forgive me for the informality of the introduction, he said. He produced a card. I am the Baron Maximilian von Stauffenbach.The card was heavy in my fingers. It bespoke wealth and good taste, and I ran my thumb over the thickly engraved crest. He clicked his heels together and made a graceful bow.I am sorry I cannot offer you a place to sit, I told him as we made our way into the kitchen. Nor a cup of tea. As you saw, I seem to have been intruded upon.The barons eyes sharpened under his slender grey brows as he glanced about the wreckage of the room. Has anything of importance been taken?I moved to the shelf where a tiny tin sewing box shaped like a pig usually stood in pride of place. It had been dashed to the floor and rolled to the corner. I was not surprised the housebreaker had overlooked it. Aunt Lucy had firmly believed in hiding ones money in plain sight, reasoning that most thieves were men and that a man would never think to look for money in so homely and domestic an article as a sewing box. I fetched it, crawling upon my hands and knees to do so. It customarily held all of the Harbottle wealth in the world, a few bank notes and some miscellaneous coins. I shook it and it rattleda slightly less lively sound than it had given before I had paid the undertaker.No. That was the only thing of value and it seems to be untouched. Strange that he did not smash it openperhaps he did not notice it in his haste. He has made a complete mess of the kitchen. I shall be ages clearing it up, I said peevishly.The baron fell silent a moment, as if considering things carefully, then shook himself, muttering, It is the only way.I beg your pardon, Baron?Nothing, child, he said kindly. I do not wish to alarm you, my dear, but I am afraid I must speak plainly now. You might be in danger.Danger! I assure you I am not. There is nothing worth stealing here, and that thief will hardly

come again now he has been chased out by a sword stick and your revolver, I told him, but the barons concerns were not eased.He put a hand to my arm, and I was startled at the strength of the grip of those soft, elegant fingers. I do not jest with you. I saw the notice in the newspaper about the death of your guardian, and I come to see you, only to find they have already found you. I am, almost, too late.He bit off his words then, as if he had said more than he intended, but I seized upon his statement. You said they. You think this intruder has friends? Friends with malicious designs upon me?He shook his head. You saw the carriage. What sort of burglar rides in a private conveyance? No, I cannot explain, child. I can only tell you that you must leave this place. Now. You have chased him away, but he will return and he will not come alone.You know him?His fingers gripped my arm still more desperately. No! I do not, but I can guess. And your very life may depend upon my being able to persuade you that I am not some crazy man and that I speak the truth. And yet how am I to persuade you? You must believe! I am the Baron von Stauffenbach, he repeated helplessly, his voice thick with anguish. Please, my dear child, if you will not accept my offer to take you to London, at least permit me to see you onto a train myself. You may ask to go anywhere in the world at my expense. But I must know that you are safe.I had always followed the maxim that intuition should be ones guide, and so it was in this case. The gentlemans obvious distress was persuasive, but his willingness to permit me to choose my own destination decided me. O! There ought to have been a frisson of foreknowledge, a shiver of precognition that the choice to accompany the baron would prove the single most significant decision of my entire existence. And yet there was not. I was aware of a mild curiosity about his excitability and the natural lifting of the spirits that accompanies the beginning of any great journey. But above all this was the cool satisfaction at having saved myself the price of a ticket to London. It was to cause me great amusement later to reflect that my life turned on a penny that day.He gestured towards the front door. My carriage is outside and I will offer you every comfort.And once in London?He shook his head. I will have to make plans as we go. I did not anticipate this. He fell to muttering again, this time in German, and I covered his hand with my own.I will come.The years seemed to fall away from him. Thank God for that!I detached myself gently. I will fetch my bag.He shook his head forcefully. We cannot tarry, child. Time is of the greatest importance!I patted his arm consolingly. My dear baron, I am already packed.CHAPTER THREEI was as good as my word, and within ten minutes of agreeing to leave with the baron, I was in his carriage, my carpetbag and butterfly net perched on the seat beside me. I left the remains of the Harbottle treasury with a note for the landlord and considered the matter closed. I reasoned the sum should be sufficient to settle the damages. I had brought with me my own slender funds, tucked carefully into a clever pocket hidden in my jacket. I had changed from my mourning ensemble to a costume of my own design, and the baron regarded me curiously.You are not what I expected, he ventured at last, but his tone was not unkind and his eyes shone warmly.I nodded. I seldom am. I have tried, I assure you. I have been brought up to do good works and to conduct myself with propriety and decorum, and yet I am forever doing the unexpected. Something always gives me away for what I really am.And what are you, child?A woman in search of adventure, I said gravely.The baron sketched a gesture that encompassed me from head to toe. And these garments will help you to find one?I was quite proud of my ensemble. My boots were flat and laced almost to the knee to protect my lower limbs from thorns and branches whilst butterflying. I had modified my corset to a more athletic arrangement with light steel stays that might, in an hour of necessity, be used as weapons. I wore slim trousers tucked into the boots, and over it all a narrow skirt with a peculiar arrangement of buttons that permitted it to be raised to the knee or opened entirely to allow me to ride astride. There was a fitted jacket to match with an assortment of clever pockets, and into one I had tucked the good luck charm I was never withouta tiny mouse of grey velvet called Chester, the sole relic of my childhood.My only jewelry was the small case compass pinned to my jacket, a present from Aunt Lucy to commemorate my first expeditionSo you will always find your way, child, she had told me, her eyes bright with unshed tears as I left home for the first time. I brought with me nothing of Aunt Nells except an appreciation for a clean white shirtwaist. The fabric of this curious suit was a serviceable dark grey wool, but I had made one or two allowances for vanity. The grey wool was trimmed with scrolls of rather dapper black silk passementerie, while my hat was an absolute confection. Broad of brim, with a snug, deep crown, it was crafted of fine black straw and wound with a length of black silk tulle that could be lowered to veil my face should bees prove troublesome. A bouquet of deep scarlet silk roses clustered on one side, a splash of delectable color I had been powerless to resist. But even they had a purpose to serve in the field, being the perfect perch for delicate specimens with damp wings.The hat was a stroke of inspiration, and I pointed this out to the baron. You see, the fashion for narrow brims has made it necessary for ladies to carry a parasol as

well, but that means the hands are never free. With this hat, I am entirely protected from the elements, yet my hands are unencumbered. I can lower the veil if I like to shield my face, and the hatpin is reinforced to make a very fine weapon. I gave a short laugh. You neednt look so startled, Baron. I do not anticipate having need of it.Even after you find an intruder in your home? he asked softly.I folded my hands in my lap. Yes, about that. I know you said you believe my life is in danger, but I must tell you I think you are quite wrong. No, the fellow was a lowly villain in search of easy pickings. Doubtless he, like you, read in the newspaper of poor Aunt Nells passing and realized the cottage would be empty during the funeral. It is a common enough occurrence. The fellow was simply an opportunistic housebreaker, and I surprised him by coming home somewhat sooner than he expected. When I gave chase, he was alarmed at the thought of having a witness to his crimes and attempted to frighten me by making it seem as if he would carry me off. That is all.The baron looked pained. But if you do not truly believe yourself to be in danger, why have you come away with me?My tone was deliberately patient. Because you were leaving Little Byfield. I was planning to depart this afternoon in any event, but you have very kindly saved me the cost of a ticket to London. I am obliged to you.The baron clucked his tongue and muttered an imprecation in German. And I thought I had persuaded you. Oh, child, what must I say to convince you of the dangers before you?Surely it cannot be so bad as all that. I expect you are merely hungry. Things always look darkest when one is hungry or tired, I find. I reached for my carpetbag and unbuckled the straps. I have some apples in here and some cheese. I regret there is no bread, but this will serve until we can stop for some refreshment.I proffered an apple and a wedge of weeping Cheddar, and the baron took them, turning them over in his hands. The apple is a bit soft now, but it is from the orchard in Little Byfield and quite sweet, I promise, I told him.The baron shook his head. I do not require food, my dear.Spirits, then? I rummaged in my bag until I found a flask, which I withdrew with a flourish. It is a little something I acquired in South America, very good for restoring ones nerves.He handed back the food but took the flask, swallowing a mouthful under my watchful eye before choking hard. Very nice, he gasped.I assessed his color. Youve a bit more pink in your cheeks, I am glad to say. You looked quite pale, you know. Have you difficulties with your health?My heart, he told me, handing back the flask. Sometimes the breath, it does not come easily; sometimes there is pain. But I have work yet unfinished.Work? I replaced the flask carefully and tucked the food back into a clean cloth. What sort of work?To keep you safe, he said softly, and it was this gentleness that caught my attention. I peered at him closely, scrutinizing him from his aristocratic brow to the well-formed lips under the generous mustaches, the graceful hands that clasped his knees loosely, the watchful eyes that never left mine. You have her eyes, he murmured at last. Your mothers eyes.My heart rose in my throat, threatening to choke me. I could not speak for a moment, and when I did, my usually low voice was quick and high. You knew my mother! How very extraordinary. I must confess, I know nothing of her.He hesitated. She was the most beautiful creature I have ever seen, he said simply.I gave him an arch smile. I suspect I look nothing like her, then.The baron protested, as I had expected he would.No woman can be so lovely and not know it, he told me firmly. He put a finger under my chin and tipped my head this way and that, studying me carefully. You might be her twin. It is uncanny, as if I were looking into her face once more. The same lips, the same cheekbones. I told her once I could cut glass upon those cheekbones. And of course, the eyes. I have never seen eyes that color before or since.Aunt Nell used to say it was not decent to have violet eyes, that they were the telltale sign of a bad nature, like ginger hair or a hunchback. And village children used to tease me about being a bad fairya changeling child.Children can be very stupid, the baron said gravely.And dull, which is why I have no interest in becoming a mother of six, I told him. He lifted his brows.Six is a curiously specific number.I had a curiously specific offer today, but let us speak no more of that. Of course, I do not wish to be a paid companion or a daughter-in-law either. I have had quite enough of attending to elderly ladies, I finished absently.They were good to you, though? he asked, his tone shaded with anxiety. The Harbottle ladies? They treated you with kindness?Oh yes. I was fed and clothed and I dont suppose I ever wanted for anything, not really. I had a new dress every season and new books to read. Of course, that was due to the lending library. We moved so often I could never keep books of my own. Aunt Lucy always bought a subscription to the library as soon as we settled in a new village. As I grew older, I pursued my own interests. I have traveled far and seen much of the world, and when the aunts had need of me, I returned to care for them. It was a pleasant enough life.Did you mind, all of this moving to and fro?I grinned. If I am honest, I loathed it as a child. It always seemed that we moved just as I had amassed a good collectioneggs, frogs, beetles. I was forever leaving behind something I loved. The aunts were driven by their whims. One year we might live the whole twelvemonth in Lyme. The next they would have us move from town to town, four within the span of

a year. I learned to accept it, as children do. And it taught me to travel lightly. I narrowed my gaze. You said you knew them. I do not remember meeting friends of theirs. They kept so much to themselves. And I never knew my mother, not even her name. What can you tell me?The baron opened his mouth, his lips pursed. Then he closed it sharply and shook his head. Nothing at this moment, child. The truth is not mine to speak. I must seek permission before I reveal to you what I know, but I promise you, I will seek it, and when the moment is right, I will tell you all.I sighed. I was, truth be told, quite frustrated at the barons obstinacy, but there was something steely in his manner that told me he would not be moved upon the point. I suppose I will have to be satisfied with that.The baron relaxed visibly then, but almost as soon as his expression eased, a shadow passed over his features again. For now, the most important thing is to make certain that you are safe.You keep talking of my safety, but I cannot imagine why! I am the least interesting person in England, I assure you. No one could possibly want to harm me. That was not entirely true, I reflected. The last paper I had written for The British Journal of Lepidoptery had stirred quite a bit of controversy, but as I always published papers and conducted my butterfly sales under the anonymity of my first initial and surname alone, no ill will could be directed towards me personally. As strongly as I pointed out that publishing in scientific journals was a scholarly accomplishment, the aunts had protested just as vehemently that filling orders for Aurelian collectors was too near to trade to be permissible for a lady. They had compromised, albeit reluctantly, that I might continue my studies and work under the cognomen of V. Speedwell.In the end, I had not minded, and it never failed to amuse me to receive letters that began with the salutation, Dear Mr. Speedwell... True, I had nipped the odd specimen out from under the nose of less diligent hunters, for I was indefatigable in my pursuit, but the very notion of some sort of lepidopterist cabal after my head was enough to make me laugh.A wraithlike smile touched the barons lips. I will pray to God that you are right and that I am merely borrowing troubles that will not come to pass. In the meantime, until I am certain, you will be guided by me?I looked at him a long moment, holding his anxious gaze with mine. Then I nodded. I will.Your trust in me is unexpected but most gratifying, he told me.I am a great believer in intuition, Baron. And my intuition tells me that you are a man upon whom I may rely. I did not add that he was the sole clue I had ever had to my mothers identity. I had no intention of permitting him to escape me until I had learned everything I could about my antecedents.From your lips to the ears of God, he said, and it struck me that when the baron mentioned God he did not do so flippantly. Whatever matter touched me, it concerned the baron deeply.I leaned forward then, determined to press my luck as far as I could. Will you answer one question for me? I promise to ask no others until you deem it fit.Very well.I stated the question boldly, as I hoped he would wish. Are you my father?His kindly face creased in sorrow, but he did not look away. No, child. I wish I were, but I am not.A sharp and unexpected pang struck my heart. I had thought myself indifferent to the answer, but I was wrong. Then we will merely be friends, I said. I put out my hand solemnly. Other men might have laughed. But the baron shook my hand, and having done so, he bowed over it and kissed it with courtly formality.We will be friends, he agreed. And I will do everything in my power to make certain you learn what you wish to know.Thank you, Baron. I nodded towards his brow. You are bleeding again. It is not a very hopeful omen, is it? A journey begun in bloodshed augurs ill, according to the ancients. I meant it as a jest, but the baron did not smile. And after a moment, neither did I.The journey to London proved uneventful to the point of boredom, and I began to be a little sorry we had not taken the train. The baron insisted upon the precaution of ducking down various country lanes to make quite certain we were eluding any possible pursuers, with the result that the drive took twice as long as it ought. He also refused any suggestion of stopping for a meal, resorting instead to a selection of unappetizing sandwiches purchased at exorbitant cost from a roadside inn. I nibbled at mine as the baron continued to formulate a plan. He suggested and discarded a dozen options before throwing up his hands and applying himself to his own repast.We will think of something, he assured me. But it is not good to deliberate upon such things when one is trying to eat. It disturbs the digestion. So we will talk of other matters. Tell me, if you do not mean to be a governess or a companion, what sort of adventure do you wish to seek out?I wiped my mouth of crumbs and began to explain. I am a student of natural history, all branches. I subscribe to all of the major journals on exploration and discovery. As you might deduce from my butterfly net, lepidoptery is my particular specialty. I hunt butterflies as a profession, filling orders for Aurelians who lack the means or the desire to hunt their own specimens, I added.But the baron was not listening. An expression of wonder stole over his face, and he sat back, his mournful little sandwich untouched. Of course, he murmured. Stoker.I beg your pardon?He collected himself. A very old and very dear friend of mineStoker. He is just the man to help us now. He will keep you safe, child.My brow furrowed. Baron, I realize I have been somewhat reckless in

accepting your offer of transportation to London, and I have been quite cavalier in thinking that I must do as you bid me. But I do not believe I can countenance the notion of staying with this Mr. Stoker. He is even more a stranger to me than yourself. You must tell me something of him.Stoker is a complex fellow, but I have never known a man more honorable. He owes me a debt of gratitude, and his own conscience will not permit him to fail me if I call upon his aid. I would trust Stoker with the thing I hold most dear in the whole of the world, the baron said.You would trust him with your life? I challenged.No, child. I would trust him with yours.CHAPTER FOURIt was very late when we arrived in Londonor very early, I suppose, for dawn was upon us, pale pearl grey light washing over the city as it began to wake.Only a few minutes more, the baron promised, and he sat upright in the carriage now. His shoulders had slumped with fatigue the last several hours, and I had managed to sleep a bit, curled over my traveling bag with the baron keeping watch on the road behind. But as we came into the city I rose, rubbing at my eyes and pinching my cheeks and pinning my hat more firmly upon my head. My previous visits to London had been brief ones en route to other lands, confined to stuffy train stations and unsavory cabs. The sight of the great sprawling gloom of the metropolis enthralled me.You like the city, the baron said with a twinkle in his eyes. I should have thought a natural historian would prefer the country.I love it all, I told him somewhat breathlessly. Every arrival in London is the beginning of a new story. I tore my gaze from the view of the city and gave him a smile. I wonder if I shall divide my life scientifically into the periods B.B. and A.B.before the Baron von Stauffenbach and after. Have you set me off on great adventures, then, Baron? I teased.But the baron made no reply. The carriage rocked to a stop and he instructed me to alight, taking my carpetbag himself as I carried my butterfly net. My grasp of London geography being tenuous at best, I had a notion we were somewhere east of the Tower on the north bank of the River Thames, but that was all I could determine. The neighborhood was in the heart of the docklands, filled with warehouses and cheap lodgings and people who lookedand smelleddistinctly unwashed. Gulls wheeled overhead, shrieking for food, and the heavy, greasy aroma of frying fish filled the air.Stokers workshop is in the next street, the baron said, guiding me over the broken pavement with a hand under my elbow. This is not the most salubrious quarter, but I did not think it wise to have my own carriage stop directly at his door.We maneuvered through a narrow alley that debouched into the next street. The baron stopped at a nondescript door at the very end of an even more nondescript wall. It looked like any of a thousand other doors in London, and the building beyond seemed a sort of warehouse, with a high roof and plain, solid structure. He lives here?The baron nodded. It suits his work. He rapped sharply, more than once, but there was no answer, and I began to wonder if our adventure was destined to end as soon as it had begun.To my surprise, the baron extracted a large ring of keys from his pocket and, after a moments consideration, selected one. He fitted it to the lock and let himself in, motioning me to follow. He locked the door carefully behind us and replaced the keys in his pocket. We were in a small anteroom of sorts, and from the various empty packing cases scattered about the floor I deduced it had once served as a shopfront for the warehouse behind. The baron beckoned me forward and we passed into the storage areasa series of large rooms, each filthier and colder than the last, and all stuffed with rubbish. Windows ran along the south wall, revealing that the warehouse was built directly above the river. The dank odor of water was heavy in the air, and the floors were cold with damp.Finally, we emerged into the warehouse itself, an immense cavern of a space, and I stifled a gasp.You have brought me to hell, I whispered in horrified delight, for the place was like something out of Dantes fevered imagination. The room was lit with the unholy crimson light of an enormous stove, and in its fiery glow I made out an endless assortment of shelves and hooks, each laden with something more grisly and disturbing than the last. Bones leered out from the gloomlong, knobby femurs and grinning, pointed skulls with great fanged teeth. Unspeakable things floated in specimen jars of ghoulish yellow fluids, and animal skins were pinned flat to the walls as if newly flayed from the flesh. A wide iron cauldron, large enough to boil a man, stood expectantly to one side, as if waiting for its next offering.But none of these was as disturbing as the sight that met my eyes in the center of the room. There stood an enormous creature, rough flesh sculpted over a steel skeleton, pieces of wrinkled skin half-draped upon it, the rest hanging limp and lifeless to the floor like a discarded garment. Standing below it was a man, stripped to the waist, his naked torso covered in sweat and streaked with black, the smoky soot mingling with a collection of tattoos that spread across his back and down his arms. He wore old-fashioned breeches tucked into high boots and an apron fashioned of leather and fitted with pockets holding various tools that looked like instruments of torture. He was wrestling with the skin of the beast, the muscles of his back and shoulders corded against the strain, and he swore fluently as he worked.I felt a smile rising to my lips, for this was no hell, no monsters den. It was, in fact, the lair of a

taxidermist. The shelves along one wall were fitted with Wardian cases containing hundredsno, thousandsof specimens, a veritable museum of natural history hidden away in a dingy warehouse on the north bank of the Thames. I longed to explore everything at once, but it was the man himself who claimed my attention.Stoker, the baron called.The man whirled, his hands still gripping the animals skin, his face imperfectly illuminated by the fire. He was half in shadow, and the shadow revealed him slowly. His left eye was covered by a black leather patch, and thin white scars raked his brow and the cheekbone below. They carried on, down the length of his neck, into the thick black beard, twisting under his collarbone and around his torso. They marred only the skin, I noted, for the muscles beneath were whole and strong, and the entire impression was one of great vitality and energy, strength unbridled. He looked like nothing so much as a fallen god working at a trade.Hephaestus at the forge, I murmured, recalling my mythology. The baron shot me a quick appraising glance.My dear?Nothing, I said quickly, for the man had dropped his tools and was coming near. Just then he caught sight of me and paused, reaching for a shirt. To my regret, he pulled it on, obscuring his impressive form as he turned to the baron.Max, what the devilThe baron held up a hand. I come to throw myself upon your mercy, Stoker. This young lady is Miss Speedwell. I must beg your help and ask you to keep her here. I cannot explain yet, but I must leave her with you.Mr. Stoker turned the full force of his gaze upon me, scrutinizing me from my butterfly net to my neatly pinned hat, and shook his head. Not bloody likely.Stoker, I know how you feel about your privacy, and I would not ask but I have no choice, the baron pressed, his voice low.If I had had any sense of delicacy, I would have been acutely embarrassed by the situation. As it happened, I was merely bored with their discussion. I had little doubt the baron would prevail, and I was fairly itching to see what lurked amidst the collection Mr. Stoker had amassed. I wandered to the nearest shelf, where I peered at a specimen floating in a jar. It was a pretty little frog with enormous eyes and a faintly surprised expression.I could hear them arguing in low voices behind me, the barons aristocratic tones punctuated by Mr. Stokers occasional profanity. I put out a hand and he called out sharply. Do not touch that! It took me the better part of a year to find the damned thing and it cannot be replaced.If he expected his harsh tone to cow me, he should learn differently right from the start, I decided. I picked up the jar and turned, setting a pleasant smile upon my lips. Then you ought to have taken better care of it. Your seal is damaged, and the preservative solution is contaminated. The specimen looks to have been badly fixed as well. Pity, really, its quite a fine little Phyllomedusa tomopterna.His mouth tightened. As the label quite plainly states, it is a Phyllomedusa tarsius.Yes, I see what the label states, but the label is wrong. You can tell by the coloration of its lower legs. These are very bright orange with pronounced tiger stripes. Tarsius has green legs. Really, I am quite surprised you did not see it for yourself. I should have thought so avid a collector would have noticed such a difference. Ah well, perhaps you have not had the chance to examine it closely.Mr. Stokers mouth gaped open until he closed it with an audible snap. I assure you, Miss Speedwell, I am intimately familiar with that particular specimen, considering I collected it myself in the jungles of the .I was enthralled. He had appalling manners and questionable hygiene considering the state of his hands, but any man who had been to the was worth talking to.Evidently Mr. Stoker did not share my interest in conversation, for he turned back to the baron to remonstrate with him one last time.I havent time to mind strays for you, Max. I have to finish that bloody great elephant by next month or Lord Rosemorran will not pay me.The baron put out his hand. My dear friend, I would not ask if necessity did not demand it.Mr. Stoker said nothing, and, doubtless sensing his advantage, the baron pressed it. I ask you for this one thing in memory of the dangers we have known together.Mr. Stokers face flushed dark red. It is a very genteel form of extortion to remind a man of his debts, Max. Very well, dammit. I am nothing if not a man of my word. You have it. I will keep the lady here until you come for her.The baron put out his hand to clasp his friend by the shoulder. You have repaid your debt in full with this.I cannot think how, Mr. Stoker protested. Overbearing spinsters are not exactly your stock in trade.I studiously ignored the insult as I replaced his Phyllomedusa. Within a few moments the baron was on his way, taking his leave of me with a bow over my hand and a smartly Teutonic click of the heels.He hesitated, my hand still in his, his eyes searching my face. I leave you in the best carebetter than my own, child. I will send word soon.Please do, I replied with a touch of asperity as I flicked a glance at Mr. Stoker. He curled a lip by way of reply.The baron hesitated. You must know, if it were in my power to tell you everything... he began. I held up a hand.I have come to know you a little in the course of our journey. I believe you to be a man of honor, Baron. It is plain that you are bound by strong loyalties. I must respect that.Respect it, but you do not like it, he finished with a kindly twinkle.And it is apparent you have come to know me a little too, I acknowledged. I will bid you farewell in the German fashion then. Auf Wiedersehen, Baron.He clicked his heels together a second time

and pressed my hand. God go with you, Miss Speedwell.He left then, and Mr. Stoker saw him out, returning a moment later to find me studying his specimens again. The baron did not tell me you were a taxidermist when he suggested I stay with you, I said pleasantly.He returned to his elephant, taking up his tools. I am a natural historian, he corrected. Taxidermy is merely a part of what I do.He offered neither a seat nor refreshment, but I was not prepared to stand on ceremony. I found a moth-eaten sofa lurking under a pile of skins and moved them aside enough to perch on the edgecarefully, for I noticed a leg of the sofa was missing, replaced with a decaying stack of volumes from the Description de lgypte. It is very lateor very early. And yet you are at work.Revue de pressePraise forA Curious Beginning With wicked intelligence, Deanna Raybourn has created a fresh and fascinating sleuth. Veronica Speedwell is sure to join the greats of mystery fiction. Impeccably plotted and meticulously researched,A Curious Beginningwill leave you, as it left me, whimpering for more.Alan Bradley,New York Timesbestselling author of the Flavia de Luce series Oh, frabjous day! Deanna Raybourn is back in the Victorian era with a heroine who could give Amelia Peabody a run for her money. No one write parasols, petticoats, and pistols like Deanna Raybourn.Lauren Willig, New York Times bestselling author of the Pink Carnation series andThe Other DaughterWickedly clever and devilishly amusing. . .Veronica Speedwell is a joyunflappable, unrepentant, and thoroughly delightful.Susan Elia MacNeal, New York Times bestselling author of the Maggie Hope series I love this book! Brings us the powerful Veronica Speedwell, who triumphs over adversity and danger with wit, charm, and uncanny determination. A real find.Robyn Carr, New York Times bestselling author of the Virgin River series A treat. One of the few writers who can make history feel immediate and exciting without losing a grasp of the period.Rhys Bowen, New York Times bestselling author of Her Royal Spyness series