

ELSIE VENNER

EXT. NEW ENGLAND COUNTRYSIDE. DAY.

Idyllic early spring morning. Title: "New England. 1840"

EXT. GARDEN. DAY.

A very pregnant YOUNG WOMAN is tending her flower garden. A dog's barking (off) distracts her.

EXT. CORNER OF THE GARDEN. DAY.

The dog has cornered something in a pile of brush but is keeping its distance. The Young Woman approaches.

YOUNG WOMAN

Tiger!

The dog lets up his barking.

YOUNG WOMAN (CONT'D)

What have you got? A rabbit?

As she starts toward the pile, the dog renews his barking. She hesitates, suddenly frightened. She takes the dog by the collar.

YOUNG WOMAN (CONT'D)

Come! Leave it be.

EXT. BACK OF THE HOUSE. DAY.

The Young Woman carries a basket of cut flowers. As she opens the door, one of her hand trowels drops from the basket. She stoops down to retrieve it.

In a frozen moment she hears a rattling. She is within inches of the glittering eyes of a rattlesnake. She is transfixed. The snake strikes her on the arm. She collapses. The dog barks in earnest.

MAN

(off)

Catalina!

The MAN, whose face we do not see, rushes to her, taking her in his arms.

MAN (CONT'D)
Catalina---!

EXT. NEW ENGLAND COUNTRY ROAD. DAY.

Title: "Seventeen years later."

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD. DAY.

A coach is rattling down the road. It is early Fall.

INT. COACH. DAY.

The occupants are an older SOUTHERN GENTLEMAN and his WIFE, and a handsome, fair-haired young man, BERNARD LANGON. They have been riding in silence. The Gentleman swigs from a silver flask. He offers to Bernard, who declines.

GENTLEMAN
The Sword of Damocles, young man.

BERNARD
Pardon? I do not take your meaning, sir.

GENTLEMAN
Your destination is Rockland?

BERNARD
It is, sir.

GENTLEMAN
The town sits at the base of a mountain. It looms over the town. Persons have been known to move from the place after only a short residence because they were haunted day and night by the thought of the awful wall of rock piled up into the air above their heads.

BERNARD
---Like the Sword of Damocles.

EXT. ROAD INTO TOWN. DAY.

As the coach makes a final turn, we can see that the town does indeed lie in the shadow of a dark and craggy mountain.

INT. COACH. DAY.

Bernard is looking up in awe through the window.

EXT. COACH STATION. DAY.

The hostellers are busily changing horses. The Gentleman is shaking Bernard's hand.

GENTLEMAN

God protect you, young man!

Gentleman returns to the coach. Bernard takes in the view of the main street, tree-lined, with several smart mansion-houses in view. He starts down the street.

Bernard's attention is immediately drawn to a shriek of alarm from an ANCIENT WOMAN. Fleeing from the Woman and towards Bernard is a RUFFIAN, about 14 years old.

Bernard reacts instinctively, deftly collaring the Ruffian. Thinking he has stolen a purse or money, Bernard expertly parts the Ruffian's closed fist.

BERNARD

let's have it, now ---

In the Ruffian's hand are several dried bean pods. Bernard takes the pods and is in such a state of mystery, the Ruffian extricates himself and scampers away.

EXT. THE INSTITUTE. DAY.

Bernard is standing before the Apollinean Female Institute est. 1831 as an ornate sign proudly proclaims. It is an imposing brick structure of suitable institutional architecture.

After taking note of some girls on the lawn, he removes an envelope from his waistcoat, girds his loins, and enters.

The circle of GIRLS whom Bernard had noted are intent upon something on the ground: It is a huge, black beetle, on its back, legs flailing away.

The Girls are both repulsed and attracted by the spectacle.

A dark, beautiful GIRL, whom we will later know as ELSIE VENNERS, approaches the circle. The Girls make way for her.

ROSA
A moral dilemma---!

CHARLOTTE
Do we flip it over?

EMMA
Or let it be---?

The Girls contemplate this dilemma. Elsie has no patience with their girlish game and squashes it flat with her foot, leaving the girls to contemplate the flattened and oozing beetle.

INT. INSTITUTE. PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE. DAY.

Bernard sits across the desk from SILAS PECKHAM, a thin, nasal-twanged New Englander, raised upon a diet of salt-fish and pickled cucumbers. He is perusing Bernard's letter of introduction, holding it closely to his face.

SILAS PECKHAM
Bernard Langdon... Boston?

BERNARD
My grandfather made a fortune and the name. Father spent the fortune, leaving me the name.

SILAS PECKHAM
Can you handle young girls, Mr. Langdon?

BERNARD
I can defend myself, sir.

Silas Peckham has never recognized a witticism in his life.

SILAS PECKHAM
You come highly recommended by your college. Medical studies?

BERNARD
Yes sir.

SILAS PECKHAM
Got a doctor here. Kittridge. Doctor Kittridge. Very reasonable. Often trades for services.

Peckham rises, shaking Bernard's hand, escorting him to the door.

SILAS PECKHAM (CONT'D)
 My teachers enjoy the Lord's Day as
 a day of rest. Of course, you will
 attend divine services in the morning,
 at midday, and in the evening,
 otherwise the Sabbath is yours.

INT. INSTITUTE. HALL. DAY.

Peckham has opened the door and taken Bernard into the hall. He clasps Bernard's shoulder and before Bernard can respond or even get his bearings, Peckham has re-entered and closed the door to his office, Mr. Peckham ... Principal staring Bernard in the face.

Bernard turns to survey the school. No one is in sight but suppressed feminine tittering can be heard.

He starts down the hall until a voice from behind stops him...

HELEN DARLEY
 Mr. Langdon?

He turns. It is Miss HELEN DARLEY, 35, a plain woman, delicate and gentle.

HELEN DARLEY (CONT'D)
 Helen Darley.

BERNARD
 Miss Darley---

She walks him down the hall.

HELEN DARLEY
 Silas Peckham keeps this young ladies' school exactly as he would keep a hundred head of cattle for the simple, unadorned purpose of making just as much money in just as few years as can be safely done. Yet, sir, this is a first-class establishment because he gives his instructors full reign to teach.

Bernard stops.

BERNARD
 (mock serious)
 Then I may never see him again--?

A brief pause then Helen smiles.

HELEN DARLEY
 Indeed, Mr. Langdon. Indeed!

INT. INSTITUTE. SCHOOLROOM. DAY.

HANNAH MARTIN, 14, and ROSA MILBURN, 16, are peeking into the hall. Hannah is munching on a piece of cake.

ROSA
 Langdon--? I wonder what his first name is? Chauncy? No. Walter? Yes: *Walter Scott* Langdon.

HANNAH
 (mouthful of cake)
 He's pretty---!

INT. INSTITUTE. HALL. DAY.

Helen continues her tour. They stop to view a class in progress.

HELEN
 Miss Morgan. French. The practical sciences. Some geography.

They continue. A bearded middle-aged, man is accompanying a student who is singing an art song.

HELEN (CONT'D)
 Mr. Schneider. Also helps with the French. Latin. And German. And that's it.

BERNARD
 So the remainder is---? Ours?

HELEN
 Yes.

INT. INSTITUTE. CLASSROOM. DAY.

Hannah and Rosa scamper to their places. Upon Helen and Bernard's entrance into the classroom, all rise.

Helen acknowledges this, and they take their seats, with more than the usual whispering.

HELEN
Ladies ----

And they quieten. Helen is no-nonsense in the classroom.

HELEN (CONT'D)
This is Mr. Langdon. From ---

BERNARD
---Boston.

Not only handsome and well-bred but from the cosmopolitan city of Boston!

CLOSE-UP of Rosa.

ROSA
Definitely *Walter Scott*...

NORMAL VIEW.

HELEN
You will take this opportunity to review your composition assignment.

Helen takes her place at the front of the room, Bernard pulling up a chair to sit with her. His eyes are immediately drawn to one girl in particular: the dark GIRL, who has moved her seat apart from the others. SHE does not look at him. He forces himself to ask about others first:

BERNARD
Who is that girl in the ringlets?

HELEN
Charlotte Ann Wood. Writes very pretty poems.

BERNARD
And the pink one?

HELEN
Emma Dean. Squires daughter. Day scholar. Nice girl.

BERNARD
And... her?

CLOSE-UP on Rosa already writing out in elaborate script in her copy-book: Walter Scott Langdon.

HELEN

(V/O)

Rosa Milburn. Has a romance novel in her pocket which she means to read in school-time.

NORMAL VIEW.

BERNARD

...and that girl? In the back.

At this, Helen becomes tense and nervous. We see the girl, ELSIE VENNER. Her dress also sets her apart, being of a checkered, curious pattern. She sits, winding a gold chain about her wrist, and then uncoiling it, as if in a kind of reverie. Helen lowers her voice.

HELEN

Don't look at her as if we are talking about her. She is a day scholar. Lives with her father at the edge of town. Her name is Elsie Venner.

Bernard cannot help but look at her. At that moment Elise's eyes meet Bernard's. Her eyes are not large but are black and intense two glittering diamonds, which seem to transfix Bernard.

Helen abruptly rises.

HELEN (CONT'D)

Let me take you to the parlor.

INT. INSTITUTE. CLASSROOM. DAY.

Helen returns from the parlor. She sits at the desk.

HELEN

Now, ladies----

She feels Elsie looking at her. She tries to avoid this, but cannot. She opens a book, turning the pages. Looks up. Elsie still staring. Helen's forehead is marked with perspiration. Finally she gets up, walking down the aisle to Elsie's desk.

HELEN (CONT'D)

What do you want of me, Elsie Venner?

ELSIE

Nothing. I wanted to see if I could
make you come to me.

Elsie does not lisp, yet her articulation of one or two
consonants is not absolutely perfect.

HELEN

Where did you get that flower?

ELSIE

From where it grew. Take it.

Helen's hand, involuntarily, shaking, takes the flower, their
finger-tips touching.

INT. INSTITUTE. PARLOR. DAY.

Bernard is examining the books lining the shelves in the
Parlor. A bell sounds and the girls are released for the
day.

INT. INSTITUTE. CLASSROOM. DAY.

Helen throws the flower into the cold ashes of the fireplace,
covering it completely. She goes to the wash-stand in the
corner and carefully washes her finger-tips.

She is startled by a banging. She turns. It is Elsie, adding
her composition to the bulky stack on Helen's desk. Their
eyes meet. Elsie flashes a smile. Helen turns away. Elsie
leaves.

INT. BERNARD'S ROOM. DAY.

The next morning finds Bernard, his toilet half-finished,
engaged in the final moments of his daily exercise regimen.

From a leather strap hanging from a beam in the ceiling, he
lifts and lowers himself by the left hand alone. This done,
he concludes with a mighty pull on a Dynanometer, its springs
creaking and groaning.

Mightily satisfied, he pronounces...

BERNARD

That will do ----

He goes to the window to partake of the air deeply. The
mountain arrests his attention.

EXT. INSTITUTE. YARD. DAY.

Bernard is looking at the mountain. A bass-voice behind him intones...

VOICE
DA-DA-DA DAH...

It is SCHNEIDER. He speaks with a trace of a German accent.

SCHNEIDER
In the immortal notes of Herr von
Beethoven, Fate knocking at the door.

Schneider greets Bernard with a click of his heels.

SCHNEIDER (CONT'D)
Hugo Schneider.

BERNARD
(shaking hands)
Bernard Langdon.

Schneider gestures toward the mountain with his pipe.

SCHNEIDER
Natives of this town are compelled
to return after many years. If the
mountain should ever slide, they
feel as if they ought to be here.
The danger and the fascination are
the attraction, Mr. Langdon.

Helen, loaded with her stack of compositions, arrives.

HELEN
Gentlemen ----

Bernard and Schneider *ad. Lib.* greetings and good-days, as she continues past them and into The Institute.

SCHNEIDER
(puffing contentedly)
A fine, dedicated teacher, Miss
Darley: frail, sensitive,
conscientious ... overworked. But, I
believe, by choice... So! Have you
accommodations?

BERNARD
Mrs. Pettingill's.