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The Sapphic Salon

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Introduction

Beyond the clatter of hansom cabs and the drone of sermons, Victorian London kept other rhythms—quieter, quickening, and often unheard. In a city of soot and spectacle, there were rooms where curtains were drawn not to dim the light but to sharpen it, to turn attention inward toward the work of reading, thinking, and daring to love differently. The Sapphic Salon is one such room. It is not a club with a crest, nor a salon in the French fashion exactly, nor a brothel, nor a political society as Parliament would recognize it. It is a refuge that hides in plain sight, arranged with chairs that remember the curve of certain shoulders and tables nicked by pen knives and paint.

The women who gather there are not of a single sort. A poet who supports her widowed mother by copying legal briefs sits beside a portraitist whose patrons hang in the Royal Academy; a patron returned from the port cities of empire debates a printer's apprentice with ink under her nails; a dressmaker from Spitalfields arrives late, thread still looped around her wrist. They come bearing books, rough sketches, verses folded into parcels, and sometimes a loaf or a bottle of something strong shoved into a carpetbag. They also carry other cargo: questions about what a life might be if it need not be tethered to a husband; griefs unacknowledged in the family pew; the bright, insistent hope that friendship could be a structure as sound as any marriage.

To step into the Salon is to step past the economy of surveillance that governs the rest of the city. The gaze of neighbors, editors, constables, and cousins is real and often punishing; the walls here do not make that fact vanish, but they do allow a rehearsal of another order. The women learn a vocabulary that can live in daylight if it must—rhetoric borrowed from art criticism, charity committees, and natural history. A violet pinned to a cloak might be a simple flourish, or it might mean the meeting is moved, or that tonight's reading will not be merely literary. A pair of gloves, deliberately mismatched, might signal a walk that is also a conversation that is also a vow. Strategies multiply: letters slipped inside circulating-library books, prints labeled as allegory when they are in fact confession, a séance convened as a pretext to keep the door shut and the men out.

It is not only secrecy that binds them; it is the abundance of feeling they are told to ration. They read one another aloud, and in the cadence of a stanza a room can tilt toward revelation. Hands are offered and accepted; a sleeve brushes another sleeve; a gaze lingers across a draft. Desire in these pages will have many forms: it is political because the world has declared it so, and it is tender because tenderness is a practice, a habit learned the way one learns a language—through mistakes, patience, and repetition. Some bonds will be romantic and risked; some will be fierce friendships, a

steadying of the soul; some will be patronage and partnership braided so tightly that no one can say where money ends and faith begins.

This novel is not a ledger of historical persons, though its rooms are furnished with what history leaves behind: diary fragments, marginalia, reviews that scold, caricatures that misrepresent, and the soft ghost of letters burned in coal grates. The chapters move through streets and studios, kitchens and reading rooms, from Fitzrovia to the river stairs and out to the Brighton shore. You will hear many voices—some declared, some withheld—because the story of a circle is not a single mouth speaking but a chorus. At times the narrative will narrow to a single glance, a brushstroke, a turn of phrase; at others it will widen to take in committees, riots, lectures, and the public's appetite for scandal.

A note on names and the word we have chosen to gather them: sapphic. It is a bridge we borrow across time—a way to signal that the heart of this tale is the erotic and intellectual companionship of women, without forcing them under a single modern banner. Not all of them would claim the same language. Some will marry men, and some will not. Some will call what they feel friendship to keep safe what is more than friendship. The Salon does not require them to be the same; it asks only for their seriousness, their mischief, their courage, and the generosity to tend one another's daring.

If there is an argument here, it is that intimacy is a form of knowledge and that knowledge, shared and sharpened, can be a refuge and a revolt at once. The city beyond these pages will try to make cages of admiration and of contempt alike, to fix identities under glass and call the display complete. The women in this story learn to live otherwise—not perfectly, not without harm, but with attention and invention. They build a commons out of candles and ink, out of meals scavenged and paid forward, out of the warmth that gathers when one person says to another, I see you, and the other, finally, believes her.

The door is not locked. You will know it when you come upon the fanlight with its hairline crack, the brass plate without a name, the faint smell of turpentine and cloves. Knock if you like; no one will answer. Better to push gently and step into the hush between sentences. A chair has been pulled close to the fire. There is a place for your coat on the peg, and a cup warming your hands. Listen: someone is beginning to read.

CHAPTER ONE: The House on Rathbone Street

The address, 43 Rathbone Street, was sufficiently ordinary to possess a kind of camouflage. It was located in Fitzrovia, where the noise of Oxford Street was muffled by the presence of smaller trades and artists' studios. The street was respectable enough not to invite the attention of the constabulary, yet shabby enough not to concern the more rigorous kind of society reporter. The house itself was a narrow, three-story structure of pale brick, with a freshly painted black door that seemed to absorb the twilight and render it invisible. The ground floor was nominally a bookbinder's shop, advertised by a discreet gilt sign, but the bell rarely rang. Mr. Silas Croft, the supposed proprietor, was an ancient man with trembling hands and a remarkable talent for being elsewhere when a customer called. He was, in fact, the house's paid silence, a reliable ghost whose chief task was ensuring that the door to the upper floors remained sealed against unexpected inquiry.

It was a Tuesday afternoon in early October 1883, and the air was thick with the scent of coal smoke and the faint, sweet decay of late autumn. Eleanor Vance, twenty-six and possessed of an alarming amount of undirected energy, stood across the street, pretending to examine a chipped porcelain basin in an antiques dealer's window. She adjusted the heavy velvet ribbon of her bonnet, a gesture that was half nervousness, half defiance. The bonnet was borrowed and slightly too grand for her usual attire, a calculated risk meant to convey a kind of well-bred confidence she absolutely did not feel.

Eleanor was a writer—or, rather, she was a clerk who wrote. Her days were spent translating French legal documents for a firm in Lincoln's Inn, a work of rigid precision that paid barely enough to cover the rent of her small Bloomsbury room. Her nights, however, were dedicated to a novella about a governess who runs away with a woman explorer, a manuscript currently hidden under her mattress, laced with a sense of passionate urgency that terrified her in the daylight. She was at Rathbone Street on the suggestion of Mrs. Harriet Shaw, a formidable literary critic known for her severe reviews and her equally severe patronage of promising young women.

Mrs. Shaw had been vague but insistent. "You have talent, Miss Vance. Too much to waste it on the polite drivel the circulating libraries demand. Go to Croft's. Ask for the second-floor ledger. Do not speak to the bookbinder. If you are meant to be there, you will know what to do next."

The instructions were maddeningly cryptic. Eleanor felt the familiar twist of self-doubt in her stomach. What if she made a mistake? What if she walked into a trap? This was London, after all, and a respectable young woman could lose her reputation faster

than she could secure a decent advance. But the thought of her manuscript—of the desire to have her words read, to find an audience beyond her own lonely reflection in the gaslight—was stronger than her fear. She crossed the street quickly, her borrowed kid boots clicking on the pavement.

She pushed open the black door. A little bell jangled, a sound thin and lonely. The shop was dim, smelling strongly of glue, tanned leather, and dry dust. Rows of half-bound volumes, some blank, some waiting for lettering, stood sentinel on low shelves. There was no sign of Mr. Croft.

Eleanor cleared her throat, rehearsing the phrase Mrs. Shaw had provided: "I have come regarding the re-binding of the *Meditations*."

A voice, low and slightly amused, drifted from a space behind a tall stack of quarto volumes. "The *Meditations* are quite secure, Miss Vance. They require no further attention to their spine. Unless, of course, their reader found their content too demanding."

Eleanor jumped, startled. A woman stepped out from behind the shelves. She was perhaps ten years older than Eleanor, dressed in a walking suit of dark grey wool, unremarkable save for the single, remarkable detail of a silk scarf tied loosely at her neck, embroidered with a pattern of stylized, deep purple violets. She was elegant, with eyes the colour of good brandy and an expression that suggested she was perpetually assessing a situation. This was not the bookbinder.

"I—I apologize," Eleanor stammered, feeling the heat rise in her cheeks. "Mrs. Shaw sent me. I was told to ask for the ledger."

The woman smiled, a small, knowing movement of her lips. "The ledger. Of course. It is not for accounts, Miss Vance. It is for names. And for the agreements that names imply."

She moved toward a narrow staircase tucked away at the back of the shop, hidden by a heavy, faded curtain. The ascent was steep and the steps groaned under their feet. The air grew fresher as they climbed, leaving the musty smell of the shop below.

"My name is Charlotte Thorne," the woman said over her shoulder. "I am the resident cynic, the keeper of the clock, and the one who insists on good quality sherry. You will find that everyone here has at least two designations. It is useful for misdirection."

They reached the second-floor landing. The room they entered was immediately different from the world outside. It was a spacious parlour, clearly the main room of the house, transformed by a deliberate aesthetic of comfort and intellectual seriousness. The walls were painted a warm sage green, catching the light from two

large windows that overlooked the street. These windows, however, were draped with heavy curtains of a rich gold damask, filtering the afternoon sun into a soft, private glow.

The room was furnished not with the usual fussy Victoriana, but with sturdy, comfortable pieces designed for use: a round mahogany table piled high with unbound books, journals, and scraps of manuscript; a small writing desk covered in orderly chaos; and several deep, leather armchairs arranged around a cold fireplace. A small marble bust of Sappho sat prominently on a mantelpiece, garlanded with a faded green ribbon.

Two other women were already present. One, older, perhaps in her late thirties, was perched on the arm of a chair, fiercely sharpening a pencil with a small, silver knife. She wore spectacles perched low on her nose and a practical dress that seemed to have paint smears permanently adhered to the cuffs. This was clearly an artist. The other woman sat at the table, oblivious to their entrance, entirely absorbed in reading a pamphlet she held close to her face, a concentrated frown indenting her brow. She was younger than Charlotte, dressed in the severe black of a schoolteacher or a serious scholar, her dark hair pulled back severely.

Charlotte gestured around the room. "Welcome, Miss Vance, to the second floor of Croft's. This is where the books cease to be objects and start becoming weapons. The ledger is here."

She walked to the writing desk and opened a drawer. It was not a grand leather-bound volume but a plain, cloth-covered commonplace book, the kind used by university students for lecture notes. Charlotte laid it open on the table. The pages were filled with elegant, sloping handwriting—names, dates, and sometimes a cryptic line of poetry or a quotation in French.

Eleanor approached the table, her heart beating a rapid rhythm. She recognized a few names, figures vaguely mentioned in literary society—a travel writer, a successful playwright who wrote under a male pseudonym.

"This is not a membership list," Charlotte murmured, leaning close. "It is a record of trust. Every woman who enters this circle commits to a form of radical honesty, and to the absolute protection of every other woman present. This house is a common ground, Miss Vance. But the city outside is a battlefield. If you choose to sign, you agree that your presence here is a secret that must survive fire, scandal, and the most determined gossip."

The weight of the commitment settled upon Eleanor. She thought again of her novella, of the scandalous affection she had poured onto the page. To be read, truly read, by women who understood what it meant to write such a thing, felt both terrifying and

like a deep, essential necessity. She picked up the pen offered by Charlotte. It was an ordinary steel nib, but in her hand, it felt suddenly momentous.

"What is the agreement?" Eleanor asked, her voice barely a whisper.

The artist, who had been listening intently while sharpening her pencil, finally spoke. Her voice was rich, with a contralto resonance. "The agreement is simple, Miss Vance. No one here is what her husband, her father, or her parish requires her to be. We are what we make ourselves, and we keep that shared making safe."

Eleanor took a breath, dipped the nib into the inkwell, and, with a hand that was remarkably steady, signed her name: *Eleanor Vance*.

Charlotte Thorne closed the ledger. "Excellent. Now you may meet the others. That sharp-witted painter by the fire is Miss Beatrice Elms, and the woman who appears ready to debate the entire history of philosophy is Miss Clara Fielding."

Beatrice Elms, the painter, came forward, offering a quick, firm handshake. Her fingers smelled faintly of turpentine. "Welcome to the Salon, Eleanor Vance. Do you prefer to be called Miss Vance, or Eleanor?"

"Eleanor, please. I reserve the title 'Miss Vance' for my legal clients," Eleanor replied, managing a slight, genuine smile.

Clara Fielding looked up from her pamphlet, her large, serious eyes assessing Eleanor with an intellectual rigor that was almost physical. "Good afternoon. That is a truly exceptional bonnet, but I trust you did not wear it merely for decorative purposes. Are you prepared to read tonight?"

Clara's directness was bracing. She seemed to possess no social niceties whatsoever, demanding substance instantly.

"I—I brought a piece. A short political essay, actually, about the limitations of coverture," Eleanor admitted. She had feared her novella was too intimate for a first meeting, opting instead for a piece of more 'respectable' intellectual critique.

Clara nodded approvingly. "Good. We have had enough poetry on the subject of disappointed expectation this month to fill a minor anthology. A little prose on the legal theft of female identity will be refreshing." She went immediately back to her reading.

Charlotte retrieved a small, stoppered decanter and three small glasses from a cupboard, along with a plate of thin biscuits. "Never mind Clara's terrifying intellectual standards, Eleanor. She is harmless unless you propose a weak argument. Have some

sherry. It's Spanish, quite illicit, and far superior to what one finds at the usual drawing rooms."

As Eleanor accepted the glass, she finally took in the finer details of the room that defined the Salon. It was not just the furniture; it was the detritus of intensely focused lives. A small etching press was tucked into a corner, its handle oiled and ready. On the mantelpiece, besides Sappho, were various curious objects: a half-burnt candle stub, a fossilized shell, and a small, exquisite silver locket Eleanor recognized as a mourning piece, worn only for the deepest, non-familial losses.

"What exactly *is* this place, Charlotte?" Eleanor asked, sipping the sherry, which was indeed warm and complex. "Mrs. Shaw called it the 'Thursday Circle,' but..."

"It's many things," Charlotte replied, leaning against the mantelpiece. "It began seven years ago as a simple reading group—a way for Beatrice and me to share our work outside the censorship of male editors and reviewers. It evolved. It became a bank for patronage, a source of commission, a place where a woman can ask for help locating a discreet flat or escaping a tedious engagement. We call it the Salon, perhaps grandly, because it suggests the combination of the erotic and the intellectual—the twin hungers women are forced to starve."

Beatrice added, "It is where we learn the vocabulary the world tries to deny us. The language of ambition, of political rage, and of desire that is not aimed toward reproductive utility. Tonight is only Tuesday, so the full circle, the 'Thursday Circle,' will not meet. But we often gather in smaller groups to edit, to plan, or just to breathe."

Eleanor felt a shift inside her, a loosening of the tight coil of anxiety she usually carried. She was used to performing 'respectability,' but here, the performance seemed not only unnecessary but actively discouraged.

Clara, without looking up, suddenly offered a piece of information. "Your essay on coverture is sound, but ensure you address the practical limitations of the Married Women's Property Act of '82. The law offers abstract relief, but the machinery of debt and dependency still ensnares. Avoid sentimentality."

Eleanor blinked. "How did you know my subject was coverture, not just generally political?"

Clara finally laid down her pamphlet. "Because your left hand is resting lightly on the brass clasp of your reticule, a gesture that suggests a nervousness specific to expressing an opinion on economics or law, topics considered particularly unnatural for women. If it were a poem, the gesture would be closer to the collarbone. And because it is the most pressing legal horror currently available to educated women."

Beatrice laughed, a deep, easy sound. "That is Clara. She sees the subtext in everything, including the placement of your hands."

"It is only observation," Clara corrected coolly. "Observation, which, unlike faith, is reliable. Now, if we are not discussing the legal fictions that strip us of personhood, I must return to this assessment of the new Darwinian theory. It is dreadful."

Charlotte took Eleanor's empty glass. "Do not worry, Eleanor. We are only dreadful when we are bored. You will find that this place is less concerned with being polite than with being effective."

Effective. Eleanor liked the word. It was a word of action, of agency. She looked at the circle of women—the painter with her steady hands, the intellectual with her terrifying grasp of logic, and Charlotte, the elegant keeper of secrets. She felt the immediate, magnetic pull of inclusion, a sensation far more potent than the chilly acceptance of polite society.

The afternoon moved slowly into evening. Eleanor was encouraged to sit and wait, to simply observe the room and its inhabitants. Charlotte busied herself with sorting a collection of correspondence, some sealed with wax, others clearly coded. Beatrice began sketching furiously in a small, worn sketchbook, occasionally humming a tune Eleanor did not recognize. Clara read, occasionally punctuating her study with a sharp, whispered curse against a footnote.

Eleanor allowed herself to settle into an armchair that was remarkably soft. She found herself staring at the mantelpiece—at Sappho, the silent witness to their circle. The classical poet, whose fragments of verse were so carefully preserved, represented not just the past, but a precedent. A permission.

She opened her reticule and pulled out the folded sheets of her essay. She began to read it silently, but this time, the words felt different. They were no longer the solitary whisper of her room; they were a preparation for a challenge, a contribution to a collective inventory of resistance. She was no longer simply Eleanor Vance, the clerk; she was a participant in the intellectual rebellion happening quietly on the second floor of 43 Rathbone Street.

The light outside had faded entirely when Charlotte finally announced, "Dinner. We eat together on Tuesdays, small groups only. It is downstairs, and I promise you, Mr. Croft will not be joining us."

They descended a second flight of stairs, narrower and creaking more ominously than the first, leading down to the basement kitchen—a large, surprisingly cheerful room warmed by a blazing coal fire under a huge black range. The air here was scented with

bay leaves and roasting meat. This space, unlike the parlour, felt entirely domestic, yet still subversive. On the long wooden table, four settings were laid out, lit by a single gas fixture that cast the room in a bright, inviting glare.

A fourth woman was waiting for them, bustling between the pantry and the table. She was dressed in an apron over a simple, dark dress, her sleeves rolled up to reveal strong forearms. She was older than all the others, with kind, tired eyes and an aura of competence. This was Mrs. Poole, the housekeeper, cook, and silent administrator of the house's domestic needs.

"Miss Vance, this is Mrs. Poole," Charlotte introduced. "She knows more about the internal workings of London's high society than any society columnist, and she can silence a troublesome postman with a single look."

Mrs. Poole wiped her hands on her apron and offered Eleanor a brief nod. "Welcome. Sit down, dear. I've made lamb stew. You look like you need feeding."

The shift from the rarefied air of the parlour to the hearty reality of the kitchen was grounding. As they sat, the conversation became less about legal fictions and more about the immediate logistics of survival. Beatrice complained about the expense of linseed oil; Clara needed a specific, obscure German text from the British Library; Charlotte was worried about a letter that had been intercepted.

They talked in low, rapid voices, a language peppered with allusions and half-finished sentences that Eleanor could not entirely follow yet. It was the language of people who had to compress vital information into short bursts, always wary of the ears that might be listening through the walls. Eleanor felt the practical weight of their lives, the necessity of the Salon not just as an intellectual haven, but as a system of mutual aid.

After the meal, as Mrs. Poole began clearing the plates, Charlotte turned to Eleanor. "The first step is simply being here, Eleanor. The next is revealing what you hold most closely. We read tonight not for criticism, but for trust."

Eleanor nodded, pulling out her essay on coverture. She straightened the pages, feeling the nervous tremor return, but also a burgeoning sense of readiness. She looked at the three faces waiting for her words. These women were her audience, her jury, and perhaps, her future. The House on Rathbone Street was silent now, wrapped in the thick fog of the London night, holding its breath. Eleanor began to read, her voice steadying as she spoke the truth she had previously only dared to write in secret. The sound of her words filled the room, a challenge thrown against the suffocating silence of Victorian conformity.

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