Dr. Willis

CHARLOTTE. Might I add a suggestion? Try not to be awake too much.

JUDITH. Right you are.

CHARLOTTE. And try not to be too angry or sad. Or excessively joyful. Do you have – (*Sotto.*) a desire to consort with men?

JUDITH *casts a glance at* DR WILLIS *and* COOMBES.

JUDITH. Matter of fact, I do.

CHARLOTTE. Don't. Even if your husband dies, there was a woman in Cratfield took up with a younger man, such a dreadful, dreadful do it were.

JUDITH. Why, what happened?

CHARLOTTE. Well, she was greatly talked about.

Pause.

EMMA. I had an aunt, fifty-two years old, her courses stopped quite suddenly, week later, she burst into flames. My uncle found her, she was two arms, two legs, and a pile of ashes. The furniture covered in grease, inside the drawers even, it dirtied the linen.

ANN. How dreadful.

EMMA. Well, it was probably the best thing for her.

HANNAH. My great-grandmother had a baby when she was seventy-three.

HELEN. No.

HANNAH (*nods*). Boy was a jibber though.

ANN. I do think it very queer that we know more about the movement of a comet that is thousands of miles away than the workings of a woman's body.

Pause. The squeak of the speculum in the silence.

Then DR WILLIS *comes out. Cleans and puts his apparatus away.*

ELIZABETH. Well?

Start

DR WILLIS. Mrs Poppy are you decent?

SALLY. As I'll ever be.

DR WILLIS. You may turn around Mr Coombes, thank you.

DR WILLIS *puts the lamp down. The* MATRONS *watch him, expectant.*

EMMA. Well Dr Willis, we are all agog, what is your opinion?

DR WILLIS *wipes his hands on a handkerchief and surveys the* MATRONS.

DR WILLIS. Do you understand the difference between being quick with child and being with quick child?

ELIZABETH. Yes.

The other MATRONS *exchange looks, murmur their uncertainty.*

DR WILLIS. Quick with child is having conceived. With quick child is when the child is quickened, or moving. Do you understand the distinction I make?

The MATRONS *nod and murmur their assent.*

The prisoner is quick with child. Furthermore the child is quickened, though it is still in the early stages.

A murmur of reaction. ELIZABETH *looks down, overwhelmed with relief.*

I must depart now but I will suggest to the Justice that transportation is delayed until after the birth and that Mrs Luke is allowed to visit the prisoner daily, I suspect it will be a difficult pregnancy. (*To* SALLY.) You have struggled to carry a child before?

SALLY. How / d'you

DR WILLIS. There is an abnormality to the cervix that concerns me, and I am not certain the ovaries are without disease. (*To* ELIZABETH.) She must rest as much as possible and be fed well, with a little meat and small beer.

ELIZABETH. Thank you Dr Willis.

DR WILLIS. After the baby comes, the womb would benefit from a steam treatment to cleanse it of impurities. I don't expect the procedure is familiar to you / but

ELIZABETH. I have heard of it.

DR WILLIS. Oh, good.

ELIZABETH. I think it's a load of old shite.

DR WILLIS. Yes, well. It would certainly be more effective to remove the ovaries entirely.

JUDITH. Man wants to spay her.

DR WILLIS *smiles patiently.*

DR WILLIS. The ovaries are the most powerful agents in all the commotion of a lady's system. The whole animal economy of a woman makes reason and intellect a struggle. The cruelty of which Mrs Poppy is guilty does not come naturally to the female physiology. It is usually attributable to the periodic illness. If Sally was menstruating when she met this young man, then she may not be responsible for her actions. Do you have a hearty appetite?

SALLY. Right now I could eat a shoe.

DR WILLIS. Yes, I would say there is evidence for a tyranny of the ovaries.

He sighs.

Alas. The life of a woman is a history of disease. Mr Coombes.

He shakes COOMBES*'s hand.*

Mrs Luke.

He nods at her. She puts out her hand to shake. It is black with soot. He smiles, kind.

I won't, if you don't mind. Dirty hands. Bad for business. Ladies.

End

He bows, courteous, and goes.
They all look at SALLY. COOMBES *blows the candle out.*

PEG. Well, I suppose we must be satisfied by that.

ELIZABETH. Of course. Now you have heard it from a man you can believe it.

JUDITH. It is a good result Lizzy. Do not mar it cos your pride is hurt. Will you lead us in a vote?

ELIZABETH *shakes her head.* JUDITH *turns to* CHARLOTTE.

Mrs Cary. Tompkins. I know that is not what you hoped for but perhaps you will

CHARLOTTE *bursts into tears. Mortified, she hides herself, to recover.*

SARAH SMITH. Strike me blind, we'll be here when that comet comes round again at this rate, you agather, raise your hand if you are satisfied by the doctor's advice.

All of the MATRONS *raise their hands except* CHARLOTTE, EMMA *and* HELEN.
A pause. Then with great difficulty, CHARLOTTE *raises hers.*

HELEN *has her head bowed. She is crying.*

Helen?

HELEN. It is not fair. It is not fair.

ELIZABETH. Whassa matter maw? You were sympathetic to her from the start and now it's proven you change your mind?

HELEN. I thought she was lying to save her neck! I had sympathy for the stupid bunter. I did not imagine it could be true.

JUDITH. But is it not better this way?