

I slashed at the foliage with a bamboo walking stick pinched from an elephant's-foot stand in the front hall. Back here in the kitchen garden, the high red brick walls had not yet let in the warming sun; everything was still sodden from the rain that had fallen in the night.

Making my way through the debris of last year's uncut grass, I poked along the bottom of the wall until I found what I was looking for: a clump of bright leaves, whose scarlet shine made their three-leaved clusters easy to spot among the other vines. Pulling on a pair of cotton gardening gloves that had been tucked into my belt, and launching into a loudly whistled rendition of Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo, I went to work.

Later, in the safety of my Sanctum Sanctorum, my Holy of Holies--I had come across that delightful phrase in a biography of Thomas Jefferson and adopted it as my own--I stuffed the colourful leaves into a glass retort, taking care not to remove my gloves until their glossy foliage was safely tamped down. Now came the part I loved.

Stoppering the retort, I connected it on one side to a flask in which water was already boiling, and on the other, to a coiled glass condensing tube whose open end hung suspended over an empty beaker. With the water bubbling furiously, I watched the steam find its way through the tubing and escape into the flask among the leaves. Already they were beginning to curl and soften as the hot vapour opened the tiny pockets between their cells, releasing the oils that were the essence of the living plant.

This was the way the ancient alchemists had practiced their art: fire and steam, steam and fire. Distillation.

How I loved this work.

Distillation. I said it aloud. "Dis-till-ation!"

I watched in awe as the steam cooled and condensed in the coil, and wrung my hands in ecstasy as the first limpid drop of liquid hung suspended--then dropped with an audible "plop!" into the waiting receptacle.

When the water had boiled away, the operation was complete. I turned off the flame and cupped my chin in my palms to watch with fascination as the fluid in the

beaker settled into two distinct layers: on the bottom the clear distilled water, atop which floated a liquid of a light yellow hue. This was the essential oil of the leaves. It was called urushiol and had--among other things--been used in the manufacture of lacquer.

Digging into the pocket of my jumper, I pulled out a shiny golden tube. I removed its cap, and couldn't help smiling as the red tip was revealed. Ophelia's lipstick: purloined from the drawer of her dressing table, along with the pearls and the Scotch mints.

And Feely--Miss Snotrag--hadn't even noticed it was gone. Remembering the mints, I popped one into my mouth, crushing the sweet noisily between my molars.

The core of lipstick came out easily enough, and I relit the spirit lamp. Only a gentle heat was required to reduce the waxy stuff to a sticky mass. If Feely only knew that lipstick was made of fish scales, I thought, she might be a little less eager to slather the stuff all over her face. I must remember to tell her. I grinned. Later.

With a pipette I drew off a few millimeters of the distilled oil that floated in the beaker, then, drop by drop, dripped it gently into the ooze of the melted lipstick, giving the mixture a vigorous stir with a wooden tongue depressor.

Too thin, I thought, and fetching down a jar, I added a dollop of beeswax to restore it to its former consistency.

Time for the gloves again--and for the iron bullet mold I had pinched from Buckshaw's really quite decent firearm museum.

Odd, isn't it, that a charge of lipstick is precisely the size of a .45 calibre slug. A useful bit of information, really. I'd have to remember to think of its wider ramifications tonight when I was tucked safely into my bed. Right now, I was far too busy.

Teased from its mold and cooled under running water, the reformulated red core fit neatly back inside its golden dispenser.

I screwed it up and down several times to make sure that it was working. Then I replaced the cap. Feely was a late sleeper and would still be dawdling over breakfast.