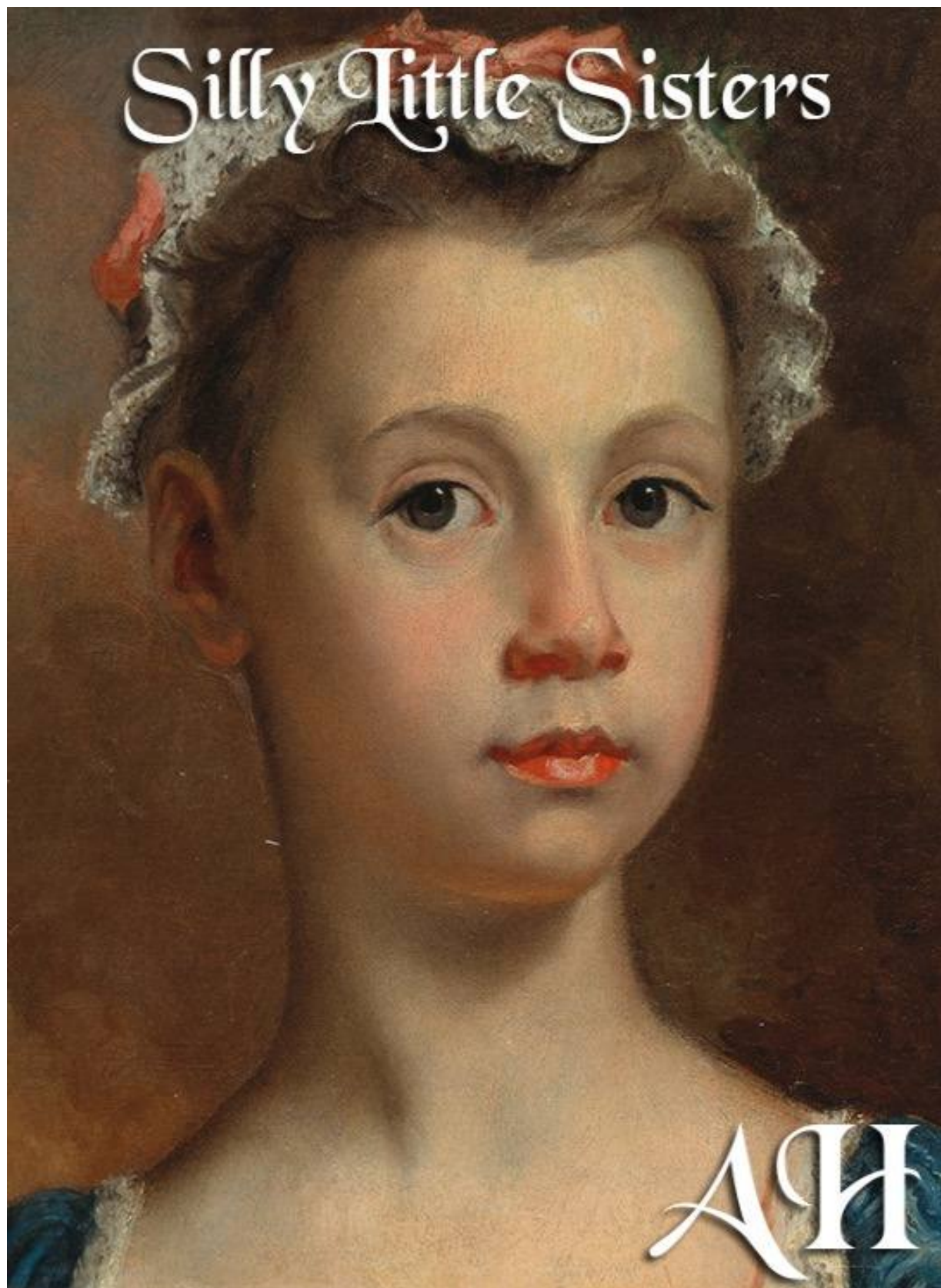


Silly Little Sisters



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Anne Hauden

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SILLY LITTLE SISTERS

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ONE

The use of black cloth for the fashioning of a suit of clothes, especially when the textile in question was of a silken crêpe, usually presupposed that the wearer was in full mourning, but it had then to be matched with the modish long waistcote and knee-breeches in the same fabric, mercifully looser and more comfortably fitting than the fashions of a decade ago. In this case, however, the latter two garments were unlike the coat, for they were made of figured paduasoy, also black, the brocading of the latter of a most exquisite kind and probably woven to order, which was about as costly a proceeding as could be in matters of dress. The choice of black for wear was favoured by the mercantile orders in large and dirty towns for obvious reasons, or among the rich for reasons of whim and eccentricity, as was the choice of greyish face powder instead of the white bismuth, but not applied as usual like a mask, but rubbed upon certain parts of the already lean physiognomy to highlight and sharpen its hard and regular features, for the lavish application of white and pink and red did not suit this face at all. A concession to the dictates of accepted accessories was made in the presence of a little taffeta patch on one cheekbone, while the dressing of one's own hair was in compleat contrariness to the latest coiffures, which prescribed the use of exquisite wigs with a curled foretop, a pigeon's wing or two at the ears, and a liberal use of powder and pomatum to make the hair look grey, whatever the wearer's real hair colour, but if he used a wig, that mattered not for he would have been shaven bald – whereas the specimen under scrutiny had tresses the colour of the raven's wing, and that was perhaps why he wore black clothes and made his countenance look dead. This sobriety was not of a puritanical kind; there was a flurry of Valenciennes lace to embellish the snow white linens, diamonds at the throat and in all buttons whether of waistcote or cote or the wide, turned back cuffs, and exquisite embroidery on all edges of cuff, hems and pocket flaps. There was even a muff of feathers, all dyed black, and black stockings worn under the breeches hem, with garters hidden, of course, unlike the modes half-a-generation ago.

This spectacle of morbid finery was sprawled upon the comfortable, bright, silken squabs of a carriage with a 'cellar' – or cellaret – beneath the seat, containing foods and wines and wares in which to fare upon them, with glass windows not just above the doors but at the side panels, and silken curtains to draw over them for privacy or to keep out any blazing rays of the sun. It was a vehicle that only the very rich could afford in which to be transported, as was apparent even from the outside, which was a neat shape, like an inverted isosceles trapezium but with very rounded corners so that at first sight it was akin to a broad oval. The whole was lacquered in black, with a coat of arms under a ducal crest upon the door panels. As with most heavier carriages of this type the cabin was fitted to the framework with leathern straps but this creation had springs too, which enabled the body to ride well as the wheels, all four of which took the toll of whatever the roads had to offer, and not all roads were good, nor the whole stretch of a roadway in good repair, for that matter depended upon the parish through which it passed, which was responsible for its upkeep. This vehicle managed all vicissitudes cast its way, for it was not just an ordinary great carriage, it was a berline, a thing which had reached England from the continent, and was the invention of a Provençal of Italian origin, one Philippe Chiesa, Chief Engineer to the late Elector of

Brandenburg, and father of the present King of Prussia, Frederick II, so that it bore a name to honour the Prussian capital. This sort of vehicle had the virtue of being stable in all circumstances and well-balanced, thus best suited to country travel, even if the French were supposed to have adapted it for Town use, despite the fact that the French were involved in a diplomacy that would make the Prussian a belligerent enemy. Its adoption in this country was not sudden but its popularity was, for the Prussian monarch was an ally of the English King, George II, who was not English at all but Hanoverian born, but at least he could speak and work in English, unlike his father, who had been pejoratively been nicknamed ‘German George’. Indeed the dynasty was much despised for being so obscure that many peers claimed to have pedigrees that were superior to that of their own monarch, which was not difficult even in England after the Stuart kings.

One such was the dour supercilious entity in this equipage, with all its trappings of wealth and security, six horses to pull it, a cloud of armed outriders riding behind, and following, a cabriolet, or lighter smaller carriage, to carry valet and luggage. All the same, servantry apart, he was not alone, for he had two travelling companions to their own extreme mortification. One was a bluff, placid fellow who affected no splendour in his attire and looked that which he was, the practical but well-dressed country gentleman, for his clothes were of good quality, but the man in black made him feel uncomfortable and silly and worse, seemed to know it, which was a little too irritating to be ignored, but it had to be borne, albeit grudgingly, and with displayed disaffection, for despite the Great Law of Subordination and the fact that ‘every Englishman loved a lord’, a John Bull had no superior, all of which was inextricably self-contradictory. This displeasure was aggravated by the third presence in the cabin, which was that of a wizened, crumpled, withered, shrivelled example of male emaciation, burthened under a full-bottomed wig and boasting more wrinkles than a keg full of dried prunes imported from Guyenne. This creature, also clad in sombre black, and obnoxiously shrewd with it, delighted in annoying the countryman by sneering and peering at him, until brought to book with a single question by the man whom he served.

“Hickeringill, why stare you at Sir Robert, so?” demanded his master.

“My apologies, your grace, sir,” relented the scrawny one, with a bow to each person. Sir Robert shrugged and nervously adjusted the pearl in his throat ruffle.

“Why, you twitch more than a caper merchant (dancing master), my dear Orre,” commented his grace quizzically. “Whose dog is dead?”

“If only you were wearing red, my dear Irvin,” sighed Sir Robert Orre, “I’d ha’ been tempted to make response, but as times go, all I can do is pose a query. You go a-courting, so why are you clad in what, at first sight, appears to be deep mourning?”

“For that I’d need to dress wholly in wildebore,” dissented the Duke. “I happen to like to wear black; many people do, and not just in dirty Towns. Yet if you chuse to regard it as weeds, then do so by all means, for my poor bride’s sake, for by all accounts, she has the most terrible fate in store for her, and must marry the mixen for the sake of the muck (wed an undesirable person for money), and she must have me.”

“She has to, Duke. Her father’s finances and the size of his family behove her to agree, for the best he can give any of them is a Rochester portion (two torn smocks and what Nature gave).”

“Do you not feel a pang o’ conscience or two, having recommended her as a possible

wife for me?”

“Possible wife? Mean you that you may not have her? That will finish the old man: he will be bound to leave the key under the doorstep (go bankrupt), and as for his offspring, well, taking their pedigrees to market will fetch them nothing.”

“Answer my question, Orre,” persisted the Duke.

“Truth be told, it was my cousin Mortlake chose you; you were not my idea, but I know the old man –,”

“Actually it was not cousin Mortlake, it was Louisa, who is so very fond of me as my sister that she would try and have me end my mouse-hunt (wencher) ways – or mend them, ’tis near as is fourpence to a groat.”

“It never ceases to amaze me that an elegant, fashionable, polished, suave and refined bene mort (beautiful woman) like her should ha’ chusen to wed a simple soul of a John Trot (country bumpkin) like my cousin with his bucolic ways and tastes. She might ha’ been expected to seduce a wealthy, gentle-born yokel, but to wed him?”

“I was convinced she was suffering from a temporary aberration when she announced her wish thus, and I even called her ‘Bess of Bedlam’, whereat she snuffed pepper roundly. I do not entirely approve of the match, but they have lasted together some seven years and thrice spawned a two-legged tympani (baby), with no deterioration between them apparent, but it is fair to anticipate that when he reaches middle-age he will grow dull and my sister Louisa is not going to suffer dullness in anyone. Nor am I, for that matter, even if dull wives are the best wives to be had, for there is no chance of living at the sign of the Queen’s Head (house where the wife rules) with them, or enduring a cat and dog life. By some accounts, my bride-to-be is a placid creature. Is she also dull?”

“Nay, but she is a most conventional country lass,” replied Orre.

“The stillroom and the physick border and her needlework and the spinet?”

“Not forgetting the saddle and learning the new poetry off by heart, as girls do when they starch their caps.”

“Split me! They starch their own caps in that house?” the Duke recoiled. “The black ox hath trod upon on all their feet (they know poverty), indeed.”

“She has a good singing voice and I have heard it. You sing, Duke, do you not? You could sing duets together,” proposed Sir Robert.

“Before or after we ha’ jumped the besom (gone through a mock marriage), linked and locked in marital mists?”

Exasperated, Sir Robert Orre pursed his lips and said nothing.

“Two and twenty years old, you said,” reminded his grace, and Hickeringill the secretary grinned and nodded.

“Not a giddy girl,” assured the Baronet, “for she is already a spinster.”

“The eldest of four sisters?”

“Don’t level your eye at any o’ t’ others, for they’re too young for you, with perhaps the exception of Lady Honoria, who is a notorious termagant and will lead apes in hell, sure as louse in bosom,” quoth Sir Robert, his allusion to parasites making the Duke wince. “All of nineteen, is her la’ ship, and the despair o’ the district. She’ll not be content to be your good and quiet wife, suffering your games and mistresses, and dutifully making you all the faces (having children) you need.”

“’Tis a baleful business, indeed, is espousal,” conceded his grace, “for being burthened with an hereditary title that passes in tail and not by collateral has a distinct disadvantage: one has to wed and breed in order to keep it from falling into abeyance. At my time of life I should be free to enjoy what is left of youth and the advent of maturity, not be settling down with a lawful wedded boring humdrum (spouse) who *has rights over me!* Can you imagine letting a skirt have rights over a man? Even if I ever divide the house with her (throw her out), she can come maunding (begging), the law obliges me to keep her back and belly. The entire concept is preposterous; ’tis incongruity exemplified.”

“As a husband, you are her compleat overlord; she has no other rights beyond which those you permit and she has no control over property –,”

“She has no property; it is I who am bound to maintain her and for that she can legally ask as long as we are bound together. While we share the same roof, she may spend my money and I am responsible for all her debts. In this case I am going to be responsible for the debts of her vicar of St. Fool’s father, too.”

“That is your choice,” Sir Robert reminded. “Besides, Irvin, you have wealth that is immeasurable. The nation thrives, we have gained colonies since the last war, another is brewing that will doubtless benefit us, there are improvements in agriculture and industries, and I’ll wager that you have an oar in every boat and have profited handsomely from all of it. Wherefor do you rant so? One of your wild gaming parties would pay for –,”

“You know not of what you speak; have you seen a written assessment o’ her father’s debts? I have studied one at some length. The man has windmills (empty projects) in his head and extravagant ways of execution wi’ respect to them.”

“Once he had a fortune at his command,” commented Orre. “The irony of it is that he did not inherit it and then proceed to squander it, like so many young jemmies (dandies). He was the son of an impoverished father and he built up this fortune of which I spoke, by what means I know not, but he was extremely lucky, until some delusion of grandeur possessed him. The waste in which he indulged, and still does, defies the imagination. He is fond of whipping the devil (doing things the irregular or illegal way), greasing fat sows in the arse (bribing rich men), and always wi’ folk whom he thinks are of influence; he has no friends but those whom he could use to further his affairs, he deems, and he likes to keep his connexions oiled until he loses a use for them, whereupon he forgets about them. He is convinced that only he knows best and would fling the house out of the window to prove that is so, but how effective that is, Heaven alone knows, for I find him embarrassing. He is wearing out his wife, and soon he will be ripe for Bedlam, which is as well, for he is a trial to all his children, and his heir is poised to take charge of his affairs, so as he loses his wits, he will be consigned to the wings and then the family may recommence as if from a beginning. Your part in it is to take away one daughter and let them have that helping hand so that they may arrive at a point from which to recommence in the first place.”

“She is an expensive wife already.”

“She will only be too grateful to wed you, for her life is not an easy one. While her father is charming and even obsequious before useful strangers, he calls his offspring by foul names and threatens them with disinheritance, while menacing his wife with expulsion. To you he will be unctuous, depend upon it.”

“One must keep up appearances, I suppose,” the Duke grunted laconically. Pray, how

know you of all this?"

"Everyone on his estate, and in his village knows it. Of late I saw him in Town and he was berating his wife – in public, in a hectoring tone, and everyone turned and stared at him and thought him mad."

"And this is the father-in-law that you and your cousin and my sister have conspired to saddle me with?"

"If anything, you will be able to control him," said Orre, "as no-one can."

"Control? You talk as if he were of so many minds that he would never be mad, or that his has the merry-go-sorry (hysteria)," shied Irvin. "Is this an endogenous condition? I would be loth to breed trash from his blood."

"His blood is the Blood of the Woodvilles," smiled Orre.

"Of that I am aware; that, and perhaps the fact that the homoney (wife) to be is obedient and not entirely handsome-bodied in the face (ugly), are the only reasons I am going on this journey of encounter," grimaced the Duke.

Orre eyed him pensively: the Duke of Irvin was of such ton that Society was afraid to consider him as a son-in-law, and he was among those who were thus described, whatever the range of his other influence, as beggars who could not be chusers.

"Be easy," said Orre. "Of his offspring, the closest in character to him is his daughter Honoria: the others are said to be 'their mother's brood'. It is a local joke and had no bearing on their legitimacy, for she is a virtuous woman, and he is morbidly jealous. Were a man young enough to be her grandson – a figure of speech – were to pay her a compliment, he would make sad havoc of it for the Green-Eyed Monster is strong in him. If anything, he will ha' begotten by-blows about which few know and when it does emerge, it is enough to make a fool out of him."

"Whereupon he screams bandog and Bedlam and demands the respect due to a patriarch and a Duke of noble lineage?" divined the Duke of Irvin. "Sadly I have met his sort before in that regard at least. Most tiresome. What of his children, the legitimate ones?"

"They are not told, but they play at guessing games, especially the older boys, and one of the girls, who is fast approaching a woman but prefers to remain a hoyden," answered Orre.

"Interesting," conceded his g to make ends meet, race, raising a pensive eyebrow.

"She is half your age, Duke," reminded Sir Robert.

"That would make her seventeen, and not one of the younger children at all; girls of our degree wed at fourteen these days; it is a common enough occurrence," smirked Irvin.

Sir Robert Orre, Baronet, could not help but pull a grimace of disgust. At that moment, when the groom he had fetched for the household's eldest daughter, the former was behaving like a lecherous old man, for the vehicle drove through a pair of stone gate-posts, which, in need of repair as they were, were also mounted each by a gryphon, oddly new and intact and very highly polished.

"You see?" remarked Sir Robert. "The very posts upon which these are mounted are crumbling, but he has lately acquired these, for they form a part of his coat of arms, to *impress* you. How you will *impress* him and his family with your six-horse team when four are more usual; ten to one he will claim that it justifies the order for the purchase of the gryphons."

"Berlines are heavy and six horses for a long journey are a matter of necessity," the Duke supplied wryly. "By the bye, the Duke of Hearne and his entourage may not be as

impressed by this equipage as you think. Some say that this vehicle was named a berline after the *berlina*, which is an Italian pillory, and they may know that version. Has his grace my father-in-law-to-be shallow tastes and a showy character?”

“Egregiously so, with a superficiality that can hide decay and disorder under a mask or tawdry decoration,” the other confirmed. “Ironically it has done his offspring some good, for far from emulating him, they are all either too young and concerned with wild entertainments of a bucolic kind, or they endeavour to counterbalance their father’s nature –,”

“Which has not been given a very edifying description by you,” said Irvin. “I am veritably looking forward, then, to this encounter with this quiet gem of a countrywoman who is to be my wife, which will far outweigh the impending trial of meeting her father, who promises to be an ordeal to my notions on refinement, wit and behaviour.”

At that, the secretary badly suppressed a snigger and the travelling companion, who for propriety’s sake, was to perform the introductions, fell silent.

The approach of his grace’s carriage was duly sighted from the house that was to be its destination, but thô it stood tranquil in its jumbled mediaeval habit damaged not by neglect but by the Wars of the Roses, which no-one wanted to repair as a reminder of what could rent this land when its rulers went awry, within, all was uproar. His elderly grace was ceaselessly bellowing contrary orders, criticising wantonly, hectoring his wife, disapproving of all a manner of housekeeping details about which he knew precious little, interfering at this last moment with orders about domestic arrangements in which his experience was close to nothing, causing bitterness and inconvenience with his impractical commands, calling the servants names, and generally making a tremendous fuss where hardly more than the slightest effort was warranted, the matter of the Duke of Irvin’s visit already being provided for by his wife and older offspring, together with what remained of his faithful servants, while he was busy about nothing in particular. It was almost as if he was suddenly preparing for the advent of an expected visitor when the latter was in his driveway and when it was explained to him that all the things he had required were either ready or impossible, he took credit for the organisation of it all, allowing not a scrap of such glory to his long-suffering Duchess. Worse, he insisted on being alone as he received his distinguished visitor in the great hall of his ancestors, hung with banners, antient weaponry and trophies, and peopled with suits of armour from divers eras, as well as a tall grandfather clock that kept excellent time, because ‘Thos. Tompion *Londini fecit.*’ Her grace had to wait in the parlour, and the intended was packed off to her rooms there to wait until her father deigned to send for her.

The Duke of Irvin, on disembarking, did not look about him and demand whether this was one of those shambling castles or palaces which James I was in the habit of ordering to be built and then abandoning during the middle of its construction; he was neither so impolite nor so ignorant, for this was indeed a relic of a bygone age, with towers and turrets added as necessity, wars, attempted disseisin and other vicissitudes related to violent activity dictated, while the damage inflicted upon it was actually negligible. This bastion was built to outlast destruction and thus time had little effect upon it; not even Oliver Cromwell had ordered it to be pulled down, as he had with the Marquis of Winchester’s Basing House, for the simple reason that this had not actually stood in his way as being in a location of strategic importance. Even the stonework that embellished the gothic-arched windows with their mullions and transoms had not much suffered, and the great door was all that remained of the

massively braced portcullis that led to a drawbridge over a moat, for all the latter mentioned were long gone and the moat under a garden about which nothing was noteworthy. Upon the great oaken portal had been installed a knocker in the form of a ring held between the jaws of a gryphon, but there was no need to wield it, for a liveried footman opened the access and bowed the visitors in. Waiting for them was their host, resplendent in dark crimson velvet laced with gold, but this was his best suit and kept for great occasions, like the wig he wore, in a fashion that was some ten years older but mercifully not too different to that affected today, except to the most fastidious eye, and suited to elders. As for his look, it was a trifle wild-eyed, but time had been kind to him, for he apparently aged well, and thus his years could indeed not be guessed, except that he was growing old and that was all. Even the good colour was lent his skin by the fact of living in the country and going hunting as a true lord should, althô he owned no pack of hounds, an expensive luxury, while the weather had not ravaged him, even if time had ravaged his temper, but that he concealed, like his house, under a veneer of affability, with the difference that the castle was genuinely steady and he was not so. At any rate, he believed most devotedly in the Great Law of Subordination, for he was barely civil to the Baronet if most courteous to the Duke, for both were of the same rank, and not only that, both belonged to the old families of England, rather than those come into prominence under the Tudors by buying monastic lands and demanding titles to go with their estates, or squarely purchasing them from the Stuart Kings. His kind, like those of the visitor, had ridden to victory and disgrace under the banners of Richard I and to victory and defeat against the Maid of Orleans. All the same, his conduct embarrassed the guest, for despite his rank, he went through the range of mannerisms, such as appalling hauteur with Orre to almost grovelling obsequiousness with Irvin, as if to soften the latter enough to loosen purse-strings all the way. Indeed he spoke even before Sir Robert could perform the introductions and that too with fervid excitement. Then he conducted them into the parlour, with its hammer-beam roof serving as a ceiling and a jumble of styles, from Italian intaglio dating from the times when Lorenzo was Magnificent, to a chest of drawers recently ordered out of the workshop of Master Chippendale, all in mahogany, while all upholstery was in gros point and doubtless made at home to save money. Here, also on display were the Duchess of Hearne and the heir to this estate and titles, the Marquis of Devenish, who looked dull and disappointed, unlike his prim mother, bravely setting her face in a mask of patrician satisfaction with life. Neither were inclined to repeat the exaggerated reception of the master of the house; both knew that the new guest, Orre not being in the count, was a rake, and so notorious for it that he was unacceptable to most houses and that he had to come seeking his spouse among the desperate. It was his good luck that this time he had found someone of his degree, otherwise he would have had to go hunting among social climbing members of the lower gentry, which would not have allowed his Duchess much liberty in Town or at Court, for want of appropriate ancestry. The Duke of Irvin, for his part, if unable to penetrate the Duchess's inscrutability, could see that her beauty was faded and that she was prematurely aged, while the Marquis resented him to some degree: he was an immoral and amoral man, whereas the other went regularly to church and even believed in what he prayed while leading an exemplary life – in the country, apart from impregnating all the local wenches, there was little else to do – so, why did the bad fellow enjoy such wealth and the freedom it purchased whereas a good and God-fearing man lived counting every penny under the misrule of a once brilliant now nigh deranged fool? Nor

did he seem particularly enthusiastic about having this grey-faced fright dressed in black wed his sister, who surely should have been allowed better after waiting so long, when girls of their rank wed at fourteen? Even if he was well-looking in a macabre sort of way, he was unfashionably tall and too big in the frame: Devenish himself was a graceful and slight man of medium build and, by his own account, deserved to go win hearts in London, but that was not possible when one had nought but the Devil dancing in one's pocket. One thing was clear notwithstanding the impenetrable surface of goodwill shewn by the mother and the reserve which the son dared display: they tacitly questioned choice of the black garb in a suitor come a-courting and Devenish even sneered at the fact that the Duke, who had nothing effeminate about him, carried a muff. That was as far as his grace of Irvin would allow, for he warned his future brother-in-law off with a piercing stare in which his steely eyes took on a diabolical glare. For his pains, he may have achieved obedience but he aroused nothing but hostility.

As when menfolk were encountered the two Dukes talked, for after the politenesses about the manner of the visitors' journey were dispensed with, the Duchess went away to see that the guest's affairs were properly installed, and the males sat down to take wine and discuss the state of the nation, or so the host deemed it necessary to do. Like all country dwellers he was a little out of date but he was well-informed like all of his order, from which the government of the country was chosen. Orre had his word to say now and again, but the Duke of Hearne kept trying to exclude him with references to what was being said in the Upper House, because the King's unofficial First Minister was now Spencer Compton, while Lord Carteret the Foreign Minister, was negotiating with the Prussian King, who had taken Silesia from the Holy Roman Empire by invading it, and there were difficulties about the young female ruler of the said Empire being allowed to rule at all, even if her late father had had many European states sigh his 'Pragmatic Sanction', to recognise her spouse, Charles of Lorraine, as Emperor, a title she could not inherit – and Bavaria refused. All the same, it seemed that Compton, whose only official title was First Lord of the Treasury, was slow to make war. The Earl of Orford, once the famed Sir Robert Walpole, who with his cousin Townsend had kept England at peace but for the occasional clash or two, almost since the last great War of the Spanish Succession, was out of office since February, when the king prorogued Parliament to enable him to resign and new folk to take office. The two Dukes talked of elections and how people sat in the street and kept a pot boiling on a makeshift hearth of stones, as if to shew that they were householders and entitled to vote. It turned out that Lord Devenish had been most useful in organising his part, but his father claimed most of the honours. All the same, there was a new generation of parliamentarians, who were great orators and very much inclined to war-mongering, or so reminded the Duke of Irvin, when the older man asked him about his own placemen, for the Duke of Irvin exercised such considerable patronage over so many different estates that he would rather not talk of his political affairs, and furthermore, he steered the conversation out of England itself, for there was already competition in the Americas and in India; and no-one knew on whose side the colonists really were under Washington. Then there was the Duke of Newcastle, who always liked the notion of making war. A notorious fop, he was said to have such a fear of catching colds on stone floor in chapels that he would stand on a Royal train to keep his feet warm. The Duke of Hearne was undeterred: there was nothing like a good war to make Britain rich, if she could filch colonies off the French or the Indians, tho' the gentry were still recovering

from the effects of war since Queen Anne's time. To do so, Carteret was right to help Empress Maria Theresia and bring the Prussian monarch to book.

During this discussion, the Duke of Irvin became aware of the fact that there was more activity in the house, beyond the unloading and transportation into the house – castle – of his luggage, especially upon the stairway and the landings. In the drawing room, he could not see the two slender figures concealed there to watch but when the Duchess returned to say that his rooms were truly ready now that his valet was unpacking his affairs in them, he espied them through the open doors, and to make matters easier, they came up for a better look at him, but he could not tell to what sort of person they belonged. When he rose, in order to respond to her grace's remark, for he would have liked to be more comfortable before he met his betrothed or continued conversations, the two stealthy folk fled, darting off in a flurry of coat-skirts, breeches and boots on display momentarily, lithe, agile, graceful young folk whisking themselves off into the passage to disappear from his sight once he had attained the upper corridor, duly escorted by his host, for they were behind one of the doors along it.

"We saw him," gurgled one of them, in a curiously high voice, "and what a creature!"

"He looks like Old Scratch," added a male baritone, "and is veritably the gentleman in black (both terms mean the Devil), for that is what he is wearing. "'Ouns, Carrie Woodville, must you wear that cap tied under your chin?" he added, turning to one of the ladies already in the chamber. "Egad, it is past palling."

"I must have my head covered," replied Lady Caroline, as she patted down her skirts of yellow tabinet, for Yellow was a safe hue before the very modish, and so had been for years. "If I don't, I will not look demure. My worry is that these robings (turnbacks) on my bodice will look outmoded, for Lady Orre has it that robings upon bodices should reach the floor, and encompass the skirts."

"In the greenmans (countryside) we're always a decade later than the Metropolis when it comes to the modes. Even the fashion dolls sent out from Paris reach provincial towns after the world and his wife in London Town has done with them," said the high voice. "He won't notice; from what I saw of him, he'd be more interested in what you keep behind that bodice than how it is embellished. Now to that cap: it makes you look like your own housemaid, and there is a cathedral (old-fashioned) accessory if any."

"And just what do you think you look like?" snarled another young lady in the chamber, who looked older than Lady Caroline, but it was all in the expression on their respective faces.

"An arrant knave?" came the jocose response.

The doors opened to admit a girl in white silk, tall for her thirteen years, her brown hair in a curled foretop ending in a pigeon's wing above each ear, and the back braided and pinned up to the top of her head.

"What do you say?" she shewed off merrily, turning in a full pirouette. "I did it all myself. Are we to go down and see this freak? I sighted him from the windows; what a carriage, and what keffyls (horses; Welsh) to go with it! You'll never find their like here. What is amiss, Honoria? You frown so."

"Don't use cant, Selina, especially not in private, for one day you will forget and use it before guests. Now we have no room for errors, for father's fortune and ours is about to be made or broken, and it is not just how well Carrie can convince her suitor of her nubility, but

what kind of impression her family gives about themselves that could influence him,” admonished Lady Honoria gravely

“We’re not marrying him,” countered Lady Selina.

“By my troth, this girl is obtuse,” groaned Honoria.

“So when are we going down?” persisted Selina.

“We are not going down,” declared her older but not eldest sister.

“Eh, Justina, you’d cut a fine dash throwing your legs in breeches about before that leg-lifter below if you present yourself garbed man-fashion,” laughed Selina.

“Selina! *Never* such a word – pair of words – ’tis very low – again! I do not even want to know where you learned them,” scolded Honoria.

“You’d make a fine mother-in-law,” teased Justina. “Besides, I don’t ha’ to present myself,” she added, for with such a face and such a name, she was no man at all, but just a pretty, slim girl, inclined towards tallness, and thus fitted well into the clothes of her brother Lord Julius, with whom she had entered, and who, like her, was in riding boots, so that they made a kin pair, except that she also had a bosom and a tiny waist.

Lady Caroline advanced towards her youngest sister, looking worried.

“Selina, from where did you acquire the use of such odiously obscene language?” she wondered gently.

“From me,” owned Julius, downcast and blinking sheepishly. “Yestermorn I was talking to Justina about Irvin and I called him that, because his reputation seems to have preceded him. ’Twas in the schoolroom and Selina was there. I beg pardon; it was indeed thoughtless of me. I on no account meant for her to repeat it before you.”

“Considering the pain it will give Carrie,” noted Justina but Selina rapidly changed the subject and pounced on Lady Caroline.

“Lud, Carrie, why have you donned that old gown to meet your intended in?” she demanded. “Unlike us, you surely, will go before Irvin?”

“I don’t have many new gowns, and this is among the best,” smiled Caroline.

“Wait until you are wed to the creature below,” gloated Julius. “Rich as a nabob. You’ll not even wipe your feet on that old rag.”

“Don’t make her feel worse than she does. What a family we are! Instead of preparing her and encouraging her, all we ha’ done are thwart her resolve,” commented Justina, and Caroline came and embraced her.

What a family they were indeed, inclined towards thinness, but active and alert of eye, all of them well-looking and alike, more or less, with the exception of Honoria, who was lantern jawed and resembled her gruff father, with the possibility that she would become beetle browed in old age. Of the others, the fairest was Caroline and the darkest was Justina, for the former was flaxen haired and the latter blessed with tresses of a dark rich brown which she liked to call black, but there was a family resemblance which they had gained from their mother and each one had her or his own fascination: Selina was too young and not fully formed but already she was the elf of the family; Julius, who had no other prospects than to become cannon fodder, had a pleasant face apart from the fine bone structure that underlay truly good looks, Carrie had a saintly placidity about her, of the sort that Old Italian Masters tried to impart to the Holy Virgin in their dreadful daubs that everyone was supposed to declare masterpieces, except that their model was often enough the mistress of the patron who

had commissioned the work, while Justina was just lovely and the male attire brought this out more than all the powder, patch and pomatum that she could ever chuse to lay hands on, and fortunately this house could not afford it. Painfully aware of what indeed they lacked, Selina broke into recitation.

“Diamonds, carriages, plumes, silk, perfumed gloves and embroidered fans, not to mention a fine Brunswick¹ not quilted for warmth, but lined in sable fur all the way from Siberia,” she gloated with pleasure. “That is what your intended is worth.”

“Carrie will be a Duchess, for having been born daughter of a Duke,” snorted Honoria. “What else can one expect for her?”

“Mother is a Duchess but all she has is not even two shirts and a rag,” reminded Julius.

“This family is different,” hedged Honoria primly.

“Yea, we sit on the penniless bench and our pa won’t even let us chuse the colour in which our rooms should be painted lest mixing it be too expensive, and then he goes and spends all the money on silken flocks for his lodging. Our ma cannot talk to the butler unchaperoned for he is a man, or else the paternal parent will throw a jealous fit, and no dentist can attend her unless her spouse is in the room even thô she is old enough to be mother to any practitioner, including the potter carrier (apothecary), and she is too old to have horns to sell,” criticised Justina. “As for our dear and responsible daddy upon whom the law allows to devolve every right in Christendom and a few more aside of them, he put all his mortgages and debts into the joint names of himself and his son-and-heir, who is nevertheless forbidden all powers to use them legally and lord knows he may be all of four and twenty. He interferes in and changes everything Devenish does, even thô he has more wit than hair, and has the gall to tell him that he is useless and of no help at all. Whatever obscenity Selina mistakenly used to name Carrie’s suitor, she is well rid of us in this house, even if she wed Satan himself, and she is going to, for this was quite a handsome version.”

“Quite a fine speech you made,” carped Honoria.

“Cease that, Honoria; Justina is only trying to console me, for in my own house I have been brought up by one whose fate has been worse than mine,” corrected Lady Caroline. “I care little of the ducal morals at this stage as long as he does not subject me to interrogations worse than to the prisoner in the dock if ever I am left in the house alone as to who called and what I did or said.”

“And he nigh throttled me at looking at Miss Nan Orre in her gaudie gown at Yuletide, but he may go staring goats and monkeys at some shop-slut like a dog after a bitch in heat,” snorted Julius with contempt as much as dejection and indignation.

“Julius, you will cease to make such crude and unmeet comparisons,” decreed Honoria. “’Tis also prodigious vulgar, and in any wise, Nan Orre’s gown was purchased off a Scotchman’s cart² no less, and not likely to burn a navigable river (ordinary).”

“Where, think you, this gown came from?” sighed Carrie, frankly.

“Sadly, the only comparisons one can make pertinent to papa are crude and unmeet,” mused Justina.

“Er – do you and Julius plan to go to this Irvin fellow like that?” asked Selina of the latter with a rather obtuse air. “After all, papa may decide to shew off his family: ‘Call for the children!’” she added on a bawl, with some wild sweeping gestures, in mimicry of her father. “No ‘please’, no ‘thank-you’, no manners.”

“If he calls us, I may go as I am; what is amiss with riding dress?” scoffed Julius.

“Not in the drawing room,” asserted Lady Honoria, “which does not include Justina’s predicament.”

“Send her below as she is and say her name is Justin, Julius’s twin,” suggested Selina, “but that her voice ain’t broke yet – or that *he* had an accident.”

Thereat there was mirth from all, including Caroline and excluding Honoria.

“I wish papa would have one,” muttered the former unexpectedly.

“Shew some respect for a father, and suffer it; your spouse and master will be no different; in fact he already has a reputation for being worse, so he must seek among those who are about to follow a whereas (go bankrupt) for a spouse, for no-one else will have him.”

“You sound just like papa, Honoria,” chuckled Justina, “right down to the ‘shew some respect’ part of it. When I was in the nursery that’s all I ever overheard him say, and when I was naughty, and brought before him to have my head washed without soap (be scolded harshly), his favourite final statement was ‘or I’ll break your neck’.

“Is that how one speaks to children? I’m devilish glad that he was already too old to take much notice of me after I was born,” snorted Selina.

“Papa never took notice of any of his offspring after Justina, and she only in the negative sense; Julius he was happy with, but mother kept having girls, four of us to two males, which was monstrously impolitic of her, and no help to us,” assessed Caroline. “My own youth was fraught enough, but my inability to gain a spouse by the time I was sixteen, was all my fault, I tell you.”

“Had you been a handbasket portion (wife of rich family giving gifts to husband), you’d have had one easy as lying,” quoth Julius.

A rapping sounded on the door, and when Caroline answered with a consent, Lord Devenish entered on a brisk step, flustered enough to be febrile, and ashen-faced with it, while his head seemed to droop as if it were hanging off the top of his long, lowered neck, crowning his stooping, tall, limp, lanky person.

“The visitor has returned from his quarters, and father has just offered to shew the Duke around his one thousand and two hundred acres,” he announced, but Justina interrupted.

“That much already! The last time he played raise-mountain, (boasted), it was a thousand.”

“It has even been eight hundred and fifty –,”

“But never eight hundred, which is what it really is.”

“You know papa; long tongued as granny and all his geese are swans.”

“Well, he was telling the Duke that the latter must surely ha’ noticed how fine were the pastures and the fields and the flocks – without mentioning that they were the work of tenants and that we have enclosed nothing, having nothing with which to buy seed and beasts, and know you what we have been talking of all this time, apart from his usual beginning, namely politics that are a little out of date? First the wondrous condition of the estate, next the fine furnishings – which the Duke must ha’ noticed are in every colour, depending on what we can acquire most cheaply off the Scotchman’s cart – and finally, himself. His every sentence commences with the pronoun ‘I’. By then, mother was with us, and so the suitor in all fairness owned to her that he was impatient to meet his intended. ‘Call the children!’ ordered father, and poor pilgarlick (oneself) was sent scuttling out like some errand boy. As

for our visitor, I am sure that I saw on his face an expression of contempt that read ‘what a paltry, pathetic figure of a man this is, more your too humble servant than a man, ever’. Wait until you see Irvin: he has greyish powder on his face and his are the coldest grey eyes I have ever seen. He would make a perfect envoy from the Nether Regions sent up to assume a suave and civilised appearance and aspect, in order to report to Lucifer the state of the mortals at any given time, for we always need a little help with our projects.”

“Well, Julius, it is time we dusted off, otherwise I am due for the hustings (due for trouble). Devenish cannot fetch ‘the children’ if two of them have already gone out before the Duke of Irvin reached this grand demesne,” pronounced Justina.

“That settles it. We’re off. I ha’ no stomach for a meeting with an envoy from Hell,” agreed Lord Julius Woodville. “Fancy that papa should shew off to a Croesus like Irvin.”

As the siblings made for the door, Devenish spoke.

“He had a volley coming for him, having boasted about his acreage and the luscious furnishings, for Irvin calmly turned to him and asked if Carrie was bringing a dowry after all. That was when he rapidly changed the subject and suggested that they go out. The guest agreed but asked to see his betrothed first. By the bye, Julius, mother says that you must cease addressing the old man as ‘papa’ and her as ‘mamma’ while Irvin remains here: ’tis ‘father’ and ‘mother’ for the males, for papa and mamma are lullaby-cheat (baby) terms, and will serve with an onion in the mouths of females, who are likened to infantry (children).”

“I hope that Irvin was funning about the dowry,” fretted Carrie.

“Be easy – at least I think so, as far as such a creature can fun,” quoth Devenish.

“We should go below now, otherwise he will only send word for us again, and to delay thus is disobliging to our guest,” stated Honoria and rose. “I do not want papa to humiliate us all, me included, because you all go along with salt and spoons (are dilatory).”

At that the twain in the doorway egressed in haste, but Devenish hissed after them.

“What possessed you two to tog up thus and go out when you knew that Irvin would arrive today and by all accounting, in the middle of the afternoon?” he demanded, his voice low and discreet. “You cannot lope off now.”

“We are keeping a prior engagement, or have you forgotten that today is the day that Pye’s bankruptcy decree comes into effect?” reminded Justina.

“I cannot help but feel that Pye is a kindred spirit to me: he spent three years trying to pay off inherited debts and failed. He tried to continue that experiment with that water wheel and the engineers absconded with the investors’ capital, whereto his father made the greatest contribution. I half-fear that such a fate could one day be visited upon me. Incidentally, what interest have you both in Pye’s misfortunes?”

“Well, we are going to try and help him play a little game,” quoth Julius, with merry mischief. “’Tis called ‘defraud the creditor’ and ’twas Lady Orre’s idea,” he added with a snigger. “Now there is one who knows how many days go to the week as far as mint (money) is concerned. She thought of a capital way to preserve Pye’s properties and prevent them from falling into the hands o’ rapacious jacks in an office (imperious petty officials) and creditors; a right prinado (female sharper), she.”

“Watch you don’t catch cold at your pranks and end up in the iron doublet (get put in prison) for it,” intoned Honoria.

“Thus spake the voice of doom,” intoned Julius. “Before he is formally declared to be

wearing a green bonnet (bankrupt), Squire Pye may sell of certain assets about which the courts know not, and secrete the remuneration. Even bankrupts need to eat.”

“Master Pye has a great quantity of plate, and fine woodwork, which could be carried off and sold as are things in the Bankruptcy Courts, for Robin Hood’s pennyworth (starkly under-priced like stolen goods) Lady Orre is going to take them off him and sell them for him through her multiple connexions for what suchlike would honestly fetch on the open market. She and Dame Stopford have already transported much of it, so there will be nothing much of value to be seized, and if he is asked where all his silver and whatnot went, he can say he has sold it off for cash already a while ago, to make wheels turn. If they ask for receipts and he has none, they can hardly make him leap at a daisy (hang him), and that is that,” said Justina.

“Nor can they argue with his friends, for Lady Orre is ready with a choking oyster, so well hung is her tongue,” said Julius. “Now we must shog: ‘Call the children!’ remember?”

“What you propose to become involved in is dishonest!” called Honoria after them.

Justina turned back and thrust her head in between a gap she made of the doors.

“Since when was it dishonest to help an honest man keep what really is his but for the folly of his elders and supposedly betters?” she riposted, and disappeared at a run, that was reverberant in the house, for houses were not places for running in, except that, as if to cover the noise, Caroline swept forward and, on her brother the Marquis’s arm, led them out, and there were but four of them altogether.

Even as the colt and filly of the family escaped, they overheard their siblings fuss about attire: Honoria was wearing a fine apron, and would not take it off because it was one of her mother’s and had been saved for grand occasions, being all of lace and worth two hundred pounds, bought during the days when fortune had smiled upon this family.

“Are lace aprons out, in Town among the Quality?” asked Justina of her brother.

“I know as much about that as one can put in one’s eye,” he answered. “Do you feel dishonest about helping out with Pye?”

“I cannot but think in what situation Devenish will be when our sacred papa decides finally to drop off his perch, and if similar circumstances will govern his attempts to set all to rights. He is more leery than Pye and has his hand on his half-pence, so if ‘father’ would just let him alone to run affairs! I do not say that he will get us out of the briars on a bridge of gold and silver, but I have more faith in him than in our august parent, and that is the vardy (verdict: rustic dialect) of a chit (girl, baby) of seventeen, which is not worth much, I fear,” she averred sardonically. “I am not happy that we talked of Pye before the others: Honoria may bleat, and then the murder will be out that it was really Lady Orre and mamma who hatched this plot over a year ago, when the vultures first began to move against Pye.”

“The others think it a plot of Mesdames Orre and Stopford, and as long as we make mention of mother, it should see us through a winter Friday,” he assured.

“I am half afraid that Honoria could tell papa, during one of her addled moments,” confessed the young female.

“Speaking of addled, do you recall how it all began? Pye came here to seek help or counsel and father tried to bribe some official, using Pye’s gold, of which all was lost, for he just brought pinnock to pannock (brought all to ruin),” mused Julius. “Then someone buzzed that it was Pye who was bribing judges when it was our own pa – I’ve always wondered who launched that one. That was when mother managed to get Lady Orre to call and they

conjobbled this together.”

“I hope that mother does not predecease father for Devenish’s sake,” quoth Justina. “The Lord alone knows how many haddocks he could bring to paddock (lit. lose everything) before he dies, and all of it for Devenish to sort out.”

“If Irvin weds Carrie and bails us out of papa’s debts, it would be the decent thing to do on pa’s part to go to grass with his teeth uppermost as soon as the last one is paid,” declared Julius, callous but realistic. “You and the other girls will want marrying, but mother will arrange it; all her life she has played a suppressed role to our father and his baulks, and the result is that we are gone home by beggar’s bush. How a man can fail to see that he has a wife who would carry no coals (can’t be swindled) and can thus be a help-mate, eludes me: were someone to give me such a homoney (wife) I’d take her, even if she is handsome-bodied in the face (ugly), and if she had an ounce of wit, I’d do my utmost to foster it.”

“Most men are not like that: you speak so because you have sat upon the penniless bench,” commented Justina. “I hope Devenish is lucky in his moiety (wife), for he knows his own limits and can see through bluster and self-delusion.”

“Father is jealous of mother because she is twenty years younger than him and if allowed to open her coffee-mill (mouth), would make him look like two-fools, which he already is,” scoffed Julius. “Are we not lucky to have such a father, for we have learned very early in life many of the faults in the human character and what dog tricks to eschew. Were life cakes and ale, we would come out conies and brainless belles all, our heads full of bees (fanciful) and with about as much wit as a coot.”

“That is because, but for Honoria, we take not after our father, but after mamma. Now Honoria, she is indeed her father’s daughter, an acorn off the old tree,” remarked Justina.

“She is a true draw-latch (sneaking person), like him: she is taken to eavesdropping and I used to catch him listening at doors.”

“He still does,” she furnished. “Like him she disapproves of everything we do. I sometimes wonder, thô; we are not what you’d call an wholly united and happy family; for one reason or another, we are all unhappy and we’d all like to be away from here. She must be the unhappiest of all of us.”

“Especially with herself,” grunted Julius, as they rushed off the spiralling backstairs and out into the sunshine, setting off at a jogging run, side by side and nevertheless able to talk while they did so. “She does not like to do anything except deliver nasty remarks.”

“She should keep the company of horses more,” quoth Justina. “When I am hypish (low-spirited), I go to the stables or the paddock and just sit around. They make me feel better just with their company.”

“Your head is not so full of bees as of horses; Honoria does not even like horses.”

“Which they doubtless sense, and so we have a vicious circle.”

“She thinks they are vicious in any wise, and mere beasts of burthen.”

“’Tis curious how even famed equestrians who have performed in horse ballets before the Habsburg Empress and written treatises on the care, diet and schooling of these animals with all a manner of recommendations upon how to exact their obedience, but, in faith, with ne’er a comment about them as creatures of sensibility or character. If you want a horse to do as you say, remember first that he does not obey you unless ’tis out of fear of a whipping and that is not the way to do things at all: instead, he obliges you, if he understands you, and if he

does not, 'tis your fault, not his. To have him oblige you, esteem his good sense and his sixth sense a little, and he is yours to command, but shew gratitude or approval; he is not a baby or a child but a big animal with more intelligence than most grown men, whom the common law of this green and pleasant land has enfranchised, but would anyone dream of giving a vote to a horse?" pronounced Justina. "Do we ever realise, when we take up a strange animal, whom we do not know, that it sits in judgment upon our character and can probably tell how many lies we ha' told today?"

"I suppose that is why father can barely control his favourite stallion Ajax whereas the fellow behaves like a lamb with you," chuckled her brother.

"And think you that I am strong enough to curb that six hundred pounds' worth of weight in horseflesh?" she challenged. "I don't even use those horrid cheek bars whereof papa is so fond, but just a loose, flat-ring jointed snaffle, on the same horse, with more effect, and he goes as I please, out of sheer goodwill. No horse likes folk who shew off on them, and thus become unmanageable. On the other hand, I cannot say that I do not tell lies –,"

"In our family, we all have to fib liberally to survive," he ceded.

"That's the best part about a horse: one does not have to fib to him for any reason," said she thoughtfully. "Sometimes they know what one is thinking. It makes you wonder, somehow, and I go and read about how our minds work, so that they can penetrate them, for we cannot see into each other."

"Was that why I saw you with Locke's 'Essay on the Human Understanding'?" he laughed, whereupon she smacked his arm lightly.

"I was merely consulting it: it is not bedwork (easy work) reading that thing," she owned. "It was often beyond me, but it was most worthy in assisting me in falling asleep."

"So horses make a Justina into a blue-stocking," he teased.

"I wonder if horses turn us into better people," she said thoughtfully. "Ah, how wonderful it is to be out of doors in good weather! This is the country life, which poor Carrie will have a great miss of when she weds and has to live in Romeville (London) for a part of the year, and the Quality for companions: give me a horse any day."

"At least Carrie will have a house to govern. Here, she had to beg and plead before she could have lodgings with a private parlour in them," he commented, "and as she is not so dedicated an equestrienne as are you, she will doubtless be glad with daily exercise on horseback for an hour or less, accompanied by a catch fart (footman), while her husband is about his business as usual."

"I wonder whether I would like that kind of life," she mused, as the wind-rush they created blew back their clothes and hair.

"It is probably the life that most girls born of our degree must have," he declared. "What I abhor is being a second son. Ere long, papa will touch Irvin for shells (money) with which to buy me a commission, for war is a-brewing on the Continent and rages already in India and the New World. Very well, even if we are of Norman descent, the French have been our enemies forever and a day, but what if I get sent to serve with some scab in India or in America? What have the brown man or the red man ever done to me and mine so that I should kill him and enable my government to take his land and riches?"

"So that this country will be all the wealthier and more powerful for it."

"Will I gain anything out of it beyond bullet fever (death)? Truth be told, Bob Acres

(coward) as I sound, I do not want to go to war. I'd rather serve as a lawyer's clerk or behind the counter of a counting house, and I've heard tell that not a few peers' sons have ended up thus, and as far as the family name matters, fie on pride when the geese go bare-legged."

"There are times when I wish I were a boy – man, but all depends what sort."

"Our sort are in the seeds (in trouble) especially if the ribbon runs thin (the money runs out)," he grumbled, with justification. "Having said that, what I would not give to be free of this family, even if I would miss this old home. By family I really mean the father-creature, for what a huff and ding we must have about every little thing. Take Carrie's parlour: it seems that he raises objections just because he knows it will make us unhappy."

"He raised objections to ideas that are not his own," said Justina, as they entered the stables, not at a run, but at a suitably calm walk, whereafter she turned to the grooms and made a request for Ajax.

The Duke of Hearne's favourite horse was forbidden to his children to use, but there were those among them who would try their luck.

"He has just offered Irvin a ride around his grounds," reminded her brother.

"He'd not dare take Irvin out and ride Ajax; the stallion will act like God's revenge against murder," she scoffed. "When he goes with company to indulge his conceits, he takes a ride that goes at an egg-trot, even if he may sometimes shew off Ajax, and now is the time to ride the boy, for Irvin is to stay with us, and papa will not dare fling the house out of the window and chounter at me later, because with his voice, everything is in earshot."

Thus was the matter settled, and a fine dappled grey hunter, rather too tall for the rider in question, was tackled up and brought forth, to receive a horse buss on his nose, before she scrambled into his saddle unaided, the stirrups shorter than for the Duke, as they had been adjusted for her. Her brother was soon ready with his chestnut gelding, and off they went, first at a canter, to run clear and free of this location, before they slackened in the lane and made towards a belt of woodland which parted them from some truly good pathways where they could give their mounts their heads. When they were on the walk again, they chatted.

"I wonder if Irvin is come bearing gifts for Carrie," she mused.

"From what I saw of him, Irvin doubtless believes Irvin is enough," grunted Julius. "I am developing an aversion to gifts, but I think it is living here that has thus distempered me."

His sister turned to him in inquiry, the reins slack on the great stallion's neck.

"Our father's last birthday, when he ended up with bread and cheese in his head (drunk)," he recollected. "He berated us all for the paltry spread of gifts we had tendered unto him, whether purchased or made at home, and said that he was 'going to collect up your dirty trinkets and throw them in your faces', I quote. It made mamma weep and he grew worse."

"Granted. I don't exactly enthuse over what I will make or buy for him this year," accepted Justina, "besides, it is with his money that we obtain the objects, so we really should not waste it at all if he deems it so trifling."

"Indeed, but I do not want presents from anyone," stated Julius haughtily.

"When we have bigger sums of pin-money from husbands of our own, and Devenish is able to save his groats here, you may change your mind," she said, "come to think of it, only Selina is marginally too young to wed, for the rest of us are all past a marriageable age, and all we do is wait. The best so far, and the first, has been this rake-hell from London."

"Like most of father's schemes – I must make myself used to addressing him thus – it

may prove abortive,” sneered Lord Julius, “or just plain disastrous. He calls us irresponsible for doing nothing all day but riding horses and watching the lands flourish, but by gad, if spending a fortune that one has amassed and then getting into debt and then seeking a cure for it by wedding off one’s daughter to a *debauché* is not irresponsible, then pray, what is?”

“His choice of Carrie is interesting; perhaps ’tis for the all too obvious reason that she is his eldest daughter, but I would not say that he has given a thought to whether or not she is suited to a proud London Duke with a powdered face, refined mannerisms and a salaried seraglio, or at least a mistress. Carrie would be in place as the happy humdrum of a country squire, or a lord who preferred his estates to the hurly-burly of such life as the Quality does lead, about which I know nothing but hearsay, to be honest,” assessed Justina.

“There is no such thing as a parent who chuses a husband to suit the character of a daughter, or a son, for that matter. The whole thing is addled,” asserted Julius, “if unfair: whether or not he keeps an entire seraglio or just visits someone, or simply goes bitching, I know not, but he has a name as a famed – or should one say infamous – rake, and Carrie is not wedding a husband but a man with attachments unrecognised by the law, even if the Quality knows of them or suspects the same. Not that whatever object of amusement he presently has is going to last; the rake-hell subsists on variety and the thrill of seduction, from well-preserved grandmothers to barely nubile belles on their first foray into Town – what fun it is to take a virginity – and this I know from Orre, for his cousin is wed to Irvin’s sister.”

“Was she the prying hussy who came here prinked out fine as a lord’s bastard and on the pretext of wanting to have a coze and a stroll wi’ Carrie, asked her more intrusive questions than the Grand Inquisitor of Spain? Had she ever a sweetheart? Was she a maid? Why, Torquemada himself would have blushed at the things she said! What business was it of hers, or of Irvin’s, for that matter?”

“She had the effrontery to tell our mother that her brother chuses to wed only to ensure the continuation of his noble dynasty, for heirs he has not, and that therefore he would give them a mother of birth, a correct aspect, carriage, and mien, with dignity and sober habitudes, placid of manner, reticent, and, mark you this, *of spotless virtue*,” snorted Lord Julius.

“Bah, ’tis like papa; he may philander, even at his age, but his wife must be of unimpeachable character,” acknowledged Lady Justina, in disgust. “The virtue of a wife is become a symbol of status, as much as an excuse.”

“The excuse, first, pray?” probed her brother.

“She is so virtuous that she is dull, and so he must needs philander, the poor fellow,” said Justina, “and the symbol? Nothing could be simpler: no man likes to be a knight of Hornsey (cuckold) and so what better way of asserting your dominance over your fellows than by boasting your wife’s fidelity? In so doing one doesn’t emphasise her virtue as such, one takes care to give credit to the marvel that one is, so that one makes her faithful to one.”

“Poor Caroline; condemned to boredom and betrayal. Even tho’ ’tis not in her nature to have an intrigue, I wonder if he will keep her confined as papa does with mamma, like a truly jealous husband,” lamented and speculated Julius.

“Not that Caroline can refuse, despite her two and twenty years that make her adult and no longer subject to parental control, for she is supported by the meagre parental purse and if she declares her own mind, I would not put it past our father to threaten her with expulsion. After all, what are girl-children, but burthensome to their own and useful to others

as receptacles for the process of breeding, so that generations may follow? Carrie is quite old, in that respect; Irvin is twelve years her senior, so that is not as bad as sometimes could be, like our own mother. Nor, in this house, with such a father as we have, are we encouraged to be our own masters, for he and only he shall arrange how our lives proceed. Do you recall how, two years ago, our Aunt Lizzie had Honoria over to stay and no less a person than the Duchess of Kendal offered to see what could be done about obtaining her a minor place at court? Granted, court office is expensive but the old flat would not hear of it, because it was not his idea; it was mamma who found that the post would eat us out of house and home.”

“So will Honoria, probably; she lacks such parts as would recommend her as a wife, even to the most modest of the squirearchy,” noted Julius wryly. “God knows what will happen when a commission is purchased for me, perforce.”

“Come to think of it, perhaps Irvin is some sort of disguised Godsend,” commented Justina, “paradoxical as that sounds. Whiles, I feel as if I live here on borrowed time, and that the sunny days of carefree frolic in the country lanes astride a horse will end abruptly. Would that I were gone elsewhere before that happens, preferably as wife to a hard-riding gentleman whose first concerns are his horses and hounds and who must have a robust spouse of like inclination. Irvin will divide his time between Town and his estates, so Carrie will go dragging after him. At first, they will breed their lullaby cheats enough to fill a brattery, and then, who knows, they will be spouses in name only, and even while she is growing big-bellied, he will be leading his own life, so in all this, the worst he could do to Carrie is neglect her, and I daresay she will welcome it and be set for life, following her own wiles, with enough of his money to lead a pleasant, peaceful and placid existence. He may even be rid of her by packing her off to one of his estates in the greenmans. That is when she could be of service to the rest of us, including Devenish, who also has to wed, and so do you, in case our esteemed parent brings a noble to nine-pence (dilapidates a fortune) again.”

“If Irvin ever tires of Carrie and her brattery, ten to one our august father will impose himself upon her household and direct it as well,” warned Julius.

“That cove Irvin has cut his eye-teeth; he will ensure that pa goes directly home, as far as direct elements are concerned,” dismissed Justina.

“Yea! By then he would have learned what is the length of our father’s foot and very likely, if he is as ruthless as Orre said he can be, he would forbid his own pa-in-law access to his estates, and what peace of mind for Carrie!” whooped Julius, then paused to ponder a matter which seemed suddenly to have struck his thoughts. “I wonder why they did not offer Honoria to him: she’s more magisterial and ambitious.”

“Perhaps they offered all of us, and see us from his point of view: at thirteen, Selina is even too young for him if all he wants is to breed. Then, half his age exactly, is the hoyden rigsby roaring girl, who is either nose deep in a book or most of the time on horseback in knee breeches, no less. There follows the termagant with her temper and her airs, and finally, pretty demure damozel bent over her embroidery frame making screens and chair covers.”

“Then it is sometimes an advantage to have nothing to recommend oneself,” he beamed, as they rode out of the woodland into open country. “The last week’s rain has made of this a carpet road. Let us give the boys their heads!” he added with a cheer.

“Amen to that!” she echoed, and the horses, sensing excitement, began to prance, eager to be launched into a gallop.

So they were, to the ultimate satisfaction of all.

¹(Brunswick: a short hooded jacket with long flared sleeves worn for warmth)

²(Scotchman's cart; these plied the land for country-folk to buy fabrics and ready-made clothes, some of quality, including the Red Riding Hood, and thô such vendors were not all Scotch, all sold on credit)

TWO

The ride to Squire Pye's home was conducted at a pace as fast as the ground allowed and much of it was eventually cross country, over fences and gates and hedges, as the *joie de vivre* in a stallion at leaping and running grew contagious and affected the other horse and both equestrians. In fact they made not so much for the manor house as for the stables attached to the garden, and the fun of their progress made them forget their grumbling, until they reached the purlieu of their destination, however, when Julius talked of whether the bailiffs would confiscate the vegetables growing in the potager or take up the paving in the stable yard, which was in such neat condition.

"That would not apply at home," scoffed Justina. "Our stable yard, when dried out by the breeze, is a dust storm, and after it has rained, becomes a mire. Other folk have cobbles or paving put in, but we, we have ours taken out, for what was left of it was haphazard and thus dangerous, but it cannot be replaced, as too expensive, even if he spends a fortune in bribes in a failed attempt to become Lord Lieutenant of the Shire. Not that having the old paving slabs dug out did not cost us money, which could have been better spent progressively adding to them so that the whole surface was compleat."

"And what o' the repair of the old ramshackle stable buildings? We don't just need new tiles, we need new joists, on the roofs," stated Julius. "Remember what Devenish said?"

"Aye," she groaned. "We only have a few horses. They are only animals after all. It is only a roof, and what if it does cave in and injure or kill beasts? 'Tis not as if the stables were full. What an old wastrel! And to think that he dismissed the horses as beings whereof the lives were not important. Everything except a parasite or a stinging insect has a life that is important, even those that we slaughter for food for they keep us alive."

"On the subject of parasites and stinging insects, the first would include most of the Royal Court, and the second most of the government, but they are human with laws to protect them. This is a real lapse in logic," he joked, as they reined in, and Ajax raised his handsome head, to toss his mane, attracting Julius's attention. "Do you recall the time Ajax nigh bit him? What a kick up that raised."

"Which kick up? Ajax has tried to bite him on innumerable occasions," she replied, so all he did was laugh.

Thus it was with mirth that they entered the stables and there, awaiting them, was young Squire Pye, with no less than twelve riding horses, four plough horses, for he would not plough with bullocks as they did in climes north of the Thames and practised what they preached in the climes of his southern born wife, and, some six carriage horses, four for the coach, which was to be auctioned and two for the cabriolet. Altho they were more or less linked together, it was Julius and Justina's task to drive them back to Great Hearne Castle, and it was at a most propitious moment, for the fabulously wealthy Duke of Irvin was staying with them, and lived and travelled in style. Granted that the horse team with which he had reached was on hire from the last posting stage, but his own horses were due in a day or two, and no-one was going to know in the environs whether he had in fact sent some of them ahead to await him while the rest were following. If Squire Pye had tears in his eyes, his Squiress shewed relief, for despite the relative youth of this girl and her stripling sibling, they both managed horses well and responsibly, had been in the saddle even before they could walk and had an eye for horseflesh, as well as a dependable attitude as to how these fine animals should

be treated. Justina also had an eye for equine housing, and the neat, well-maintained stables, now empty, which upset her, for by comparison, she could boast crumbling remises in which the Hearne Dukes stored their ceremonial carriages and the tumbledown stable appurtenances, where once the family even had employed their own saddler, which somewhat detracted from the sunshine of youth with endless days of horse riding.

Squire Pye's heavy horses had work to do, for they were harnessed to a wagon and taken to the front of the house, where waited the last of the valuable furniture to be loaded on and taken away, for the bailiffs were due tomorrow to read out the decree and decide what could go, it being necessary to leave necessities and tools of any trade, such as farm implements and even mathematical and geodesic instruments used for surveying land, howsoever the latter were expensive. The girl and boy were expert in backing the midland-shire monsters, gentle giants both, into the shafts, for horses did not like reverse movement, and ere long, the last of Squire Pye's family and personal treasures were on their way. His house did not look bare; it was properly furnished but just enjoyed equipment that was needed in the normal course of things, for the last thing anyone wanted was that the place seem suspiciously denuded. Justina saw all, within and without, for, from the house frontage, its plain garden and flower beds, to the fine furnishings that were being taken away to be concealed with neighbours, everything was neat, clean and properly maintained, to her silent and bitter envy, everything organised or arrayed to suit the convenience of those who used and cared for it, unlike the rambling edifice that was Great Hearne Castle, and all its outbuildings, the latter having lost much of their pebbledash, remarkable for their display of crumbling stonework and rotting woodwork, evidence, to her, less of their unfortunate dilapidation owing to poverty or neglect than of their owner's impractical methods and notions on expenditure. Of course she said nothing, she had been brought up amid all of it, she had also seen everything deteriorate unchecked before her eyes as she grew up and understood more and more about it.

At Master Pye's side there stood a thirteenth riding horse, a tall, slender, lithe mare, the colour of pitch with the difference that pitch did not shine as much as her fine, glossy, sleek musculature, with a silver-blue sheen in the sunlight, and not a single white hair upon her face or body. Eyeing her with increasing appreciation, Justina noted that the mare, too, eyed her in return, seeming quizzical with it. Brother and sister exchanged amused glances, but whereas the former was idly diverted, the latter seemed purposeful and turned to the unlucky squire to wonder why the handsome black equine had been separated from her fellows.

"She is the one Orre himself would like to buy," said he.

"Sir Robert is at our house, with the man who is to offer for Carrie," supplied Justina.

"She is a little slender for a heavy fellow like Orre," remarked Julius.

"Her sire was an Arabian horse from a Persian stud, and was brought to France," answered the squire. "Arabians have amazing stamina and can carry weights out of all proportion to their size –," there the Woodville siblings interrupted to laugh, "– and he made an unofficial condition: he and our neighbours will keep my horses until I am ready to buy them back, but all except for Jezebel; for he intends to have her as his own. She has very good blood, and, I think, may have been among the horses sent as a gift to King Louis XV of France, who said he did not like that sort of horse, and so they were dispersed."

“Well, the French King’s tastes are a bit gutter-bred in any case; his women tend to be town garbage but he hides it under fancy titles,” supplied Lord Julius. “What I’d not give for a horse with an Arabian sire; it must be worth a Jew’s eye (exceedingly valuable)!”

“I am not sending her with the others; Orre is to fetch her himself,” replied Pye. “You see, that which you are both engaged upon so that the bailiff cannot confiscate my horses is against the law, which is why you may do it with a certain amount of impunity, for neither of you are adult, and thus not responsible for your actions, even if Lord Julius turns one and twenty at the end of the month. However, Jezebel’s case is an out and out sale, for if the bailiffs were to come at this moment, Heaven forefend, they may not take her: the worst they can do is require me to pay the proceeds of sale, based on the price agreed, into the bankruptcy fund at court. That is not what Orre wants; he would collect her while the bailiffs are here, so they will see that she is sold and not returnable, like the others everyone is hiding. Before you go, I have a purse for the Duke, because he cannot keep my horses free of expenses due, and that you must not forget to give him.”

“Is your agreement to sell her writ in stone?” asked Justina. “What if you sold her in the meanwhile to another?”

“In all honesty, I’d sooner go to Halifax than sell her, but as times go, I must.”

“If you change your mind this minute, I’d buy her, and you shan’t have to shew your money for I have none to give. She is not listed among your assets due for seizure, is she?” pronounced Justina.

Incredulously, Squire Pye stared at her, while Julius held his tongue, even if he looked aghast and wanted to cry out a demand as to what his sister was to use in payment. Then Pye confirmed that he had hidden the mare when the bailiffs came to see his possessions, just as he had concealed his other horses and his valuables.

“I have a gold watch all the way from Augsburg,” she announced, “and with it comes a chain. I wanted a George Graham, but I got this foreign thing instead.”

“That is the watch father ordered for your fifteenth birthday,” protested Julius, unnerved. “He will be at the house top if he knew you mean to sell it.”

“I have never liked it, and an entire year went by before I would wear it. It is not of secondary value, but it is not what I wanted, and I am tired of being asked what I want and then having another chuse it according to his preferences rather than mine,” stated Justina. “’Tis a little too old for me, and too elaborate –,”

“Are you wearing it?” asked Pye.

“As a matter of fact, I am; I wear it only when I ride Ajax, so that I may not be happily diverted and thus stay out too late, only to be in a scrape,” explained she, “’tis here,” she added, unfobbing it from her waistcote and presenting to him a fine piece of jewellery, set with all a manner of gemstones, so that it was very colourful.

“With the chain?” bargained Pye.

“With that,” agreed Justina, who seemed unable to be rid of it fast enough.

“Tina, if father ever finds out, he will murder you,” he warned.

“Squire Pye, I am lighter in the body than Sir Robert, and I will groom her myself, and see personally to her feed. I know how to take care of and wash tackle, I am almost as good as our farrier, except that I don’t mention it to my family, for we are not supposed to work with our hands, and she will have all her old friends with her for a while, and after that, jolly

old groghams (steady old horses) who would not hurt a fly. What say you?"

Squire Pye begged a moment to go consult his wife, and on being granted it, departed.

"Have you more hair than wit?" demanded Julius.

"Papa knows not what we do half the time, and the other half he is not interested, unless he would read us one of his interminable lectures, or unless we are in his sights. This mare will keep me out of the house all day, and he'll forget I even exist. Instead of a few shillings worth of pin-money spent on the pedlar or the Scotchman, I'll pay her feed, and we have acres enough of grass in the paddocks which at least are not rented out. She'll be all right, I tell you: I hope that Pye agrees! Who do you think helps muck out the stables many a Sunday? Father will not even know; he never even goes there anymore; it is beneath his ducal dignity: when he rides the horse is brought about to the door of the house."

"She's a fine mare, but – I don't like her name," objected Julius.

"As you can find nothing wrong with her neck or her eye or her hocks or her knees or her barrel or the slope of her pasterns or the lie of her shoulders, think you that I will be deterred by the nature of her name?" she laughed.

Just then Pye returned, for the Squiress had been nigh the cart and not taken long to make up her mind, considering that all her jewels that were heirlooms were under threat of seizure. Thus Justina inquired why the mare had such a name, and the squire smiled.

"That is because she belongs to the same race as did Jezebel, more or less, as far as we know, except that Jezebel the Queen was not a horse," he supplied and joked.

"Do I have an agreement of sale?" she pursued.

"Justina, that watch cost half a term's rents. Even mother was appalled at the extravagance," blurted out Julius, unable to contain himself.

"If I like it not, 'tis worth nothing," scoffed his sister. "May I borrow the halter for her? I'll return it after I get her home," she promised.

"'Tis an old piece o' leather; you may keep it," consented Pye. "Will not the presence of another horse not shew up in the accounts?"

"My father's examination of ledgers these days is cursory and besides, as long as I get my pin money every month, she will have a full belly," assured Lady Justina. "He scarcely even knows what we keep in our stables; last year Devenish sold a colt and never told him: the money went in buying new grates for the fireplaces, of which not a word was said o' the pudden. 'Tis beneath the Duke of Hearne's dignity to be interested in matters domestic."

"So it is with all Dukes, Lady Justina; that is also why they have wives and servants, except that you do not meet any others apart from your father," chuckled Squire Pye.

All the same, Lord Julius deemed this a most unsafe project of his sister's.

"Master Pye, let not my madcap sister jeopardise your agreement with Sir Robert Orre, for it could prejudice your relations with him, your effects being hidden in his house among others," he counselled, and then howled, for Justina stamped savagely on his foot.

"The Baronet was never a part of the scheme to save my effects; it was his good lady, and he has agreed for she turned him into a jerry-sneak (hen-pecked husband) until he did," related Pye. "Besides he thinks he does me a great favour in buying Jezebel for the princely sum of fifty pounds, which I deem to be Robin Hood's pennyworth (starkly under-priced like stolen goods). Frankly I would rather take the watch, and my wife likes it."

"What if Orre snuffs pepper (take offence) and goes buzzing (gossiping) to father?"

postulated Julius, but Justina ignored him.

“Has Jezebel a pedigree book?” she inquired.

“I’ll fetch you her papers,” assented Pye and went into the house.

“She’ll be the only horse in our stable with a true pedigree and not just a certification that the sire was a Barb or from the Duke of Beaufort’s stables or some such half-baked tilly-vally. Papa will let me keep her, for papa doth love a pedigree,” gloated Justina.

So the deed was done and the deal made and Justina Woodville bought herself a mare while parting with a gift whereat she placed little value, despite her brother’s cautions that one day the mare would die and the watch would still be ticking to the end of time. Indeed that was what made Mistress Pye agree to the bargain, but the girl did not care and off they went, rounding up the equines that they meant to save, with Pye’s money in a purse stuffed into Julius’s pocket and Justina, who was so keen to try out her new acquisition, to whom she referred as her new friend, that she slid off the saddle upon Ajax’s back directly upon Jezebel’s bare one, with nought but a halter to retain her. Thus was the stallion attached among the horses that belonged to Pye and the whole group were herded off back to the Hearne property, whither no bailiff engaged upon bankruptcy proceedings would dare penetrate. There could be no galloping now, even if the horses all surged forward on the green meads at a trot or a canter, for horses did not go anywhere at a walk unless they were grazing or being held at the mouth by a bit, so there was a little scuffling, and off they went, briskly but under control. No racing, no risks, no loud laughter, no high spirits were permitted, but Justina was content every time the herd speeded up itself up into a canter, for the mare enjoyed it, and held aloft her tail like a banner. That Pye should have agreed so easily was a little worrying, for the brother at least, who was not really sure that his sister was going to be able to hide as large a beast as a full-sized horse in their stables, but when he saw her now, smug and happy he just had to smile. Not that Justina was totally absorbed by the joy engendered by her new purchase, for, as the animals swept along, their coats glistening in the sun, she was struck by a thought, and had a question for him, as he was her elder.

“Julius, you know an ace or two more than the Devil; certainly you know an ace or two more than I do; why do we remove Squire Pye’s effects at this eleventh hour and not weeks in advance,” she wondered pensively, “even if it does work out to his benefit as coinciding with the arrival on our estate of the Duke of Irvin, who goes about in a state of luxurious affluence that could justify the collection of keffyls on our lands?”

“Pye has spent three years trying to pay off the debts he inherited and despite enclosing land and farming it personally and vigorously, something we will never do in papa’s – I beg pardon, father’s – lifetime, he has not been able to make deadlines, totals, and full satisfaction to every creditor, even if he has saved the lands from the giant mortgages imposed upon it. The rest left, who would make good what he has, from his assets, have taken out bankruptcy proceedings, and the first time round, they claimed even his lands. He appealed and that was allowed, but the case went on and was confined to moveable assets by the judicial bench. So now these have to be assessed, and as he will not lose his heirlooms and beauties, he will defeat these ungenerous folk who fail to be satisfied and would be paid in full by a man who has honestly tried to do so. A great many of his father’s creditors took a proportion of what was owed them and were content, so why should this minority be so rapacious, avaricious, and downright malicious? A few more years later, who knows, he may

be able to make good the remainder of what he owes them, interests and all. So he too has turned nasty, and would deny them their dues, at least, force them to wait until he may honestly earn enough off his lands to pay, without recourse to his family valuables being put up the spout to pay them, leaving him just the bare bones of a household. He has few servants, like us, and no pantler or housekeeper, major domo or steward; his gardeners and grooms are one and the same folk, he practises strict economies and the courts know. Well, we, and he, were hoping that the courts would throw the case out, but on the other hand, the judges could just as well have ordered that the very estates be sold to acquit all the debts in full. Until their judgment, nothing was known for certain, but now that we have it, and that he is due to be declared bankrupt until he has paid off all his debts, he would that it be from his earnings and rents rather than his prize effects, so they cannot come and seize his cattle or his poultry, but they may take and sell off, for a song, his wife's satinwood spinet, or walnut dressing-case, or his own lacquered cabinets. Of course, no-one will believe it that his house lacks mirrors in gilded frames or fine pottery or brassware: he will lose all that. At the last minute he sends off what he would most like to save, for it is only at that last minute that he knows where he stands, and he can pretend that he sold it to pay off the creditors the first time around. He will not let them take his horses, but there is nothing to stop his hiring half-a-dozen next month when the rents come in, or because he sold a good spring barley crop, except that those same horses run before us now, and really are his own, but not hired at all. If for example, he had to sell his estate, and became a lack-land, all these efforts would hardly have been worthwhile, would they? So he is obliged to wait until the very end before he takes whatever steps he has planned, with the help of those who planned them aside of him. Have I answered you adequately?"

"All I know now is that I hope it never happens to us and that whatever they put before me, even if his face is cold and dirty as a winter Friday, could carve me a good muck-hill on my trencher, I will marry it," recited Justina. "The injustice of this is that he has never been one through whose fingers money slips like water; he has worked hard to re-establish his estate and it looks good, for all his efforts."

"The debts he inherited were greater and the mortgages too. He was born under a thruppenny planet, the poor honey; I wish I had Kemp's shoes to throw after him."

"Think you that this ploy will work?"

"If it doesn't, we are all due for the louse house (gaol), defrauding the creditors as his accessories," he shrugged. "It is odd, thô, that it was thought of by females."

"Life is funny but not droll," she mused, looking ahead. "We cannot go through the wood: we will have to go roundabout."

"Aye, and you go on ahead as a scout; I would rather we met no carriage or crossed any other person on that lane; it is a parish lane and even if it runs through our father's land, it is for public use. What if assessors are a day or two early? They may wonder what herd of horses this is," warned Julius.

"What do I if I see a carriage? Shout 'stand and deliver'?"

"And have their coachman discharge a blunderbuss in your face mistaking you for a real land-pirate? Just ride on ahead and see, and if the view is halloo, to borrow a phrase, then whisk yourself about the head of the wood and we'll advance this troop at a gallop, march! Or almost. I had better move up to the skirts of the woodland and hope that that strip of it we

cross is not so transparent as to allow a passer-by to see what is coming to and assembling behind it," he planned.

"Well, I'll go with you a bit of ways then on ahead to the right, to survey the lane in both directions," assented Justina. "What a lesson this day has been so far! First, Carrie's beau and now Pye – and I bought a horse."

"We haven't even seen Carrie's beau," he reminded wryly.

"But she's a lovely horse," credited the girl. "Responds very well to leg cues."

"She has been properly schooled," he replied. "Otherwise you'd be crying 'tailer' (child's call when one falls on one's bottom)!"

All she did was laugh, and they separated to herd the horses accordingly and head them off towards the farthest skirts of the wood, where it became sparse and ceased altogether. It was not far from that point that she took leave and set off at a fast canter, putting distance between herself and the herd so that the equines left behind would not shy. Thus she was well away from her brother and his troop when she reached the lane, and turned into it, instinctively pulling her tricorne low over her forehead. The progress of many hooves and much whinnying had masked the rumble of a carriage drawn by four horses, that was coming from the direction opposite to the wood and heading for it, except that it had been hidden hitherto by a bend in the road. It was not unfamiliar, even if the horses belonged to her father and were not matched; it was not rushing along, but it made good speed even so. The fact that it was at some length away coupled with the curve in the lie of the lane allowed the passengers to behold a lithe, slightly built figure riding the bare back of a splendid black mare, even thô the equestrian figure turned, not towards them to pass them going homeward, but swung away towards the grassy bank of the lane in order to re-enter the woodland. All at once, the equipage lurched and lunged forward at a changed pace, hurtling along at a gallop, and Justina, surprised, turned to look at it, only to find that Sir Robert Orre was leaning out of a window and shaking his fist and shouting oaths at her. To her further astonishment, the vehicle suddenly heaved, skidded and slackened, halting so precipitately that one of the leaders almost reared, and the driver bawled out sounds to steady his haulage team. Even before it had come to a dead stop, the Baronet leaped out of the cabin, animated, furious, and unintelligible, so that she decided to take to her heels, or those of her mount figuratively speaking, whereupon he waved his fists in a rage before bending to pick up some large stones from the roadside, and hurled them one after the other at the escaping figure. One of them, in descending, struck the black mare by scraping past her left hock, just as she bent her hind leg in the course of her gait, and this blow, althô neither hard nor injurious, threw her off balance by pushing her limb in too far. Thus she missed her footing, slid and fell, shedding her rider like a slate off a roof in a storm.

Obviously Sir Robert had recognised the horse, and now brought down not only his prize but also her rider, so he bounded towards them, but meanwhile that verisame rider turned, and shewed that she still retained the reins, but in rolling over, she beheld not only that Orre was coming at her, yet also that a tall man in black had descended from the vehicle, and even from here, in a quick glimpse, she discerned that he had refined features, a pale face and distinctively shining eyes. That sight, more than the advent of the angry Baronet, served her in causing her to scramble to her feet, just as the mare rose to hers, like some majestic enchanted animal, a fairy horse, rising out of the ground, and before the latter took off from

the shock of it all, Justina, whom Orre had clearly recognised, leaped up to sprawl upon the shining black back and exert a little control upon the noseband of the halter, for Jezebel remained unbridled, and it was not just her schooling that kept her disciplined, but the skill of the slender female who bestrode her. Off they dashed, into the woodland, and Justina hoped that no-one would follow, at least on horseback, even if the vehicle, for driving over the Duke of Hearne's estates, was not accompanied by outriders. She also prayed that Orre would return to the carriage and that it would resume its course, so that Julius and she could drive the horses back to the castle stables, for how was it going to look if it was still waiting in the lane, as the herd emerged and crossed in front or ahind of it, and the explanation for that one that was not to be expatiated upon in the presence of a stranger? So, if she appeared to vanish, it was along the widening belt of boskiness that she went, to halt and lurk in the shadows, wherefrom she could see out better than they could see in, but she could also hear them now, for the low, euphonious drawl of a stranger was calling Sir Robert back and telling him that he had caused enough havoc for one day, while the said Sir Robert ranted about the sauce of it and the jackanapes and the fact that that was his horse. Indeed, it was closer than she thought, for the tall man in black had come towards Orre and was carrying a tricorne hat. All at once she raised a hand to her own head: the tricorne was her own! Then it occurred to her: she had seen his face with clarity, so doubtless, he has seen hers with unambiguity. To her great relief, the two gentlemen boarded the berline and it hove off on its original course, passing her in her leafy fastness, and she let it go well on before she returned to Julius to tell him that the passage was at last clear, but also, what had befallen her.

"I hope that he did not see it was a female, but he has my hat," she sighed.

"Was the old man there?" pursued her brother.

"Papa? If so, he had remained in the vehicle and I did not see inside it. When it went by, I could not tell how many people were in it for the curtains were pulled to keep out the afternoon sun," she supplied. "However, were he there, it is a mercy that I decided to ride this horse and he did not find me on Ajax, otherwise he would haul me over the coals (give severe reprimand) and not hesitate so to do with a guest present, bad as that looks," she supplied. "Orre recognised the mare and injured her! I cannot believe that he could do such a thing; I know it was to arrest our progress, but she has a spot of blood on her leg and that is a fine way to begin a new life with a new owner. He was shouting bandog and Bedlam that that was his horse, so I hope that he will not jeopardise poor Squire Pye's position out of sheer spite just because the latter sold this poor girl to me."

"That would be shabby and unlike a gentleman," assured Julius. "At worst, he will come to us to find out what happened about the mare: he will not ask Pye. I had the impression that Pye would rather not ha' sold to him in the first place and that he was relieved to sell to you. Everyone knows that he rides like a butcher and that not only are you damned, confoundedly good on horseback, you rise early (are astute) where horses are concerned whereas all he does to exact obedience is to give 'em a handsome reward (horse whipping)."

"Irvin has my hat; could anything ha' been better blessed by the bishop (said when things are gone wrong)?" she fussed. "I am not supposed to go about dressed up in your clothes and a Town bull (rake-hell from London) sees me toggled out thus. I'm due for a kyrie eleison (terrible scolding), if not a proper souring (severe beating)."

"Are you sure it was Irvin and not our da-da, with the shadows of the wood playing

curious tricks on what you could see?” consoled Julius.

“Irvin wears no louse bag (bag of a bag-wig) like father, for there was no solitaire ribbon from it on the front of his cravat, so his hair must be in a club (thick pigtail) or loose, down his back – and you should ha’ seen his sparklers (very bright eyes)! I was by no means confusing the two o’ them; besides, this sprag (dandy) was very tall and our father is not,” she confirmed dismally. “I am done for, I tell you.”

“Now that they are gone, let us concentrate our wits on taking these Houyhnhnms¹ home,” recommended Julius.

“I hope that Orre does not make much matter of a wooden platter talking of this,” she sighed, as they started off together, which meant that the siblings had to separate.

“Be easy,” called Julius after her, “they are out viewing our pa’s grand estates, so he will not let Orre be foreman of the jury (monopolise conversation) whining on about a horse.”

In fact he was almost right, for the Duke of Hearne did not want anyone talking liberally about the affairs of neighbour Pye, especially if they had London connexions, and interrupted his complaints and grumbling with a plausible explanation.

“It was probably Julius taking the mare away just in case her being left behind resulted in the bailiffs refusing to accept your offer to buy her and taking her away,” he said.

“It looked more like a Julia to me,” mused the Duke of Irvin.

Hearne did not hear but Orre did, and that remark silenced him at last, for if he made any more of this event, it was not unlikely that he would land the hoyden maid in trouble with her father, for her notoriety on horseback was a feature of the region. Otherwise, he knew that the visitor had a reputation, and it would doubtless endanger her were he to be given what could be sordid ideas about the silly maid, by reason of too much emphasis on her prank. So Sir Robert fell silent, but now that his interest in the matter was up, the Duke would not let the subject go.

“Why are you so angry about the horse? What if the Squire in question has sold her to another? Is that not what you fear? You don’t for a moment believe that she was being brought here to save her from the assessors,” pursued the guest.

“I asked to buy her and he agreed,” said Orre.

“I ha’ seen you ride, my friend. Agreed he with alacrity or with reluctance?” asked Irvin with chilly humour.

“He is reluctant to sell his goods; they were not acquired with ease, and that mare is a darling,” said Orre.

“Well, now she belongs to Julia. Swallow it down, my good fellow,” smirked the visitor, turning away, his smile glacial.

“Who is Julia?” demanded the Duke of Hearne, having the thread of the exchange.

“My good friend, let us drop the subject,” suggested the Duke of Irvin, leaning towards the Baronet, with as much cordiality as embalming fluid. “Is there trouble a-brewing in the region, that your son and daughter were absent from the drawing room, Duke?” he asked of his host.

“No trouble, they just went to see a neighbour and their timing was askew for it coincided with your grace’s advent, whereto we have looked forward to muchly,” evaded and flattered the hopeful father-in-law.

“I am familiar with the Pye affair; a man inherits nothing but losses, breaks himself in

two to restore his heritage and pay for a father's errors and far from being given the chance in which to complete his effort, his creditors chuse wantonly to swoop upon him like vultures," pronounced Irvin sourly. "Had they waited a half decade longer, he would have paid them in full and with interest, but nay, as he redeemed all the mortgages they became greedy. They would have had the courts possess his land, but the judges were not of the same mind: in order to pay he was to be allowed his means of livelihood and as he farms as much as he rents out to tenants, and practises the most stringent economies compared to his father, well, they obtained their decree in bankruptcy but restricted to his assets and excluding all tools of his trade. He keeps his land, therefore, and with it, all immovable properties. If his neighbours help him in saving his groats, so be it: when he comes out of this, his creditors will just have to be content with a small portion of what they are owed and it serves them right to have hounded a hardworking man out of sheer malice and greed. Thus it is a form of justice that he should shelter his most valuable possessions, and leave to the bailiffs' discretion mere necessities, which they may be shy of taking in great number. You do him a Godly service to keep his horses, which is what I believe your son and daughter went to fetch, nay?"

The Duke of Hearne fidgeted.

"I was to buy one of those animals," growled the Baronet.

"That would have been funds in his coffers for the assessors to seize," the Duke stated with overt disapproval. "The young people have made arrangements about his horses, so let us abide by them: I have a suspicion that they are more helpful to his predicament than forcing him to sell when he is vulnerable and must give up his emoluments to the courts."

Sir Robert Orre sank in his seat and said nothing.

"When we have finished driving about the estate and are returned home, you may ask what is become of that black mare who is the apple of your eye," proposed the visitor. "Pray, Duke, do you enclose and farm?"

"I am too old to change to such energetic ways of management: my son would have me do it but we agree like all the clocks of London as to how, so he says neither muff nor mum about it now," the older Duke answered. "He awaits dead men's shoes so that he may run my estate his way, and a true muddle he will make of it, sir, I tell you, a true muddle."

"Enclosing and farming may have advantages to those who know how to exploit them, but as long as one stretches one's leg according to the coverlet, living on one's rents alone can work and for centuries, already has," ceded as much as hinted Irvin, but Hearne had learned almost nothing.

"Take Pye," he snorted. "He enclosed and farmed, and look where it took him: the bankruptcy court, no less, and having to defraud it to save the gewgaws of his heritage –,"

"Saving your favour, Duke, under certain specific circumstances, such actions are not fraudulent but mere methods of survival," interposed Orre.

"And you would help him by buying his black filly," jeered the Duke of Irvin. "How old were the two members of your family whom you sent forth to assist him, Duke?" he probed, turning to Hearne.

"Julius is nigh one and twenty and Justina is seventeen," the older Duke supplied.

"Justina, so that is her name," mused the other, and Orre began to wipe his brow.

"Ho, ho, I see now!" hailed Hearne. "You thought they were twins and named Julius and Julia, is that it?"

That his comprehension of matters should be somewhat impaired by his insistence on living in a false reality – a paradox – of his own creation, did not surprise his hoped-for future son-in-law, who did not give the game away and just agreed with the old man. In fact he appeared to agree with the old man all drive long, until they compleated their cursory tour of the property, which was in divers states of repair and profit, depending on the nature or diligence of the tenants in question: some were yeomen and lived almost like little gentlemen with neat houses and barns, clean farmyards and flourishing herds or crops, others seemed content just to scratch out a living from strips of land almost like their mediaeval ancestors, and the Duke their landlord did nothing to order them to improve their lot and hence his rents, for that required effort and one thing the Duke his visitor had divined so far: his host and future father-in-law was inordinately lazy, even too lazy to improve on another's notions or exertions, and stubborn with it. Indeed, it was the aforementioned host who suggested that they should turn about, and return to the castle, because he could have so much of his estate and no more, as in all honesty, it no longer interested him. Conversation died, to be replaced by a monologue conducted by the Duke of Hearne, who recalled earlier triumphs here which were of his doing, even if it was difficult to see their traces, and Irvin listened, while noticing that Orre had obviously heard this before, probably several times. Eventually when they reached the castle, the older man requested leave to go within in haste: he was at that time of life when his organs were very much in his way and his drainage tubing all too frequently at work. The visitor asked permission to walk in the garden meanwhile, and Sir Robert kept him company, but whereas the Duke of Hearne could only talk about himself, the Baronet had one problem on his mind.

“Before I leave, I must pause at the stables; I suspect that the horses will have arrived,” he said, “and I can leave with the black mare.”

“What if we go there now?” suggested the Duke.

So off they strolled, at a languid pace, after leaving a message with a flunkey as to their destination. This hiatus in their progress and its leisurely fashion gave time to Justina and Julius, who were still in the stables, for after having housed the new arrivals, who were to stay shut in for two days, but for their heads, so that they could see and smell their changed lodging, Justina went and washed the scraped hide that had bled a little, but was closing of its own accord, and doused it in a homemade lotion of witch hazel, before putting on it a vulnerary mixture of herbs in a pad, such things as were always stored in the saddle room for horses and grooms alike, before binding the dressing up in a clean rag. All the while the mare stood still, even if it pleased Julius to warn his sister that the animal would kick her as high as the moon, for she was a stranger to whom the creature was unused. Then they recollected a visit to a friend, during which they had to halt at an inn, where a prosperous farmer arrived briefly with a great, blue roan stallion, who took exception to the ostler's touch and was pleased to kick him, so that he fell face down into a dunghill that the inn drudge was collecting to transport away in his barrow – and how they all laughed, even Carrie, while the stallion just favoured them with a supercilious look. There was none of that here; the gentle Jezebel was a lady among horses, and in any wise, they did not slap her upon her croup, which folk did with equines as a form of appreciative gesture, and which the said equines actually did not like but suffered as a matter of politeness, recognising the circumstance that the human animal could be soullessly dim. As for Justina, while she worked, with every

manipulation, she assured the mare that she was doing no harm and even explained what she was about, as if the creature was a person who needed to be told about the treatment she was receiving. As she wanted to be careful and painless in her ministrations she was slow and Julius told her, several times, to hasten, but she would make the acquaintance of the mare, whom she kissed upon the nose before she departed, whereupon the animal blew air out of her own nostrils into her face. It made her laugh, for she knew that that was how horses greeted one another, if friendly. Just then, her brother called her to order: folk were coming.

“Well, then go and face them out with a card of ten,” recommended his sister, diving into the box which was to house the mare and hiding behind her hind legs, which she did not wield as a weapon of severe magnitude.

It was the Duke of Irvin, with Sir Robert Orre, who cheered at the sight of the mare, and proclaimed that he could fetch her now, but first the house-guest intervened.

“Orre, pray, introduce this young gentleman; we have not met, and he has an *air de famille* about him,” requested his grace.

So Lord Julius made the acquaintance of the man who was expected to be his brother-in-law, and politenesses were exchanged about the reason for the younger man’s absence being a good one. No-one mentioned Justina but Sir Robert was agog to be off with his prize, who eyed him with suspicion, for she was no brainless being and if anything, a horse had an excellent memory, for she recalled him as being the one who had hurled a stone after her in anger and hurt her on the side of one rear hock.

“Attend a moment, sir,” stalled Julius. “What are you doing?”

“Taking away this horse: Pye promised her to me –,”

“All he did was consent to the possibility of a purchase that you could be making, but then he agreed to a better offer, with an immediate payment that could be immediately concealed, Sir Robert,” objected Julius.

“Who bought her?” thundered Sir Robert.

“Don’t bully the lad just because you are old enough to be his father,” interceded the Duke amiably.

“Actually I am too young to have spawned him,” corrected the Baronet stiffly. “All right, Lord Julius, did you buy the mare?”

“No, but Justina did,” gloated her brother.

“Justina? Tell that to the horse marines! Poor Justina gets a minimal amount of pin money –,” protested Sir Robert, “no, wait, her father gave her a truly phantastical watch some birthdays ago; never say that she traded it for this heap of horseflesh?”

“If she’s such a heap of horseflesh, why do you want her?” challenged Julius. “You threw a stone at her; it could have injured her gravely or made her bolt, and caused a serious fall. I vow, I have never seen anything so irresponsible.”

“So there is an end to it, Sir Robert; the mare is now someone else’s property and not currently for sale, so let us finish with this,” proposed the Duke.

“Justina bandaged her leg and now she is right as a line,” boasted Julius.

“They don’t have their own farrier, so they dress, drench and even help shoe their own horses,” supplied the Baronet to the rich aristocrat, whereat Julius felt humiliated and ashamed. “How could Pye ha’ played a trick on me and sold a horse I wanted to a girl with a foreign clickman toad (watch: dialect)?”

“Accept defeat like a man, Orre. If you are so attached to the idea of owning a black mare, I will give you one, and no catches coming with her,” offered the Duke.

“Why should you give me anything?” demanded Sir Robert warily.

“As a token of my appreciation in respect of the services you have rendered today as marriage broker,” rejoined the Duke suavely. “Does that satisfy you?”

“I am not anything as vulgar as a marriage broker,” scoffed the Baronet.

“Don’t be nice as a nanny hen, my dear fellow,” advocated the Duke. “Today we discussed very vulgar things, such as money and its outlay to clear debts in return for my making an independent portion for my wife for to suit her during her marriage outside of her dower portion when I die. We could easily ha’ conducted it in less time with less fuss, but the Duke would make a great hog shearing of every aspect of the matter, and with it, much noise. I think I said Amen to everything in order to escape that verisame noise, in all frankness. So now let us leave young Julia who beat you to the winning post by a horse whisker alone with her triumph. By the bye, that rock you hurled at its hock, how know you that you did not crack or weaken the bone? The mare is no good to you anymore. If anything, you should be compensating the maid for the damage you wrought upon her horse. There are laws in this land that punish damage to property and to my way of seeing it, they are not nearly hard enough, especially to curb those who commit wanton attacks thus.”

“Ye ’re a confounded rogue, d’ ye hear?” rasped Orre.

“In faith, aye,” sang his grace, both complacent and complaisant. “Have you more to say for yourself on the subject? No? Then let it be closed, for I now have a question. Is young Julia – no, Justina – tall for her age?”

“Not really; a seventeen-year-old may pass for a stripling, and Lord Julius here is one o’ King John’s men,” said Sir Robert wryly, whereupon Julius grimaced.

“I don’t thank you for your judgment, sir,” he snorted, so half the horses in the stables snorted too, and all of them Pye’s, for they needed to be housed for the first days of their sojourn away from their dangerous home.

“Your sister a trifle knavish?” smirked the Duke.

“No, sir,” lied Julius in denial.

“Who rode this horse on the way here?” he asked.

“Er – I did,” stated Julius, with great firmness.

“So the person whom I saw fall, and intrepidly roll about to right itself without losing hold of the reins was you?” pursued the Duke.

Lord Julius shrugged.

“Hmm. It must ha’ been a trick o’ the light, or rather the absence of it, for you were about to enter the woodland,” continued his grace, still as sharp as he was humorous.

It was better to stand in stony silence than repeatedly lie, and Julius struck the attitude of one who was not flattered at being reminded that he had suffered a fall from a horse before analytical spectators.

“My felicitations,” resumed the Duke, with words that surprised him. “You were able to control her but with a cavesson noseband, for she wore no bridle or bit. You must be a foremost equestrian.”

“Thanking your grace,” said the young man very stiffly and just as rigid in his movements, bowed.

“Yes, that was a whacking great fall,” accepted the Duke, as if it explained the other’s lack of physical fluidity, when in fact a stiff bow was all it needed to convey to another that they, or their inquiries, were not really welcome in a specific circumstance. “If you’ll excuse us, pray. Come along, Orre; don’t forget, when you come visiting, I will give you a black mare of your choice.”

“I would hesitate, meaning no offence, for if you bred her, she will have the Devil in her,” declined the Baronet.

On that note the two visitors departed, but just as they were about to pass the stable gates, the Duke of Irvin turned and placed something atop of one of the posts. It was a three cornered hat, the one which Justina had lost. Julius did not go at once and collect it; instead he waited. When he was sure that they were far away, he went to the box which the mare inhabited and over the half-door of which she was leaning out to watch, whereupon he could see his sister, standing behind her, leaning against her hind thighs.

“Irvin knew it was a girl and I lied like a Trojan,” sighed Julius.

“For which as the Lord made me most truly thankful,” acknowledged his sister.

“And he left your hat on the gate-post,” added he.

At that she laughed, and he could not help but join her. Their moment of mirth being spent, Justina emerged from the enclave and shut in the mare.

“Now I must mix her a good feed,” she said, “so that she begins to learn that this is her new home.”

“I have had a fearsome thought,” owned Lord Julius. “When you fell back there, you did not shed anything from your pockets, did you?”

Justina replied by drawing out Jezebel’s pedigree book from her waistcote pocket.

“You mean this?” she asked, and her brother heaved a deep sigh of relief.

¹(Houyhnhnms: see ‘Gulliver’s Travels’ by Dr. Swift)

THREE

By the time that the two siblings were again with their fellows, in Lady Caroline's rooms, Julius was spruce in a suit of figured blue silk and Justina had put by the attire she habitually borrowed from him in exchange for a gown of pink cherry-derry, a favourite fabric with a silk warp and cotton weft, with a plain, closed bodice and skirts opening over a lightly quilted petticoat, which was actually a skirt and not an undergarment, of grey satin, which saved her the trouble of stiffening it out with heavy underskirts of horsehair or drugget, thus too warm, and a small hoop at her hip that kept the whole lower dress broad, out and away. It was not always customary to wear a full hoop, that was to say, an underskirt boned in loops all the way down to the hem, when one was in the country, even for the Quality and even if an Irvin visited the family castle, but there had to be a semblance of formality about one's attire after the unladylike games he had caught her playing, and she was still not sure whether he had accepted Julius's fibbing, for he had indeed enjoyed a look at her full in the face. However, before they could talk of their misadventures to anyone, Selina entered and went to the two new arrivals.

"Papa wants to see you," she reported, "and look sharp about it. He has been demanding your presences since they all returned from their drive; strictly, since Orre departed and Irvin retired to his lodging. The message comes through mamma, who adds that you had better look sharp about it, for he is grumbling in his gizzard, and it could well be leading up to a true old tirret (fit of temper: dialect)."

"We are cool as cucumbers," assured the male of the pair, ushering his sister forth, but neither hurried for neither particularly wanted an audience with their father.

"Quick and nimble, more like a bear than a squirrel," mocked Honoria. "Know you not to come by the lame post (slow and late) when father calls?"

Neither replied and whisked themselves out, Justina wincing a little, for her fall was beginning to make her ache in parts of her limbs and her back. Selina was heard calling a wish for good luck, but they did not answer and went below directly, even if, on the stair, there was time for Justina to ask her brother if he knew for how long Irvin meant to stay here.

"I never am told things," he snorted. "I suspect it will be as long as it takes to settle the matter of the betrothal, and as there is not much to settle, a short horse is soon carried."

"I'd hardly call the business of father's debts 'a short horse'," dissented Justina. "What if Irvin raises objections to paying them all?"

"We don't know to what sum they amount," reminded the other.

"We should take more interest in family affairs, but they are so dreadful that I'd as lief be out in all weathers upon a horse," owned Justina.

On that insalubrious note, they knocked on the doors of the parlour, and when their father answered, let themselves in. The Duke was seated in a grandly carved chair that had served his ancestors a hundred years ago – or almost – and the Duchess was not far, upon a chair of the same set but less ornately carved at the top-rail.

"Did you sort out Pye's problem?" demanded his grace. "There was an accident on the way; what was it that happened?"

"We had a horse that Sir Robert Orre wanted, that is all," said Justina, "but Squire Pye sent her along with the others."

"Bah! Those horses are all going to have to be seen by the farrier," grumbled the

Duke, staring out of the window.

“Pye gave us a purse for the expenses, and we turned it over to mother when we reached home,” assured Julius.

In fact the purse was on him, but the Duchess said nothing; if he owned that he had it, the Duke would have taken it and probably ‘forgotten’ that it was to be saved for spending only on Squire Pye’s horses, but if her grace had it, it would be lost among the funds set aside for the housekeeping and he would genuinely forget about it, so that its contents would not be misused or wasted.

“Use Brown,” he ordered.

“Wylie is better and cheaper,” objected Justina.

“Brown’s clients are all gentry and the rich. Wylie is for yeomen and labourers,” the Duke averred. “Use Brown, and there is an end to it.”

The twain stood still and said nothing, for they had every intention of disobeying.

“Where was Ajax?” barked the Duke suddenly.

“When we returned, he was in his stall,” said Justina, which was a half-truth.

“When I ordered the outing, I wanted horses, and they sent me the guest’s own carriage with a motley team of my animals to pull it,” he growled.

There was no reply from the young folk, so the Duchess spoke.

“Perhaps your grace’s orders were misunderstood,” she postulated.

“Parcel of incompetents, all,” snapped the Duke. “You two, sit down. I want to give you my instructions about Pye’s horses.”

“He has already sent them to us in his letter to you thanking your grace for accepting to take them in, and besides, it will soon be time for supper,” protested Justina.

“Why does everyone make excuses when I want to talk?” cried the Duke. “Is supper more important than my talks?”

“Be calm, sir: even here your voice carries and we have a guest –,” began the Duchess, but the Duke interrupted in full voice.

“DON’T SHUSH ME!” he bawled, his eyeballs rolling, before he rounded on his son and daughter. “Why have you two not sat down?”

The siblings occupied a wooden settle whereto the cushions and squabs were covered with gros-point and tied with cord, exchanging glances as they did. Thoughtless, touchy and ill-humoured, the Duke of Hearne embarked upon a monologue full of favourite and hackneyed *clichés* uttered in a loud voice and which pertained to his usual but boring fancies of grandeur all of which the members of his family had heard before, with much repetition and incoherence, so that if it began related to the care of Pye’s horses, it changed course, and they were not sure how, to the subject of Lady Caroline’s marriage, and in that respect, the money it would bring, all of which the members of his family had heard before too, for the betrothal of his eldest daughter was his great financial triumph and he had been speaking ceaselessly about it for weeks. Eventually the Duchess intervened to warn that all that money would be lost if the provider of it did not sup on time during his first evening in this house, even if at these latitudes the sun set late and his grace believed that they were still in the middle of the afternoon, which was about as sarcastic as she dared to be, so he relented and let his offspring depart, for what he really wanted was an audience for his oral performance of the day and that was all. In the hall, as they wend their way towards the spiral staircase,

Julius turned to Justina.

“Have you any brains left?” he asked.

“After his verbal squitters (diarrhoea)? I ha’ long learned to greet his bagpiping (long-winded talking) as if I were born in a mill (deaf),” owned his sister. “If I reach his age and have developed such habitudes as has he, I hope I will have the sense to see it and then I will shoot myself.”

“There should be a law about that,” joked Julius. “There is a law about everything in this country, except that which is useful. Are you all right? You are stiff in your movements, and when you rose from beside me, I heard you wince.”

“No thanks to Sir Robert Orre,” she grunted. “He never noticed, mercifully, otherwise I would have had to explain myself, and we tell enough clankers and whiskers to him all day to keep out of trouble.”

“Not that he really cares; mother says that all he thinks of is himself and no more,” quoth Julius, lowering his voice as he followed her up the steps. “In fact, marrying Carrie off is more about his own conveniences than anything else.”

“Granted, but with six offspring in the house all healthy and liable to reach adulthood unscathed, he needs to farm us out to husbands and such; even wealthy families do so,” she ceded. “Nor do girls want to remain spinsters. We’d gladly wed a blasted fellow than lead apes in hell, even if I have never understood that.”

“Would you do as much?”

“Me? All I want to do is ride horses all day.”

Julius gave a sad little laugh and soon they were in Lady Caroline’s parlour.

“There you are with your bears,” she greeted them. “What did he want this time?”

“I was not really listening,” owned Justina, “but I think I have heard the half of it before,” she said, provoking mirth.

“We don’t speak when he talks, for it will only lengthen the interlude,” averred Julius.

“I know,” said Carrie. “Did he talk about mother’s letter?”

“Where’s Honoria?” wondered Justina, noticing, all of a sudden, that her other older sister was nowhere to be seen.

“Never mind Honoria; what of mother’s letter?” pursued Julius.

“In fact the two matters are related,” included Lord Devenish. “Honorina stormed out of the house in a huff to go walk in the garden and if you go to the windows, you will see her there. It is all because mamma had a letter from Aunt Lizzie, wondering whether you, Justina, should be brought out during this Season, and if so, she would like you to go to Romeville and stay with her for a few weeks, to see if there is any harvesting to be done. She mentioned you by name and Honoria became jealous, that is all.”

“She has already had her turn at Aunt Lizzie’s, so why should she be jealous?” wondered Selina at once dour and bemused.

“I did too, but you know Honoria,” said Caroline. “I hate to speak ill, but she spoilt all her own chances when in Town and drove Aunt Lizzie to distraction.”

“What letter is this?” demanded Julius.

“Mother sent for the posts while the older menfolk were out and of course, dared not open a letter from her own sister, for father had to read it first. In fact, the letter is still with him, for all I know, and I daresay she has not even looked at it yet,” intoned Devenish with

disapprobation.

“He mentioned not a word of it to me and I was before him, and it is I whom the letter concerns,” complained Justina indignantly. “Even mamma did not remind him!”

“Mamma told me to tell you in case she was harassed or abstracted, and forgot,” said Lady Caroline. “Everyone is harassed living in this house.”

“No wonder Justina escapes with the horses all the time,” laughed Selina.

“I finally bought my own horse today,” announced Justina, “no more stealing Ajax – and before everyone screams how I paid for it or whose credit I pledged, I gave up that watch which papa ordered for my fifteenth birthday, and which I have never liked.”

“I thought you stole Ajax just to annoy papa,” remarked Selina.

“I thought you affected not to like that watch just to annoy papa,” owned Devenish.

“The truth is obviously less complicated than we have wanted to imagine,” acknowledged Lady Caroline. “It will put a small strain on the family finances, but –,”

“No more than there already are at the moment, for I have decided to use all my pin money to feed and care for her,” assured Justina.

“Confound the strain on the family finances,” spat Devenish. “He wastes enough money, does he not? ’Tis time we wasted some and not on bribes as the result of empty promises that lead nowhere. By the time I inherit, there will be nothing, so you all might as well enjoy what is left while it is left. All I know is that we are due, odd come shortlies (someday soon), to be run off our legs (bankrupt), for the old man is already run over shoes (heavily in debt).”

Justina seemed a little disconcerted at the bitterness he demonstrated.

“Don’t worry, Devenish, we’ll all wed the mixen because of the muck,” she assured. “Carrie, how went the encounter with the intended?”

“It went well. Bread and cheese (ordinary), really, which is what I expected,” said the eldest sister. “Honorina chose to accompany me, and was far more dignified than I was. It was another reason for her to be jealous –,”

“How now? Who’d be jealous of someone condemned to wed a wencher?” demanded Julius obliviously.

“She is not to marry a wealthy Duke and be a rich Duchess,” carped Devenish.

“You’d ha’ thought she was cured of a wish to wed Dukes, being the daughter of one,” snorted Selina, “and look how hobbyhorsical (whimsical) he is. She has not the patience of mamma to withstand such a man.”

“Sadly, she wished to be the cynosure and I had a notion that she hoped he would change his mind, or should I have said, choice,” related Lady Caroline. “He remained true to the arrangements, much to her dismay, but in all frankness, I would not ha’ cared were he to have asked if he could have her instead of me, for I so not really like the look of him.”

“He’s not ugly,” shrugged Justina, pulling a face and growing pensive.

“Dear ’Tina, there is more to life with a man than his beauty, and Irvin’s is of a horrific kind. One has the impression that one is being courted by an emissary from hell,” laughed Carrie. “Honorina rather fancied him, I thought. She may have him for all that matters. It is only because Pye is being made bankrupt that papa has panicked and finally taken steps to be rid of us upon a fellow who, hopefully will *buy* his daughter, effectively, for that is what wedding me and paying off all the family debts will amount to. As I am the

eldest, I am up for the sacrifice, and to be brutally honest, I resent it, but I will do my duty.”

“Yet would you not wed just to be out of this house?” demanded Justina.

“Indeed and indeed, but not to protect a selfish old man from the consequences of his folly. Althô irresponsible himself, he has been quick and emphatic about reminding me of my duty to the family and my gratitude to him for keeping me on when other peers’ daughters have wed at fourteen and been sent forth from their homes,” said Carrie. “Of course we cannot say that ‘other peers’ make efforts to find husbands for their daughters, whereas the only efforts he makes are those which suit the windmills in his head.”

“This is no better; look what he had Orre drag in,” scoffed Devenish, “a man that the Quality eschew as spouse for their children, even thô he carries a great stroke (has a big pull), because he is a notorious rabshackle (profligate).”

“Me, I am merely exchanging one selfish and wilful man for another,” scoffed Lady Caroline. “Husbands can be cruel animals and this Irvin alarms me with his pale sinister face and his eyes of steel and his hard mouth, with set ways that marriage will not change, for what on earth ever cured a philanderer?”

“Being docked smack smooth (amputation of the penis after serious V.D.)?” suggested Julius, whereupon they all laughed.

“Gentlemen,” pronounced Lady Caroline, addressing her brothers, “I hope that you have learned to lead your lives from your father, as an example to you as what not to do and whom not to follow in all that you shall hereafter commit.”

“Was Irvin friendly or did he just sit and leer?” asked Justina.

“To my grave embarrassment, papa was foreman of the jury, as usual,” sighed Lady Caroline dully, “while Irvin sat and stared at everyone as if assessing their worth and weight. Then he turned and looked out of the window, bored and probably bewildered. I doubt if he has met many specimens like our father, blustering and shewing off. I was so ashamed.”

“I wonder if that will prejudice the betrothal,” fretted Selina. “So we know not if Irvin will agree to being Sir Timothy (one who pays for all)?”

“He knows that already,” said the Marquis of Devenish. “Father strikes me as being a trifle envious of Irvin – would you believe it? Of his clothes, his appearance, his manner, of everything, and had to be a raise-mountain just for the sake of it. Aye, it was embarrassing, for we all know that Irvin knows that few can better his resources, especially an old Duke known for having the Devil dancing in his pocket (penniless).”

“I’d not mind father’s carrying heavy rakes (swaggering) so much if it weren’t for the obvious rappers (lies) he tells, and Irvin is not such a hob (dolt) as to be taken in thereby, that I can tell you, even if I have not sat in a room with him,” commented Julius. “I fell in with him in the stableyard and it was not an easy exchange of words; he always seems to ha’ the advance on one – especially if one is telling rappers oneself about one’s sister hiding behind the rump of a new horse she has just bought.”

That provoked mirth too, but then Julius went on to give Irvin credit for silencing Orre about the mare, who had been the apple of his eye and whom he wanted to take away, which the Duke effectively prevented.

“At least that, then,” approved Devenish. “Were your rappers consistent?”

“They had to be, for they were simple,” averred Julius.

“Fathers were *inconsistent*, so Irvin would ha’ seen through them anyway,” groaned

the Marquis. "I dread to imagine what he thought."

"Well, one thing is certain," quoth Caroline, "whether he offers for me or Honoria or Justina or even Selina, he knows that none of us will refuse him, so whatever our father gabbles on about, there will be a bride and she will cost him her father's debts."

"We must look like a very ridiculous family," remarked Selina.

"He is ridiculous in his own way," noted Justina. "After all this is the only way he can obtain a wife, by buying her, effectively."

"A joyful prospect for the prospective wife," sang Caroline. "I ought to be grateful, says papa: I have no dowry, no money of my own through mamma, nothing especial to recommend me, and no particular talent. Grateful, glad and relieved; those were the preferred words when he began to lecture me into submission after he learned that Orre found me a potential spouse. I was not flattered, and to be honest, I expected a husband like the one our mother was made to take and who is now our father. At least the difference in age is not so great, and furthermore, Irvin looks clean, which is an achievement in this day and age."

"I wonder if marrying you off will give papa such a sense of success that he will hurry and wed us all off faster than a dog can lick," said Selina.

"The trouble with that is his judgment in people is bad and his taste is worse," objected Lord Devenish. "Look what he let Orre bring for Carrie."

"Does not Orre have a son?" wondered Justina. "Wasn't there a Bobby Orre, who used to pull Honoria's hair and then there would be pluck-'em fair and a screaming match?"

"That was Bobby's younger brother Michael, who is to go to sea," answered Devenish. "Bobby went to Eton, St. John's College, Cambridge, and on the Grand Tour, after which he was found a cosy post in our embassy in – Lord knows where, Sweden or Denmark, maybe, so we do not see anything of him, but we will when his pa is put to bed with a mattock and he comes home as Baronet to claim his inheritance."

"I have never seen the inside of a public school or a university and the Grand Tour is beyond our means," enumerated Julius.

"Eton is as far as I ever went and that was the end of it," said the Marquis.

"You are well-read, Devenish," credited Caroline. "I'll warrant that you know more than anyone who is a gold hatband (university aristocrat)."

In reply to that, he bowed low over her hand, and jocosely she called him '*monsieur*'. Thereat, Selina revealed that she knew how degrees were acquired just by the payment of fees and what was known as term trotting, so that one did not really learn anything at those famous universities at all, and her older siblings marvelled at the sources of her information and the rather raw idiom she used. This conversation provided a shield behind which Julius and Justina had a small exchange of their own.

"Are you going to tell them about your misadventure?" he whispered, but not in her ear and not so that they would notice.

"When the Devil is blind," refused she. "Do you suppose he knew I was a girl and that really it was not you?"

"Hard to say: he sets his face in a brake (poker-faced) and I may as well be squeezing farts from a dead man, but if he is as raffish as they say, then he will have found you of great interest dressed man-fashion," he replied.

"He did, for I saw an ugly glint in his eye," she confirmed.

“He might have had that in any wise,” sniggered Julius, “for all we know he might be a backgammon man (practitioner of sodomy) with catamites.”

“Poor Carrie!” Justina tried not to laugh and the bell below tolled to announce that supper was served.

Altho the offspring of the Duke and Duchess of Hearne were long out of the nursery, but for one, it was only the Marquis, as son and heir, who ate his meals with their graces in the dining room, while everyone else had a table laid in one of the rooms of the nursery apartments, from Lady Caroline to Lady Selina, and no-one questioned or objected to this; indeed, they preferred to eat away from their father and the formality which eating with their parents imposed on them as much as the restrictions on their behaviour, and the conversations they could have. In the dining room, talk was the prerogative of the Duke, who always filled the meal with a disquisition on some unpleasant subject that had come to his mind, which was not conducive to the appetite of anyone, but his two mess-mates were accustomed to it and thus immune to its effects upon their gastric tracts. Today and henceforth, at least as long as Irvin was in residence at Great Hearne Castle, Lady Caroline had also to attend meals below with the ‘adults’ and sit at her father’s left, opposite her husband-to-be, who had the place of honour at the older Duke’s right. As she quitted them, her siblings all wished her luck, and she went below to enter the dining room on the arm of her brother the Marquis, for he was to sit up to his mother at the other end of the table opposite to Sir Robert Orre, who had invited himself to sup; perhaps his bout of ill-humour at losing the black mare had made him so churlish and forward, but then he had fed the Duke and Duchess many a dinner.

While their graces and their company were being served in the dining room by discreet footmen, for there was no pantler or butler, to use the more modern term, the household being unable to pay for such, and the servants in attendance as many as could be found in the home of an affluent country squire rather than a Duke of antient title, the young Woodvilles came together in a more convivial and relaxed atmosphere for their meal. They made a handsome set of siblings, all of them enjoying a similar air, as if to shew that they were related, but for the last entrant, who had to be called for from the window, and that was Lady Honoria. As it was Lady Justina who called for her, and that too in a manner more droll than respectful, she had for that other no greeting on her advent, except a darkling look, which had no effect upon the sparkling effervescence of the younger sister, who, of them all, was truly the best looking, even if her amusements and her lack of respect for season or weather had made her brown as a berry. She had a neat little face, in which every feature was perfectly proportioned, and the entirety extremely expressive. The Woodvilles were a tallish family, with one exception, and of the females so far, for Selina yet had to grow, Justina was the tallest, standing close to her brother Julius in height. There the similarity ended, for his hair was sandy-blonde whereas hers was dark and lustrous, his face was fair as were his blue eyes were light, not dark like his younger sister’s brown ones. Despite his visage shewing that he was one of them, he was not satisfied with his appearance, for he was a slight fellow, who would have liked to have the wider frame and the lanky height of his elder brother who was no heavier in build but longer in length, and was in the habit of condemning himself as blessed with the figure of a girl, but the characteristic he hated most of all was that he was blessed with pale eyelashes, such as no-one in his family had, and perhaps his dissatisfaction was justified, for were they darker, he would have been a most handsome young man, the cut of his physiognomy closest to

Justina's, but then Justina's eyelashes were long and thick and black and when her eyelids drooped, they gave her a sultry air, about which she had not the slightest idea.

If Julius envied his older brother's length, then that was all, for apart from his height, at the age of four and twenty, Lord Devenish had little else but a tendency to be bookish, and an impatience to absorb the contents of the ledgers in his father's study, wherefrom he was banned, to recommend him. He had already acquired a stoop, and his person resembled that of a thin, lanky, limp, older man. Upon his pale countenance were lines of fatigue, about his dull, lustreless, blue eyes a certain heaviness, and in the flaxen hair at his temples a mixture of silver strands, prematurely growing on the head of an otherwise young man. He had the love and esteem of his siblings for his was a good and obliging nature, rather than weakness of character, but he too was unsatisfied with Nature's gifts and wished he were handsome, for he was aware that such a mien was usually a prime attraction for ladies, and the excellence of his personality was not written on a man's brow, therefore he regarded himself as a little ugly and it saddened his already poisoned life. Most like him in looks was Caroline, but much in a pretty version, and all who beheld her acknowledged her to be a beauty, for it was an epoch when beauty equalled fairness and gone was the belle with black or deep chestnut hair who charmed the King and beaux alike at the Court of – King Charles II, for example. Most notable about Caroline Woodville was a gentle countenance and a sublime grace of movement, which could not fail to seduce, if her father let her out often enough to allow her God-given attributes do their work, but he believed that all females would be harlots if they could so he preferred to ignore that he had daughters – unless it was his turn next, in his imagination at least, in the bankruptcy courts. Caroline's very visage spelt peace and placidity, her mannerisms had a willowy elegance unlike the almost virile energy of Justina, but she had not a dull air about her. It was a pity she was not present to enliven the table with her grace and to pacify it with her benevolence. If Justina had the palm nevertheless for good looks, it was immature Selina who threatened them all, for she was the one with the deep blue eyes and the lustrous chestnut locks in abundance to start her off, with creamy skin with which Justina's accentuated colour could not compare. Still her physiognomy was still that of a girl and no-one could say with certainty that she would pursue a course that would dethrone all her sisters in appearance.

Last mentioned but by no means last in precedence was Honoria, who looked like no-one in the room but at times reminded them in dismay of their father, not just in air and ways but in her features, but otherwise she was different to them in anywise. They were slim and slender, and the Duke was not fat, but Honoria was heavy, and inclined towards plumpness. The Woodville siblings whether here or downstairs all had lean faces but hers was round. She could have looked like a jolly fubs of a woman, but she frowned and was grumpy and disapproving all the time of everyone. During more charitable moments – when she was not about to plague them with all her criticism and nagging – her sister and brother thought that her ill-temper was the result of being stuck here with a useless father and, all said and done, an equally useless mother, except that she had a less resigned way of shewing it. All the same a buxom figure was the mode, which she ceased not to assert, especially when she saw Justina in a gown under which the stays were not lace too tightly, notwithstanding that the girl had a waist about which a man could put both hands; she plucked her eyebrows as did the girls at court, and used a pinkish paint over her eyelids, like the London modes, which

did little more than give her eyes a swollen appearance, but no-one could dissuade her against the use of such aids or tell her that they were not an improvement to her face. Like Justina, her hair and eyes were dark, but unlike Justina, she did not have the delicate and elegant features of her siblings, or the same luxuriantly silken texture of hair, and she ensured that her skin remained white, by remaining out of the sun or only venturing into it under a parasol, or a *bergère* hat, which began as being made of plain straw, was round and simple, with a low crown, and a brim that could be slightly dipped at the sides, with a ribbon for a hatband, and ended covered in costly silks and embellished with velvet flowers or ostrich tufts depending upon the purse or inclinations of the wearer. In the country, the sight of a plainer one was more likely, and often it was worn over the perennial cap that was gathered with a drawstring ribbon tied in a bow at the chin causing that a frill be created at the edge. Carrie had to leave hers behind for supper below, but all the other females wore theirs at table, for their meal was more informal, but as Honoria took charge of matters, it soon grew less merry than usual, and ended in silence.

Ironically enough, so did that of the adults below, notwithstanding the Duke of Hearne abhorring a vacuum in noise, which he filled with his voice. All the dishes to be served were on the table and the attendants served them in a set order, until the course was cleared and replaced by a second one, which included sweets and fruits and fruit pies; as it followed a moment when there was nothing upon the table-top, so that it was a ‘desert’, this was known as a ‘dessert’, spelt French. Also present were cheese and nuts. Unlike the great banquets of the great nobility, the food was relatively rustic but tastily flavoured with home-grown herbs, so the Duke of Irvin ate heartily and shewed no reluctance when setting about to commence upon whatever was place before him, as if confronted with a thing of dubious worth. All this was to the tune or lack of it of the host’s opinions on the East India Company, and if some of these view were valid, this was probably not the place repeatedly to air them, between mouthfuls of food, which ceased not his unilateral conversation, for all folk had time to do was acknowledge what he said, and no-one postulated a contrary notion, for fear that there would be an argument, or so Irvin guessed from the noncommittal responses he produced. However, he also drank deep draughts of ale and wine, and in that order, for the reverse was ‘to be putting the churl upon the gentleman’ and bad ton. It was during one of these gaps in vociferation when the host was wetting his throat that the Duke of Irvin seized the opportunity to lean forward and twit Sir Robert.

“What was the maggot that bit you for you to throw stones at that boy riding a horse, bareback and with but a cavesson or halter? You could have caused the death of both animal and rider, for those were not pebbles, but rocks!” he reproached.

“I wanted to stop them, for it was a horse that I –,” began Orre in whining protest but Irvin cut him short.

“You are a countryman and you ride: surely you know that hurling rocks at equestrians is not only unseemly but dangerous? What if the mare shied and the rider fell and broke – er – his neck?” scolded Irvin, sounding and looking annoyed, but ever cold.

“I was beside myself,” came the excuse, as Orre recovered a little spleen, “and besides when I saw who bestrode her, I knew I had lost her.”

“So you flung the helve after the hatchet (took another useless step) and that served to settle the affair to your satisfaction?” carped the younger Duke. “I saw it all and how it

happened, sir. Pray shall we have no more knock-me-down doings while I am here?"

"What's this?" wondered the host, looking absented, lost and a little wild.

"The incident on the way out, when we halted and Sir Robert and I jumped from the carriage," supplied the future son-in-law.

The Duke of Hearne had been present and was supposed to have witnessed all, and he did not want to say that he did not really know what was going on, so he fell silent. Indeed, he did his utmost to endeavour to recall what had happened, so he remained speechless, working hard at his memory and his idle recollections of the event, which did not explain the exchange between his supper guests, and as everyone was so relieved by the quiet that ensued, no-one spoke, which was often the case in company, whether or not folk knew one another, after a source of vocal noise had been removed. Thus, both meals, upstairs and below, ended tranquilly until mother and daughter left the table, and the Duke of Irvin raised the subject of finance, so the host grew sheepish and promised to discuss – a favoured word of his – all tomorrow when his 'steward' – he had none – came to join them. In other words, he was not going to talk before Orre and the supposed bridegroom knew as much. They passed around the port and the Duke of Hearne spoke of his visit to Portugal as a lad, of the earthquake and subsequent *auto da fé*, of the follies of the Catholic Inquisition, which was excluded from France owing to the Gallican Articles, and everyone agreed. The Duke of Irvin put an end to the interlude by ending his consumption of port, which his host found very limited, and did not take the hint about talk but just thought that the other was trying to give a good impression of himself, in which case he deemed that the sooner he joined his betrothed the better. So the gentlemen adjourned to join the ladies and the Duchess made her daughter pour out the tea, which was savoured in little cups without handles in the Chinese fashion, out of a Chinese porcelain service, whereof the teapot resembled a saucepan, with a basket-weave handle. It pleased the older Duke to tell the younger one that this was pekoe and not just bohea, a poor quality tea reserved for servants – who probably stole the pekoe anyway, and the latter made a very small acknowledgment, whereat the two ladies were wholly embarrassed. To this her father added the revelation that his wife had had a letter from her sister offering to take his third daughter, Justina, about London for the Season, without admitting that his wife had not even read that letter from her sister yet, but that he did not wish to send her abroad until she had a coming out ball, for he had already made that error once with his daughter Honoria owing to lack of funds and Honoria was still single, which was as broad a hint as any, both for money to pay for the ball and to find Honoria a spouse, and Carrie wished to her mother, on a discreet whisper, that she were upstairs.

Actually, upstairs, all the world was not rosy, for Honoria had taken it into her head, after supper, to remember that she had spent a Season in London and was officially out, so that she too should have been summoned to the supper table, and she grumbled heartily about it. The siblings therefore parted to retire to their own rooms because the company with her dominating it was no good, but later, they all heard Carrie arrive finally and go to her apartments, so they all emerged from theirs, and converged on her parlour, irrespective of the consideration that she was fatigued or spiritually extenuated, even Selina in her bed-shift and wrapping gown and her hair in papers. Not that Carrie sent them off and complained she was tired; this was her first meal in the presence of her intended, so it was obvious that they were eager to know what had happened. She related the matter that was foremost in her mind,

namely her sense of shame at the shamelessness with which her father was asking for more and more money, for he had talked of Aunt Lizzie's letter and wanted Justina to have a coming out ball, which he had not given Honoria because he could not afford it. Honoria grew angry because she had missed such a grand event in the life of an aristocratic female fledgling, and indignant that her father attributed her lack of a spouse to that, while Justina was annoyed at having her affairs discussed before strangers without even either of her parents officially informing her, especially when Carrie added that their father had aired his plans for the sort of ball he wanted and that he would have liked it to be held at the beginning of the following month, so that Justina could go to Town at once thereafter. As everyone who was anyone in the nobility of England was already in London for the Season and not likely to be seduced into the distant countryside to attend, so the ball was for neighbours and relations and their friends only, which was enough company in which to have Justina presented. To humiliate this grasping family further, Carrie was certain, the Duke of Irvin had asked whether the young lady's wardrobe in London was arranged, and their father either failed to take the hint or ignored it, and told him that, as always, that was a gift from the aunt, who chose what went into it and thus limited the expenses, for after all, country girls on their first visit to the Metropolis did not know how best to equip themselves.

"Already we are pulling at Irvin's purse strings! What will he think of us?" objected Justina. "Loth as I am to lose Carrie to this rake just because he is rich, if the father-figure overdoes the demands, Irvin could just cry off (slip his engagements and go)."

"We cannot afford it anymore," stated Caroline herself. "By the bye, did you and Julius have a misadventure on the way home from Pye's with the horses, and did Orre hurl stones at you or Julius?"

"Why? Did Orre complain to father?" asked Justina.

"Irvin hauled Orre over the coals about it, and looked like God's revenge against murder," answered Lady Caroline. "The victim was riding bareback and directing the mount with but a halter, which puts me in mind of you, Justina."

"He thinks it is Julius, I hope, or at least, Julius took the blame for it," owned Justina.

"One of these days, you will be caught red handed," began Honoria. "The shame of it! If Irvin finds out that we have sisters who dress as boys and curvet about the land it will bring worse than disgrace upon our heads and then no-one, not even rakes, will want to wed us."

"Are you all right, Justina? He threw rocks at you and the horse. Were there injuries?" asked Carrie, more concerned about welfare than shame.

"What ignominy –," recommenced Honoria, but Caroline cut her short.

"I am concerned about the poor mare; at present it looks just like a graze, but we will see whether her bones are afflicted. When the graze heals, I will put comfrey poultices upon her, and if necessary, take her to the bone-setter for a look at her," fretted Justina. "Me, I'm as right as a line, but for some aches and pains which will disappear with some more exercise. As for Irvin, as I said, he was led to think it was Julius who endured it all, and he stopped Orre from walking off with poor Jezebel, so that is that. Now about this ball, we will have to have new clothes. Is he going to pay our draper's and haberdasher's bill, for I am making my own gown, but it is not so easy for Devenish and Julius, who need a tailor to put together their togs, and I know not if our village botch (tailor) is up to it."

"If necessary," agreed Julius. "We have to shew him that we consciously save money,

even if the said money burns holes in the pockets of our father.”

“By the way, has he actually offered yet?” wondered Selina.

“’Tis affrighting how she hits the nail hard upon the head,” groaned Caroline. “No, my dear, he has not. Tomorrow they will go through father’s ledgers so he knows his liabilities and then he is supposed to offer after that, or so said Orre.”

“Now or is this the old song he sang before he brought Irvin here?” demanded Julius.

“The latter, I fear,” sighed Caroline, lowering her head.

“Who will pay the wedding expenses? Traditionally they fall upon the household of the bride,” inquired and reminded Justina.

“Irvin, obviously,” scoffed Honoria. “Another disgrace.”

“Does he know?” wondered Julius.

“We can’t afford it: we do not even have silver to pawn, at least, plate of worth: father gave it all away when he was bribing folk so that he could become Lord Lieutenant of the Shire, and the rest went in electioneering,” answered Carrie.

“I don’t approve of this marriage,” announced Julius.

“To call it a marriage is still like eating calf in cow’s belly,” shuddered Justina.

“I don’t approve of that either,” he added.

“Perhaps he will be generous about the ball; we, mother and I, will try to explain to him that it is a way of having you, Justina, find a spouse, and that would be one less liability to worry about as well, if you wed a rich man, a contributor to the family, and a second son-in-law who could assist Irvin in curbing the old man’s tendency to spend,” quoth Caroline. “Goodness knows that you need a change of air from this stifling house, and going out on horseback all day into a world that does not exist is not the way to cure matters, for our affairs mend like sour ale in summer.”

“Is Justina to wed another rich rake?” asked Selina. “No-one else will have us.”

“She is but thirteen and already so cynical,” lamented Honoria. “Me, I should have had a fine and dull courtier, had Aunt Lizzie not been so impatient and sent me home before I could weave a spell over him such as would lead to matrimony.”

“Are there men who are both fine and dull? Does such an animal exist?” pursued Selina. “Ten to one they are hiding something.”

“Look what we have become,” lamented Caroline, “all of us.”

“Let Selina fun in her own way,” dismissed Justina.

“I wasn’t funning,” corrected Selina.

Just then there was a knocking and when Caroline answered, Devenish entered.

“I am come to escort you downstairs, Carrie,” he announced, “but I am none of the Hastings sort (slow) about this errand, so make church-work (work that takes long) of it, if it so pleases you. Father dispatched me with an order so peremptory that I was tempted to tell him to make a page of his own age (do it himself). He is shewing to Irvin how he has boiled pig at home (is master in his own house) and we all suffer for it.”

“We were talking of marriage,” she replied.

“So were we,” he reported. “In the morning, the Duke and his secretary will go over father’s papers, and after dinner, he will take you walking, with a chaperon (a man escorting a woman), who will be either Julius or I, following at a discreet distance, and give you a ring. Mother managed to whisper to me that she is going to tell father not to insist on a ball or

touching Irvin to pay for it, because it looks too grasping, even if he flings the house out of the window in a rage as the result of having his will curbed. That is the order of the day for tomorrow. Why you are needed now is just for shew, to look interested in affairs, and play some music or pay some attention to your bridegroom to be, for 'tis true, you and he have not exchanged verbal conversation at all yet. Once the engagement is official, the Duke will leave Hearne Castle and stay with Robert Orre, for it is not proper to have one's affianced spouse under the same roof as one, says the old man, and the Duke is agreeable."

"Take Irvin strolling as far from the house as possible and always in the open," advocated Selina. "Otherwise, father will play the corner creeper (sneaky spy; one who listens at doors)."

"Like you, Honoria," sniggered Justina.

"If you have things to hide then you reproach folk unfairly," scoffed Honoria.

"I cannot help feeling that there is many a slip between cup and lip, and that once the Duke actually sees the state of father's finances he may move, not just to Orre's but back to his London House to enjoy the rest of the season," said Caroline gloomily. "I am of feelings most ambivalent about these nuptials, for on the one hand, they will save this family for the moment, enable me to leave, and finally end my spinsterhood. On the other hand – O, no matter; what is of use to the family and ultimately to me in some respects, will have to serve with the proverbial onion. My great fear was to end up like mother, but I have watched Irvin and he is not at all like father, so it will be a different sort of wretchedness, and if he leaves me alone, it will be easier to bear. One thing I have learned, as my father's daughter, is that all ideas about status may go to the deuce, all pride is destroyed, 'tis not enough to be humble for one must also be humiliated, and I should cease to dissect everything even abstractly, for it changes nothing and does me no good. Come along, Devenish, let us go."

"I am all right here for the present," he delayed. "It is stifling in there with them all."

"When are we marrying you off, Devenish?" piped up Selina.

"After the father of the family is put to bed with a mattock (dead and buried)," he declaimed without hesitation. "Imagine my bringing a poor girl to live here under the same roof with him. We put up with it for we were born to it, but an outsider will never last."

"Aside o' that, if she sees him treat you as a lacquey, she will begin to," quoth Julius.

"A most valid point," agreed Justina.

"What if papa decides to *make* you wed?" postulated Honoria scornfully. "You'll have to tell him exactly what you told us."

"I'll leave that pleasure to your good offices," he rejoined, whereupon she huffed and prepared for an argument except that Julius cut in with a question.

"Just how wealthy is Irvin?" he wondered.

"Unspeakably so," quoth his brother. "He has plenty of terra firma in several counties, he owns collieries and mines, and he is also involved in improper dealings as far as the investment of cash is concerned, which lack of probity, I hear tell, brings in the plate fleet."

"Like stock-jobbing?" tried Justina.

"The details are not clear, but commerce is concerned," confirmed Devenish.

"Papa thinks commerce to be vulgar," said Selina.

"At the moment, fie on pride when the geese go bare legged," quoth Julius.

"There is no smoke without fire, but Irvin can turn dangerous," said Devenish, "or so

it is said according to Orre, but on the other hand, some folk like to build themselves a reputation that is worse than they are, and as his financial dealings have nothing to do with his marriage, what you don't know can't hurt you. Furthermore, how much of it is true and how much has been ascribed to him, with or without his encouragement, is not clear. You've heard tell o' the House of Whitfordshire?"

"Who hasn't?" intoned Julius.

"The greatest of William the Conqueror's followers were promised a county would be created for them which would be their apanage, but as it says in Ezekiel, 'put not thy fate in princes, for in them there is no intention to create new counties for thee'," quoth Justina.

"One of their faults, if you could call it that, was that they were of far superior lineage to their master," recounted Devenish, "and were not of the opinion that Edward the Confessor had the right to give his throne away to another prince of foreign extraction when there were his own relations living, for what would happen to the practice of primogeniture among the Normans if William decided to do that?"

"If they did not believe in their master's claim to the English crown, no wonder that they did not receive a county all of their own," snorted Honoria.

"Not that it made any difference: they threw all of William's favourites out of the lands he had made over to them, had a running battle with Odo and Lanfranc about church land acres of which they absorbed, they ended up challenging his son and refusing to take Stephen's part against Matilda, they ended up with so much realty that they might as well have been given a county palatine all of their own, and so they remain today, in several branches, all very rich, and extremely discriminating about whom they wed," continued Lord Devenish. "They are extremely clannish: let one land in the seeds (in trouble) and the rest come running to help."

"What has this to do with Irvin? Has he Whitfordshire in him?" asked Honoria.

"The Duke of Whitfordshire, who is head of the Whitfordshire family, is a cousin of his through his mother," stated Devenish.

"The Duke of Whitfordshire is a suspected Papist," announced Honoria, "a church Papist, who takes communion in an Anglican church and abides by the Sunday observance laws, but he is supposed to have his own Popish chaplain and follows that religion in secret while affecting Protestantism, in order not to pay recusancy fines."

"Is Irvin a Papist, then?" wondered Julius.

"I do not think it matters now," snorted Caroline. "I cannot refuse even if he were one, even if it reminds me of how his sister Lady Mortlake spoke to me, and I will not forget her idiom: 'my brother needs a device whereby he shall produce heirs. You shall have the honour to be that device'. Needless to say, I was not flattered at being reduced to the status of a mere device, and I thought her arrogant."

"She is a Duke's daughter, and so are you. You should have been arrogant back," snorted Honoria.

"Actually she was quoting her brother, for he used the word this evening while we were at port," revealed Devenish.

"This is all rather disgusting," assessed Julius.

"Why do we not all draw straws as to who should have him?" suggested Justina.

"Even Selina. If she draws the short straw, we may give it to Honoria, instead."

“Why me?” argued the latter.

“You complain of having let a whiting leap (let an opportunity slip),” reminded Justina.

“How many siblings has Irvin, Devenish?”

“Two, a younger and an older sister, Lavinia, Countess of Northingham,” he supplied.

“Think on this,” invited Selina with a grimace, “when Carrie weds this blasted fellow (abandoned rogue), he will be one of us, one of our family, like a brother.”

“Impartially speaking, that is not a very salubrious situation,” commented Justina.

“Were I a third party, I’d want nothing to do with him, let alone bring him into our family, but, were I he, I would hesitate to have to do with such a family as ours – unless of course he needs a device, and everyone is too high in the instep (haughty) to cede him one because they can do better than a purse proud (lecherous) puzz (man about town).”

“If so, then he must be bad ton, so I will be bad ton too,” regretted Caroline. “Then how am I to find fine spouse for my sisters? Why, will we even be received anywhere?”

On that sobering note, the conversation ground to an unpleasant halt, because there was nothing more, that anyone else knew to say by way of contribution or consolation. Devenish remembered why he was here, and at last, led his sister away, to go below for having been sent for.

FOUR

For all the self-indulgence that his supposed life was expected to afflict him with, the Duke of Irvin was up early enough to go out for a stroll on the terrace where there had once been a moat and appear at breakfast with the first of them, but whether he was aware that the siblings all watched him from the upper windows never was revealed, excluding Caroline, who was pretending to make an especial effort for him at her dressing table. After the meal, Julius and Justina disappeared, and went to work in the stables, where the Duke had insufficient servantry to care for his own few horses let alone the ones he hid for Pye, and he was not even aware that the equine side to his world ran smoothly because a son and a daughter of his own house laboured like stable boys and grooms, mixing feed, filling hay nets, and even soaping tackle. It was not education for a female even of it prepared the gentleman for a career in the cavalry. Their mates were older grooms who stayed on for whatever their master could afford to pay for they were unlikely to find gainful employment at their time of life, and thus preserved the social distinctions between themselves and the Duke's children doing their work which younger men would not necessarily have wanted to.

As for the visitor, he sat with his crafty little secretary, of whom Justina had had one glimpse before nicknaming the fellow 'Tom Tit-Tot'¹, and declaring that all the only thing missing was the long tail that whirled at phenomenal speeds. Content over their labour, fretting over the health of a horse who did not eat her feed, and the bruised hock – some called it a hough – of the mare Jezebel, and leading the horses out for their exercise, Julius and Justina had a busy morn, just busier than a normal day, without noticing any difference between it and any other until it was time to come into the house and prepare for dinner, when they learned that the Duke of Irvin was quick to recognise a situation that was tantamount to the threshold of bankruptcy, and, even if his secretary was left to examine the figures more closely, he could tell from totals and expenditures that the old man was living way beyond his means and so he decided to have a severe word with him. Of this the stable-bound siblings only learned when they returned to the castle, from Devenish, who had to sit in on the examinations and also witnessed the reproof. Irvin declared himself ready to pay off all debts and let the estate be run according to its best capacities as limited by its owner's lack of energy, but that was all. As soon as the bills and debts were acquitted, he would not contribute a penny more, and he had already calculated what were the expected outlays for the wedding. After that, even if he kept his wife in luxury, he would control all her expenses, and he was never going to contribute another penny ever again to the old Duke's useless and lavish life, with so much wastage on bribes that could benefit the education of his children.

The Duke of Hearne was furious with rage at this impudence but it was long overdue: someone had to cure the old man of his way of buying short-term loyalty with monies better spent on his family, the upkeep of his estates and even their modernisation, not forgetting investment that would increase his income the lazy way. However, he had no choice and by the time he had composed a fitting retort for his insolent future son-in-law, it was afternoon and the latter's horses had arrived. The old Duke tried to make a shew of vanity about not yet having given his consent to the betrothal, so the young Duke told him to make up his mind while he saw that his animals were properly lodged, and when he returned he would give Lady Caroline a ring. What he also did was divert many of these animals to Sir Robert Orre's, for the stabling facilities were smaller at the Baronet's manor than at the old Duke's

castle such as these were, and in any wise, once Carrie wore his ring, he was to remove himself herefrom. Tom Tit-Tot stayed, to inspect the books and that was that for the time being. The Duke's visit to the stables did not take all afternoon, and so, when the family supped together, many a bumper was raised in her honour and her father became drunk and aggressive which spoilt what had already been a fraught day. Perhaps Irvin would be as pleased to leave for Orre's as would the Woodvilles be glad and relieved to see him go.

The Duke of Irvin's homily was not without its consequences; as Justina and Julius belatedly found out, while his grace was teaching his grace not to be such a spendthrift, and his grace trying to intervene by shouting that his grace was feeding him roast meat and beating him with the spit, which effectively meant that he ill appreciated being done a favour and then being upbraided for it, the Duchess tried to pacify both parties lest her husband's vanity spoilt this chance and with it, every other possibility of marrying off his penniless brood and discharging his liabilities. It seemed that for as long as the argument lasted, she was successful, but that night, the Duke of Hearne called on his wife in her apartments and quarrelled with her loud and lustily, in stentorian accents that carried to the farthest reaches of this antient bastion, so no-one lodged therein could sleep until he had done. Such interludes did not last until the Duchess had burst into tears, they carried on until the Duke was tired of repeating the same old reproaches and the word 'respect' was much bandied about, even if one never heard the wife's responses. Finally when he had enough of a good thing, that was the power to assert himself, he flung out of her rooms and did not even trouble to shut the doors, grumbling all the way to his own chambers, whereof the portals needed to be shut by his valet, for he scorned to bother with them, which was just as well, for he would have surely slammed them, as he used to during such interludes when he was younger. The cause of his surly ill-humour with his spouse was the fact that she had dared speak to interpose while he was putting that fellow Irvin in his place that morning, and every time he made a pejorative allusion to that other, which everyone on two storeys could hear, clear as a bell, he bellowed that he would not be silenced. So Irvin, as much as anyone else here, overheard this masterpiece of speechifying, and there were those among the ducal offspring who trembled for the wedding, as much as there were those who habitually trembled when their father staged one of his fights with their mother, who could not stand up to him. Thus when the house finally settled down to grim silence, the advent of sleep was slow in some cases.

All the same that did not prevent the children of the house who laboured in the stables from rising early and going to work, which they interrupted to come back to the castle buildings for breakfast, for which there were two servings depending on location. Before she departed to join the guest, her parents and her brother, Caroline expressed her anxieties about her situation and matters in general.

"After last night, I wonder that he is going to want anything more to do with this house, for the dubious honour of such a gruesome father-in-law," she said. "Half of me says 'huzzah' and I am done with wedding such a man, whose only claim to fame is mistresses and whoring, for I shall end by worrying about my health, and when he will shoot me 'twixt wind and water (give one venereal disease)."

"You cannot say no now, whatever his demeanour; we need for you to wed, and wed someone who will pay," asserted Honoria. "Carrie, of all people, you alone know best what the duty of a daughter in such a house as ours is."

“If you are so concerned about duty, offer to wed him yourself,” suggested Justina, “instead of reading Carrie a kyrie eleison – and don’t offer me: I am half his age.”

“And look at you, with your blowsabella (rustic beauty: ironical) complexion and your propensity for dressing in men’s clothes. A fine kiln to call the oven burnt house (pot calling the kettle black),” rejoined Honoria. “Besides, Carrie is all of two-and-twenty. Soon, she will be too old to wed and condemned to eternal spinsterhood, which means beggary here, for there is no money for even a Rochester portion.”

“That’s quite a fine speech you made, apart from the fact that I daren’t wear my gowns in which to shovel horse manur; besides, these duds I wear to work in are Julius’s cast-offs. Were anyone to see me, I’d look the stable-boy,” defended Justina.

“Pray, let us stop disputing. We have had enough o’ that last night,” sighed Devenish, and put out his elbow for Caroline to take, before leading her off.

“So now what is to do?” demanded Julius. “We breakfast and wait until Irvin leaves for Orre’s, if he has not yet changed his mind?”

“Of course!” huffed Honoria, “Did you really expect that folk of our degree would allow that two of our number, known to be available when he last saw us, suddenly vanished again when he was to be seen off?”

“Is he not coming back here anymore?” wondered Selina.

“No, no, he is merely changing his lodgings and will call every day until he leaves for Town, for such matters as the document for the transfer of monies for the consideration of Carrie’s hand must be drafted, as well as the date when or around when the marriage is to take place wants settling,” explained Devenish. “Weddings are not for tomorrow; father will want a most ceremonious event, and Carrie will most likely ha’ had her three-and-twentieth birthday before she is Duchess of Irvin.”

Lady Caroline responded with a shiver.

“Don’t call me that yet,” she breathed.

Devenish apologised, but Honoria, far less compassionate, and suspected of being envious that chance had brought her sister a macabrely handsome husband with a vast fortune that was not going to run out, so she reminded her sorry sibling of her duty again, and the older ones set off below, to join the Dukes and the Duchess.

“Think of it like this,” called Justina after her, on a loud whisper, “you’ll not have to endure another of papa’s jobations (long, tedious rebukes). Make a hand of it, if you can.”

“Crude, but well-intentioned,” adjudged Julius, and they followed Honoria into the nursery, where Selina slid ahead to her place.

This seemed to annoy Honoria.

“I should be below with the others, not sitting with immature children,” she grumbled.

“May I come and groom horses with you both today?” requested Selina.

“You have the schoolroom, poor honey,” sighed Justina in reminder.

Selina took a long hard look at her sister Honoria. There was no school master or private tutor here; the house could not afford one, and the Duke was too proud to send his children to neighbours to share their tutors for a small fee. Instead, his eldest daughter and his oldest son taught the younger siblings, and as Caroline was to be elsewhere, her deputy in this case was Honoria, which Selina did not savour at all. So no-one said anything more and their chat was confined to inanities and horses, for Justina breathed a sigh of relief at not having to

stable and feed and groom Irvin's animals as well as Pye's. After breakfast, Selina was marched off to the schoolroom and Honoria assumed an exasperated air, as if the weight of the world was being loaded on her shoulders, while Julius and Justina waited in their rooms, she with a copy of Dr. Smollett and he with some old editions of the 'Rambler' magazine, until they were sent for. This involved lining up in age order, with Honoria and Selina, to await the Duke; Caroline came and joined them and soon, the berline arrived, harnessed to a splendid team of Cleveland Bay Horses, after which servants loaded on Irvin's last carpet bags, and Justina stepped out of line to ask what were become of his grace's riding horses, and those upon which the outriders were to leave, only to be told that all outriders and saddle horses had been sent ahead to Sir Robert's already, as had some of his heavier luggage and his servants, but not including Hickeringill. This latter personage, as Carrie explained, was to spend all day going through the ducal books and was to return to sleep at Orre's overnight. The only meal to be fed him was dinner, and as he was not Quality or a servant, he was to eat alone in the pantry, which used to house the silver and the pantler, but now the household possessed neither. Not long after, their graces all, followed by the Marquis, emerged and the Duke of Hearne could not have shewn more bonhomie, all of which seemed genuine, which it probably was, for the Duke of Hearne's displays depended largely upon his mood. Evidently it had been a most convivial breakfast, because the Duke of Irvin had said that whatever Hickeringill found, he was going to wed Lady Caroline, for the secretary's task was to discover the extent of outlay that was going to be necessary, and that was the work of subordinates accustomed to precision. Better than that, the Duke of Irvin was to call during the afternoon, in order to take his betrothed walking, and her father was well-pleased with his future son-in-law. All this did Lady Caroline whisper to her siblings as the gentlemen, attended demurely by the Duchess, took leave by the open door of the cabin, but before he departed the visiting Duke paused to glance over the others, waiting for him to go, effectively. Of course he bowed low over his betrothed's hand, but then he surveyed the others, his gaze alighting briefly upon Justina and Julius.

"You have a pretty family, Duke," he credited. "A very pretty family."

It was Honoria who glowed with satisfaction; perhaps she nurtured a secret desire that the Duke would change his mind and, keeping to the promise to wed a Woodville daughter, would request that his bride no longer be Caroline but the far more strong-charactered Honoria. This expression of joy imported a hint of hope, and when Justina noticed her stir aside of Julius, she leaned forward for a better look of her older sister's face and discerned all, reading her countenance like a page from a book, with large and clear print upon it. The berline rolled away and the line dissolved, Selina telling Caroline to take her lessons and Julius and Justina rushing on ahead to go and change in order to labour. It was on their way from the house to the stable yard that Julius gave his younger sister the benefit of his opinion.

"When Irvin spoke of a pretty family, he meant you," he stated.

"Tell that to the horse marines," laughed Justina. "Blowsabella, that's what Honoria called me, for I ha' caught the sun on my face notwithstanding that I wear a hat, but it has been a long process. I tell you, when I go to Aunt Lizzie's, I will probably be very unfashionable and have to wear layers of face powder to hide my tanned skin."

"Honoria thought he meant her," he carped.

"This is a silly subject, so I am going to fire a gun (abruptly introduce a new subject of

conversation),” she riposted. “While they were here, were not Irvin’s horses such capital blood creatures! I wonder where he obtained them.”

“When we are a family, you may ask him,” suggested the other.

“You ask him,” she grinned, “you’re the one with whom he had a conversation and whom he thinks fell off Jezebel; he even rang a peal in Sir Robert’s ears about it, so Carrie said to us.”

“Granted, but the more I think on it, the more I fear you are sewing pillows under your elbows about Irvin thinking that I was you. He saw you full face, he is not yaw-sighted.”

“Let us not talk about this,” she shied, a little annoyed. “I have been thinking about my habitual working in the stables. What if Irvin drags Carrie to the paddocks, or here, when they go walking, with the express intention of finding me here? Besides, there is much weeding to be done in the potager and mamma is not at liberty there to pass the afternoon with Selina and Honoria, which she and Carrie would have done.”

“Set us see what Honoria says at dinner,” he postponed, for he was loth to lose his work-mate even if this was not her place and she was probably of more use at present in the vegetable garden.

It was as she predicted; when the siblings returned to the house for dinner, and presented themselves changed out of their rough clothing, Honoria told them that the potager needed attention and that she wanted Justina to join her and Selina there, for Irvin would come by and bye, which kept Carrie from doing her part in it, while the Duchess had to stay on hand lest she was needed. Julius may have grimaced and Justina did not look forward to that kind of work, even if it was less gruelling than pitching hay or scrubbing saddlery, but at least it kept her out of the way, for the Duke came all right, and as she had feared, managed to bring his companion towards the paddocks indeed, where they stood and admired Pye’s horses, but at least his grace neither verified whether his own team was being looked after correctly, for he was come in a carriage, nor ventured he into the stable precincts to view what kind of personnel the Duke of Hearne had serving him. At a distance, during their walk, they sighted the girl and two young women in the potager, unidentifiable under their straw hats, and Caroline did not mind to tell her spouse-to-be that that was work she habitually did. The Duke did not suggest that they should go and greet the ladies at their toil even tho Carrie thought that he should have, and tacitly wondered whether he could read rapacity in Honoria’s smiles, none of which was very much to the credit of this family or to Honoria herself. All the same, the day passed off peacefully and the Duke of Irvin’s visit was endured, short as it was, for after all, he had only left this morning, and he promised to return tomorrow, tho he did not say when. The only matter which caused any anxiety was the presence of Hickeringill, as he ferreted undisturbed among the ducal expenses, which operation the Duke of Hearne should have supervised but was too lazy so to do, and which his heir wanted to, but his own father forbade it. In fact, Devenish was the only person to worry thus, for none of his siblings seemed to care; even Carrie was resigned to his presence and the results of his examinations. If Honoria agreed that this outsider ought at least to have been supervised, she was most indignant and huffish about it everywhere except in her father’s presence and dared not say a word about it either to him or to Irvin’s secretary. At supper, which this time was attended by the eldest sister in the nursery, she talked of her stroll: Irvin was most urbane, unlike even the most ceremonious squires she had ever met, and he did not talk much except

of what was around them, namely the castle, the grounds, their upkeep, and slipped in the occasional relevant reference to his own demesne in the same context but without boasting. His only departure from the matter of Hearne property was Squire Pye's predicament and in particular, Pye's horses, whom they viewed from the paddock fence, for he seemed to know much not only about equines, but also about equestrianism. As to his character, they were none the wiser: he did not rattle on but spoke as many words as he encouraged forth of the lady, so that they actually made conversation, and he did not force the pace by asking her questions, which was rude and high-handed. In fact, he was the perfect gentleman, but it was the first stroll he had with his wife-to-be, so worse only could be expected of him. When Lady Caroline reached this conclusion to her account, she had the air of one who would speak of him no more, and in any case, he was not yet the alpha and the omega of the household: Honoria wanted to crow about her labours in the potager and complain that she was short-handed, while Devenish was upset about their father not letting him even figure in the work going on in the study, while Selina wished to announce that today she had learned that the notorious Borgia family of Renaissance Rome were in fact of Spanish origins from Valencia, which had nothing to do with anything at all being discussed here. With no outsider in residence, the household returned to order and the day ended as usual, in an atmosphere of the usual nervous anticipation as to what the Duke of Hearne would do next or whom he would victimise as the fancy took him.

In ignorance of the Duke of Irvin's plans, the morrow began as usual, with lessons for Selina, the Duchess running the house, and two siblings going to the stables, as Honoria repaired to the garden. In fact it was she who came running back to give the warning; although tucked behind the castle garden, the lie of the land and the curve of the drive enabled anyone in the kitchen garden to see who was in the park and approaching the castle from the gates. In the stables all they knew was that one of their own footmen brought a beautiful chestnut stallion with a most elegant gait and a truly honest face to go with his fine looks. It was the footman who told Justina and Julius that this was the Duke of Irvin's horse, for his grace had just ridden up and the Duke of Hearne had dispatched not one but two footmen to receive him, one to take away his mount and the second to conduct him within, where a loud welcome was accorded him by the master of the house, or so it seemed through the open windows. Justina and Julius joked about how their father would command either the Duchess or Devenish to 'call Caroline' and send for the best wine in the house, for his grace the host was an expert on fine wines – or thought he was – and likely to give any visitor a lecture upon it. Entrusting the visiting mount to their care, an incongruous sight in his gold-laced liveries as he addressed a slightly built person in breeches of cord-du-roy and a leather apron as 'my lady', the footman returned to the house, for every servant, now, counted for something, especially if the master decided to invite the caller to dine, which brother and sister earnestly hoped that he would not, but that he would stay to take wine and cake, for they wanted to have a good look at his splendid mount, and Justina coaxed the animal to open his mouth so that they could tell his age, enabling her to announce that he was five years old. Then both of them stepped back to admire the creature, his reins still lax in Justina's hand, while he in turn, regarded them, his eyes twinkling.

"Am I addled or is he smirking?" mused Julius.

"Horses always know when they are the object of admiration," she replied, 'and at the

hand of such a ragamuffin as am I at this moment, I'd say he would smirk. So Irvin is just arrived, eh? That means he'll not leave in a while, once the old man begins at him, so –," she broke off, with the air of a plotting rogue.

"No, you are not going to!" cried Julius.

"Not going to what, my filthy fellow?" she gurgled euphoniously. "Of course I am."

As she spoke she divested herself of her apron, which she tossed lightly at her brother so as not to startle the horse, before launching herself upon the saddle.

"Stab m' vitals, wait until he sees you," laughed Julius.

"Yea, verily, I am going to ride past our front windows and halloo as I do so," chuckled she, wheeling the horse about towards the paddocks, of which one was empty. "Soft mouth, picks his feet up, by my troth, that blackguard Irvin knows an ace or two more than the Devil about horseflesh. This is the reward one has for working in the stables: we have first crack at any fine piece of blood that comes wandering our way."

"He has lop ears," criticised Julius.

"That denotes a kind and generous horse," whooped she, and took the chestnut out of the stableyard at a dancing trot; Justina could feel that he was shewing off and she enjoyed it just as much as did the animal.

"I'm putting him over the fence!" she hailed her brother, as they hove off at a canter, and Lord Julius raised a thumb.

With that, she successfully launched the fine stallion over the obstacle and down he gracefully came on the other side. Just then, she heard another voice and the startled Julius turned towards it, perceiving that it emanated from a tall being dressed in black riding clothes. If her brother was abashed, so was she, and she even overheard the intruder greet him by name, for they had conversed before, so before he asked any questions, she set off across the paddock at full gallop, taking the chestnut to the adjacent fence, leaping it without further ado, when she noticed out of the corner of her eye that both Julius and Irvin were at the palings nearest the stable yard and leaning upon the topmost of them, watching this display. What she then did was to disappear into a pocket of woodland nearby, which curved about the rear of the stables and so she brought the stallion thereto, dismounting, and slapping him on his croup, so that he would take off to seek, preferably, his master. In fact he went bounding off around the walls and into the yard itself, attracted by the fragrance of oats – edibles, in other words – while she sped off toward the castle through the potager, intending to enter the edifice by the servants' door, which the young folk used it all the time. As she darted into the potager, taking the path through it, something swift and heavy pounced on her from behind seized her by the waist and turned her briskly about, pulling her towards him so that she was pressed up against his abdomen.

"Now let's have a closer look at you," chuckled the Duke of Irvin, pulling up her chin with one gloved hand, only to have her grimacing brazenly at him, even if her features were twisted and wry. "Well, well, I'll be damned!" he laughed.

All she did was smirk and nod, so he released her, so she took a step in retreat.

"Did we enjoy riding my horse?" he asked.

At that, she inclined her head.

"I never let folk ride my horses but for those who exercise them, and that usually does not include you," intoned he, suddenly stern.

Justina turned down the corners of her mouth and shrugged her shoulders, as if to indicate that she could have hardly cared less.

“And know you how I correct transgressions? With the use of this,” he proceeded, holding up a fine ebony whip with a gold and mother-of-pearl handle. “Of course I never have to use it on horses; they seem to know better.”

Turning away, she snorted, as if to shew compleat contempt.

“Do we say neither muff nor mum because we are a tony (simpleton) or a Town shift (sharper)?” he asked.

Justina had to control the urge to put out her tongue at him which would at once have given her away as a girl, so he had no response from her whatsoever, and he had to make do with what she looked like and his suspicions about her.

“I am aware that in this household, certain economies are practised, so are you one of Hearne’s boys, or are you a Marquis of Marrowbones (footman), perchance?” he tried, hoping to tempt her voice out of her.

Beaming mischievously, she folded her arms, and tilted her head, as if challenging him to decide. All at once, he let fall his whip.

“Dear me, how maladroit in me,” he mused, and then kicked the object towards her with the toe of his boot. “Pick that up, boy,” he commanded.

Justina smiled sweetly, bowed low, retrieved the whip, bowed again, proffered the item, but then suddenly swung it and struck him across the boot cuffs therewith, so that he was not really hurt, but it caused him to cry out all the same. With that, she flung the thing at him and darted off. He caught it dexterously and sprang after her like a cat chasing its prey, and he fully intended to pounce on her and bring her crashing down under him – except that Lady Justina Woodville had become rather strong for her size and her sex, in all these years as a stable hand, so that she slid out from his grasp, even if she suffered herself to be dragged by an arm, but she still kept an upright balance.

“My apologies, sir,” he mocked, “why you should have stated your rank and degree. Goodness me, how you pant; I must ha’ knocked the wind clean out of you.”

Justina looked dour but heaved breathlessly all the same.

“Great Heaven, be easy, dear – er – fellow,” sniggered the Duke, pulling off a glove, “or else your heart will burst. Let me see,” he added, reaching for her breast, “by my faith, how hard it beats –,”

At that she took a sharp step backward.

“I may not touch you? I am not diseased,” he reassured, gloating, as he extended his hand once again. “Let me feel your heart.”

Justina moved not at all but when his hand reached her body she slapped his fingers. All at once she found herself lifted well up, swung about, and set down crouching with her knees under her and one of her arms twisted behind her back as an iron grip encircled her forearm, resulting in searing pain, but if she pulled a face, she absolutely refused to cry out.

“If you wish to be a man, you must learn to fight like one,” he gurgled, before letting her go, only to take hold of her again, albeit gently and then assist her to her feet, in which she had no choice in the matter at all. “O, welladay, I have made you so dusty,” lamented his grace, and under the pretence of dusting her down, slapped her hard upon the rump.

With a bound, she dashed out of his way, leaping an entire bed of vegetables,

whereafter both her hands sank protectively to her seat as she turned indignantly to regard him and thought what a sad life her sister Caroline was in for.

"Pardon me but did I hurt you?" he jeered unctuously. "Do say that you forgive me, sir, or else I shall be so upset. Say just one word to me, at least."

Recalcitrantly, she pressed her lips together.

"Just one word?" he cooed, his voice rich and euphonious. "I shall be vastly offended otherwise. You are no mute, so give me one little word."

"FIGS (the sign of two fingers)," boomed Justina, lowering her voice an octave.

"Figs?" echoed he, surprised but laughing. "Very well, let it be 'figs'," relented his grace, throwing an arm about her shoulders. "Now let me see; you let the chestnut into the stable yard from the back and piked off, so the fellow should still be there."

Justina only shrugged.

"O, 'pon m' soul, what dear little shoulders," drawled he, fondling them as they moved under his hand.

Her ladyship pulled one of her ugliest faces, as if to express to herself her disgusted and disgruntled amazement, but the Duke saw and seemed not to mind at all. Together they re-entered the stable yard, where the smirking chestnut was already made fast by Julius, who stopped short on beholding their ingress, his jaw in danger of dropping. His sister called him to order by clearing her throat with a low, rasping sound and turning down the corners of her mouth, before raising her eyebrows, as if to convey that she did not comprehend this situation and thought the Duke to be addled in the bargain.

"Let us fetch that horse, shall we, my young buck?" suggested Irvin gaily, addressing Justina, before turning to the other. "Lord Julius, I have just had the pleasure of encountering your brother."

Julius gave a sheepish and embarrassed laugh and prepared to slink off. The Duke himself untied his horse who gave him a supercilious glance and promptly turned to wiggle his lips upon Justina's bosom, whereupon she looked exasperated but ignored the attention, even if she was sure that the stallion was reading his master's prurient mind, but the Duke only laughed merrily.

"He cannot help it, he is male," joked he. "Give us your knee, young fellow."

Justina could have vaulted into that saddle unaided but the Duke had already bent and taken a hold of her leg, which he duly folded back at the knee, and just as he gave her his unwanted help as far as his horse's back, he ran his unwanted hand up the inside of her thigh as she landed in her seat, a bemused and sickened expression on her face.

"The stirrups are too long," he complained and would have taken hold of her leg to move it towards the withers so that he could adjust the leathers, even if he had not measured them according to the length of her arm, which was not really current practice off the race track, for folk preferred riding in long stirrups, but before he could carry out his ministrations, she had thrust her feet into those leathers themselves and wheeled the horse away from him, giving him a respectful salute rather like a yokel might give a gentleman.

"Off you go," encouraged the Duke of Irvin. "Your father's coming."

This curious warning had the opposite effect of making Justina rein in with a frown, while Julius paused, his demeanour bewildered, but his grace gesticulated urgently.

"Be off with you," he urged Justina.

So off she went, but just as she had taken herself out of sight, the Duke of Hearne marched into the stable yard, in person, a rare event, for even if he lacked the great train of followers of a Duke of Chandos or a Duke of Beaufort, he never demeaned himself by coming to appurtenances such as these.

“Ah, my dear Irvin!” he hailed, bluff and hearty. “Go away, bantling,” came a savage dismissal for his own son, hard on the heels of his welcoming greeting for the caller. “Now where on earth are you off to, sir?” he asked the other Duke, who had the good taste to regard him with questioning quizzicality. “You young men are all alike, hot-blooded and ready to snuff pepper about a chip in a potage. I was like that at your age. Come along back inside and let us talk about this over a glass of negus, for upon my soul, sir, there is no need to be hasty in these matters.”

Smirking for the hundredth time, the Duke of Irvin preceded the older man out of the stable yard, nodding rather condescendingly. No sooner had they gone than did Justina return and Julius stepped out of the saddle room.

“I wonder what has been going on,” the latter mused anxiously.

“Our august papa is not an easy person to negotiate with and I would say your head to a turnip that he came out with a proposition that gave Irvin the idea to abandon the project. When you wed, it is not just a wife you acquire, but her whole family,” assessed she sourly. “Yet what grovelling on the part of our old man; it made me want to cascade (vomit)!”

“My dear Justina, when you want a thing badly enough, you have to become an arseworm (arse-kisser),” quoth her brother, with the sagacity of one who had lived through many a humiliation in order to gain some small favour.

“Now from whence cometh that kind of knowing? You’ve not had to play ‘your all too humble servant’ with anyone, for you have not been around long enough, and you’ve scarce been out o’ the shire,” marvelled Justina.

“Devenish; when he needs a thing from our dear and venerable father, he has to beg for it like a dog,” said Julius, “which hardly makes him muchly respectful of the Fifth Commandment, to honour thy father and thy mother. As for Irvin, he strikes me as hard as Brazil-wood; he would do nought for a soul without making that other be obligated (make a person indebted by kindness) as the result of it.”

“If there has been a disagreement that has resulted in Irvin’s crying off and papa’s having to come after him on his knees, then it is time someone taught him to hold his maw.”

“Since when has that ever been possible? Even mamma has no control over his tongue; they call a wife’s fingers ‘the Ten Commandments’; well, those of our mother have all been amputated,” scoffed Julius. “The trouble with the old man is that he always overdoes it, including the grovelling.”

“I feel so ridiculous, in fact, I feel doubly ridiculous,” she grunted. “Here I am, bestriding Irvin’s horse, but I have a foul taste in my mouth about it.”

“As the result of the goings-on, whatever they be, in the house?”

“Not so; he put his hand up my leg as he so-called helped me mount up. I think he was trying to confirm that I was and am a girl.”

“Unless he is a molly,” grinned and teased Julius.

“Do I look like a catamite?” she snorted.

“His horse is no better; I nigh split my sides containing my laughter when he made for

your apple-dumpling shop (female bosom)," owned Julius merrily.

"So did Irvin."

"What, nigh laugh too?"

"No, make for my apple-dumpling shop."

"Carry me out and bury me decently! The old lecher!" exclaimed Julius, both aghast and, unfortunately, amused.

"What does he mean to do? Wed Carrie and roger all her sisters one by one?" scoffed Justina. "When he is done with us, is he coming after you both like a true boreto man (sodomite)?"

Julius looked pensive at the thought, but his sister, far from taking advantage of the privilege which the Duke had allowed her, slid off the horse's back.

"Smirking Sam, that is what I am going to call him," she announced. "Well, playing the Jack is not going to have the work done," she added. "The only thing I can say in Irvin's defence was that his trying to florence (when a man ruffles a girl) me took place when he and papa had fallen out and the engagement with Carrie was perhaps in the balance."

"Aye, there's that," mused Julius. "Smirking Sam, you called him? Well, he wasn't smirking when he came careering around the stables into the stable yard, and that was when Irvin started off after you. Never imagined that a man like him could take off so fast, or that he was so fit! He is the picture of profligate indolence. What else did he do to you?"

"Apart from trying to pull my arm off and forcing me to my knees?" she sneered, leading off the chestnut to water him and then lodge him in an empty stall.

By the time the sister and brother had finished their day's work, the Duke of Irvin was already gone, for a footman came to fetch his horse, and so it seemed that he had stayed to dine after all, which event made no difference to the two young quasi-stable hands, for they ate bread and cheese and drank cider in the paddock under a tree, with nothing but inane and equine conversation to occupy them. However, for supper, they were at pains to wash and tidy themselves up, for Carrie would preside and if the meal was served exceptionally in her parlour instead of the nursery, it was the least courtesy they could shew. For their pains they had an additional reward, as Devenish arrived for to join them, because the Duke and Duchess were eating alone. That was when their younger son pounced on his older brother and asked what had happened shortly after Irvin had arrived earlier in the day.

"O, it was all rather ignominious," related the Marquis, his gaze upon his siblings desultory, as if he were embarrassed by the very recollections whereby he was beset. "Our eminent father took it into his head to impose upon Irvin a set of calculations that he had compiled, and God alone knows from what hole he obtained his figures, that were supposed to enlighten the visiting Duke. The latter, with an infinity of patience, urged the old man to wait until Hickingill had done his work, but nay, our all-knowing parent insisted on pressing his compilations upon the visitor, who refused to look at them, for he knew a trick worth two o' that; if he as much as glances at anything that our father has mabbed up, he would find that he will be held to it, despite whatever Hickingill turns up, and that game is not worth the candle. I know not if father was trying to fogle him or if he was shewing that he was once the acme of all accounting, but Irvin was adamant and father was at the house top. So Irvin said he was going until father cooled his head whenever that would ever be, which sounded pretty final to me, and I said so. The old fellow lost his temper and screamed bandog and bedlam

until mother interposed and told him, to his beard, that he had just ended the engagement. The effect was stupendous; he at once ceased bawling, but it took some hammering into his head that the Duke did not mean he would come back when he said when father had cooled his head, for words like ‘whenever that would be’ were ‘in the week of four Fridays’ wrapped up in clean linen. So he set off to waylay the other and actually caught up wi’ the fellow for he brought Irvin back to the house. Irvin must ha’ been strolling at a snail’s gallop, for that to have happened.”

Justina and Julius exchanged glances: Irvin had been otherwise engaged in insulting the virgins of the Duke of Hearne’s family.

“It was totally shameful,” resumed Devenish. “What those calculations amounted to was an untidy pile of scrap paper on a small table. Later I had a look at them: they were all prognostications of the theoretical type that he used to make when he began to be in a bad loaf and invest in what he called a lumping pennyworth that turned into a make (swindle or bad bargain) or, was only good on paper but impossible in practice. He was going to shew Irvin what he was going to do with all the money Irvin gave him, and pay up the debts out of the profits of his successful enterprises, but after dining, Irvin made one thing clear. There would be no ducats (money) passing this way: Irvin would undertake each debt himself and pay it, and the Duke his venerable father-in-law was not to be troubled with sorting out the matter himself for it would be taken care of on his behalf, and that was exactly what Hickeringill was working on. He was very much out of humour because of it, so after Irvin left, he dismissed me and said he and our mother were to sup alone.”

“That means he will lecture her about her duty to respect him all throughout the meal and she will not swallow a morsel,” said Selina. “Me, I would rather wed a squire or even a merchant and have two shirts and a rag (enough comfortably to live on), but that my husband be Joan Thompson’s man (uxorious husband).”

“We saw father come to the stable yard and stop Irvin from leaving, and it was not dignified,” owned Julius. “The grooms witnessed the whole too, I am sure, for they see it all even if they play least in sight.”

“I am truly past caring what folk think of our father,” lamented Caroline, “and I opine that he should be left to make as great a fool of himself as he pleases, but when it involves his family, especially us, the next generation, I am wretched. How folk must regard us, the tainted children of such a man, and thus, how does Irvin regard me? By now he must have lost every last chance of ever entertaining for me the most minuscule scrap of esteem, that is necessary for any marriage to be founded upon, even if it is one of convenience. What if he has an idea that I am like my father? You in the stables only saw the beginning: when Irvin was back here, what fawning and lick-spittle! It was enough to make a fly weep. He may degrade himself if he wishes, but when parents behave thus, do they realise that they condemn all their offspring?”

“One thing,” swooped Honoria, totally disaffected, “did Irvin see Justina in breeches?”

“We had the impression that he did not notice her and thought she was just a boy,” lied Julius. “His remarks were addressed to me, mostly, and Justina had to take away and water his horse.”

“Did he speak to you?” pounced Honoria at her younger sister.

“Aye, but I never spoke to him,” said the latter. “Then father came and his attention

was turned elsewhere.”

“He is intelligent and cunning,” quoth Honoria in a scolding tone. “One look would ha’ told a man of his experience that you were a girl dressed man-fashion.”

“My dear Honoria, had father seen me he’d have recognised me in anywise and I’d ha’ been given the rebuke of a lifetime, for there is nothing the old man likes better than to humiliate his own children before spectators,” deviated Justina.

“Forgetting that is such bad form and should be glossed over compleatly,” added Lady Caroline. “He is a crafty man, is Irvin. He made papa look exceedingly silly. His great weapon is his silent coldness. To overcome him, I think, one needs be colder.”

“Is it even possible?” snorted Devenish in dismay.

“Or the compleat opposite, like severe ardour, to melt him into a pool of water,” postulated Justina.

“In human terms, sweat,” cackled Julius.

“How masterfully poetical,” rejoined Justina. “On the other hand, I suspect that papa’s temper was in the furnace when they had their little – er – tiff. Carrie, did you manage to achieve something practical with Irvin, such as the date of the wedding?”

“We actually talked of it, and he suggested that it be an autumn affair, so that we may retire to the country, for then the hunts would be over and his sisters’ various families ready to bed down for the winter, over which he would have no companion but me to distract him and I would surely conceive of him a child,” replied Carrie. “We also talked of things mundane: he will take over father’s mortgages and discharge the other debts, he will pay for the wedding even tho’ it will be held here, as tradition behoves it to be held in the bride’s parish, and that will include our attire, so let us keep it simple: no orders to Carr or Swann to bespeak a silk figured especially to our respective and separate tastes. Of my life, he said that I was to have my own apartment upstairs and my own parlour, but that I should learn to run the household altho’ not the estates, I could make and receive calls with or without him, and in the latter case the persons with whom I was to consort had to be reputable, but that it was better ton to be seen with another lady of Quality at one’s side and not go visiting in Town alone, except that would happen next year and I would have had enough time in his company as his wife to learn about social matters. When he said the words ‘my wife’, a shudder ran down my spine and I am sure that I coloured but I hastened to keep my countenance, even if I could wield no force over my blushes. When we are wed and he has discovered the nature of my wants he will be able to allow me a substantial amount of pin money and then know how much it must be. I may pledge his credit, I may go to plays and the opera, and if I want, he will use his good offices to obtain for me an appointment at court. I may be a lady of fashion if I wish but he would rather that I evaded scandalous company, otherwise folk will doubt the paternity of the fruits of my womb. One thing he absolutely forbade me: I must never go to moneylenders for any reason, nor ever pawn any of my jewels, and I must not gain a taste for gambling, whether it be the Devil’s books (cards) or the Devil’s bones (dice).”

“It all sounds fearsomely reasonable,” sighed Devenish.

“All this you and he conjobbled together?” asked Justina.

“They took a walk in the garden near the potager and Honoria went to listen behind the sweet pea trellises, instead of helping me with the weeding,” included Selina.

“The point I was making,” included Justina, to silence Honoria even before she

sparked off a dispute, "was that you and he worked out more about your marriage together in one afternoon than he could in two days with papa?"

"Exactly," assented Caroline. "I feel I ought to be grateful, but instead, I squirm. I think of mother."

"Life for mother would ha' been somewhat less awkward were the ribbon to run thick (there is plenty of money)," quoth Honoria.

"Life for mother was a constant series of self-abnegations even when the ribbon did run thick," reminded Devenish, who was old enough to recall all vividly.

"Self-abnegation is a feature of being a moiety (wife)," stated Selina, "unless one lives on Queen Street (house ruled by wife)."

"I know little o' the character o' the man, but there is little chance o' that with the Duke of Irvin," doubted Julius.

"I know more o' the character of my own sister, and she is not o' the ilk to impose her will in a household, howsoever strong it is," said Justina. "By the bye, was he not supposed to have given you a ring, or was that something just said and never happened?"

"It happened and I spoke not of it so that no-one would remember," owned Carrie.

"Where is it now?" asked Julius.

"Selina wears it when he is not about and I have to appear before him," announced Lady Caroline unexpectedly.

"Selina?" chorused the two stable-hands.

"Your insistence on working among horses means that you are far removed from the affairs of this family," scoffed Honoria. "Were you to stay closer to the house and work in the garden or the stillroom, you would know what was going on."

"And who would take care of the horses? You?" challenged Justina.

"Selina wears my ring," cut in Caroline to cut short any chance of an argument, "because it is a great rock of a diamond, of the finest water, and she has never worn anything so precious in her life, let her have some fun."

"Nor is she likely ever to have such a jewel," added Selina herself.

"You shall have the King's horse and no joke," consoled Julius, for that was an expression used to answer an arrant lie.

"You have never worn anything so precious in your life either," said Honoria to Lady Caroline, with a dryness to her voice.

"I will have to wear it for the rest of my life if I die in childbed or the rest of his life in anywise, and there will be more where that came from, so I am in no hurry to bedizen my hands with jewels of great cost," quoth Carrie rather crisply. "Irvin asked for all the mortgage papers as well as the bill-notes, and he doubtless means to work on them with his trampler (attorney; nowadays, solicitor) in London, so I am as good as done for."

"Carrie, speak not like that," commiserated Justina, who knew more about Irvin than anyone in this room.

"Why did neither you nor Julius come to dine?" demanded Honoria.

"We asked for some bread and cheese at the kitchen door. It was easier than coming in and changing, for Pye's horses had been turned out at last and there was much mucking out to do, and I doubt if poor old Jeb and Joe and Will would ha' been able to do it all without some more youthful help. Besides, that is what we do now," answered Julius.

"I need help in the potager," sulked Honoria.

"I'll go there after supper until the light fades," offered Justina.

"Know you why they really work in the stables?" challenged Devenish. "When Julius and Honoria were past the age of twelve, they were forever in trouble with father. It was as if the expectation and then the onset of puberty made them anathema to him. With Julius it went on for longer than it did with Honoria, so he used to escape. It has not happened to Justina because she escaped before anything could happen. Besides, Justina has never grown out of a girl's enthusiasm for horseback riding, and she is a true equestrienne, with a way with horse. Let the best dog leap the stile first: she is good with horses so let her work with them until she is sold off to some husband or other."

"We need the extra hand," sighed Julius.

"She has the look of a village blowsabella; she'll never obtain a husband worth anything," decried Honoria.

"Has everyone eaten all they can?" asked Justina. "As there is no passing the port and adjourning for tea, then may I deem the meal to be over? If that is so, I pray you permission to go change my gown and don a pinafore and go into the potager."

"Justina, you don't –," began Carrie, but she only rose and Honoria called after her as she made for the door.

"Don't forget to wear a hat," she suggested on a tone more of authority and command than recommendation.

"Aye, aye, captain," answered her younger sister, and departed.

They continued with their conversation, mostly about Irvin, and Caroline's intentions to be stoical whatever he did, until Julius espied, in the distance, Justina's figure, in a blue gown of dimothy with an apron over it and a bergère hat on her head, crouching among the rows of vegetables barely visible behind the trellis, for the kitchen garden and physick border were not embellishments and not for the eyes of those who strolled on the paths and in the flower bowers for pleasure, except that the height of the building did different things to perspective and allowed a greater view of all. Althô he said nothing, her brother went out to her, and Selina noticed; indeed, she saw him cross the gardens on his way to his younger sister at work. When he reached her, he paused before her but did not lend a hand.

"You, I presume, have no intention of telling Carrie that Irvin mauled you," he noted.

"And you, still in your silks, have no intention of bearing a fist here," she rejoined.

"I'm sick of the idle crick and the belly work in the heel (lazy) at this time of day," he confessed. "About Irvin, thô?"

"I intend to say neither buff nor baff. It will upset her, and even the casuistic explanation that the ruffling about was performed during a brief hiatus when the engagement was doubtful, will sound like the cat crew and the cock rocked the cradle," averred Justina. "Poor Carrie is not at all comfortable about this betrothal and feels she is being thrown away, but then she is, and so are many daughters, which was why the antient Romans saved themselves this trouble and exposed them at birth. Why make it worse, and let her know that Irvin fumbled her own sister, the damnable flirt? In her present mood, it would upset her grievously, I reckon."

"Whether he meant to be unengaged to her or not, even for a moment, he knew you would not tell, that is why he dared behave as he did, and he was almost sure that you would

have me keep my bonebox (mouth) good and stowed (shut up)," commented Julius. "Clever old strunt (willy). As to what he did, men like to do that to girls, if they are lucky enough."

"He did nothing to burn navigable rivers. It was all silliness," she dismissed, with distaste and discomfiture, grateful that the lie of her head, the fact that she was crouching and the brim of the hat all hid her face from his view. "Tomorrow, I must see how Jezebel walks; the wound has scarred well already. Whether she is lame or not, I will put a comfrey poultice upon her," she changed the subject, and in a moment he found out why, for Selina was in the garden, still in silks, but with a pinafore and a hat.

"I'd best shog," decided Julius.

Justina said nothing and let him go; a few minutes later she was joined by Selina.

"Where is that ring?" inquired she humorously.

"I left it with Carrie, lest it should fall off and I lose it," answered Selina.

"You did not have to come out," said Justina. "I departed not because I felt any duty to obey Honoria but I feared that an argument was brewing and wanted no part of it. Besides, the inside of a castle is dreary on a summer evening, and I'd sooner be out of doors."

"I'm staying until I can see the fireflies," chuckled Selina. "Why do you crouch in that uncomfortable way?"

"Were I to bend like you are doing now, my supper is sure to make a rapid exit through my nose," answered Justina.

Selina responded by crouching also.

"Don't," forbade Justina. "You'll ruin your gown and we cannot afford the dowlas (draper), remember that," she warned, but as Selina straightened up, she looked aside, as if distracted by something or person in the direction of the stables.

"Halloo, what is to do at this time of evening?" she mused, and Justina looked up.

"That, if I'm not much mistaken, is bully Orre," the latter commented, and lowered her head over her work, shuffling along as she did.

Orre had obviously not ridden up to the castle door but taken his horse himself to the stables and ostensibly meant to walk therefrom to the front, but it was no secret that from the stable pathway, the potager was plainly visible. Perhaps he recognised Justina, perhaps he came on the chance that it could be she, perhaps he just meant to make nosey conversation with the young, which was what older folk always did with the children of their neighbours and so-called friends, but he was on his way towards them. Selina, her hat on, watched him advene, but Justina kept working until he reached and then only, did she trouble to rise, her hands rather dusty.

"When we are done here, we are going to pass the watering can around a little, so are you come to bear a fist (lend a hand)? Good even to you, Sir Robert," greeted the saucy Justina, even if her air was grave.

"You've recovered your spirits, young lady, and your suppleness," he stated. "Were it I after such a whack of a fall, I'd be bent double croaking in pain."

"That is because you are no chicken (no longer young). I can't afford that luxury, I am sure all our neighbours gloat about that enough," she rejoined, "and no thanks to you I should be in such a state either. I never had a word of apology out of you, sir. Is that the prerogative of those who are older? To knock down a person and not say they are sorry figures for it?"

"Whoa, there! You are about as incensed with me as I was with you when I saw you

on that mare,” he declared, attempting to laugh.

“Did you go take it out on Pye, having failed to kill us both?” she rejoined.

“I am enraged with both of you but what is done is done, so I am letting bygones be bygones,” he conceded.

You would not talk like that if my father were a rich, and not an impoverished, Duke, thought she, regarding him with disdain, for he still had not begged her pardon, with the true insolence of the jumped up country gentry.

“I’ll lay that in water (reserve judgment) until the mare recovers,” she responded.

“So be it,” he agreed.

“You are very sanguine,” she commented suspiciously. “What brings you to this grim demesne this evening? The absolutely tempting desire to peach on me to my father?”

“I am persuaded not to do such a thing,” he averred.

“Your outstandingly good and generous nature?” she carped.

“Not exactly, but it has played its part, for it was evoked by your brother-in-law to be,” he owned.

“Irvin?” she gasped interrogatively. “Tell that to the horse marines!”

“You look sharp, my girl. Irvin never does a thing free, gratis and for nothing, so if I were you, I’d be wondering what the catch is, or when he will call in this debt,” he intoned.

“As far as debts go, you still owe me an apology,” she persisted, strong and proud.

“And you owe me a word of thanks for a warning. He knows you were a girl, dressed man-fashion, for when I said it was Julius, perhaps, he said it looked more like a Julia,” he gurgled, as if the whole matter were hilarious, which it was not, to her at least.

“He may go to the deuce,” she growled, “even if I do thank him for dissuading you from becoming a mumble-news.”

“Does your father know that you bought a horse?” demanded the Baronet.

“That’s for Irvin to decide to tell him, would you not say? ’Tis part of the same incident,” she replied.

“You’re a leery little ’un,” he chuckled. Well, I’ll go in bid your papa a good evening, and keep all your secrets, eh?”

“Good evening, Sir Robert,” she pronounced in valediction. “By the way, what *does* bring you here? You have a house guest to entertain.”

“It is by reason of him that I am come,” he replied.

“Running errands or running away?” she probed.

“Using the former as a pretext for the latter,” he owned, and bid both her and Selina God speed.

It was only when he was in the garden and out of earshot that Selina spoke.

“Was all that something I should not know about?” she understood.

“A little that way,” admitted her sister. “You’ve done your stint in the garden. You should go in.”

¹(‘Tom Tit-Tot’: an English Rumpelstiltskin)

FIVE

In the confusion and embarrassment and ill-humour and panic of that morning, the Duke of Hearne had forgotten to ask a subsidy for Justina's coming out, to the vast relief of his wife and offspring, whose dread of the almost vulgar shamelessness whereto he could descend when seeking money knew few limits. All the same the Duchess and her older children debated about it because they were aware that they really could not afford such an event and whether it was wise to take expenditure on credit to be repaid at Michaelmas or even Christmas, or whether she or Devenish should request the Duke of Irvin for the funds in a more delicate and discreet manner, but no conclusion was reached hereat, for there was compleat disagreement between both sides, and what did not help was when Caroline asked Justina, considered too young for to decide fairly, what she preferred, the young girl said that she would rather not have a coming-out ball at all: the alternatives that could stage it were too dire and unreliable. The best thing would be if Irvin himself offered, or so Caroline believed, but menfolk did not think of such matters apart from being invited to them, and so it was necessary that someone hinted discreetly after the matter, even if Justina was ever against it. However, fate lent them all a helping hand the very next Sunday, when, after attending Divine Service, the entire Hearne family were invited to dine at Sir Robert Orre's, where the host Baronet's wife, a genial busybody who knew everyone, wanted to know everything and wished to be at the heart of every development, went up to Caroline and congratulated her on her decision, for there were fewer and fewer families in England of such pedigree as could compare with the House of Woodville, so the bride to be was treated to a hug and a kiss, for her sagacity in consenting to so eminent a person as suitor.

"It must be a great relief to that veritable saint, your poor mamma, at last to begin on the course that will finally marry off all her daughters; Selina is already thirteen and in a year or two, will be nubile," she chattered on, always in Irvin's hearing, for as Caroline's official swain, he was obliged to escort her. "At least the Duchess is not as unfortunate as some, with a bevy of daughters so unattractive that even dowries will tempt no man – all plain and dull, to be sure, and suddenly and simultaneously grown up. You, when a mother, are sure not to have that cross to bear, for if you have daughters, they are sure to be lovely, and they will never lack for a goodly portion, by the grace of God."

That she was well in advance of Providence was irrelevant to her, but she had to pause for a breath when the Duke spoke.

"For all that, Lady Caroline deserves commiseration as much as congratulation, for with her virtues, she could surely have done better," quoth he urbanely.

"For that we stand to blame," laughed Lady Orre, "ourselves and cousin Mortlake."

"And my sister Louisa," included the Duke, "with whom you are doubtless ill impressed, for she has and always has had a most unfortunate manner. My late father despaired of her and wondered how he was going to find her a spouse despite the fortune she had to her name, but then one day, she upped and eloped with Mortlake, whom we were inclined to treat as duped into it, but they seem to be as cosy as mice in malt for all that."

"Lady Mortlake is not unknown at Hearne Castle, accompanying her spouse Sir Adrian. There never was a more felicitous combination of beauty and charm," said Lady Caroline, "so when your grace alleges that she was the despair of your undoubtedly eminent and late father, I cannot but be surprised."

“She could flirt like a veritable hussy, madam,” he owned. “She and I were likened to leaves off the same branch.”

“Well, truth be told, we none of us flirt: we know not how, and the opportunity therefor has scarce come our way,” said Caroline, as Lady Orre opened her mouth to speak. “It is not in Honoria’s nature, and Justina has not long been out of the schoolroom. Aunt Lizzie means for her to go to London to meet beaux and be in Society, but how that turns out remains to be seen.”

“Has she been brought out yet?” asked Lady Orre bluntly.

“If by that, you mean has she had a ball introducing her to Society, I fear not,” said Lady Caroline, and thus the sacred subject was revealed. “She has a little of the hoyden left in her, I fear.”

“My dear, there is nothing like a coming out to cure a girl of those tendencies,” glowed Lady Orre. “Duke, in faith, Justina is a true charmer. She is sure to wed a hard-riding young man, who can manage a horse with as much skill and courage as can she. You should see her in the saddle, sir,” she rattled on, determined to talk nonsense and glad to draw the flow of conversation from Caroline’s control of it, except that Caroline could not have been more pleased by that fact. “Justina can ride any horse in any wise, side-saddle, astride – Ooo, I should not ha’ said that – bare-back, pillion, and she has such an eye for horseflesh, young as she is. Hereabouts everyone is equestrian, of course: this is great horse-riding country. Has your grace met young Lady Justina?”

“When I departed Great Hearne Castle to come and stay here, she was in the valedictory line to see me off,” the Duke confirmed.

As he spoke, he glanced up at Julius, who was not far away and certainly in earshot, listening anxiously, in reply where-to his grace contrived a fine imitation of ‘Smirking Sam’, except that he did not have the horse’s honest eyes but narrowed ones that nevertheless glittered. Peevish, irritated and irked, Julius flinched, which satisfied his grace entirely.

“Justina assists her brother Julius in the stables, just as the others see to the gardens, for they have the best potager and physick border in the whole shire, I vow, which makes truth of the saying that if you want a thing done well, you must do it yourself. Yet whereas that has not affected the mores of the young ladies involved, Justina is not one for the drawing rooms just yet, and what benefit her aunt’s invitation to London will be to her I fail to see,” dismissed Lady Orre. “After all, it is not in the entourage of the frippery Duke of Newcastle that she will be able to find her hard-riding husband, but in the country, so she should be exposed as much as possible to the county dwelling patricians.”

“I expect that is what a coming-out ball at Hearne Castle will be in aid of,” the Duke interposed pensively.

“Coming-out balls are costly events,” regretted Lady Orre. “The Duke’s economics are stretched to the limit. One or two bad investments and an old House is endangered, more is the pity for the heritage of England,” she rued rather pompously. “Well, we have to stretch our legs according to our coverlets and poor Justina may have to wait until the next year for her ball. I vow, I cannot even recall if Honoria had one, but she was sent to London and returned a maid, so that was of no use.”

“Whether she is brought out this year or the next, it will be a small country affair, trusting to your judgment of what kind of spouse is suitable for her, for in London the balls

are for rich young ladies, and not the more modest ones that we hold here; smaller but no less valid and useful country balls, as far as the result is concerned,” added Lady Caroline.

“That is exactly what I was saying,” sighed Lady Orre. “Her trip to Town may bring but a haddock to paddock and all that expense, for nothing. Her time will come, poor thing: if her sister is to wed then maybe that her ball will have to be postponed until next year.”

“That will only make her champ at the bit all the more,” said Irvin. “When she sees her sister prepare to wed, she will want to be out in Society, whether of Town or country all the more, and it does help with introductions in Town if a young lady has been brought out, whether in Town or country.”

“Lady Caroline, instead of Justina taking advantage of Lizzie Ashlington’s invitation to the capital, you go instead, and buy your trousseau,” advised Lady Orre.

“Poor Justina! That would be most unjust and hard on her,” objected Caroline. “How can one expect a girl of her age, scarcely into womanhood, to understand such a sacrifice?”

“If all you want for the coming-out ball is a simple country hop, then you may find that it can be arranged in the inside of a month, Lady Caroline,” observed the Duke suavely.

“And how so, sir?” wondered she, cleverly incredulous and artfully oblivious.

“I have an idea how to arrange such a simple thing,” he smiled. “Leave it all to me. Surely, as her brother-to-be, I am allowed to perform her a small service that will set her squarely on the road to adulthood?”

“Sir, if this involves anymore outlay upon your part –,” began Lady Caroline.

“Madam, pray hush; no more o’ the pudden,” he silenced jocosely.

Lady Caroline was at pains to hide her dismay, and across the chamber, Julius sighed, turning down the corners of his mouth, his eyes open wide and expressive of his inability to fathom out the man who wished so earnestly to be Justina’s brother – and put his hand up the inside of her thigh. Presently they were called in to dine, and so Carrie was able to talk quietly to him about his offer, her reluctance to accept considering all his generosity, and money matters in general terms.

“’Twas a monstrous embarrassment to me yestermorn, sir,” she confessed, “to heed and watch how all the finances were discussed.”

“Finances are not a lady’s problem, unless she makes errors of egregious proportions,” he waived, with a condition.

“Perhaps, but pray, allow me to explain the germ of my meaning,” she requested. “I make not so bold, nor affect such pride, as caused me to feel humiliation or ingratitude by decrying your magnanimous act, as a mere act of charity. I do, however, feel ashamed that you are being asked for money, which is putting it very crudely, but truthfully, for such pleas are ill things to do.”

“Your ladyship’s delicacy and honesty are extraordinarily refreshing,” quoth he, “but look at the matter in this light; I would not be able to find a wife unless I were prepared to pay her father for her, and now, pray, I mean, not that your ladyship is a marketable commodity, but that only such a lady whose family is in straits of some sort, would wed me. For that am I very grateful in my turn, for I realise that had you but a hundred a year, you’d still prefer to lead apes in hell were there not family constraints of duty thus binding you, than wed a rake who unfortunately does not see a way to change his ways, but that does not mean that a healthy marriage could not make him tire of them as fatuous and no longer enjoyable. In any

wise, yours is not an enviable situation so you have every right to feel humiliated if not indignant, and certainly exploited, even if we all understand submission on the part of the female as taking her fate for granted, and betray her as we do, on all sides.”

“Betray her on all sides?” she partly and interrogatively replicated.

“With respect, fathers who use their children for their own profits or purposes are not always honourable, ma’am, even if one takes into account that girl children must be married off as best as one can arrange, and if one has too many of them, it is a liability that needs to be lightened even in the wealthiest households.”

“As Christians we are told to honour our parents, who give us life –,”

“Life comes from God, ma’am; and that Commandment is a Jewish inclusion into our religion. It is a manifestation that the Old Testament father is the monarch in a household. A child does not ask for life; he has it foisted upon him. A father who, in spite of this unhappy act of bringing a fellow creature into an imperfect world, and then chuses to use his offspring, especially the vulnerable ones, to solve difficulties he has created for himself, by sacrificing them and using family duty as the excuse, obviously has children primarily for his own sake, not for theirs, or else he should pass his life in trying to make them happy. I am as much to blame as those whom I denounce thus, for I would have sons of you, madam, in order to perpetrate my posterity, and if daughters come along as well they might, they have to be sold off according to their degree to men of such wealth as their father commands. Thus if a child who is hectoring about his or her due to the family, goes off and rebels against parental or paternal authority, he is decried as useless and undutiful, and his condemnatory parent mechanically waives his liberties to exact esteem and obedience from them.”

Astounded as she was, Carrie laughed and blurted out an unspeakable truth.

“If I refuse, I will be cast out of the house,” she said.

The Duke of Irvin turned his head towards his would-be-father-in-law, to watch him bluster at Lady Orre in order to assert the power of his personality – not that he would have allowed his wife to speak to Sir Robert Orre in a chat which did not include other women with such impunity, familiarity and freedom as he arrogated unto himself.

“I honestly believe that you are not funning, dear ma’am,” he mused. “Between such a father and such a spouse you are to be veritably in a cleft stick. It is not in your nature, from what I am told and what I have seen, but if you turn recalcitrant, angry and unpleasant, you will have my compleat understanding.”

Carrie found this candour far from refreshing but rather unsettling instead.

“At least I am to wed a liberal-minded spouse,” she praised warily, “altho be easy; I understand that certain liberties you will indulge in are denied to me, for the sake of the certainty of paternity.”

In reply he bowed his agreement, all his reasonableness and ratiocination, his open-handed words and sentiments, his condemnations of parenthood which included himself, so that it was impossible to accuse him of criticising her father alone, and his almost raw honesty about his own proclivities, made Lady Caroline most uncomfortable. Firstly she was suspicious of his sincerity and feared that this could well all be hypocrisy in some unforeseen manner, and secondly, she wondered about his unflattering description of her father. Not that she felt bound to defend the old man – for selling her off, or even about her embarrassment at the features thus denounced, for all Irvin said was true, and actually mirrored her own pained

opinions upon the same. However, when coupled with his shew of modesty and self-abasement, as well as his commendations of her, not to mention his assertion of her rights, his remarks struck her as an endeavour to ingratiate himself with her, or win her confidence, in the hope that she was ingenuous enough to grant it. After they had finished dining, and the gentlemen were come for tea, Caroline sought the chance during the same interlude to fall by Devenish for to mention what Irvin had said earlier, whereupon her brother at once declared without the slightest hesitation that the Duke of Irvin seemed as if he were trying to sharpen her dislike of their father into hateful distrust, so that whatever he turned out to be, she would prefer to lean on her spouse as the more sympathetic and less ruthless of the two unpleasant men. Her brother's assessment was not too different to her own: Irvin was cleverly working upon her confidence – in him.

Not content with having the Duke of Irvin residing under her own roof, Lady Orre determined to impose her society upon him somewhat, even when she invited others to share it. Her ostensible excuse was to talk of Caroline by seeming to extol the virtues and talents of that other, for any reason was good enough for her to have him by the button. Her great rival for the Duke's society was of course the older Duke, who, whenever he spoke, had to be surrounded by a compleat audience and so he dominated their post-prandial parlour circle with much told tales of how he had beaten the Duc de Richelieu at a wine tasting contest held by the King of France when he was last at Versailles, which must have been a long time ago, but he was not much assisted in his attempts at steering the course of the conversation by Irvin himself, who preferred his hostess, especially when she abruptly changed the subject and talked of the next ball they hoped, would be held in this region, namely Justina's coming-out. This turned into a lively discussion, for Honoria, forgetting all sense of occasion, protested that she had not had such a fuss made about her, whereupon Lady Orre reminded her that her aunt had obtained her a court post which she scorned to accept, even if remaining in one was extremely costly, for the sovereign did not pay for dress and took a fee for accommodation, while Justina had to find a fine hard-riding country fellow with plenty of dirty acres and that was not done at court, but by means of a country hop. The Duke of Irvin encouraged this reasoning, declaring that the more notoriety a nubile lady acquired the better it was for her even if there was little by way of a portion in her pocket, and their exchange could have become quarrelsome were it not for their host, of all people, who was not a person of great refinement, and appeared suddenly to announce that he remembered that Lady Caroline could sing with a fine voice – and not just to beg bacon, as the saying went – but also accompany herself on the clavichord, while Irvin could read music and likewise give them a song, so why they had not already performed a duet together, he did not know. The old Duke had to have a say in matters and proclaimed, both pompous and proud, that his daughter Caroline could sing all the soprano parts in everything choral that Mr. Handel had ever written so far.

"Actually I prefer catches and glees," owned Caroline modestly, much to her father's annoyance, for she was far from grandiose.

"I prefer any song whereto there is more than one part and so I would commend you for your preference, Lady Caroline," quoth the Duke of Irvin. "To me, the sound of two or more different voices is equalled by the truly pleasant spectacle of two people stood together thus making music and in harmony for at least as long as the song lasts."

"I have a bass voice," included the Duke of Hearne. "A bass voice is too manly for

song,” he declaimed and his wife stealthily kicked his ankle to silence him.

“Some of the finest songs have been written for a bass voice, and it should not be wasted if one has it, for male voices in England rarely go below the baritone, unlike in Russia or among the Germans,” dissented and compared Irvin. “When I was young, my parents took the wise precaution of having it trained as if I were to be a professional singer, but of course I was not; they thought I would be an asset to the drawing room.”

“Music is all right if you have the time to waste on it. Carrie is either practising or at needlework, so that I hardly see her,” growled the old Duke, determined to have the sourest possible last word, and his wife kicked him again.

“Carrie is out of reach for she either teaches her younger sisters or she gardens,” defended the Duchess. “Unlike the poor, who think that by being given vegetables to eat, they are being cheated of their right to eat meat, we scorn not the fruits of the potager.”

“In summer, a potager is the source of many a fine sallet,” approved Lady Orre.

“Is Lady Caroline teaching Lady Justina as well?” wondered Irvin.

“I ceased so to do when she reached her seventeenth birthday,” confirmed Carrie. “Father, how can you say that I can sing all that Mr. Handel wrote if I am teaching or gardening? I do practise daily, but not so that one would notice.”

“Just as well,” he growled. “No talent is exercising to the extent of perfection if one is not going to make a living out of it, and for folk like us, such things are expressly excluded.”

This was a barb shot at Irvin.

“The quest for perfection should come in the schooling of one’s mind,” he postulated, “for the older one grows, the more rigorous must this schooling become, to ward off the various aspects of dementia, which is a most insidious enemy in its onset, the latter being imperceptible in its early stages, and we are all liable to fall victim to it, and become a parcel of old imbeciles. All forms of schooling are permissible: I understand that the demands made upon the mind by the study of music keep it sharpest of all. This morning I was in the library looking over music and came upon a trio by our verisame Mr. Handel, but a trio for voices, in Italian, and wondered whether, if we amuse ourselves this afternoon following dinner, we could perform it. Sing you in Italian, my lady?”

The Duke of Hearne was silenced, the subject changed, and Lady Caroline was put into prominence again, while the Duchess hissed at her husband to cease trying to be the cynosure, for it was their eldest daughter’s prerogative so to be now.

“I do my best to sing in whatever language a song is written, but I am unsure of what injustice I commit upon the pronunciation thereof,” said the latter, “and it happens then, that I do not understand what I am singing, so perhaps my modulation is wrong and my expression flat, as long as the tone is not.”

“As long as the tone is not, there is no need to import emotion, as do professional singers, and embarrass all who watch them,” said Irvin.

“Caroline learned to sing in French, which is a beautiful language for songs,” the Duke of Hearne just had to say, unaware that Julius and Justina were seated with their heads down and the backs of their hands folded over their respective mouths, for they found their father’s irrepressibility, or more accurately, inability to be silenced, very droll.

“All languages are good for singing in,” stated the Duke of Irvin diplomatically.

“Pray, sir, what was this trio you found?” inquired Lady Orre, wishful to revert to

more sublime topics and keep Hearne from his verbal ramblings, while diverting Irvin's attention to her if not to his betrothed.

"'Twas among the music you lent me yestereven, ma'am," he replied, "the song '*Quel fior che all' alba ride*'."

"That is a song known to us; Devenish takes the baritone part, and I one of the two sopranos," supplied Caroline, trying hard to affect good humour.

"And presumably Lady Honoria takes the other?" probed the younger Duke, at whom Honoria had been smiling all this while.

"Honoria's voice is a low mezzo soprano that can even take some contralto parts," furnished Devenish, "even if she will wash my head without soap for saying so. The other soprano is invariably Justina."

"And I will play the clavichord and provide the accompaniment, on one condition," gurgled Lady Orre. "The baritone part will be your grace's to sing."

The Duke may have bowed his consent, but all this time he was looking, even rather voraciously, at Justina, who somehow failed to notice, while Julius was worried and restless, which Devenish, who was vastly relieved at not having to sing before the Duke, did not perceive. In fact, no-one did, not even Caroline, who seemed more interested in joining Lady Orre who was fetching forward some music left on the clavichord in the room, to see if the relevant song was there. Irvin joined them, for he owned that he had placed it there himself earlier in the day in the hope that they could sing it now, one way or another, so he deftly found it for them, and then they all fussed about which soprano took the first and the second entry, for Lady Orre wanted to be in the trio and 'not disturb' Justina, except that her voice was not high enough for the second entry, which she wanted Caroline to take.

"I usually sing the first entry, and Justina takes the second one," owned Lady Caroline modestly, whereupon Sir Robert joined them.

"Just you play, my dear: dragoon it (occupy two branches of one profession) and you'll either sing or play a false note," advised the unsympathetic spouse.

"Tush!" snorted the lady, and smacked her husband on the chest with the sheet music, before waving him off to dismiss him, rather as one did with a bothersome insect.

"Lady Justina?" summoned Sir Robert. "Come give us a ditty, and settle this affair."

Lady Justina, aware that the Duke of Irvin watched her with the greatest satisfaction, came and stood on the other side of Caroline. Lady Orre ceremoniously placed herself before the exquisitely painted clavichord, decorated with pastoral scenes and peasants in paradisiacal array, for no real country-folk were ever so elegant and colourfully clad. Justina hoped that Irvin would go to the accompanist's left while she and her sister, the latter between him and the male singer, would stay at Lady Orre's right. However, Irvin reorganised them and Lady Orre smiled sweetly as he did, for he put himself directly behind her, and wanted a young lady at either side, making such a pretty spectacle of all of them for he placed a hand on each songstress's shoulder. Fortunately, as Justina saw it, the fashions allowed them to wear light scarves upon their bodices, which were of lace if one was rich, banded by ribbon on the body if one was fashionable, or tucked into the stomacher if one was ordinary, no matter how exalted of birth. The mode for fastening down scarves in front with dark ribbon between the robings of the bodice so that it reached a point at the waist front enabled the ladies to display the finest laces and silken films in that wise, but stay modest, and Caroline had at last stitched

robings to the front of her skirts, even if country denizens were always backward when it came to the modes, and so mercifully for both sisters, the ducal fingers, which were clean and graceful and finely made, did not touch their skin. Caroline had enough nightmares in the daytime imagining what a rake was like on his wedding night, and Justina had had enough of his touch already without wanting it upon her bare shoulders. Aware that his ministrations were embarrassing to his intended and unwanted by her sister, the Duke of Irvin gloried in his manhood and if they presented a balanced spectacle, elements of it were most uncomfortable. Only Lady Orre delighted in his proximity and leaned back on her stool, as if she were hoping to touch his body with her back, and this made the maidenly sisters exchange glances of cynical surprise, which soon faded even if the cynicism remained. The performance began: Lady Orre tinkled away on the keyboard and tossed her head, the blossoms made of silk pinned to her hair-knot shaking with her movements, and Caroline began, her voice strong, because she had mustered up every ounce of courage in her body, for the worst thing for her would have been to commence with a nervous croak, even if it improved. Melodious and in tune, she sang out.

“Quel fior che all’ alba ride.”

Then gleamed Justina’s clear, steady and powerful voice.

“Il sole poi l’uccide –,”

“E tomba nella sera –,” sang his grace quietly, for he would have overwhelmed them all with his deep and rich voice, as he drew out the long notes of the last word.

Low and lilting, but smug and smirking, it was he who seemed to lead, even if his was the part in the lowest register. The two sisters performed successfully, but neither looked particularly happy with her lot at this moment, for the older of the twain was visibly nervous and the younger obviously uneasy. Of the female element, only Lady Orre enjoyed herself, for now and again did she contrive to cause her body or her head to touch the Duke, who did not move away, for to do so, he would have had to relinquish his hold on his two prizes. However, when they were saved by the jolly old *primavera* and the song ended, a look of grimness flashed across the Duke’s face to which he swiftly restored a smile, while Lady Caroline managed to seem pleased, for in fact she was relieved to have survived so far, but Justina hid all under a mask of compleat blandness. Orre and Devenish led the applause very loudly, while the Duchess seemed indulgently to approve of her daughters, and both Julius and Honoria gave a proper display of appreciation, as did Michael Orre and his two sisters. Even the Duke of Hearne broke out of his sullenness to announce to one and all how well his children sang – had one of them made a mistake, she would have been the Duchess’s foolish daughter, unable even to sing for her supper. As for the sisters, the song really came to an end when Irvin’s hand came off their respective shoulders whereupon they all bowed to acknowledge the applause. Even thô her playing was faultless and she was much praised for it, Lady Orre’s remarks to Caroline on the beauty of her voice had a false ring to them, for she would rather have sung as well, and this insincerity, even envy, made Justina wince inwardly, for it was not as if she had never heard Carrie sing before, it was all because of Irvin. When he faced the rest of the world he donned his suave and impenetrable smirk, but when he stole the occasional glance at Justina, his brow twitched, as if trying not to frown, and a thoughtful air fleetingly betook his demeanour. All the same, Lady Justina Woodville was not called on much to sing that evening, and the sisters Orre, with Ladies Caroline and Honoria, together

with Lady Orre, Lord Devenish and the Duke of Irvin, provided most of the musical entertainment. The Duke told of Mr. Handel's visit to Italy to learn the Italian way of music and in the process thereof, met lights, whom he had now eclipsed, such as Signor Corelli, who later went to be Court Composer to the King of Spain, because the Queen Mother was Elizabeth Farnese. Handel had shewn his compositions to Corelli who told him, with typical Italian levity, "*O, mio caro fratello Sassone*, I do not understand your northern music." There was mirth and Lady Orre hung on his grace's every word.

"I wonder if he is rogering his hostess," whispered Lord Julius to his fellow stable hand, who hushed him. "I was watching when the three of you opened the singing. It looked to me as if he meant to wed the one and do it to (have sex with) the other."

"I had that impression long before tonight," said Justina softly. "This is worse than even father talking of his favourite subject, namely himself."

"Did you know that between them, Caroline playing a negative part meant to persuade him to the contrary of what she said, our sister and Lady Orre have had him offer to pay for your coming-out ball?" revealed Julius.

"O, by thunder! Am I supposed to thank him?"

"So far, you are not supposed to know."

"I am obligated: he will exact payment."

"This becomes more complicated by the minute. God knows what will happen if father tries to touch him for a commission for me," lamented Julius.

"I hope he has no taste for pretty buggeranto boys as well as doxy chits," grunted Justina.

"Choke chicken, more are hatching! That's a Job's comforting if ever I heard one," he groaned. "Lucky old Irvin; I rather envy the fellow. Fancy being famous as a rake and so rich with it he can arrange anything he wants. Not for him to shovel horse-manure and lay out fresh bedding or mix up oats for feed; he just sends for a horse and goes off when and as the maggot bites."

"I don't envy him at all. I have no idea how well received he is in the drawing rooms of the Quality in Town, or if he is the pleasure of every guest list be it a house-party or a rout. Nor can he wed, let's say, like the Duke of Beaufort or the Duke of Argyll, chusing among the very best that the highest society has to offer. He is a rake: fathers will not let him near their daughters and certainly never agree to their wedding him. He did this to himself so he does not really deserve our sympathy, but fancy being greeted at a ball to which one has an invitation, yet treated like a leper while one is there, and fancy having to chuse among the impoverished, who cannot say no, or worse for to propagate his line, or among ambitious mercantile families who don't need the glanthorn (money) but love for a daughter to become a Duchess. Not that he wants to learn from it: he is engaged now to Carrie, and under her nose, he eyes me. The trouble is, he knows that his macabre charm and his lean good looks ensure that he is handsome, despite his height, for Jacks o' Legs (tall men) are not the mode, but trim little men are, like you."

"I disagree. The man is rich as Croesus. He can pay for anything. He will underwrite your coming out," sighed Julius.

"Your cup is really too low (you look down in the dumps) and soon someone will notice and ask out loud. No-one here is illustrious for their discretion," she warned.

“In the back of my mind is the next favour they will ask of him, and I don’t want it,” he complained. “Why can I not have some sort of dull job in a far-flung embassy of ours where there is nothing to do but observe foreign ceremony and get paid for it, like Bobby Orre? What is so acceptable about a Baronet’s brat that eludes a Duke’s son?”

“He has been sent to the United Provinces of the Netherlands, not Denmark or whatever not. I asked Orre. From hell, Hull, Halifax and the Netherlands may the Good Lord preserve us,” she recited but altered the recitation accordingly.

“I was not thinking of the Dutch; more like Siam or Cathay.”

“Have we embassies in such places? Need we embassies in such places?”

“We import spices from the islands about Siam and no end of stuffs – tea, silk, porcelain and lacquer-work from Cathay, so our merchants must have an embassy.”

“Then talk to your future brother-in-law; he may carry a great stroke in some things, even if he is not good enough for grand lords to marry their daughters to. Think you that is what vexes father so? That he is reduced to the level of those peers who have no freedoms because they lack the means to buy influence, and can only take the dregs for husbands for their offspring?”

“I’d hardly call Irvin the dregs. He comes of an excellent and antient family and is flush without being crude. The rest is a detail; with Carrie as his reputable and virtuous Duchess at his side, he will –,”

“Buy back his respectability?” interposed Justina.

“Cavey; he looks your way, and we are supposed to be listening to songs not prattling,” cautioned Julius.

The Duke of Irvin did more than just look; at the end of this song the performers paused for a rest, sort out the remainder of the program, and drink chilled hock; so he left them and came and occupied the seat beside Justina, whereupon she genuinely believed that he was here to reprove her and her brother for whispering and disturbing the music-makers.

“What is the reason,” he began, “for such an angelic voice to be silent when the others on hand are talented and willing but not quite o’ that range?”

“The answer to that is easy, sir,” she declared. “The sisters Orre are famed in the region as goodly songstresses, and if I am heard to be as good as they are, there will be a crow to pluck between our families. My father is not very adept at keeping friends, so I do not see the common sense in giving such of his proclivities a helping hand.”

“You are not as good as they are but much better,” he claimed. “If you spend your time at manual labour, when do you practise?”

“Have you never paused to listen to your land-folk as they toil taking in your hay and your grain, or shearing your sheep or milking your cows? Have you not passed droves of damsels on their way to market with eggs and cheeses to sell, in excess of your needs? Have you never visited the buttery where the ale brewed at home is being made by a gang of brewsters?” she inquired. “While at labour, all are singing. If you like, I practise all day.”

“The horses like it,” joked Julius.

“Horses are excellent judges of sound; the moment a thing is off key, they’ll bolt,” teased the Duke.

“If I sing and hit a false note, ears are pricked up,” admitted Justina.

“Sing you just what you hear or can you read music?” asked the Duke, addressing

Lady Justina.

“Both,” she answered. “I had a compleat education for a girl at the hands of my sister until I was seventeen. I rarely practise the clavichord, but I can read music with ease.”

“May I tempt you back to the choral?” he invited.

“The singers need an audience to spectate upon and applaud them, sir,” she declined.

“So they do; but that is the only amusement open to us and to you tonight,” he commented, looking about him.

“Was your grace of the inclination to turn back the carpet so that we could have a hop?” she wondered.

“In my experience of country house living, howsoever modest the resources, there is one feature that is never absent from any scene, and that is the card table,” he stated.

“The Orres may play cards but if so, I know not of it for I have never been in their house when they have had such company as enjoyed it, but we do not play at home: my mother has absolutely banned the Devil’s books and when the Orres or even the Mortlakes or any other neighbouring family receive us, there is no gambling of any kind; folk do not bet even privately,” she revealed, whereupon he nodded.

“That was not a piece of information that I would have liked to come by from anyone outside the Duke of Hearne’s household,” he accepted with approbation. “Would you rather dance, then, Lady Justina?”

“I am the proverbial cow in a cage, a miller’s mare,” she denied, describing herself as clumsy on her feet, but he shook his head.

“One of the finest characters I have met is the miller’s mare,” he declared, so she lowered her gaze and smiled.

Just then, Honoria arrived, all but taking him by the elbow, and full of high spirits.

“Come, Duke, you are needed at the clavichord,” she urged, and when he rose with a word of apology, she glowered at Justina, to reprimand her for keeping him by her unduly.

After that, Justina lent more of her visual attention to the singers, who were not always the same folk, because Michael Orre never sang nor did his father, the Duke and Duchess of Hearne were always in the audience as were their younger son and daughter, and among those who provided music, not all were pressed into service every time. Even at the keyboards, Lady Orre and Caroline took it in turns to play accompaniments, and sometimes the Duke of Irvin was sitting down to listen. Justina was more aware of his demeanour now, and warily and stealthily watched him when she dared: when he was surrounded by company he was all jollity in his smooth and urbane way, without noise and excitement or animation, but ever dignified if well-tempered rather than well-humoured, but when he was not on call to sing, or otherwise spectating, his attention wandered, not to his betrothed, but to the younger of her two sisters, and he was deeply pensive as he regarded the pretty creature, who recalled his conduct in the potager, where he forced her to her knees, and his mischief when putting her into the saddle of his chestnut stallion, not forgetting his so-called attempts to feel her heart. Perhaps he just wanted to confirm that she was the Duke’s daughter dressed like a stable boy, but his way of going about it had an element of the indecent about it, and worse, at this very juncture here, she could not hold his gaze, for there was a denuding element about it that alarmed her. Whether he was just picturing her without any clothes on, naked for the taking, or whether he was trying to penetrate her thoughts and presume what they might be

from her manner and mien, mattered not: he had no business doing so if he were engaged to her sister. If he had begun as he meant to go on, for her it was going to be a stormy engagement, with many a tempest for her to ride out. She was also not so obtuse as to fail to notice that he barely regarded Caroline, even if Caroline was lovely and fair, the quintessence of a ladyship, but one blessed with verecundity, whereas she was but what Lady Orre had described her as: a hoyden barely grown out of it.

By the early eventide the Hearne family took leave and drove or rode home, and Justina came to the conclusion that the Duke of Irvin infinitely preferred her as the stable boy in tight breeches to the demure girl with the good singing voice, but then he could have hardly made a fuss of her with two whole families and his affianced wife looking on. To her, now, she had the rest of the evening in her father's dreary home with her father's even drearier companionship to look forward to, even if she eschewed it and stayed in her room, which was inconvenient, for there was only one clavichord in the house and it was in the public room that he preferred to occupy, which was the true reason why she did not practise anymore, so when her father had reproached Caroline for being unavailable because she was practising, he was telling lies as usual. The dull evening, with a family meal dominated by the old Duke's stentorian prattle – perhaps he was going deaf – followed by the younger folk retiring to Carrie's parlour, where Honoria quizzed her sister about her betrothed until Devenish deemed it untoward and demanded if she had an intention to secure him officially for herself, with a noisy and hostile end to the proceedings, whereupon the company dispersed, each for their own rooms, even if Selina came to find Justina to ask what had happened at the Orres, especially with Irvin, who had evidently grasped the imagination of the younger Woodvilles, for even Julius wished he were like that other. Most working folk dreaded the end of Sunday for it only led to Monday. Ironically, Justina looked forward to that Monday with relief.

That next morn, the Duke of Irvin came to call, riding 'Smirking Sam' as before, and those working in the stables found out soon enough when his mount was fetched to them, with orders – framed as requests, if addressed to one of the Woodvilles – that the horse be fed for the visitor was staying to dine. That signified to them that they were well advised to appear for the meal even if they had not done so before, for Justina was veritably in debt to him because of that silly coming-out ball, which Honoria had never had and the absence of which had not prevented her aunt taking her about London like a proper young lady, while Julius was afraid that, were he not about, his father would blurt out a plea for a commission for him, and Irvin, as a patriot, could not very well refuse, for that was how the Duke of Hearne would phrase it, and his son wished to thwart this course of conduct if he could. Thus they had to keep an eye on the time, and as Justina had no watch anymore, it was up to her brother to be vigilant. Their morning's work was always hard, for after clearing out the stables they left their old remaining grooms to wash the pavé and then place clean straw out, but take care not to be lazy and use old oat straw for that had a flavour which horses liked and would eat it, which was not good for them. Then while the horses were in the paddocks, the two young people would go out and shovel the manure they left behind there and stack it up on the dunghill, to keep the grass healthy, and dig up any ragwort they found on their way, not that there was much left now, but they were always on the watch for this deadly plant, so noxious to horses, for seeds could fly hither on the wind. It was not a particularly fine day to be working abroad, as there were clouds and the gusts were squally, but the siblings laboured

without let, not even to take a short rest, in order to have time enough to go in and clean themselves up, before dressing appropriately for the meal and the grand presence at it. It was not going to be one of those bread, cheese and cider days, and there would be no time for pranks in which to try out Irvin's chestnut again. Nor did they have occasion to chat much, for they worked at opposite ends of the paddocks when outside; only Julius complained once that the Marquis should have been doing this for it was not work for a girl, but all she did was reply that it was in the interests of the family that their eldest brother remain with his father, as the latter's secretary, and prevent him from committing financial follies or diverting his more careless deeds so that nothing became of them, for the Duchess was as totally useless at that as if she were totally illiterate. There was much to be said about educating women in estate management, but men would not have it: even Irvin specified that Carrie would run his household but not involve herself with affairs on his grounds.

The morn passed quickly and time moved with urgency: sooner than they thought, brother and sister were coming in to alter their condition, but at least they could congratulate themselves that their work was mostly done, even if the stable yard needed tidying and the tackle wanted soaping and polishing and they still had to groom the horses. Their only fear was that the Duke of Hearne would talk too much at the meal which then could go on all afternoon, and they requested their mother to see to this as much as she could, but all she did was whine and state that when she sat at her end of the table she was too far to exert any control on her spouse, and if she interfered to say that their guest had work to do with her husband, the latter was sure to quarrel with her afterwards for not shewing enough respect towards him, for she was his wife, and as he liked to say, she 'belonged to' him. Justina commented wryly that she would rather shovel horse-dung all her life than have coming-out balls to find a mate or go to Town for that same purpose, which upset her mother, but she was past caring, for it was the Duchess's practice to adopt the line of least resistance with her mate, supposedly to keep the peace, and wrest sacrifices out of her children, also allegedly to keep the peace, so she was losing her respect and her credibility among them. Perhaps it was in her nature, but where the latter was concerned, she also wanted to interfere, and her judgment was growing as bad as their father's, for as Justina was leaving her room after a wash and a change of raiment, her hair in a thick plait coiled at the back of her head, she overheard her mother nag Carrie on the stairs.

"But has she thanked him about the ball?" she seemed to persist.

"She may thank him when it is staged," Caroline replied, "for it will make a touching scene and should affect him all to our greater good."

"Your father may not like that, for it will spread the word that he cannot even pay for the coming out of his own daughters. Only last night he reproached me for bearing him four daughters for he could 'kick the sons out to serve in some regiment and God could take care of them: besides there were pickings in plenty in India, and he hoped that Julius would be all agog to serve to protect John Company (the East India Company)."

"He despises such work," said Lady Caroline.

"Well, it is not for folk of our degree," answered her mother. "Yet we digress: I want that Justina humbly thank the Duke of Irvin for offering to pay for her ball."

Justina hated it when her mother adopted her father's mandatory and none too polite idiom, such as the use of the words 'I want' and 'you can', but that was the tyranny of family

life: even Honoria had more authority than Devenish. Yet the two ladies were moving and to keep track of their verbal exchanges Justina had to follow and eavesdrop and risk exposing her presence, the last two features displeasing to her character. She waited until they had reached the hall below and then came hurrying down the staircase, which at once stopped their discussion, and caused them to wait for her, for they recognised her step on the stone steps, and thus she could enter the drawing room with them, instead of drawing unwarranted attention to herself by coming alone, for if she arrived while her father was in mid-sentence and it happened to disturb him, he would not spare her and shame her there and then with a virulent scolding in the presence of their guest. As they entered they found that the resolution they had taken was a wise one, for Hickeringgill was present and explaining what he had found, so his presence was discourteous as witness to Justina's humiliation. The person truly being humiliated was Lord Devenish, who deeply resented these probes into the affairs of the family, especially its failures, but Hickeringgill was not just a sniffer and an exhumers, he was also a mine of ideas on how best to act in varied circumstances depending on their history, even if he admitted that the Duke of Hearne's predicaments were very many and among the most complicated he had ever seen, for to cure a bad result, the Duke had concocted some tortuous ploy which produced an even worse result, but unable to learn his lesson, he invented something even worse than that. To unwind one's way out of this, leaving several creditors aside who need not have been paid, and no shortage of bribe monies that could have been evaded, to reach the eventual person expecting debts in his favour to be honoured, was quite a puzzle, and the sad part was, none of the funds wasted along the way were now recoverable, sometimes owing to the law of limitations and at others because the Duke had been over-keen to cover up an error. The Duke of Irvin listened with the joy of someone who already had a hank upon another, his amusement sour but enthusiastic because such was the felicity of those who had found a likely victim and a person over whom they could exert full control, but when the ladies entered, it was not Hearne who grew angry – he was that in any case – but the Duke of Irvin, for being thus disturbed. Granted that they all rose to their feet, whereupon the ladies swiftly occupied chairs, the guest bowed formally to the one whom he had not hitherto seen all day, his countenance losing that cruelly earnest jocosity and growing thoughtful and coolly reserved, wherefor the youngest of them looked very grateful, and Hickeringgill continued his disquisition because his master wanted this part of it over before dinner was announced. Thus there was no conversation except that the monologue continued, with occasional charming interpositions from the younger Duke to explain to the older one that once these affairs were sorted out, he, in person, would organise his father-in-law's affairs so that his children would not have to groom horses again to save on expenses that the household could not even incur for want of adequate funds to pay for them. As he was mannerly, even tho' this was a gentleman's affair and a man's discussion, there being females present waiting with the menfolk to be called to the dinner table, the Duke of Irvin repeatedly turned and addressed an occasional remark, or part of it, to them, yet, if he looked at the Duchess or at Lady Caroline, he continued to smile, for smiling throughout his speech made it a pill that was easier to swallow, but if he happened to level a glance at Justina, which was more the result of chance than choice, his face gained a sudden glaze of gravity to it. She noticed, of course, and hoped that her mother and sisters did not notice, but knew that it had all to do with his encounters with her hitherto, his ruffling her in the stables and garden, her singing under the weight of his

hand, and their chat yesterday at Sir Robert Orre's. Why this should be so, and why he let himself, a hardened rake, be so disorientated by her, even if he did not skip a beat in the rhythm of his conversation, she had every reason to guess, and she was ashamed of him, of the marriage to be, of her parents for bringing such a man to this house, and above all, she was ashamed of herself, not just for arousing in him his manly lusts, but because she found him well-looking and was beginning to see a strange sort of beauty in that macabre visage he presented. Indeed, she was becoming curious enough about him to wonder what he looked like with his face washed and his hair loose, free of any pomatum to keep it in place, but then thankfully Julius arrived, moments before the meal was announced.

As they took their repast, Hickeringill was, of course, not present, but Justina, who was not required to make any verbal contribution to the social element, passed her precious time wondering what was really going on in his mind and what his intentions truly were. Attractive as he was, and that was probably how he had become a rake in the first place, she did not want him to bring her out, find her a spouse, and become her lover while he was married to her own sister, for she could not betray Carrie like that. Why his face grew grave every time he saw her was inexplicable: perhaps he was imagining carnal congress with her but she wished not to think about it, or perhaps he was disappointed in her, for she had behaved ever so primly and unlike the 'stable boy' out of whom he would have expected a romping girl, so easily ensnared because she had no conscience about it in the first place. Justina hoped that the second alternative was relevant, and she told herself not to care less about the whole. As it was Irvin himself who directed table conversation and kept it serious, thus close to the morning's work, Hearne had little to say: he was humbled and furious and took very ill the prospective son-in-law's projects to save him and his income. What annoyed him most was Devenish's encouragements of Irvin to explain his intentions more clearly and so there was no rambling, just sulking and muttering which everyone ignored. Fortunately dinner took as long as it should in a robust household which fed well without ostentation, greed or grandeur, and thus was over without unnecessarily delay and a waste of time. The Duchess led out her daughters, but told Justina not to leave for the stables at once: she had to shew her face over tea, even if she and Julius would be given leave to depart soon after the gentlemen arrived, as would be Honoria, for a footman had reported that Selina was already at work in the garden. Thus it was then, but fortunately the interlude over the decanter did not take very long, and soon enough, the gentlemen were nigh.

There was no set order of procedure in the taking of tea: a matron might preside over the urn and the others come to her in order of precedence, or she could be assisted by her daughters who would take the little cups to various parties, which meant that the elderly and the menfolk were served first. The latter practice was what the Duchess adopted to save time but Honoria eluded it to go and chat to the Duke of Irvin, about music, ostensibly, and that she was going to spend the afternoon breaking her back in the garden, for they only had one gardener, who looked after what was on view from the windows, while she and her sisters grew vegetables and herbal physick. Caroline took tea towards them, but her father, annoyed at giving way to this domineering guest who, despite his simpering, remained haughty, put out a hand for the cup, so she could not ignore him, and glanced at Justina, who was leaving the urn with her father's drink, to divert her to Irvin. Thus Justina interrupted the twain, and Honoria fell silent, for the Duke not only thanked her, but carried on talking.

“No wonder that Lady Orre says that you shall have a hard-riding husband,” he added. “’Tis you and your brother who take care of the horses. Are you to adjourn thither now?”

“Not immediately, sir, for so to do at once after a full dinner would give us indigestion, and a little tea helps prevent that,” replied she.

“There is an anecdote about the Emperor Frederick II of Germany, not to be confused with King Frederick II of Prussia,” related he. “He was interested in many things, a humanist before his time, but with a mediaeval way of executing his experiments. It was his wish to discover whether exercise taken at once after a hearty meal was better conducive to digestion than a post-prandial rest, and so he had two criminals already condemned to the gallows brought before him, whereat each was fed a fine repast, of the same nature. After that, one was told to go take a nap, which he did, and the other was made to run around a yard and generally be very active. Then both were put to death simultaneously and opened up. The man who has rested had digested his food better than the one who had been sent to caper about –,” by then Justina was laughing –, “which is an interesting discovery for the science of medicine, except that the methods of procuring it may have been somewhat singular.”

“Then we abide by the Emperor’s findings, sir,” quoth Justina.

The Duke turned a little, as if to give his closer attention to her, and now faced her, so the Duchess called Honoria, for instead of dangle about him she was to make herself useful, and the visitor and paymaster’s choice in company had to prevail, not one daughter’s hopes in making herself likeable to her would-be-brother-in-law.

“Do you really want a hard-riding man, or are you not sick of folk deciding what you want?” he tried, now that he was allowed a little privacy and Honoria was gone sullenly away.

“As a female, and a daughter in a bevy of four, I had best be pliant and not give myself airs about what is decided for me,” she answered.

“After all, it was your choice to go care for horses,” he smirked.

Thereat she twisted her face about, her mouth pressed together.

“To return to the subject of my hard-riding husband, whom I am sure to find at the country hop that shall be my coming-out ball, I believe that I owe your grace my grateful thanks therefor,” she said, trying not to sound as if she were reciting, for she realised that this was why Honoria had been called off, her mother hoping she would have the sense to talk to him about this matter, if he did not raise the subject first, which would have been even better.

“In some cases, marriage is an improvement upon the life already being led, and if I am instrumental in bringing that about, then I would be most honoured to be at the bottom of it, but, if I may dare to inquire, is the concept of a hard-riding husband one of your ladyship’s imagining, or something conjured up for you by Lady Orre?” he accepted and asked.

“The latter,” she declared. “I have discussed with no-one the husband I most want because I have taken the precaution not to think on it.”

“The precaution?” he replicated.

“If one goes into the arena with a preconceived notion of what one wants, one is sure to be disappointed,” she averred.

“They told me your ladyship’s age was seventeen,” quoth he. “How in the name of all that is holy has one of your still youthful years come by such experience as to warrant such a conclusion thereto?”

“No experience of mine, but a good pair of ears that hear and assimilate when folk talk

of what they have endured, what they have seen endured, what they already know,” she owned. “‘When I grow up, I’ll wed a duke’, said my mother who was the daughter of a duke herself – and so she did. It is not my idea to wed a hard-riding man, but nor is it my wish to marry a shabaroon who will stand on the fur of a royal train because the chapel floor is of stone and he fears to catch cold because his feet are not warm. What of you, sir? You have asked me, effectively, what my ideas about my husband are, by using Lady Orre’s indiscreet chatter as an excuse. What were you going to marry, until reality forced you in our direction, or are you one of those people who wed because it is what folk in your position are sadly constrained to do owing to the duties to perpetrate a bloodline, a name, a family business, or even to keep the wrong branch of one’s relations at bay? Are you really the sort of gentleman who, if he had his way, would live his entire life as a bawdy bachelor – and that I have not heard from the mouths of ladies talking, for few know of such a mentality in men.”

“Then how do you?” he asked.

“Your grace told me,” she answered.

“That I did,” he acknowledged, lowering his head.

“There is something I would like you to learn,” she asserted, “before I beg your forgiveness and retire to hand around the tea, if there is more to hand around. I do not really want that there be a coming-out ball for it is so much time and money wasted. This is not an expression of ingratitude or of misplaced pride, but of common sense. I would ha’ said that even if my father were solvent enough to pay for it, because I may just as easily go make my fortune in London with my mother’s sister owing to the invitation she has sent to us.”

“Your sister Lady Caroline went, so did your sister Lady Honoria, and I remember Lady Caroline, whom I did not meet, but I saw her often enough at a crush and even at court. I never imagined I would end up seeking her hand in marriage but in those days I truly was not the marrying kind,” he said. “The efforts of the worthy Lady Ashlington have not resulted in marriage for either of her nieces, so perhaps we may all like to try my way after all? It would give me great pleasure to be your sponsor in this matter.”

Indeed, he was irresistibly courtly and gallant that she donned a sad smile.

“Well, I am female and a female should not resist having others chuse for her,” she said a trifle acidly. “To tell your grace the truth, I am most embarrassed by the whole, especially the financial aspects, and that is something I am not supposed to talk about.”

“Nor are you,” he agreed, with a soft laugh, like a gentle and relaxing purr, “but your candour on the subject is adorably refreshing.”

“Do you want more of it?” she pounced.

“I doubt if I will ever tire of something so open,” he punned.

“I have a brother who is about to become one and twenty, and at that age he cannot claim sheet and napkin at his father’s house, which could be denied him at a whim, but that whim could be expensive for others, for like a woman, he is the victim of a choice being made for him to put him under the colours,” she related. “I daresay that your grace believes that I am going to warn you that you are about to be touched for such a sum as would gain him a lieutenancy and pack him off to India, but –,”

“India is indeed the place to be; it is gorged with wealth that our armies, poised to take for the East India Company, that will enrich this country, and all those who serve there will have a little to put in each of their pockets,” he interposed, with sarcastic jocularly.

“Indeed, England could hardly feed her own population a century ago and we yet struggle against famine to make ends meet, despite all the new farming improvements and industries, althô much of our wheat ends up in the gin stills. Only think what tapping the resources of such a colony as India will do for us!”

“Well, he despises the Indian service and will not steal the wealth of others, and he does not want to go to war against anyone. The person he envies the most is Bobby Orre, your host’s eldest son, who has a post in some embassy where he is busy doing nothing, and he would like such a career for himself, with nothing to do all day but attend outlandish ceremonies and get paid for it, so that he is no longer a mouth for this household to feed,” she explained.

“By the deuce, I despise the Indian service; why, it attracts but rogues-in-grain, hang-in-chains, all,” said the Duke. “That is no reason to eschew service in India. ’Twill not last forever: sooner or later they will put too much in their own pockets and someone will whittle (tell) on ’em, so another will go out to replace their commander just as despicable as is he, while we’ll probably try him for malversation on the face of it and exculpate him because too many grand names are knee deep in the dirt with him. The books will be cooked and all will be wrapped up in clean linen. Serving in India could make your brother richer than if he performed daily bows at the Royal Court of Pallastrunturi.”

“Where?” she squawked.

“’Tis a mountain in Lapland: I was only funning,” he owned.

“Frankly he’d prefer somewhere farther to the East,” she corrected. “Have we an embassy in Cathay?”

“They call it China now: a corruption of Chun Hua,” he smirked.

“There then,” she said. “You are making fun of me; you are making fun of the pair of us,” she reproached, “and you speak as if poor Julius’s commission for service in India is bought and paid for.”

“What if it is?” he dismissed. “He is only going to fight the French.”

“The French army in India is composed of French trained folk native to their own soil, and forced into the service. The entire business is enough to make one want to turn bilious,” she objected. “He wants no part of it.”

“He’ll have no part in it. He will just be a cog in a giant wheel.”

“He’d rather do nothing in Cathay – I beg pardon: Chun Hua – China.”

“And you think that a post there will cost less than a commission?”

Justina reeled, and stared into his face, her own dismayed and grave.

“Ah, yes,” he affirmed, with a firm nod of the head, “everything is bought and paid for in England, even a post in which there is nothing to do.”

“Then I will trade my coming-out ball for his post at the Embassy in the Empire of Chun Hua – I beg pardon, China,” she pronounced.

“Think before you confirm those words,” he warned sharply.

“I don’t have to think. It is what I want and it is what he would prefer, that I know, for he has told me of it oft-times,” she asserted.

“Why will he not go into the army?” he demanded.

“He doesn’t want to hurt anyone, or be hurt,” she replied, and he stared at her, rendered grimly solemn by surprise. “Is that wrong in England today?”

“Not only wrong but singular,” he mused.

“Please reflect on what I requested. Tell my father and mother that it is easier to be rid of me on a spouse than it is to place their younger son, and you have found him a good post in some grand empire, where they may even be triflingly civilised –,”

“My dear Lady Justina, they are all civilised. It is just because they are not Christian and of a colour different to us that we deem ourselves better than them, and we forget that when we were wearing hemp and building stone hovels under our Saxon monarchs, they were dressed in silk and raising pagodas or towers or whatever they pray and live under. To accept that concept is alien to everything in Christendom, but it is time we began to enlighten ourselves about the condition of other mortals created as human on this planet, by the same God who is not our monopoly. Now saying that in a drawing room full of honest church-going members of any government could land you in serious social difficulties, but there are people who have begun to see this, finally.”

“I still do not go back on my word to let Julius have an embassy post instead of my being given a ball, and when I made up an excuse for your tergiversation in his favour instead of mine, your grace interrupted me, which was probably just as well, for I was teaching grandma to suck eggs,” she answered. “Now I should give you up to Caroline, for everyone will wonder why I tarry by you for so long.”

The Duke executed a most graceful bow, and she, with her small curtsy, withdrew.

No-one asked her what she had been doing with him; if he chose to talk to her, then his word was law in this house at present, and her mien was so serious that it could not possibly have been a flirtation, for those were noisy things. Her mother also dismissed her, with Julius, and, lest Irvin did not keep his word, or that matters might have developed behind her back faster than she would have liked, so that Julius already had a commission in some army purchased by the Duke of Irvin’s money and it was too late to change things, she did not tell her brother of her conversation with their future brother-in-law, or of her wish to trade her ball for his career, because she was ashamed of the expenses being loaded upon him. Grooming the horses was a task which she always found pleasurable, even if it was one they should have performed in the morning, but best of all was the fact that her new black mare was all healed up, and walking with the elegance that creatures of her blood possessed, so the day ended well, even if it rained. By the time she and her brother went home to the castle buildings, Irvin was gone, and all was silent: over supper she learned why. After the guest departed, the master of this demesne gave vent to a truly horrible fit of temper, declaring that he was no longer master in his own house, that he would not let a ‘hang-in-chains’ like Irvin tell him how to spend his rents and even put charges on them in advance so that he could not spend them, that it was all the Duchess’s fault being friends with the Orres, for they had brought this ‘thatchgallows’ to this house, that the wedding was off, and that he had his prestige as Duke of Hearne to consider, for he could not have anyone saying that Irvin now ran his affairs for him. He also accused Devenish of being in collusion with Irvin because Irvin’s plans were very like the suggestions that Devenish was wonted to make and which his father would not follow because fathers did not take financial advice from their own sons in particular if the latter stood to inherit anything. Finally he took the decanter and slammed off to the study with it, where he still was, and his wife sent his supper to him on a tray, but ate nothing herself, for she had been weeping since he stormed out of her sight and that was that.

When it was time therefor, the various members of the family went to bed, feeling bad about everything, and coming-out balls were of the least importance, while Carrie owned that *thô* she did not really want to wed Irvin, her doing so would pull the family out of the slough of debt into which her father had plunged it, and salvage something for Devenish, which the action of curbing all Hearne's financial freedoms, which had to pass through Irvin, was trying to ensure. Once they had had the hope of being on the road, at least to solvency.

That was why, on the morrow, when a bay mare was brought to the stables with the message that it belonged to the Duke of Irvin, both Justina and Julius feared the worst, thinking that their father would bawl his rage and his vanity at the rakish saviour of the family in its state of monetary misfortune, causing the latter to leave soon and never come back again. Actually he did not stay for very long, and that brought the siblings running back to the castle to find out if all had failed, only to be told that the Duke was come to take leave, for he was due to travel to London on the following day, whither he was already sending most of his things and his horses, and the mount he rode was borrowed from his host. The Duke of Hearne seemed more captivated by the fact that his son-in-law-to-be lived in a great mansion in St. James's advantageously dominating a square which he was reputed to own, while Devenish revealed that the younger peer alleged that now there was work to be done regarding marriage, property and various ancillaries that accompanied them. Before leaving he confirmed to the Duchess that he had not forgotten his offer to give young Lady Justina a coming-out ball, which put Honoria in ill-humour out of which Caroline was endeavouring to coax her. After all, he had joked, dressmakers were not magicians with wands and a good orchestra had to be hired in advance, for the church musicians would never do; besides from what Irvin had been able to discern, the castle needed some attention from a glazier, a master carpenter and an upholsterer, who would soon arrive just to undertake a few refurbishments. As for other sundries and provisions for the dining room on the night, the ducal cooks and pantler would come to Great Hearne Castle close to the designated day and prepare all on the site, while fancy linen and plate would accompany them on loan from the collections at Irvin House in the capital. If it seemed that the master of this place had changed his mind and kept his mouth shut, Justina almost broke down and wept. Julius was not going to follow the time-keeper around the palace in the Forbidden City as he chanted out the hours, declaimed the virtues they were dedicated to, and pronounced whatever actions or blessings the animal that controlled them would allow as most propitious.

The Duke of Irvin had had the common decency neither to be patronising nor to behave as a charitable philanthropist. He spoke of practical matters in a practical manner, but as if he meant to take charge, especially in the case of Justina, for he talked of her affairs as if they were more of his family than of hers. The Duchess had dreaded the response of her husband hereto as a form of humiliation, but his younger grace was so tactful and gracious that there were times when she felt that she was dealing with a mere Master of Ceremonies who had undertaken to stage a spectacle in their house. Yet his were not just words: the very day of his departure, namely the morrow, for there arrived some local artisans to undertake the tasks he had designated, and they knew more about what was wrong than the very inhabitants of the place. From this the younger Woodvilles gained a clear idea of what the Duke of Irvin thought of the integrity of his future father-in-law, as well as the extent of his own intelligence. Even so, old Hearne could not restrain himself: he ordered Devenish to go

order them to conduct some repairs in his apartments, which were more in the way of improvements than restoration, but of course he would not ask himself, and send an intermediary to face their refusals, which were most cleverly formulated: first they would complete whatever was on the list that the Duke of Irvin had given them and after that they would inform the latter as to the rest. When she found out, Justina confessed herself ashamed and in her mother's presence, wondered how their father could be so dishonest immediately to indulge in such a gross breach of trust. The mother was twice appalled, first at her husband's misconduct and second at her daughter's condemnation of it, for children were supposed to respect their parents and there was nothing deferential in Justina's assessments of her own father. Not that Justina herself was surprised by her father's behaviour, for she acknowledged to herself at least, with much bitterness, that it was only typical of him to commence any venture concerning his children by spoiling it. If it was any consolation, Caroline was already drawing up a guest-list and Selina had composed an invitation, for she had read many even if she had attended nothing. Caroline also wrote to Aunt Lizzie that Justina was duly being brought out and that she should come to attend, after which she could look all London in the eye if the nosey asked 'whether the girl was out yet'. It was Caroline, always Caroline: the Duchess was useless in such affairs except to give negative advice for fear that things would go wrong.

SIX

It was to the Duchess of Hearne that Irvin addressed his long and detailed letters about the works undertaken in certain of the rooms, even if the Duke of Hearne read them first, forbade his wife to pen missives to a man even if he was due to be her son-in-law, and bid Devenish fashion the replies which he dictated, except that Devenish wrote his own version and alleged that he just cut out his father's repetitive rambling, which excuse the old Duke suspiciously swallowed, so that something coherent was returned to Irvin as a reply. Not that this change in signatory daunted the latter, who continued to write to his would-be-mother-in-law, with instructions, proposals, lists, pieces of information and various assurances about various matters. Hearne professed not to like the work being done in his house: it was too noisy and messy and entailed a veritable crowd of folk of the lower orders invading his fine public rooms, and when it was all over, so that the worst thing about the place was that it smelled of varnish, he affected not to like the result and was disgusted with his wife and children for saying that they had never seen any part of their home look so well-ordered. As if to vex them for their opinion, their father declared openly and before the artisans and their journeymen, that he did not understand why such inconvenience needed to be caused and a fuss had to be made all for the sake of a silly girl who could not wait to go to London and make a fool of herself before fashionable society, like his other daughters had done. Nor did he let them, hurt as they were, say that more works were necessary in the whole house for Caroline's wedding, which was considerably more important than Justina's coming out. He made not a single contribution of effort, for it was the Duchess who signed the invitations which her daughters, aided by Devenish, prepared and sent out. If his public rooms were suddenly elegant despite the retention of a mediaeval charm, he described all as dull and boring, because he had not been allowed any part in the choices to be made, and his own heir described him as jealous of Irvin's good taste, which was better than anything he could conceive, let alone achieve.

In the meanwhile, a dressmaker arrived from the capital, took measurements of the ladies and a gown from each one, and made a promise that a week before the event her seamstresses would return with the finished result and adjust it for fit and comfort. They would also bring the necessary accessories. The colours of the gowns were the affair of the ladies wearing them, so Caroline chose pink, Honoria wanted sky blue, and Justina did not chuse anything at all, for her mother, who would be in leaf green, wanted her to wear white. When the seamstresses brought these creations, they would also give the future bride her first fitting, for a wedding gown was a different affair, and if it depended on the lady's taste, if she wanted a broad French hoop with petticoats and stomacher, if she wished to be dressed like a princess and wear a stiff-bodied gown, or if she still preferred the old-fashioned mantua which was still worn for extremely formal events, as if it were a sort of uniform. Caroline settled for the modern style with elbow cuffs and full robings, fearing that a revival of older modes or a court costume would cost more money. It was her father's rents that were to pay for this, she knew as much, but the dressmaker revealed that the Duke of Irvin wanted the wedding gown to be most sumptuous, both in choice of fabric and in appearance, so if she wanted a mercer to weave a length, she only had to say, yet Lady Caroline insisted that the seamstresses come with a sample book or two and no more. If the Duke wanted her to be sumptuous, she would chuse a flocked and figured damask, and they would all trim it themselves.

His grace of Irvin was gradually taking over the mortgages and debts until the bride was duly wedded to him, but those being serious matters which took time whereof to arrange the legal transfer, there had to be a correspondence between him and theoretically, the Duke of Hearne, althô the first reply he had to his first missive was a collection of inconsistencies, incoherent protestation, misrepresentations and clever but inaccurate statistics which the writer had some gumption to include, for his son-in-law-to-be already knew what he was worth. Thus the bridegroom was reluctant to write to the old Duke anymore and thenceforth wrote to Caroline when wishful to continue matters of business, knowing that she would not deal with the subject but refer it to Devenish, except that if she and her brother expedited affairs together without reference to their father, he was likely to provoke a violent quarrel that would go on for days and involve every member of his family, so she had to tell him of it even if in the end it was Devenish who dealt with the matter, notwithstanding what nonsense the old Duke told them both to say. However, when he said it, it took an entire morn of time wasted, as she emerged from her father's presence insulted, deaf, dizzy and with a severe headache, not to mention a whole list of ridiculous requests, impossible instructions and unreasonable commands, which she was going to ignore in any wise, so Caroline began to dread Irvin's missives. Fortunately, Devenish knew how to combine the truth and touch up his father's requirements, providing whatever information was useful, and so he prepared the drafts which Lady Caroline copied out in her own hand, so that it seemed as if she were conducting her father's affairs in the way that Irvin wanted. What the whole family dreaded, however, was the moment when the Midsummer Rents were collected and so Justina, ever resourceful, suggested that they confess as much to the younger Duke, but refrain from saying to the older one that they had done so. It was not very loyal, she was ready to admit that, but he had not exactly been a provident father, and – just for safety's sake, it was better not to tell the Duchess either, lest she weakened and revealed all to her husband. Neither Devenish nor Carrie argued the moral issues at stake and took their younger sister's advice.

A very fortnight before the ball was to take place, the first replies began to arrive, but as was expected, they were mostly from neighbours, to whom the invitations themselves had been delivered by hand. The Duke of Hearne was in one of his critical moods and asserted that if matters had been in his control – after all this was his house and that brat was his daughter – he would have invited every powerful peer in the land, not just relations and neighbours, for that was not the way to wed off a child. After that, every time the posts were fetched from the village tavern, which doubled as the posting house and was the second focus in the hamlet, the first being the church, there were replies, mostly from relatives of the Duke and the Duchess. Then Irvin's under-housekeeper arrived with the table-linens, which she invited her grace to inspect, but her spouse decided that he was a better judge than was she, and set about to denounce and criticise everything he saw as inappropriate or paltry. There was no point in protesting that the tablecloths bore the finest needlework, or that the brocade ones had been ordered by the Duke of Irvin in Venice, or that a mill in Macclesfield had made the napkins and woven heraldic emblems into the cloth: thus the woman delivering fell silent and let the venomously envious old man discharge the poison of his mind and incite her scorn which, unlike his, was tacit. For all that, nor did the Duchess gain much support from her older daughters, for she had allowed her husband to sell off valuable linens that were exquisitely worked upon, just to pay banal debts, without thinking that she could one day need

them to wed off her family with, let alone bring any of them out. The situation was not helped by the fact that Selina chose today to run off into the park and sit alone and weep: everyone had a new gown and there was to be a ball but she was too young to attend it so she did not even have new clothes to wear. Justina, who went out to her, wanted to cry and tell her to take her own place.

Within the last week a platoon of cooks, from pastry ‘chefs de cuisine’ to makers of sauces and custards, invaded Great Hearne Castle, and took up residence during the day in the kitchens, where they set up their utensils and arrayed their ingredients and then went to market to buy what they could not purchase fresh off the Duke’s tenants. Of course they worked with the Duke’s few servants and consulted the Duchess, Ladies Caroline and Honoria, and even the few, antient footmen, who when young had seen a thing or two, but along came Hearne himself and interfered, altho they took no notice of him or his counsel after he was gone, and did things the way their master ordered, with adaptations required by the circumstances, about which the more intelligent residents enlightened them – but he noticed and quarrelled with his wife and found fault with everything in a voice so resonant that all the denizens of the castle heard it from the attic to the kitchens. Amid all this bad blood in a bad atmosphere which grew heavier by the day, the seamstresses arrived with their finished works of art, to the vast delight of the ladies all but one, but even here Hearne had his say, for he supposed that one affecting to be as rich as Irvin could have provided finer. Justina had had enough by now and spoke out at last.

“That is because he has been run over shoes (heavily in debt) after finding ways to cover all your debts and mortgages,” she blurted out.

In the presence of the visiting seamstresses and with all the female servantry looking on, with the footmen on hand because they had to help carry up the parcels so that their contents would not be creased, and his grace’s two sons, not forgetting his youngest child, the Duke of Hearne called his third daughter every word that the lowest member of the canting crew and the roughest sailor called the basest kind of harlot and certain parts of her, so that the scene was insupportable to all but had to be suffered in silence, and, as the only response he had was from his wife, who did not try to silence him or defend her daughter, and instead, wept quietly, he repeated the whole, gross litany, saying that Justina needed to hear what she was twice, so that she would never forget it. Then, mightily pleased with himself, he stormed off leaving his family and servitors and visitors to make something of their shattered nerves and continue as if nothing had happened. They did, except that Justina refused to try on her gown, and asked Selina to don it instead. When the young girl so had, petticoats, stomacher and all, Justina hugged her and left them; stunned a moment, they only came to their senses when they heard the house door shut. Devenish went to a room with a forward window: Justina was running towards the stables, so Julius went out and finally found her sitting with her pet, the black mare. By the time she came in, the tradesfolk were gone, and her gown was hanging up by a pair of pegs especially cleared for it, in her dressing room wardrobe.

Justina was expected to shew a complaisant and well-tempered face and eat a full meal after what she had endured today. She certainly presented herself with a bland expression on her face, which was the best she could muster, but her father came into the nursery to see, swore at her under his breath, which was not conducive to appetite, so she served herself with nothing with the result that some more abusive language came her way, whereupon she just

left the table, deaf to his roaring, and changed into boy's clothes, to go and work in the stables. Ere long Julius came to join her, but before supper, as they slunk in together, but who should they have crossed in the upper corridor but their father, who seemed none the worse for wear, and even told his daughter that he hoped there were no hard feelings between them! She just shrugged but that was all, and if it kept his mouth shut for the little that was left of the day, it did not dispel the bad atmosphere in the house, her father's relentless fractiousness and the need ever to be explaining and excusing everything, combined to strain the nerves of one and all, even the Duke of Irvin's chief cook. The load on Justina's nerves was the worst among them everyone, for she felt responsible for all the trouble that was being caused. She also became weary to the point of being worn out, for not only was there her work in the stables which Julius and the few old grooms did their best to lighten, her mother wanted her to help in the house with decorations and preparations, even if Irvin's kitchen folk assured her that they would take care of the little banqueting tables and the main dining table, all in the dining room, as well as the chest. Meanwhile the Duke of Hearne was restless and argued or quarrelled with those who crossed his path, or those whom he sought out to question, and Justina was not alone in wondering why he could not just leave folk alone. Then came the relations, one carriageful after the other, until they filled the house, after which they had to be diverted to the mansions of the neighbouring squirearchy, for during weddings and events that attracted guests plentifully, local gentry and aristocracy housed the excess. Yet as to those who were here, they had to be cared for and the Duchess had the bad habit of giving them all priority, whoever they were, over the convenience of her children and the possibilities whereof they were capable. Distressed, disgruntled, disgusted, Justina was so tired by the eve of the ball that she did not care if she did not attend it, and grew so disaffected that when Selina remembered that she had not even tried on her ball gown, she did nothing about it. As she defiantly told her mother, in the presence of that verisame Aunt Lizzie who was inviting her to Town, if it fitted her like a saddle on a sow's back, so much the worse for her.

On the actual day of the ball, Justina went to the stables as usual but did not shovel used bedding or clean the paddocks; instead she groomed horses and there were now several, but she confined her attentions to those of the house and the ones belonging to Squire Pye. At dinner she was to come in and then she was told to rest; fatigue visited upon her a nap wherefrom she was awakened to be sent to the laundry offices, where it was easiest to fill and take a bath. Then one of Aunt Lizzie's footmen was sent to dress her hair, and as it had been washed and was glossy and soft, he began by putting his hand into a pot of perfumed pomatum, so she at once dismissed him, and dressed her hair herself, adornments and all, for at least one day with a clean head and tresses free of oily glue was all she asked, even if it was not going to make her have a very fashionable hairstyle, for she could not make herself proper pigeon's wings nor was she going to wear hair-powder, because she was not accustomed to the latter, it being rather expensive, unless one just used flour. The worst part of the exercise was not the bevy of female relations who took the liberty of foisting themselves upon her in her private rooms just because she had blood ties with them, and who affected to help with dressing her up for her ordeal, which was what she called it and shocked them, or the business of being laced into her gown and all its trappings, or being adorned with various gorgeous accoutrements and told how to use them at this last moment, whereat one aunt disapproved most vociferously and declared to her sister that the least she could have arranged was a

rehearsal for her daughter, whereupon the Duchess whined out a lame excuse which was typical of her and where-to no-one was listening in any wise. It was the exercise of bracing herself for the ignominy of having to encounter so many human beings, neighbours, relations, Irvin's relatives and perhaps his friends if he had any, and all of them, she knew, ready as predators verbally to tear her apart to one another while gurgling platitudes about winning hearts now, to her face, not to mention the welter of sly commentary about the expense of the party as they laughed in their sleeves at her father – which insulted his whole family – while he, unaware of it, would shew off with bluster, or put the blame on Irvin, and in either case she would want to disown all association with him.

If Justina was presuming too much before the event, it was because she knew her subject. Everyone staying at Great Hearne Castle was a relation of hers and had talked among themselves already, as she was predicting that the rest of the company would do: graceless, tasteless remarks about hunting down the right spouse, embarrassing reminiscences about her pranks as a child which they would disseminate among the entire party, especially to Irvin and his entourage, for they would be extremely grand, even Louisa Mortlake, who, though she had wed a Baronet of her own choosing, has taken care to ensure, by the way, that he was extremely wealthy. His older sister, she now knew, was a gentler soul, but also the Countess of Northingham, with a daughter at least her age, and a titled spouse in tow: a cousin of his was Sir Raymond Annesley, also a Baronet of sure means, and alleged to be among Irvin's closest friends, but a far cry from the Duke of Whitfordshire, also an Irvin cousin, supposedly rather evil and to be avoided like all the plagues. All were people of fashion, of the sort one never saw in the country unless they adjourned to their bucolic retreats and held hunting- and house-parties which evoked their ways in the Metropolis, so that they would be a *clique* apart once they had everyone presented to them, and it was a mercy the Aunt Lizzie belonged to their world, otherwise Justina was going to feel like a stranger at her own ball. In fact the idea of dressing up to go and be sneered at, envied, assessed, and interrogated, especially by the very elderly, who thought it a right which went with great age – when they should have known better – and were also both rude and gross, not forgetting some piece of *gaucherie* by her parents, served as a most effective deterrent to this young belle about to take her first steps in Society, as she knew it so far.

So, once she was tricked out, her nosey gaggle of hindering, more than helpful, attendants evaporated, to put the finishing touches to their toilettes. Alone, she sat and thought of all the things that could go wrong, and was truly a gloomy sight when poor Selina came to see her, and ask why she should have been so low-spirited on the best day of her life, for weddings did not count and were business arrangements. Her reply was lamely uttered, she felt like a lamb being taken to the slaughter; Irvin and his fine cronies, all so supercilious and haughty, would be there to smirk and jeer; what if she were suddenly taken ill and Selina deputised for her, for she was most reluctant to attend her own coming-out ball; this was but a foretaste of how poor Caroline would feel and be, in anticipation to wedding Irvin, except that she was more stoical than her younger sisters – and at last Julius appeared, coming to fetch her below. For a moment he baulked: she had on no face-paint except lip-red, and her excuse was that it kept falling on to her shoulders like powder, and spoiling the lustre of her clothes, so he powdered it himself, there and then, very slightly, just as he had powdered his own, to prevent someone taking him for a peasant strayed from the village. He agreed that the others,

when she saw them, all did indeed look like painted doxies, and that there was nothing to bear the fresh bloom on the visage of a country lass, but the laws of fashion had to be obeyed, and even he, who hated a descent into compleat foppery, had to comply a little. His dislike of the censure which these grandees and their ghastly countenances and their extreme fashions heaped upon the humble, was calculated to enliven and cheer her, but she greeted all with compleat apathy, and when encouraged to chuse a patch for her face, put her hand into the box and took out the first one. Hiding his concern from her, even if disconcertment shewed on his face as he led her out of her apartments into the corridor, where Devenish and Caroline were waiting, Julius took her to them but said nothing and did not have to.

“I think all the guests have arrived,” said Carrie, feigning girlish excitement.

“Figs to the guests,” intoned Justina, indifferent and impassive.

“I only mean to remind and not nag, my dear, but be sparing with language like that for not all are accustomed to the fact that you lead a rather gruelling life here,” quoth Lady Caroline, aiming to be kind rather than censorious.

“My corsets are laced too tightly,” complained the belle-of-the-ball-to-be.

“Another thing, don’t eat too much: the food is for the guests not for us to gorge ourselves upon – and that goes for you two gentlemen,” continued the oldest of the sisters, and the two brothers managed sheepishly to smile or chuckle, really to cheer Justina.

“I wonder if papa will contrive to become hocus (drunk) and embarrass us all,” the latter mused miserably.

Caroline could not tell whether her sister’s irrelevant interpositions were calculated to divert, annoy, or indeed not calculated at all but merely the results of nervous abstraction in an effort to force upon herself a degree of calm.

“Mamma also says don’t chatter,” added she.

“And papa also says don’t sulk or be cool to the guests,” snorted Justina.

“So you are listening,” chuckled Caroline. “Actually, papa says that you must not be rude to his friends or talk horseflesh with the men. He delivered himself of a lecture to Julius commanding him to stay away from you, for he knows that you will eventually feel lost and take refuge among your siblings, especially the one with whom you spent the most time.”

Justina rounded on her eldest sister in anger, directed against her father but about to be expressed in any wise, but the other becalmed her.

“Papa is right for once; ’twould be unseemly were you to pass all evening in the company of a brother,” quoth Caroline.

“What is unseemly about it? ’Tis not as if ’tis improper.”

“I am consigned to tell you that you must be at pains to talk amiably and modestly to all our guests and relations, and put up with the nonsense expelled by the older ones.”

“How can I talk amiably to folk I know not, and about what?”

“There will be introductions and very little superficial chat, and it is a ball, not a symposium, and pray for goodness’s sake, do not ask how long they are staying for, because it will seem as if you would like them to leave.”

“And if they quiz me impertinently because they have rank or age on their side?”

“Indulge it courteously, for one day, rank and age will be yours to misuse.”

“To humble me –,”

“It is not humbling but a manner of speaking,” Caroline tried to explain, but Lord

Devenish intervened.

“Carrie, Justina has drawn you into an argument about etiquette and conduct in order to delay her descent among the company, and you have taken the bait,” realised Devenish. “It is time we took her below after all.”

“When I was a little girl, I liked to dress up and ape a lady, and full rued that I could not enter the sacred worlds of drawing and ball rooms. Now that I am forced to, I would rather not,” remarked Justina.

“You do not look like a little girl aping a lady, you look positively a grand one yourself,” assured Devenish.

He was not flattering her to please her or to give her confidence, for when she stood up from the edge of her bed and moved into the light of the chamber, they beheld what a sight she had become. Over a white brocaded petticoat sewn with ruched spangled lace, went a white gown of figured satin, of the sort which French and Italian weavers knew how to make, the sleeves tight and reaching the elbow, with a deep cuff that was cut on the bias and hung lower at the back than at the front, over a chemise with a lace frilled tucker and the finest lace to shew under the gown sleeve frill, with a bow knot on the cuff. The bodice of the gown carried the same lace upon the edges and these were attached to a stomacher of gold lama, with a translucent scarf descending to the waist, and held down with brocaded ribbon laid horizontally over the bodice. With deft, almost angry gestures, she adjusted the ruffles at her *décolletage*, tied a frill of lace threaded with white satin into a bow about her throat, and patted down skirts, bowknots and laces.

“There, I am ready,” she rattled off.

“Not quite,” said Carrie, and took her back to her rooms, where she took up a fan, a pair of gloves and a lace handkerchief from the cluttered dressing table. “You need to carry these at least, and then you must have a watch and a necklace.”

“I possess neither,” asserted Justina, almost proudly, but Caroline took two cases waiting in a chair, which Justina had not noticed.

“The watch is mine, and I will be upset if you use it not,” she said, displaying a discreet gold fob watch and chain, suitable for a lady, “and the pearls belong to mamma, who says that you are going to have to take them to London when you go thither with Aunt Lizzie, so there is little sense to making futile refusals now.”

“Why are you so testy, Carrie?” demanded Justina, submitting to having herself manhandled as her sister decked her out with jewellery. “This is not your usual self.”

“Unless I am, you will give me an argument,” said Caroline. “I know you do not wish to wear mamma’s pearls out of pride, and that you will not bend before the pretext that she will be upset at your refusal. Let us not waste time. The person I am most anxious about your offending is Irvin: he is paying for much of this, even if he hopes to manage father’s affairs to recover some of it from the Midsummer rents and some from the Michaelmas rents, so all will be square at the end, but it could not happen without his initial outlay and he is not adding interests to what he disburses.”

“Why are you worried about me and Irvin?” wondered Justina suspiciously.

“I don’t want you owing to him that you did not want a ball, which will make you sound like an ingrate,” said Carrie.

“Come along, let us go,” hurried Devenish, as Julius peered around him.

“No-one ever asks me what I want,” muttered Justina sullenly.

“You are female, my dear. What you want is irrelevant, unless you are a crowned queen and even then you have to move with the times, or survive only as a bad memory,” said Caroline, taking her by the waist and hauling her before the *cheval* glass.

“I barely recognise myself,” sighed Justina.

“I do, and it is a pretty young lady who will make many hearts beat much faster,” approved Caroline.

“I look tweak-ish (tweak: harlot),” said her sister. “If I looked like a Bartholomew baby (fashion doll) at least it would be an improvement, for a doll always has this look of lifeless innocence on its face. I look silly and tweak-ish.”

“You look like a grand lady,” assured Julius.

“You have too much imagination or you already have bread and cheese in your head (drunk),” dissented his younger sister rather dourly. “I was not made to dress like this –,”

“The intention is that you wed after a manner that makes *this* become common wear to you, and henceforth, you are in the marriage market. You are not a hoyden anymore,” her sister told her firmly, albeit with a short laugh, “but a lady of Quality, breeding and birth.”

“With such a father? The acme of excellence and parts,” sneered Justina, being drawn out of the room by her eldest brother.

“Whatever the faults of those whom you are about to encounter, now is not the moment to descend to sarcasms about them,” quoth Caroline.

“When one encounters folk with many faults, one is usually descending,” countered Justina. “You said all the guests were here; do I take it that that includes your intended?”

“Together with his family and his set,” confirmed Lady Caroline.

“His set. So he has a set. Carry me out and bury me decently,” groaned Justina.

By now they were at the top of the stairs.

“Wipe that scowl off your face,” advised the Marquis. “While I bring you along with Carrie, Julius will go on ahead and say that you are ready to come among them. Our dear papa should be with mamma and Honoria by now.”

“Should be with mamma?” repeated Justina, confused and interrogative.

“He was in the receiving line with Carrie, Honoria, Julius and me, while mother was with Aunt Nesta. You don’t think that our august father would let her stand there and let her hand be kissed by an whole host of men, do you?” rejoined Devenish, as Julius detached himself and hurried below.

“At mother’s age, it should not matter any longer –,” grimaced Justina.

“Well, it does. Being with Nesta is safer, in all respects: she is not as nasty as Aunt Winfrith, even if she is a Janus, and makes up Banbury Stories of cock and bull, which our revered gaffer always believes because they are his sisters, after all, even if they can afford to help him out monetarily but will only do so at a rate of interest that would make the whole Synagogue at Bevis Mark blush with shame. Justina, try and smile: a dell at her first ball is supposed to: it is supposed to be a convention, because of her anticipation.”

“Do you want to know what I am really anticipating?” carped Justina.

“Don’t be facetious, Justina. It is the last thing as will stand you in good stead, whether you want a fastidious beau or a hard-riding countryman,” sighed Carrie, now sounding a little exasperated. “You’ve nigh worked yourself up into a temper.”

“I am not in a temper, I do not feel like smiling and I am filled more with dread than anticipation –,” Justina’s speech was interrupted by the arrival of Selina in the corridor. “Now why can’t she go instead of me? Poor Selina is the forgotten one in the family: if she is come to *see* the roaring girl transformed by a change of what is on her skin rather than under it, I can *see* that she has been weeping, for she is left out of everything.”

“When it is her turn, Selina will have a feast and also go to London, to entrap an Earl or a Duke,” assured Devenish.

“After life in this house, anyone solvent will do: take your noble blood to market and see how much you’ll get for it,” snorted Selina.

“Have you been putting fat-witted ideas into her head?” accused Devenish.

“She has guts enough in her brains to work out a thing or two herself,” rejoined Justina. “Apart from abandoning poor Selina, what are we to do now?”

“Wait until mother and father arrive,” said Lady Caroline.

“May I watch her leave?” whined Selina.

“I feel like the family disgrace,” grunted Justina. “I don’t want to be presented to Society on the arm of such a man as my father who calls his own daughter obscene names before servants and tradesfolk and all the world and his wife.”

“Justina, don’t revive that now,” counselled Carrie.

“I didn’t; it just revived itself,” owned Justina. “We should send up a plate of dainties for Selina,” she changed the subject.

“Did they put rosemary in the jumballs and ice them using rosewater?” beamed Selina, endeavouring to be cheerful, for once her siblings took Justina away, she would be alone here.

Just then, to the extreme surprise of all present, the Duke of Hearne appeared in the spiral of the staircase, closely followed by Julius, who was gesticulating wildly as if to communicate that he had had no notion that his father would come in person to fetch Justina and that he had no way of warning them about it, or at least, so they understood from his panicking and apologetic expression. Selina at once withdrew into the shadows and escaped to her own room: when Justina turned away from her father to her eldest brother, as if in appeal of some sort, the youngest sibling in the household had disappeared, probably to cry.

“Ah, my beautiful, beautiful daughter,” marvelled and greeted the father of the family, and while his older offspring dutifully smiled even if it was all false, the object of his praise eyed him with bewilderment, disbelief, and despair. “Now let us take you below to outshine all those trulls down below. Your mother awaits at the base of the staircase.”

“Was not trull one of the words he called me?” Justina reminded Caroline in a low voice, but there was plenty of noise downstairs and the Duke was too far distracted by it and too far from his daughter in anyway to overhear her recollections.

“Come nearer the wall-lights, Justina,” urged her father. “What a pretty child I have! Will she not be the most beautiful lady in the house, Caroline?”

“I hope that the most beautiful lady in the house is Caroline, as long as Irvin is about,” answered Justina, “for he shall have his money’s worth at least.”

“What did she say?” asked the Duke.

“Nothing; just about where she left her fan,” lied Caroline.

“Devenish, get her fan: we cannot wait on her fancies all night,” ordered the Duke.

“I think I left it in my rooms when I had to put on all that jewellery,” supplied Justina

to help the Marquis, who set off for them immediately, but the Duke growled.

“Damned foolish thing to do – where were your brains, you silly doxy?” he snapped.

So much for being papa’s beautiful daughter: Justina and Caroline both had the same thought and eyed each other, one in sadness and the other in misery.

“Hurry, Devenish; Christmas will be here before you,” hailed Carrie, and the Marquis, warned by the edge to her voice, returned to them with the desired object.

“Well? Are we finally ready? Not left anything else behind, I hope, like your wits, for example?” snapped the Duke, putting out an elbow.

Justina hesitated before taking it: within all she could feel was hostility. Julius went rushing on ahead to warn the Duchess, and Devenish sedately led Caroline at a more dignified pace behind father and reluctant younger daughter, who began to understand more and more why her sister Caroline, who did not really want to marry Irvin, wanted really to marry Irvin. At this moment, she would have married Irvin tomorrow, just to leave this house, even if it was the only place she had ever known and she did not want ever to leave it if matters were in her hands. They were not.

Her hands were gloved to the elbow, one clutching a furred fan and the other lightly upon the bend of her father’s arm, for she would not insert it into the crook thereof. When she joined Julius and her mother below, they had made room for the two to descend and step off the staircase, whereupon Lord Devenish, Lady Caroline and Lord Julius tripped off ahead of them to enter the first of the public rooms, which informed everyone that the reason for their being convened here was about to appear. Thus there was a great confluence into this chamber, and so it was just as well that the ball was confined to relations and neighbours, for they alone succeeded in making this reception room of respectable proportions look crowded out, and that was without the Quality whom the Duke of Hearne would so much have liked to grace his hallowed halls. Thus the siblings were waiting in a line at one side as the parents led into Society – for what this collection was worth – the latest commodity that any parents had for sale on the marriage mart, and one of their footmen, all in full livery, announced:

“Lady Justina Woodville!”

“Smile,” hissed the Duke, beaming all over his grim face, but Justina was overcome by this throng of faces all staring at her, whereupon he decided to goad her a little – or was it a natural response typical of him? – and so he spat, under his breath, “stubborn, sullen slut.”

The buzz of conversation was dying and Justina was sure that the entire room had heard that last salutation, but in fact, the company was feasting eyes and opinions, whether or not envious, on the dazzling white spectacle between her parents, both in dark velvets and thus well contrasted, so extremely obvious. While the parents were smiling, the heroine of the piece looked as if she had been caught red-handed at something bad and there was pained dismay on her face, which did not render it less becoming but blessed her with the honesty of her true feelings instead of a deceptive mask. Thus, notwithstanding her finery, her candour was her only jewel, and her only weapon of concealment was her undoubted dignity. As she finally regained her countenance, she stared dully at the floor ahead of her, and her attitude, instead of encouraging those tongues that were itching to criticise out of sheer jealousy, made their owners feel unwelcome here, while the others were uncomfortable or embarrassed.

“Look up!” growled a voice not far from one of her ears. “Get that damned head up and for the love of God, smile!”

Wryly, she obeyed and raised her head, but the first creature upon whom her gaze actually fell was the black-clad Duke of Irvin, resplendent in velvet and a waistcote of embroidered damask, as he stood very obtrusively with his 'set' as they had been called, all people of high fashion and the ladies even 'dressed *French*', which was not too different from modish females in London who just dressed *up*. Yet the Duke of Irvin's eyes began to sparkle like the diamonds that he and his fine ladies wore, as he raised both eyebrows and let play a thoughtful smile about the corners of his mouth. What he meant by it, Justina did not actually know but she was in such a state of high dudgeon with her father that she found it akin to malicious levity, impertinent mockery, and just plain mischief, for he was the one who had staged this ball. Coldly she averted the direction of her scrutiny, and with her father muttering hoarsely at her, in terms that were scarcely encouraging, to smile, she passed with him and her mother through a corridor made by the guests among themselves, to let her reach the chamber now appurtenanced as a ball room, wherein the orchestra tuned up and so added their mess of noise to the verbal cacophony pouring in.

Out of the corner of her eye, Justina noticed that Irvin had stepped forth and was leading all who followed her, but there was a reason, for accompanying him were her family and his, so that when the ball was opened, he would partner his intended in the first set, as Devenish was supposed to lead out his newly fledged sister, that was to say if no-one came and hurriedly claimed the first dance, while her parents partnered each other. It was all very properly and demurely executed by the gentlemen and ladies concerned respectively, except that the Duke of Hearne made a change in the procedure at the last minute. Ordering Devenish to see to his mother, he declaimed that he was personally going to present his daughter to Society, and from that moment on, Justina would gladly have danced with the Devil. The sets formed and jealous eyes turned on the belle of the night as tongues wagged about expense and the provenance of the funds necessary to mount such a spectacle, which when overheard, did no good to Justina's equanimity. So when the music commenced and the dancers started off, she was grave but quiet, and Caroline, who was near her, and who had to turn now and again about her, whispered to her not to look as if she was being martyred. In fact, she was unhappy, for on this small scale, she began to learn what was in store for her if and when she joined the Quality, for this was a foretaste of the sympathy with which she was going to be received there, and in those few moments, she learned that it was the accepted practice of renowned folk with pretensions to rank or an established position, to greet all novices with critical disapproval, which was a preliminary to the decision on whether those aspirants were to be snubbed, ignored, denounced as unfit, courted coolly, flattered, forgotten, mocked or envied. The superficial, apparent, visible response was another matter and not to be trusted, for after all the grinning, now as Justina glided past these people, she beheld an assortment of icily raised eyebrows, or eyes narrowed through lorgnettes on long jewelled sticks, accompanied by frosty smiles and artificial simpering, which was followed by whispers, significant looks or nods, and in the case of males of or past middle age, leering, while the young beaux were inquisitive, supercilious, conceited, or simply smutty, depending on whether they were alone or with a group of their like. The best were those who hardly bothered with her at all, and continued with their chatter, rude as this was, and indicative of a certain level of ill-will based on the green-eyed monster.

The dull, dour, grave dancer, who led the ball with her father did not arouse much

curiosity: folk had already decided that this was because she was nervous, but then they did not know what were her feelings about her partner at this moment, and they would never ascribe some of the same to the fact that she had perspicacity enough to understand that she was surrounded by serpents and crocodiles, or so it seemed to her, for their own vanity would blind them to such possibilities. Dutifully, she danced again, with Sir Robert Orre, and after that, his son Michael, much to Hearne's disgust, for Orre was the richest man in the district and the second most important – that was to say, if the ducal title alone counted for anything. On her first ever ball she was not allowed to have a dearth of partners, even if there were dances she preferred to sit out, and in any wise, there were gaps provided in the program, for folk to rest and feed. So after Michael, Justina had to step out with Sir Adrian Mortlake, Orre's cousin and Irvin's brother-in-law, when she was too discreet, and hardly spoke at all, which provoked him to laughter, not only in her presence, but afterwards, when he presented his wife, Lady Louisa, Irvin's younger sister, who giggled and announced what a shy thing she was – thing, indeed! Thus when Devenish came to take her to join the next set, she all but fled with relief, and talked throughout much of the interlude, as much as it would allow, to tell him of her experience with Irvin's relations, without caring a jot who overheard and carried tales, for in Society, that was what one did, even if English notions of honour forbade it, but then there were different rules about gossip, which negated those English notions of honour which bid gentlemen of this land consider themselves superior to folk of other states. Even so, Devenish had his word to say and reported that while Sir Adrian Mortlake had been exercising his mischievous tongue at her expense for Sir Raymond Annesley's entertainment, the Duke of Irvin had suddenly interposed and commanded them, first, to contain themselves, and second, to curb such irrelevant malice that only served to their discredit. Indeed, Honoria was with him when he overheard this, and both brother and sister made themselves very small and still while their future brother-in-law humiliated his own relation-by-marriage and also, his own friend, so Honoria could confirm as much – and Honoria alleged that she purportedly did not like Irvin.

Justina duly danced tirelessly until the first designated pause, like one performing a duty to the household, and indeed, she felt as if she was, for all her partners were of neighbouring stock. During this interval, she was expected to meet other gentlemen who were strangers to her, such as newly acquired relatives-by-marriage among her own parents' relations, and folk attached to the Duke of Irvin. She had been on display all this while so it was their turn to fill up her *carnet de bal*, even if her true intention was to fill a plate with dainties and send it to Selina, before it was too late for the girl to eat, and time for her to go to bed. Thus she adjourned to the dining room and began upon her ritual, and if anyone really wanted to dance with her, they had to seek her there. So they did, duly accompanied by Aunt She or Uncle He or Cousin This or That-in-law, whom she already knew, to perform the introductions, as she added food to her collection but ate not from it until, when the band began tuning up again as a signal for the dancers to convene, she handed the dish to the footman and sent him off with it to Lady Selina in her chambers. Not a few of her partners inquired if she were comfortably replete, but she replied that the comestibles were not for her, without saying for whom she had been amassing them, which led to the belief that she had been performing a service for some very antient relation, who could not stagger about on two sticks, jostle for access to the table and wield cutlery with which to serve out food, all at the

same time. At times she wondered if the inquiry was not in fact a trifle spiteful, to test whether she was a glutton and thus know that, after ten years and six children, she would be ‘all guts and garbage’, or otherwise very fat. Then there were those who were ready to shew off to her about their deeds or attributes in some way, and there were also those who were so fond of themselves as to consider the action of dancing itself a grand concession and favour, so that they never spoke a word at all. Were it not necessary for her to be a success by dancing as long as the ball lasted, she would have been content to sit by and watch as everyone else did so and compare them to the descriptions by officers, explorers and missionaries, who wrote in journals or even published books, about tribal customs in the Americas, for example, their dancing especially grasping the imagination. When she thought about it, these sets in which she was participating were no different, except for the costume, for even the purpose was the same in some cases: there were dances for fertility and for puberty and for the pairing off of couples, and even for the coupling of deities – while here they danced to seek spouses for their children and the fertility came later while the puberty had already gone. In her glittering and glorious trappings, there she was, bobbing about like a score and more, all gyrating according to the demands of the dance, whichever it was, and no-one among them would have consented to being compared with the Savages abroad, even if verbally she must already have been gored savagely tonight.

The dancing provided a lesson, like no other; Justina did not enjoy it or take pleasure in her partners, nor did she see the event of a ball as an amusement. As she understood what it stood for, her first appearance in Society, even if this was not London and the Quality were not here, made her the victim of all its members, all waiting with baited breath for her to commit some error and shock them, to transgress their myriad absurd conventions and become no longer frequentable, and even forfeit her place, as well as her respectability, which was most enjoyable entertainment for those not caught in the traps that were so easy for a newcomer to trip over. This would not just afflict her but also land her family into disgrace, whereabouts her father was most sensitive, but on the other hand, if she did not suffer, she cared not if they did, and thus, when she espied her father watching with a look of anger and frustration as his daughter danced mechanically without being able to muster up the slightest smile, and her mother fretted that her relations should wonder why little Justina was not having fun, which all girls attending a ball did, let alone one given for them, she found herself resolved to persist in her gravity, even if, later she would pay for it and hear one parent address her with indecent language while the other one either wailed at her for not sacrificing her pride, or just wailed anyway. The way she saw it, she had to endure this event, go to London and become inured to this kind of life under the aegis of Aunt Lizzie, and find some affluent dolt spouse. Beyond that it was not yet time to think – partly because, during a dance, she turned close to some elderly ladies seated at the edge of the room, and overheard their comments.

“Poor, silly, little dopey (beggar’s trull),” gloated one, “does she think that by playing the cross-patch she shall win the sympathy of her guests, or by being cool as cucumber she shall seem interesting to the young men despite being a Cambridge fortune (woman of no substance)?”

“All she is going to achieve is earn herself the reputation of being dull, for despite her fine clothes, she cuts a poor figure,” said the other.

In fact, Justina would like to slap them both, but first, one did not behave thus at a ball and second, one did not behave thus if one were seventeen to one who was seventy, however much the latter deserved it. The dance forced her to turn from them but she was annoyed and hurt, almost to the point of tears, so that as soon as the interlude ended, she curtly took leave of her surprised partner and hurried off to seek Julius, to ask if he knew who those two frights were, and she indicated her detractresses. Not only could he oblige, but he also informed her that one was mother to one of the fellows he had seen put his name in her *carnet* and when she consulted the frippery little thing dangling at her wrist, there it duly was: he belonged to the party which was come with Irvin as friends and relatives: it was Raymond Annesley. As for the other female, she was a paternal aunt of his. Sir Raymond's name was due after the next interval, and so Justina had that period in which to put into action a scheme that mushroomed into her head, as if a shower of something had brought forth ideas like a fairy ring, but she did not think about consequences or care about them. For the moment she bit back her tears successfully and went on with the supposed festivities, going from one partner to the other as if she were on runners and wound up like a clock. Then, after a seemingly eternal period of time and effort, she was free, and so was everyone else, to sit about or eat or drink, which was what the Duke of Hearne had begun to do, much to his wife's dismay, so she fussed about him which make him worse. Yet Justina was not troubled about her father at this moment and set off to seek Sir Raymond, hoping that he was not safely ensconced by members of the 'Irvin set' which included some extremely modish womenfolk who raised lorgnettes at her whenever they set eyes on her, in an attempt to erode her confidence no doubt, but she found them impolite and ignored them, not even bothering to make a little bow of welcome, or even learn who they were. During this her quest one of them managed to put her hoops, which fashion decreed to be growing, in her way, and she had to manoeuvre around them, for which the older belle did not even apologise, which put Justina in a bad mood and lower spirits – but not so low as to deter her from going up to Annesley when she at last sighted him, and waylaying him while he was on his way doubtless to some crony.

It actually dealt him a surprise to see her appear on his flank, assuredly making her way towards him, her *carnet* held out as if proffered to him to take.

"Sir Raymond," she began, "are those two gunpowders (old women), wi' their fundamentals (backsides) glued to the settle, relatives of yours?"

Sir Raymond actually looked quite affronted, for she had just referred with total lack of deference to his very own mother.

"Well," she resumed before he could swallow spleen enough to speak to this insolent girl, "between them, they called me a dopey, a Cambridge fortune and a poor figure, so, I believe that it would not be politick for you to dance with me tonight, or any other night, and with your knowledge, I will erase your name from my *carnet*," she concluded.

The Baronet was momentarily struck dumb.

"We all of us know that the best part of going to another's assembly is to eat his food, drink his wine, and speak ill of him as much as that which one has swallowed, thô one was under no obligation to swallow it," she remarked. "I am out now, but that behaviour in among the Quality is so habitual that everyone knows of it for everyone does it at all levels of the social order. However, that was a trifle beyond decency, even if we are to give age its due," she insisted, scratching out his name from where it was written with her pencil. "There,

does that not look adequate to you?"

Sir Raymond turned very red for he was most offended, and he could not very well defend his mother for calling a young virgin a 'beggar's trull', but before he could speak, if only to defend his honour and claim the privilege of scolding her for rejecting a bona fide offer to dance, a familiar and low drawl sounded nigh.

"Raymond, whose dog is dead, and why does the lady look like God's revenge against murder?" included the Duke of Irvin.

"The lady is a quarrel picking hedge bird, about to kick up a pucker about old womanish nonsense, as if it mattered," defended Sir Raymond suavely and added, managing to sound offended, "she has even scratched out my name from her *carnet*," he snapped, before rounding on her. "Do you always use a fellow with unimaginable insolence on the very day you are brought out?"

"That is Irish logic, for I cannot do a thing *always* during an event that only happens *once*," she retorted. "In turn, is it always your policy to contrive utterances passing severe upon womenfolk and denounce them unfairly to unconcerned third parties?"

"Parry that, Annesley," invited Irvin.

"A fine friend you are, you traitor," riposted Sir Raymond.

"On the other hand, perhaps you are a deeply concerned third party, Duke, for were it not for you and your insistence on this hop, for which my father will have to waste our Midsummer and Michaelmas rents, none of these nightmares would be happening," she condemned.

"A dell who does not enjoy a ball and calls it a nightmare? Of what kind of animal are we speaking, for I have never met such a creature," scoffed Annesley.

"That would shew how futile and puerile is all your social experience even tho' you are probably twice my age, and how much is the education that life among the Quality, with all its airs and graces, really worth," she declared, on a note of conclusion. "You only inscribed your name in my *carnet* because your friend the Duke constrained you too. Shew some gratitude at my liberating you from it."

"You are absolutely no good at human company," decried Annesley. "What sort of company do you keep?"

"Kill my cat and I'll kill your dog?" she wondered. "I call into question actual declarations of his dried up female relations and he hauls in my entire family for a wryneck day (hanging day)," she snorted. "Apart from my brothers and sisters, I keep company with horses and I have learned from them that they know a hawk from a handsaw when the wind is southerly," whereupon Sir Raymond laughed.

"Does she always use such cathedral bucolic expressions?" he jeered.

"All bucolic expressions are cathedral," she corrected, "and 'she' is her ladyship the Lady Justina Woodville, so never an M by your girdle (have you no manners?), Sir Baronetto? For all that, you townsfolk have a strange way of making fun of us rustics, for considering the company you keep, it is not worth accounting, so let not the oven call the kiln 'burnt house'."

"Annesley, there is a thing I would get to the bottom of, and it does not need the garnish of your society this time," the Duke of Irvin pronounced.

"I don't suppose there is any chance of an apology in this, is there? Of course, the ladies concerned were solicitous of my career, for they adjudged my demeanour not to be

conducive to the hooking of a husband, and whether they were right is not for me to say, but that their talk was painful and impolite, so was,” asserted Justina, before Annesley could depart, and in breach of the laws which her father had imposed on her about courtesy to the guests, at all costs, according to his understanding, for he was ready to humiliate mere offspring before third parties, even if those offspring themselves tended to put a different interpretation on his commands.

The Duke turned to his friend as if he were about to scold or bully that other into putting the matter right, perhaps even as far as to making his female relatives say some meaningless politeness in order to palliate their remarks, but before he could speak, she did.

“I do not snuff pepper easily, sirs, but your friend’s very hesitation and the fact that your grace has to confront him in that manner means that I am as likely to get even an insincere apology out of him or his womenfolk as I am likely to get farts out of a dead man. So, let him defend them with tooth and claw: I do not even want an apology now. In fact I wish that this whole scene would go away forever and that too, from my memory.”

“You heard, Ray – o’ Sunshine,” stated the Duke.

“When are you to wed Lady Caroline?” asked Annesley, a trifle offended.

“As soon as I have the family finances sorted out and put into a channel of my chusing,” the Duke said. “The quicker I exert control of affairs the better it will be for the bride and her siblings. Was there aught else?”

Justina now saw that even as a friend, her future brother-in-law could be ruthless, for his baronet crony looked vexed, lowered his head, made a small bow to the lady, and went.

The Duke of Irvin put out his elbow for Justina to take, and she obliged him as gingerly as she had done her father, signifying that obliging him was something she did not wish to do, but was obliged to by circumstances. Not in the least part affronted, he conveyed her to some chairs and bid her be seated, before placing himself beside her, spreading his coat-skirts with a flourish in order not to crease them as he sat, for he was not some fop who needed three seats, one for his paltry, undersized posterior, and one on either side of it for the yardage of his attire. Thus installed, he turned to her.

“All the world is not oatmeal, it seems,” he remarked.

“Nor it is and so many ugly things have happened in the family that I forget how it all began, this notion to have me brought out before I went to London, which is an expense eventually to be borne by my family by reason of your grace’s manipulations of my father’s finances, which is just as well, because it would be totally pernicious to owe the cost even of that to you. Now I regard it as money ill-spent, wasted even, for it could have gone towards repairs of the castle or of the copyholders’ houses, or even set aside with a view to future enclosures and the purchase of good livestock to go on them. I do not spend my days with my face hidden under a bale of straw; I know a word more than the pastor spoke on Sunday, with respect to how folk farm here: I don’t half hear enough their bragging to my father after church, as if to rub salt into all our wounds, for we live on rents and they live on the wealth of their soil. Your grace insisted that this ball was necessary and took charge of all elements of it down to the last gold band on my fichu, and even the great silver platters are on loan from your collection of plate. Did anyone ever tell you what I have been saying, or are truths that cut hard excluded from reportage and pillows sewn under your elbows if you chance to ask about them? What did they say to you when you asked what the dell herself thinks of all this?

Did you even ask? I say this because I have, like the ingrate that you doubtless think me, ceased not to express myself on the subject. I did not want a ball, and so many unpleasant things happened because one was being prepared: the trouble and irony is that if my father were left to prepare it he would have made a disorganised mess of it all and wasted far too much money, spent all his Michaelmas rent at Midsummer, as the saying goes. He would even have chusen our clothes and screamed bandog and Bedlam had we selected otherwise. Did the seamstresses tell you what happened when they came to deliver the gowns and perform a last fitting?"

The Duke of Irvin bowed his head, and that was eloquent enough, but he spoke, too.

"Never say you have all of that sounding in your head now?" he asked. "Is that why you were so infelicitous, for want of a better term, for unhappy sounds at once dramatic and trite, when your father led you in, and why you looked as if you were going to your own crucifixion, the only thing wanting being a cross on your shoulder, as he led you out to dance to present you to Society? Did you have all his words turning in his head?"

"Did the seamstresses repeat them to your Grace?"

"No, but I sensed that when they went to Great Hearne Castle, there was palaver (too much or unnecessary talk) on the part of my eminent and venerable father-in-law," he declared, "about which they truly had to wash the milk off their livers (cease being a coward) to reveal. Of course they did not quote him, but they said that he used his daughter indecently with Bear Garden language, and one girl even sobbed, because when her affianced spouse divided the house with her (threw her out), he called her by similar names, so I guessed all."

"It is possible that it would not have happened were there no ball," she dared. "I live my life out of doors or reading in my room, or convening with my siblings to sing songs and exchange tales in Carrie's parlour. I see my parents at church once a sev'nnight and by chance upon the stairs. The Duke and Duchess lead their lives apart from us: only recently has Devenish been forced to eat at their table and would rather return to us if he can. Knows an ace of two more than the devil, does Devenish. Had my father handed the property over to him on his coming-of-age, instead of treating him like Mumchance who was hanged for saying nothing, which is what he is now become because none of his elders listen to his advice, we would perhaps not been in clover, but we would have had two shirts and a rag. A fortune may be lost in an hour but can take a lifetime honestly to recoup, unless her Mop-Eyed Ladyship (Dame Fortune) suddenly lends a hand. My parents have long been strangers to me, except for my mother's coming to us to wail to us to 'sacrifice' –," when she spoke the last word she pronounced it like the Duchess did with all the plaintive inflexions, "– whatever it was that happened then to be in the way of some windmills in my father's head."

"So, in believing that all girls becoming ladies love a ball, I brought you out of the parlour into the kitchen (out of the frying pan into the fire)?" he understood.

"I apprehend that by sheer dint of growing up, one does that," she said, "you made it worse – and painful with it."

"Sometimes when a person means to do well by another, they are like the devil who owes a cake and repays with a loaf," he granted.

"And I sound so ungrateful," she acknowledged. "All girls love a ball. That is a trifle hackneyed as a concept, and unworthy of someone of your intelligence, is it not?"

"How know you that I am intelligent?" he challenged.

“Well, it is politer than saying that, in fact, you are a hulverhead and that I have to be courteous to you in any wise,” she rejoined, dryly. “At any rate to decide that every girl will enjoy a ball is an assumption based on –,”

“The experience that most girls love to dress up and come into Society as little ladies and look for a lord to espouse, some of these dells being a little older than Lady Selina and with as many mannerisms as mamma the Countess, and no limit to their excitement that they are about to wed a Duke if they can have one,” he replied. “I grant, there are exceptions, but they are about as few as an honest man who is a good bowler. The fact is, no matter how it results, the marriage à la mode of Hogarth’s prints is not a feature which dominates our world, even if it pervades it to some degree. Young girls cannot wait to come out. They cannot wait to wed, and they do not think of consequences. Granted, they do not have fathers who would call them names, but those same fathers would be respectably rid of them quicker than a cat on a hot back-stone.”

“You do not much respect or like womankind, do you?” she mused sourly.

“What makes you say that?” he almost laughed.

“Firstly, this verisame response that your grace gave, which shews that you think three blue beans of my remark, and secondly, the fact that you are reputed to be a rake, for you will not have a wife, and as Beau Nash in Bath is reputed to say, ‘why should I keep a cow (also a woman) when I can buy milk?’ Now you take one because you have a bloodline to ensure, and are constrained to take an unwanted step by your duty, but in the meanwhile, you cling to the notion that women like frivolous entertainments and will wed wherever there is title and money,” she accused.

“One of the reasons I abstained from marriage at the first jump, is that my father, who was always ramming duty down my gullet, would have me wed only where *his* inclinations lay,” he revealed. “Now I wed where I can, but even that is better than having one’s choice made for one, especially if it is the choice of a fobus (old fool, idiot). You see, I am not a respectfully loving son.”

“Men who are not loving sons do not like females beyond the use they can make of them and have no intention of ascribing to them the capability to chuse beyond the superficial and the foolish,” she riposted. “Perhaps I have been spending too long with horses.”

“Perhaps you have,” he agreed, regarding her with a disconcertingly penetrating gaze.

This she did not like and so thought to be rid of him, for he was too fine a figure of a man to talk to for long, and certainly not to look into the face of while he was being spoken to. The black velvet, with the fine black and gold embroideries and that unpowdered raven hair, which he had, like her, not glued about with pomatum, because the short locks in front that were curled back over the hairline in a foretop were in a pleasant state of disarray, so that they seemed just brushed back and there was a forelock hanging over that pale forehead, upon which was a slight smear of greyish-white face powder. His eyes still glittered like diamonds but when she stole a look into them, the pupils were widely dilated, so that the grey irises shrank and it seemed that he had black ones, very stark in his lean face. Carrie was going to have a handsome husband, even if his appearance was a trifle discommoding, but what else came with male beauty apart from the vanity that accompanied an awareness of it, she would find out when it was too late, as women always did, and so much for the sanctity of marriage, where-to Justina knew that she needed to aspire to relieve financial burthens and give her a

new life elsewhere for what it was worth. However, it was time for Irvin to go: one did not assess his appearance, think of marriage and wonder what happened next, all in the same minute while sitting beside him.

“Have you no partner who awaits your grace?” she asked.

“This dance I set aside to sit out with your sister, my intended, but she seems to have been taken prisoner by Lavinia, and so I shall leave them to their womanly coze,” he said, so she was truly stuck – with him, and looked across the room to seek Caroline.

“I was presented to the Countess of Northingham, your grace’s elder sister, but –,”

“No-one said that her name was Lavinia,” he interrupted. “You assume correctly.”

“Lavinia and Louisa,” she recited. “Both with the same consonant.”

“And forget not Lionel in the middle,” he invited, his eyes twinkling merrily.

“That is hardly possible,” she groaned, whereupon he actually laughed. “Together, did they plot over your head?”

“A little that way, but there is a great difference in years between them in age. They were not interested in the same things together because of it, and so the plots were innocuous, even if sparkish Louisa was at the bottom of most of them, for Lavinia was very much a girl and then a lady, whereas Lou would make mischief, even if she was not a hoyden. She was and still is wilful; Lavinia is easy-going to the level of apathy. You’ll find out when you know them better.”

“I know enough already,” stated Justina tartly. “Those dances that you arranged for me at the beginning, and one with Sir Adrian? I know what was the consequence of that, and I’ll wager that Lady Lou, as your grace called her, thought his reportage would make a fly laugh, and duly told her brother.”

“On the subject of what who calls whom, what will you call your brother-in-law when he has tied the knot with his tongue that one cannot untie with one’s teeth?” he asked.

“The same as I do now,” she replied. “It is not as if anything is going to change, except my father’s finances, and those you will steer from afar, while, as your grace will not reside in our neighbourhood, I cannot expect to see much of you.”

“If your aunt Lizzie is not successful in the marriage mart, for she did not make a great hand of it for either of your older sisters, you will come to stay with the Duchess of Irvin, and place reliance on her abilities to gain you a spouse.”

“After Honoria,” specified Justina, “and my staying with Caroline will not necessarily mean that I shall cross your grace’s path.”

“My, my,” he sighed, with a hiss of figurative pain, “this ball hit you hard, so you strike back harder. I intend to live with my wife, Lady Justina, and I do not think she is of the sort whom one quickly finds unsupportable.”

“I am relieved, for her,” intoned Justina with excessive acidity. “There will thus be no secrets between the pair of you. How truly royal for her. I hope your friends’ mothers will all be easier on her than they have on me.”

As she spoke, she rose, but he seized her wrist.

“Stay here and be seated, Lady Justina,” he counselled, taking the liberty of peering into her *carnet de bal*. “I believe that your next partner is not far and has seen you, so if you now go wandering off after a chat with Irvin, you will look rude, and put your pipes out (spoil your chances) with the others who see you. ’Tis I who must go.”

So saying, he heaved himself to his feet, and it was not a disagreeable sight to view a tall man built on a big frame move or exert himself.

“Do you realise one thing?” he asked, in no hurry to depart. “My name is not in your *carnet de bal*?”

“I am aware of it, sir,” she declared blankly and blandly, giving him the impression that she could not have cared less.

“You would rather not have had a ball,” he reminded. “In that case, I will spare you the indignity of dancing with the man who arranged it.”

“Whatever one says or thinks, your grace will please yourself, so I am not going to number the waves (attempt the impossible) about it. Sir, I am nowhere and nothing, as far as I matter to you,” she replied.

Notwithstanding, as he departed, he turned and cast her a last look, before walking away on his graceful but slightly lolling step, his timing such as caused him to vanish from view as the dance ended and her next partner not only found himself free to seek her, but found her almost hard by. Of course he did not ask her what she had Irvin had been talking about; no-one asked that where Irvin was concerned, even the cousin of his older sister’s husband, who led her to a place in the next set. It so happened that Sir Raymond Annesley then joined the set with his partner, but seeing that he would have to cross paths and occasionally step about Justina, he suggested to his lady of the moment that they should move elsewhere. Justina had thus been snubbed, but instead, she heaved a sigh of relief.

“That was as close as God’s curse to a whatever (to ‘a whore’s arse’),” she commented. “For one dreadful moment I thought that he was going to stand near us. He dislikes me much, and so do his womenfolk.”

To that there was no reply but an acknowledgment, and so Justina had at least saved face. Better than that, she was becoming self-possessed and determined, so she added a comment of her own.

“He who abandons the field loses it,” she recited, as if she was acquainted with the annals of war.

Not that the ball improved as her confidence rose, or because she confessed to Irvin that he had made a grievous error in imposing it on her, because of an assumption that all older girls liked a ball. As soon as she was next able, she went to Carrie, for her mother was going to be useless in this respect, and shewing the other her own *carnet*, asked if after the last dance, the guests would all depart, for she was tired of this hop already, and the only dances she had enjoyed had been with the sons of neighbours, who were like brothers of the Order of the Horse, even if such did not yet exist officially but there was one in fact in every area of English countryside. Carrie ruefully replied that theoretically that would be so, but the process of departure would be long, for she was going to have to stand with their parents and see everyone off, and thank them for coming.

“So by the time it is over it will be morning and I will have to off my gaudie gown for a cover-slut (pinafore) to go and shovel horse dung?”

“Tina, please do not talk like that,” entreated her sister.

“Why not? ’Tis one of the words that father used – slut,” replied Justina thoughtfully.

“Don’t be a stick-in-the-mud about what should be left in the past,” urged Caroline.

“One of these days I will do something slutty and then father can say he is right as

usual,” mused Justina. “So I have to stand between them and be affable. I am going to hold this against Irvin until my dying day.”

“The consolation is that finally we will pay him back,” quoth Carrie.

“That is no consolation: I would rather we saved the money to spend on the estate,” protested Justina, as Devenish came up, having heard both of them.

“She’s right,” he rued. “She hasn’t even enjoyed the evening an instant. Thus ’tis money ill spent, indeed, wasted. Irvin will recoup his part in two instalments and the gowns are his gifts, but otherwise, she talks grammar when it comes to the economics of this estate.”

“Devenish, now is not the time to discuss the economics of this estate,” chided Lady Caroline gently.

“Why not? The subject is more scintillating than this ball,” said Justina.

Devenish and Caroline both looked up and Lady Northingham, who was pretty and just a little plump in an agreeable way, went by, casting them all an anxious glance. Justina turned and saw her, because her own siblings grew so uncomfortable, but she was beyond earshot by then so she addressed them.

“Who’s the bundle-tail (**short fat or squat woman**)?” she inquired. “I’ve seen so many new faces, I don’t remember them all, especially the women, for I dance with them not.”

“That was Irvin’s older sister,” hissed Caroline.

“I suspect she overheard Justina’s comment about the ball,” sighed Lord Devenish.

“No matter; she’ll go buzz to her brother, who already knows. Now I must quit you both, and put myself in the path of my next predator,” said Justina with false gaiety.

On that jarring note, she swept off, leaving her brother and sister watching her with a mixture of anxiety and discomfiture. As for Justina, the evening did not improve and nor did her attitude to it, but she was far more resigned now that they were well past the half of it, and as she was not abiding by all the instructions her father had issued to her about how to treat the guests, for she judged them herself rather than according to the criteria of her elders, she was more at ease within herself. She was also pleased that the Countess of Northingham had overheard her talk pejoratively of the ball, even if the said Countess was not really that short in stature, except when she stood by her brother, who was going to receive a second dose of her spleen, and hopefully learn not patronisingly to interfere in the affairs of women just because he knew from experience that the majority of empty-headed girls did and thought as they were told to, and, for all she could tell, they were not really empty-headed at all but just acting to please their exigent elders who were always demanding gratitude for one reason or another. She made a good dancing partner for she never turned a false step, but attempts at chatting to her, unless one was from the environs and she knew the person, fell flat, even with relatives whom she scarcely knew, and the Duke of Irvin’s ‘set’ were marked out for frosty silences, even if she was aware that when she went to London, and met many more people of Quality, who promised to be just as, if not more obnoxious, she could not behave coldly with the gentlemen who singled her out for their company. She also became hungry and thirsty, but she did not touch the food, reserved as it was for outsiders, on her father’s orders, and made by Irvin’s cooks; thus she took no drink on an empty stomach, lest it made her tipsy and led her to disgrace and rightly landed her in a scrape with all her family. Thus she passed the third and last interval with her Aunt Lizzie, who knew more about the company which Irvin had brought from London, and told her of their connexions in Town whom she was sure to

meet, so as to prepare her for the forthcoming event. The Aunt was extremely pleased that her niece had danced with all-comers, but she had heard overtones about a disagreement with Annesley, about which Justina did not enlighten her despite a plethora of hints, and it took a direct question to have from her a summarised account of the matter.

“Justina Woodville, you are a pain in my bumkin (bum) already,” her aunt sighed. “Never do anything even remotely akin to such a prank in Town.”

Justina may have shifted in her seat, and pushed her aunt for more room upon the settle they shared, over which the matron was sprawled, but she said nothing and pulled a face that, in all likelihood, signified agreement. The best part of the interlude was that thô her aunt nagged at her to circulate she did nothing to facilitate it, but advised her well: if there was a conversation group nigh, one approached it and attached oneself to its fringes to hear if the subject appealed to one and if it did not, one moved on. In matters of politics, it was wise for young ladies to express no opinion; indeed, in most cases, it was wiser for them to be listeners rather than participants, for only females from established politicking circles did that, because their husbands were ministers or had government posts, and they usually were older than seventeen. Just before the interval in the ball came to an end, Justina thought to try her hand at this game, and ended up listening to a lively discussion about horseflesh, which was the only time her mask of chilly dullness fell and a genuine smile beset her countenance, even if she followed Aunt Lizzie’s advice and said nothing. The absurd feature of her situation was that she was the only female in the group, which the gentlemen noticed but as many of them were from hereabouts and included Squire Pye, no-one said anything, especially as she did not intrude. The other factor was that, during this time thus passed with a hint of pleasure, she came under the surveillance of the Duke of Irvin, who watched her with pensive gravity. Then it was time to dance, and these were the final exertions. As she was growing tired, it seemed like they were endless, but she bore them all the same, thinking that this was surely going down in her memory as the worst ball in her life, so what she was going to experience in Town would probably be easier to endure. Then, finally, the last dance was under way, and everyone stood up for that, or endeavoured to, even if they had no partner and an extempore one had to be found. The floor became quite crowded and the crowd exuberant and noisy. After that the ball was at an end, and there was applause, for the event itself, for the musicians and for the belle, now finally able officially to appear in Society and not be smuggled in by an aunt with resources. The belle herself was surrounded by her family and as all was over, she smiled with relief. The smile made her look lovelier than ever.

The process of departure was begun. Those who had vehicles to take them somewhere were called by name as each equipage, ordered something like a quarter of an hour ago to harness up and prepare to advance to the house in a line, reached the front of the castle. The family of the Duke of Hearne stood grouped about him and his wife, who had Justina, whether she liked it or not, between them. Precedence was dictated by whose vehicle had reached the castle first, and they took leave in the great mediaeval hall before they stepped out, their way lit by servants holding lanthorns. The language used was very similar, about the ball, about hospitality, about the young lady now ready for wedding bells, and the replies were alike and almost like, as each side thanked and praised the other. Justina, otherwise a cipher, was obliged to make a statement of thanks to whatever guests for attending the ‘ball’, and both her parents noticed she did not say ‘my coming-out ball,’ as they had told her to.

However, when Sir Raymond Annesley and his family appeared, she said nothing at all, and did not make any sort of obeisance to any of them, even a nod of the head, while her parents and siblings recited all the usual litanies, Justina was still and silent, to their grievous dismay, and the disconcertment of these particular guests, who did not realise that a beginner could be so rancorous. Away they went, to make room for the Duke of Irvin, who had beheld it all, and he bowed as low over Justina's hand as he did over Caroline's, for this time, it was Justina's evening of triumph, as he called it. Only he saw her countenance harden but he did and said nothing about it; his family followed, beginning with Lady Northingham and her spouse, followed by Lady Louisa Mortlake and Sir Adrian: everyone received the recitation that had been fed to Justina to regurgitate, except Mortlake himself, but if she did not keep absolutely silent as she had with the Annesley family, she just said 'good night' to him and that was all, surprising her parents, her brothers and sisters, and his wife. As for the rest of the company, there was nothing particular about them, and the ritual ended correctly and peacefully. The guests who were staying in the castle were the last, and among them, Lizzie Ashlington embraced her niece.

SEVEN

Notwithstanding the fact that Justina had been up for most of the night, that she had been tired out in body and mind by preparation, endurance, exertion, patience and a good measure of annoyance, she was up early, taking her breakfast with her, wrapped in a napkin, as she walked to the stables. This time she turned the horses out one by one, and sent the grooms out to clear the paddocks of manure, for it pleased her to groom the animals and let others do the dirty and heavy work. Half-an-hour later her brother Julius arrived, owning that he was late and as he had not eaten, he was later still, for she sent him off to breakfast on whatever the cook could give him, and then he returned to work, gloating that there was still food left over from the tables last night. He also reported that the Duke of Irvin's cooks were packing up and departing, about which she made no comment, even if she owned eventually that she had brought cold beef, maslin, a tasty but rough bread of wheat and rye, jam and fruit to eat, and nothing from the banqueting tables, for she had been expressly forbidden to partake of it, all being for the guests. Julius found this annoying and said so.

"That was last night: these are left-overs. Don't be childish, Justina!" he protested.

"Your head to a turnip that the guests in the castle will be served with all that on pewter platters for breakfast," she rejoined aerily. "So as far as I am concerned, it is all still for the guests. I starved yestereven for the sake of the damned guests, who are costing us a whack out of two terms' worth of rents. If I were to have my own household and my own way, I would never let a guest in again. That is why folk like to stand on their own bottoms (be independent, financially and in all respects)."

When she was in that sort of truculent state, he knew not to answer and make an issue of it; besides he saw that she had changed the order of things so he just complied with them, and if anything, they passed a quiet morn, even if it was not peaceful, for Justina was fractious and talked only to the horses in a kind tone, while her brother, for being fatigued and slow, earned a scolding from her, which he largely deserved, for if she could drive herself and slave away, then so could he. Late during the morntide, some of the guests came forth from the castle to the paddock fences to see their horses, groomed and gleaming, feeding off clean pastures which had been seen to already, while the offspring of their ducal host and some old grooms slaved away to prepare the stables and clean the tackle, for some of these visitors would leave for their homes or the capital on the morrow. While there were visitors in the vicinity, Justina remained confined to the stables, but at last they went, and she departed with her brother to go indoors in order to clean up for dinner and eat it – when they learned that indeed the guests had breakfasted off the leftovers of last night's feast, as had the whole family, and the Duchess had given the rest for the servants' hall, to add to their mutton dinners. Justina laughed heartily at Julius at learning this much, and told the others what she had said about all the food, adding that she had not eaten a morsel of her own coming-out feast. At this both Caroline and Honoria were both most embarrassed, and Julius, his face red, had nothing to say for himself. She also made an observation.

"Honoria did not have a coming-out ball, and nor did Carrie. I only had one because Irvin has begun to interfere with our finances and maybe to the common good, but May bees don't fly all year long," she said. "So, amid pomp and malice, I was officially brought out yestereven. Exactly what has it changed in our lives? Today, I am still mucking out stables and washing horses' bums. It was just a waste of time and money, in the end, money that this

estate could use.”

“All entertainments, if lavish, are a waste of money, and that is why they are the province only of those who are very flush,” quoth Honoria. “When I was in London at the invitation of Aunt Lizzie, we attended crushes and balls that were far more lavish than this one here last night, and I talk of a young lady’s coming-out, not something held for the monarch or the Prince Titi¹.”

“There is more of this awaiting you, Justina,” assured Caroline. “This morning Aunt Lizzie and our parents were sorting out the details.”

“What details?” demanded Justina. “When I can be spared from dung-scraping?”

“Whom will I have to help me?” cried Julius.

“What is this flummery?” snapped Justina. “Was I so naughty last night that Aunt Lizzie has withdrawn her invitation?”

“Aunt Lizzie’s original intention was that you should leave for Romeville when she does, that is to say, from here,” said Honoria. “A few days’ rest in the country, and a visit to her sister, while you pack your tiny trunk with your tinier trinkets, and send it off with the factor’s cart or the deuseville stamper; that was her intention.”

“And she changed her mind; I see,” grunted Justina. “She had no luck wedding off her elder nieces so she is not going to bother herself about me.”

“No, that is not so,” assured Caroline.

“What has she told mother?” asked Justina.

“Mother knows nothing; it is father,” quoth Honoria. “He needs to make up his mind, he says, evidently.”

“He’s of so many minds he’ll never be mad,” snorted Justina. “Day-day (bye-bye: said by small children) to London, then.”

“Justina, don’t be hasty: he is merely tergiversating: he says you are too young for to be let loose among the blades and beaux,” averred Honoria.

“Too young? How old are the ladies when they first wed their spouses? Fifteen, fourteen, even,” objected Justina.

“’Tis just that when Carrie went, she was nineteen, and I was all of eighteen,” quoth Honoria, “which is not much different to seventeen, I grant, but father will make a great harvest of little corn.”

“If he does not want me to go, why does he not come out and say so?” scoffed Justina.

“He cannot raise objections to Aunt Lizzie,” remarked Julius. “She can box the compass (answer all questions) formidably and besides, she is one of the only people who can put her tongue in his purse (silence someone). He cannot argue the point with her and is delaying until she is gone so that he may decide. He also has this objection to his daughters living on her charity, one by one, and being equipped with wardrobes by her which he cannot reimburse. He is being proud, Justina.”

“On whose mucky charity has he been subsisting of late?” growled Justina.

“That is the point: as provision is being made for restitution of funds over a period of time, he imagines that he has already paid your coming-out ball and alleges that that is enough to set you up for finding a spousy,” piped up Selina.

“I cannot wed Michael Orre; he is a second son and either has to go get shipwrecked or earn prize money or wed an heiress,” carped Justina. “This whole business was a

thorough-going waste of everything, and I did not even enjoy it.”

“That is another thing,” included Selina. “Papa is saying ‘I paid for her to have a coming-out ball and she didn’t even like it, the bitch’.”

“The bitch is better off among the hay and the straw. I have to make the beds for the horses after dinner, so I hope that this is the last I ever hear of Lizzie Ashlington, Romeville or my august father,” said Justina indignantly. “I have also lost my appetite, so I think I will be rude and leave the table. Anon, until supper-time.”

With that, she rose and promptly went to her rooms to change back into Julius’s old clothes, after which she adjourned promptly to the stables. It was a trifle upwards of an hour later that Julius arrived, and joined her at work, when this time, he did not spare her ears.

“We talked of the same old subject,” he related. “Our father’s objection is, ostensibly, that Carrie and Honoria were older than you when they went to the den of devilry that is London, and better able to look after themselves than are you, for you are young in your soul, and have passed your time with animals, not with people, for when neighbours call, you are here, and not in the house, learning the ways of the world. Even at your age, they were more mature, he alleged. You’re too much of a hoyden, all you know are horses, you know nothing of men who will lead you a merry dance and make a – er – bleeding cully (easy victim) out of you,” he went on, beads of sweat appearing on his brow.

“That was a Cant phrase. Father does not use Cant,” she intoned. “If I am infantile, why am I brought out at such great expense? To shew off to the neighbours? God knows that he readily casts aspersions on all our aspirations, and that Devenish is so good at estate business that it makes his nose swell (make one jealous), and that he is selling Carrie to a rake whom she would rather not have even if he is handsome – and she is right, for Irvin is wrong-headed, but I am left with the impression that I have a special place in his heart. He has never used language like he did to me when angry with Carrie or Honoria or our mother, he spoilt the opening of the ball yestereven, and now, this. If I run away to sea, will that do? Then, if you like, I need never come home again, and he may curse me every day and I’ll not know of it. Aye, I am a hoyden, but will it not protect me, rather than prove my immaturity?”

“We discussed his attitude to all of us in general,” said Julius. “He is a jealous man, and not just in that silly way over mother; he is jealous of us, he is jealous of youth.”

“Females have that trait,” countered Justina.

“Well, so does that man,” shrugged Julius.

“He can’t be jealous of me,” she snorted. “I am a girl and he is a man. I have no rights, and he has them all.”

“Justina, you were born the boy he wished Devenish and I were going to be, but you were just a frippery girl, so he at once envies you and is disappointed in you, so he stands in your way, calls you names, is not in the least part interested in what you do, and so on.”

“What has that to do with my going to Town or not?”

“He is also jealous of Aunt Lizzie, who is rich, and popular in town after a manner that he could never be, even if he were Sir Timothy (one who pays for all) and perpetually greasing fat sows in the arse (bribe a rich man).”

“Lizzie is sparkling and witty, not sententious, she does not shew off, and she has never tried to buy affection and prestige. So he is jealous of Lizzie. Why must I lose?”

“Someone has to,” he replied. “There was also last night –,”

“Ah, now we come to the crux of it; what did I wrong –,”

“It was not what you did wrong but what you did right,” he stated.

“Was that not the whole idea of a coming-out ball, to do things rightly and be noticed and commended for it?” she postulated. “What sort of man is it who takes exception to his daughter gaining some approval at her coming-out ball?”

“He was not the cynosure.”

“Don’t be absurd: how can a father be the cynosure at the coming-out of his own daughter?”

“For being her father. Those who had good to say of you should have come to praise him as your parent, and sire.”

“He did not bring me up; what credit can he take? All I can recall is being faintly ridiculous. Annesley’s gunpowders thought so, and when he and they departed, I sent them all to the Devil. I was probably even more ridiculous for it.”

“You were not ridiculous in anything that you did. The only thing that really attracted attention was a longish talk you had with Irvin.”

“When, instead of thanking him for having made all this possible, I berated him for it, even if I did not revive the old subject, and I should have,” she scoffed.

“What old subject?” wondered Julius obliviously.

“I told him that, instead of wasting money on a ball for me, he should put it towards the anointing (bribe) necessary for to gain you a post in some far off embassy of ours busy doing nothing, for those are worth a Jew’s eye and may cost even more than just a commission,” she divulged. “It was when I warned him that father would touch him for mint for a commission for you, except that you did not want to kill anyone, and would rather go to Cathay, which we are now to call Chun Hua or China or what-call.”

“I’d love to go to Cathay!” whooped Julius. “In the steps of Marco Polo.”

“According to those who have been there and asked after him, if a lie could ha’ choked him, that one would ha’ done it. He affected to have been appointed to some post or other in the Imperial administration. Chun Hua records shew no trace of them, and the Chinamen are great keepers of records, right back to antient times that precede the arrival of the Angles and Saxons in Britannia. You make your own steps, lad: you don’t need some lying Italian to shew you the way. The trouble is, the monies I would have had him spend to buy you a post in the embassy there were wasted last night.”

“If they buy me a commission and ship me out to India, I am dead,” he lamented.

“Tilly-vally,” she dismissed. “Once you are out there, contact the Chun Hua envoy and see about buying a post in our embassy in their capital. As soon as you are certain of it, sell your commission to some ambitious fellow, but ask for the colour of his money first, and then pay the Chinaman, before you hire your two-humped camel.”

“I beg your pardon?” he recoiled.

“There is a Chun Hua Camel which has two humps, not like the Arabian dromedary,” she supplied. “That should ensure that you will not fall off. Don’t go it alone: wait for a trading caravan, and if possible, make an assignation with an Arabian caravan travelling the Silk Route, for they are heavily armed and no banditti dare attack them.”

“How I wish,” he sighed.

“That is how you make opportunities,” she assured him.

“And the father of our family says you are not old enough, while here you are converting an unwanted military commission to a post in the British mission in Peking,” he marvelled, “and even telling me how to travel there.”

“I once read about pilgrims going to the holy land. As Christians they habitually scorned to join Arabian caravans travelling thither, and would not mingle with infidel, for God would protect them. God did protect them, He sent the infidel to take them in their caravan train, which was long, strong, armed and accompanied by mercenary cavalry. No bandit would dare point his nose at such a *cortège*, but no, our good Christians refused the invitation time and time again to be attacked repeatedly by the robbers, against which they had no means of defence – and if you refuse one of God’s gifts, He is not going to let you waste a second chance, so if they were to await the next camel train, there would not be one for weeks. That stupidity, sadly, was one of the pretexts upon which the popes launched the first crusade, so don’t be proud, go with the caravans to Peking and learn the hours of the day in the language of the Chinaman.”

“Now we have settled me, let us get you to London,” decided her brother cheerfully.

Justina also decided to be cheerful for her brother’s sake, but it was but a façade which almost cracked, when during the afternoon, the Duke of Hearne sent a message to the stables for horses to be saddled up and fetched to the door of the castle for him and the remainder of his guests, so that they could go and tour his estates: rather bitterly, his daughter remarked that it had been so long ago that he had bothered to ride through his lands that his tenants would probably not recognise him. The servants involved heard and were embarrassed: they had not been dismissed while the mounts were prepared because Justina forbade it, requiring them to take the various steeds back with them, as there was neither enough time nor sufficient personnel from the stable offices so to do instead. That interruption dealt with, now they had to look forward to the interruption that would follow when the Duke returned, and it was hoped that he would not stay out too long, for that would mean Julius and Justina would both be late for supper, because they would have to clean up the horses, dress tackle and feed as well as bed down the later arrivals, whose fault it was not. That indeed was what happened: believing he paid his servants to be at his beck and call at all times of day or night, and so they were, he seemed to forget that he had his own children among them for want of funds to pay a full complement of servantry, or that those who had departed to seek promptly paid wages in other men’s service were the young and strong ones, while the old and slow ones remained, knowing that no-one else would give them employment.

Thus when finally Justina reached her rooms, the water carried for her to wash in was tepid, which did not matter, but that which did was that she found her mother therein, fidgeting about among her effects, and tidying her clothes as these hung up on pegs in her dressing closet. Justina was not an untidy person, and the Duchess was not really putting order among her daughter’s effects, she was merely readjusting them to suit some need in her own character, for moving a casket two inches along a table and then a book another inch to one side did not constitute tidying up: her grace just liked to leave her mark on things in this unseen and unimportant way, even if it made no difference. Sometimes she did it often, sometimes her family were spared the sight of it because they were not present, but never had she entered the apartments of any of her daughters so to do. The sight of her thus engaged herein made Justina rather angry, and as she had not been in the best of spirits hitherto, and it

had very little to do with the supposed rebelliousness ascribed to young folk at a certain time of their youth, so she responded to the encouragement this anger gave.

"I'll thank you to leave my things alone, please," she pronounced. "You are wasting time in merely fidgeting, for moving an article half an inch sideways will not bring order to this house or to this family. I also have to clean myself up for dinner, and I cannot with you jiffing about in my lodging."

"Don't speak thus to me; I am your mother!" cried the Duchess in a scolding tone.

"It will do no good to stand on one's pantables in this house," rejoined the less-than-dutiful daughter. "Just leave all those things alone."

"We must decide what you are going to take; we must look and see what you need," protested the Duchess.

"Have you no guests to return to, the half of them being your own relations whom you rarely see – but then, perhaps 'tis better like that; the members of a family are like as not, more in one another's way than anything," observed Justina. "Now I have no time to argue."

"Very well, since you are not being helpful, and since you disappear even before your father and I have had time in which to breakfast, we will have to perform this exercise after you have dined. You may have Carrie and Honoria present too, if you like, for they know what's what; me, it has been an age since I went to Town," sighed the Duchess.

"Pray, of what are you speaking?" demanded Justina. "Since when was I due to go to Romeville?" she added sarcastically.

"Your father changed his mind," announced the Duchess, and flounced out.

"He'll change it again!" called Justina after her, for she had left the doors open.

The Duchess returned, and stood on the threshold.

"He cannot: Lizzie is staying on until you are ready to join her when she returns to Town, and she has moved to the Inn in the village, for this morning she and he had a tremendous argument before all the others, who are due to leave tomorrow while she is not, and your father commented upon it, saying that he could not put her up forever and he was not sure what use your going to Town would be in anywise. So she moved out, bag and baggage, but he is truly at the housetop about it, for if the whole village knows that she awaits you there, so will the entire region, and your father will be the local laughingstock again. Of course he has cursed her roundly as being so in alt (haughty) that she will not remain in the crumble-down castle of a Midland-shire lord with all her fancy London ways, and he even sent her a message to leave the Inn, which is on land he owns, and return to the Metropolis, whereupon she replied that the Orres were quite ready to house her until Justina was ready. If there is one thing your father abhors, it is that news of his affairs enter the home of another unless they are in a version he is deliberately disseminating. He also knows that the Orres are poised to dethrone him in eminence here, title or not, and if he is being a – a –,"

"Sting-bum (miser)," interrupted Justina.

"Awkward about sending you to Town, they will say he wasted all his money on your ball and forget that she is paying for you, which will dethrone him fast enough," said the Duchess, "so he transferred his attentions to me, demanding of me why I had borne him such a nuisance of a child, who had caused him nought but grief and misery since the day she was born. Then he cursed you a little, but be easy, it was nothing like the last time –,"

"Except that it was before the guests," interposed Justina, and her mother primly

averted her gaze. “Yes, it was. Are you done, mother?”

“You used to call me mamma,” recoiled the Duchess, unnerved and hurt.

“Since I was uselessly brought out,” her daughter rejoined, “you are ‘mother’ – unless you and your husband would prefer ‘your grace’? Was there anything else?”

“Lizzie has also included in her reply that she will leave the region for Town only when you are ready to join her, and she asked him to cease being so daft and disagreeable.”

“That part is a joke which he has no sense of humour to see.”

“Your father has long lost his sense of humour, Justina,” quoth the Duchess. “Do you want to go to London?”

“I generally want to do what he forbids,” replied her recalcitrant child.

“I will seek the involvement of Lady Orre. He detests her but he always takes the advice of third parties over that of his own immediate family, howsoever absurd it is, and he is susceptible to oil of tongue (flattery), at which she excels,” decided the Duchess. “You too should do your part –,”

“When the devil’s blind! The bishop has blessed (‘when a thing speedeth not well’) whatever I do,” refused Justina.

“By the bye, when you dress for supper, don something silken, for it is possible that Irvin will call afterwards for a cool tankard or suchlike,” warned the Duchess and withdrew, shutting herself out, this time.

For a second, Justina stood stock still in bewilderment, her face contorted in a grimace of compleat astonishment, her head tilted in confusion, as she took a moment to assimilate what her mother had just revealed: to her knowledge, Irvin was gone back to Town and now she had heard to the contrary, and to the effect that he and her aunt were staying under the same roof, which was going to be somewhat to her father’s detriment. In all honesty, Justina was so confused by circumstances that she was not sure whether she wanted to go to Town or not: her sisters had failed to find spouses and she was no better, and she knew that the Quality comprised a sneering, pretentious, superficial, insincere, ambitious, malicious, back-stabbing horde of folk with plenty of money, influence, fashion-sense, knowledge, worldly wisdom, a talent for intrigue and doubtless a hundred other advantages which she lacked. It was said that all girls about to become women wanted to go among them and join them as an integral part, but Justina was less enamoured of the prospect after knowing the little she did about the pitfalls on her path to fortune and the altar, itself no great place when used for the marriage ceremony, as evidenced in her own home – which she would nevertheless gladly escape, but that was only because her father poisoned the atmosphere so. All the same, even if ‘papa was called to God’ – in which case God was insane – Devenish would never consent forever to support his sisters as spinsters, whether or not he succeeded in making a going concern of the Hearne estate. In any wise, marriage was the aim, the career, the purpose, of all females from her order, and the fact that she would rather have groomed horses all day, and read books or sung songs in her leisure time, was irrelevant. In effect mostly, what one really wanted to do in life, even if it was more than just lying around all day doing nothing, was irrelevant, for menfolk too. God had created a strange world and peopled it with strange folk, for it was they, not He, who made society, and this factor was perhaps the most absurd of all.

So Justina was to go to London after all – for the moment, but all depended on her father’s whims and if he had applied whims to his fortune, no wonder that he had dilapidated

it so fast and easily. As she performed ablutions enough to remove from herself the smell of the stableyard, even if she quite liked the warm odour of horse, she pondered the idea of the expedition if it were indeed to come to fruition. However hard she tried, she found that she had no especial desire to go to Town, and that any pleasure derived out of it was probably based on imagination or false expectations. She did not doubt the excellence of her aunt's intentions or deem the enterprise ill-conceived, she was not being obstinate or difficult, she too hoped that of the sisters so far, she would find the trophy on two legs – some said three – and a thoughtful and dutiful parent, loyal to his children's interests as much as his own, was sure to agree with her, for these matters were not decided according to whimsy, as was the case of her father, it seemed, and her mother followed where he led, whatever his faults, for the law gave him that right to abuse and misuse. It was one thing for a father to be over-scrupulous and fussily careful, doubtless owing to what he had witnessed, and another to object because of caprice, or the case being of an offspring who was not obedient or servile or respectful or favoured enough, who was to be punished for it by just standing in her way. That, from the height of her seventeen years on this earth and some of them barely conscious of the fact, she deemed to be unreasonable: if he had any intelligence, he would encourage any arrangement to remove her from his house in the most acceptable and respectable way possible, and thus approve all measures leading thereto.

In haste she washed and dressed and went to sup. Carrie presided and the meal was served in her parlour; Devenish was absent and stuck with both parents at the dining table downstairs, with a vaulted hammer-beam roof above it. Neither company was very cheerful, for below there was the Duke's monologue which unnecessarily protracted the repast and if the Marquis gave any sign of boredom or inattention he would be roared at like some schoolboy at the end of a tyrannical master's stick in these new 'boarding' schools opening up over the country, much favoured of widowers who could not send children to stay with rich relations and pay for private tutors, which state of poverty on the part of his parent reflected upon the victim. Upstairs, there was desultory talk, about what happened when Julius and Justina exercised the horses, about Jezebel, about something Selina had learned today at Carrie's hand that Carrie herself had difficulty in teaching althô Selina had none in understanding, and it was out of Euclid, not that young ladies needed to be geometers, but that was what the Duke had ordered, as part of his children's curriculum, about Honoria and Devenish having a fearful argument which Devenish lost for no-one won arguments with Honoria, and about the fact, suddenly revealed by Justina, that Irvin was coming tonight. Carrie turned pale and Honoria red, while Julius gave voice to everyone's thoughts on the subject: they all believed that he was gone to Town with his sisters and their husbands. That piece of news somewhat spoiled the end of the meal, and it was only after the platters were taken away and the sopha table restored to its parlour version that Caroline bid them all take part in some sort of musical concert, in which she and Honoria played duets and everyone sang. Justina's place was closest to the window, and thô there were pots of lavender and woodruff hanging there to keep out flies and moths, the curtains were drawn, but the panes open. While yet singing, she twitched a drape, for she had heard hoof-beats in the drive, and sure enough, she descried a horseman galloping towards the castle door. Ere long he became recognisable by his shape, and she swiftly let go of the fold, unsure whether he had noticed he was being watched, because she had let too much light out of the window in a bright chink,

which would have alerted him to this attention. A few moments later the great knocker was heard, and the music makers stopped their amusements so as not to obtrude upon the advent of the Duke of Irvin.

Not long after that, Lady Caroline was sent for, and that was the end of their fun. Honoria took the opportunity to assert herself and make Justina practise her intervals, giving her motets and other difficult church music of a bygone era, never heard today except as exercises for the voice, and the younger sister was told to project hers out of the window so as not to disturb the Dukes and Duchess, for the salon they occupied of evenings gave out upon the garden in the rear of the castle and so if their windows were open, they would not hear Justina's voice carry. Not that they should have taken so much trouble, for the visitor only stayed for a quarter of an hour, and when Carrie returned, she had Devenish with her. Both were dismayed but did not wish to talk of the matter and so Selina asked that music be resumed until it was time for her to go to bed, at least. Justina had her own opinion: Irvin had been recruited by Aunt Lizzie and succeeded only in vexing his father-in-law-to-be, for altho it was all right to sell his daughter to one, the Duke of Hearne was not sending another such child to London, which was a den of rakes, and none of them lining up to wed her while bringing a huge fortune with them. The use of Irvin to second her wish had been unwise on Lizzie's part and the plan to go to London had been abandoned. Of such assumptions did Justina say nothing, even after Selina had retired and the older siblings sat and chatted, altho not about Irvin, so she too decided to adjourn, for she was tired, and almost like Selina, went directly to bed.

It was just as well, for on the morrow, the remaining presences were due to depart for their homes and so horses needed to be harnessed to carriages and outriders' mounts saddled, all in readiness for departure. This involved a great amount of anterior preparation, feeding the animals, grooming them, seeing to their feet for any last-minute manifestations or requirements, checking tackle and traces, and even exercising them briefly so that they would be tractable and not take off like bolts from a bow with no means of controlling them. All this was accomplished even before work was begun on the horses at home, and with a great sigh of relief that was too, as Justina took them out for their exercise, for it was her turn, and they preferred her to Julius because she was a girl. Meanwhile their feed was mixed, their fields were being cleared and their floors cleaned, with Julius himself engaged in one of these menial, manual tasks, until his sister returned, cheerful and happy, for that was how horses made her feel, but this time she was doubly pleased, for Jezebel the black mare was sure in her return to good health and could sense her joy thereat. So while the 'beasts of burden' were at their feeding troughs, Justina went to join in clearing the paddocks, whither they could be turned out, while she went to help in the boxes, and along came Devenish himself from the castle buildings to find his siblings.

"Why, what is the meaning of that hang-dog look?" greeted his brother.

"To quote the gaffer: 'go have Ajax brought here.'," repeated the Marquis, mimicking his father at the latter's most imperious. "By the way, Irvin and Orre are both here, on horseback, outside in the grounds so that is why you did not receive their keffys."

"Ajax has just had his breakfast. Can you all not wait?" requested Justina.

"I fear, m' dear 'Tina, the time is not come when man respects the digestion and mood of the animal," said Devenish.

“Being a mere animal (very silly fellow) himself,” she scoffed, and went into the saddle room to go tackle up the stallion herself, because thô he towered above her, when she attended to him, matters went somewhat more easily and quickly.

Meanwhile the brothers talked, and Justina learned that the visitors twain were come to ask the Duke to accompany them on a tour of some drainage work and a small dam, being respectively undertaken and constructed, by ground newly enclosed on the Orre estate, which Irvin liked and wanted Hearne to see, with a view to changing the manner in which this landholding was run, so as to make it more profitable, to the lasting benefit of the Woodvilles, for the Duke would be affluent in his old age and his heirs would progressively become wealthy. Devenish was not invited, even if Devenish would appreciate this better than the older man, who already was grumpy about it, and had even asked Orre, to his face, whether it was not a wasteful extravagance. It was his jealousy again, and proof of that was the deliberate omission of his own heir, or so analysed Julius, but then Justina, who was adjusting stirrup leathers, spoke out.

“Ten to one Devenish has been omitted by Irvin, and if not, Irvin has not suggested that he come to join them, with which silence Orre has been told to comply,” she included. “That is so that Irvin can end up controlling the way wherein this estate is run, and make so many changes that he understands and our father does not, so that he becomes content with whatever monies come his way and lets the other manage all, until time runs out, and that would be when father is gone to the Diet of Worms (in history, where Luther challenged the Holy Roman Empire. In slang, dead).”

“I’m saddling a horse,” growled Devenish, bounding off into the tackle room.

Assisted by his brother and sister, he had a mount prepared in a very short time and riding it, even if he was not booted for the enterprise, he led off his father’s horse, leaving his two siblings laughing in their sleeves at the whole situation.

“I wonder what Irvin came for last night and why no-one will say,” she mused, daring to talk of the matter at last.

“Squeege it out of Devenish. He owes you a confidence for you set him on Irvin’s tail,” advised Julius.

“I wonder if they quarrelled,” she smirked. “When has a company of guests or relations or outsider third parties ever stopped our father from swearing like a trooper, especially after he has knocked out his link (tipsy)?”

“If that were the case, why are Irvin and Orre here to look at a dam?” wondered Julius.

“My name is Twyford (I know nothing of this),” relented Justina.

All morning went by before the absent horses were returned and Justina and Julius were considering putting aside their leathern aprons after having untackled the animals, in order to go to dine, but Devenish, who brought the mounts back, addressed her.

“The codger wants to see you,” he said wryly.

“I don’t want to see him,” she retorted. “What about that?”

“He may be sending you to London after all,” ceded Devenish, “for Aunt Lizzie plans to leave next Monday, so that everyone will see her at Divine Service on Sunday, when after church, she will tell the entire parish that she is here to take you to Romeville, and when she departs, you will be going with her.”

“Our saintly father hath changed his mind?” she asked.

“And is likely to change it several times before Sunday, so don’t set much store by anything he says,” he warned, “because it probably will end with your going. He even asked if you had begun to pack.”

“Now, Devenish,” pronounced Justina, bewildered and cynically incredulous, as she turned her gaze from him, to the horse who stood at her hand, “would you be pleased to tell me what the deuce is going on – since yestereven?”

“Yestereven, Irvin arrived, which you know. He was surprised to see so many people present, and so he stayed for half a glass of negus and brush-and-loped (departed in haste), stating his hope that he would be able to call during this day, because there were farming matters he wished to discuss, and it was dull conversation in a parlour circle,” related the Marquis. “After he had gone, the master of this demesne spoke with extreme and inappropriate virulence as to his subject, decrying him as intrusive, and that he – our father – would shew him who was the master and the leader here –,”

“Master and leader?” almost echoed Justina, unable to contain herself and thus interrupting him. “This before his and mother’s relations?”

“He does seek others and lose himself (make a fool of oneself) more often than occasionally,” reminded Devenish.

“Is that why you both came upstairs to the rest of us with your Friday-faces (‘long and dirty as a winter Friday’) on?” asked Julius, ready to laugh.

“Was it that obvious?” wondered Devenish with an embarrassed chuckle.

“If it had been a bear it would ha’ bit you (very obvious). Go on,” invited Justina.

“It also embarrassed everyone else, but we did not stay to see what was going to happen and we did not for an instant think that Irvin would come today, but not only did he, but he came with Orre and father fell over himself trying to oblige,” recounted the Marquis. “He was your too humble servant. Fortunately the canting crew that is our family had all departed or else they would have witnessed his ridiculous shew of arse-licking. So off we all went, but first, when I arrived, both Irvin and father looked at me as if I were a truly queer fish. As we rode off, I said to Irvin that I was due to inherit this property, and whatever innovations he intended to impose on my shabby, half-senile rum Ned (very silly fellow) of a father, would need to have my approval, for I was done with a bridge being made of my nose (when folk pass the port across someone and not to him). That Irvin knows a trick worth two of that and it was plain as a pipe stem to him that I was not the author of my objection: he dared ask to my beard, which sly boots thought of that one, and would I please not strain his hand, so I said that we had talked of all among the sisters and brothers. Whereupon he tilted his head and, with a smile that was soulless let alone lifeless, wondered if it were not perhaps the Lady Justina, by your leave? Thereto, I said it was not impossible, and he replied that her la’ ship had cut her eye-teeth. Then he owned to me that it was on her account, or rather her Aunt Lizzie’s account, that he was come yestereven but he wished not to discuss it before spectators and therefore piked off. So off we went to the dam, and who should ha’ come up by the lane through the adjacent woodland in a cabriolet but Lady Orre and Lady Ashlington, Aunt Lizzie in person, who stopped the vehicle, and unto her went our future brother-in-law, to hand her out of the vehicle, and lead her, his horse at hand, to join the company, so Sir Robert brought along Lady Orre and while we all scurried about praising what we did not understand, Aunt Lizzie came plump out with it and secured a promise from her brother-in-

law to send his daughter with her come next Monday.”

“Our father’s promises are not worth powder and shot,” commented Justina.

“Well, it is on. He will say nay tomorrow and yea the day after and as we like to say, be of so many minds that he’ll never be mad, but Aunt Lizzie, who will not say Amen to everything, like her sister our mother, has gained the support of Irvin, and the hand that holds the purse-strings rules the world,” asserted Devenish. “That was not the end of it. When he learned that you were to go to Town, he offered his sister, Lady Northingham, as a duenna, for she is among the most reputable ladies in the Quality, of extraordinary standards of conduct and discretion. He even said that between them, Lady Ashlington and Lady Northingham could present you at court. At mention of that magic word ‘court’, the old man pricked up his ears; status and honour and respect and prestige, remember? He announced that he was going to have the Duchess our mother lend you her diamonds.”

“She hasn’t any,” quoth Justina. “He sold ’em – thô for so little that he might as well have given them away.”

“That was said to impress the others,” groaned Devenish.

“What else?” replied a bored chorus.

“Now come within; father wants to see you,” recollected and urged the Marquis.

“Are those rogues gone? Irvin and Orre? I’m still wearing my farting crackers (breeches),” said Justina, pulling off her apron.

“They are gone,” assured her eldest brother.

Justina prepared to leave, but then, paused with hesitation.

“When does Irvin quit these climes?” she asked.

“Tomorrow,” answered Devenish. “He is to go to London, so he will be there when you are, and as Aunt Lizzie moves in circles similar to him, there is a chance you two will meet,” he confirmed. “These things I know for I asked them both.”

Drawing a deep and sharp breath, Justina fled from the scene to return to the house, and bid a footman announce to her father that she was here in answer to his order, but that she was improperly dressed for the drawing room. In fact she was just improperly dressed, and she half expected her father to call her vile names because of it. The Duke decided today that formalities be observed and sent an order with the servant to tell his daughter to go and change before she thought of shewing her face in the great halls of his ancestors while in his presence, which the man did not repeat to her, but she heard her father’s stentorian voice and was already mounting the staircase before he could tell her anything, even if his version was polite. As she stepped off the stairs into the corridor that would take her to her apartment, she met Lady Caroline, who seemed to be confused, as if she had lost something and was seeking it. In fact it turned out to be someone.

“Justina, have you seen Honoria?” she inquired.

“Alas, not, and I am about to pull an old house down over my head if I do not hurry, for I am ill-dressed for an audience with the Duke and he will have me change first,” said Justina, briefly turning to address her sister before she walked away. “I hope there is enough water in my ewer,” she added, “for a quick dab with a sponge.”

“I’ll help you,” offered Caroline and followed her.

“Is there something wrong about Honoria?” wondered the younger sister.

“Perhaps. Irvin and Orre came to the door and that was all; when father invited them

in they excused themselves on account of having a long ride ahead of them before dinner,” related Caroline as they both entered Justina’s rooms. “We came out to see them off, and Honoria tried to say – er – courtesies to Irvin, who was very civil but not interested, so after they departed, she stormed off in a huff into the house, and I cannot find her in her rooms or with Selina, nor was she awaiting me in either my lodging or my parlour, so I am a trifle anxious on her account.”

“She might have put on her hat and gone to tear weeds out of the potager, with a vengeance, for his not encouraging her,” said Justina, as she undressed with her sister’s help.

“He cannot very well utter gallantries to her under the nose of his intended,” said Lady Caroline, albeit uncomfortable.

“Do you wonder what he says to Honoria if you are not about?” asked Justina. “I ask because he is a notable wench, and in the early stages of negotiation for your hand, was very much off the hinges, with me. Those are things one does not tell a sister about to be wed, but now I hear that I may even go to Town, and that Irvin will be there. He did not come after you or Honoria when you were with Aunt Lizzie, because he did not know you and flirting with you especially, is as useless as monkey’s grease. The trouble is, he has seen me in men’s clothes, while at work with the horses and when we fetched Pye’s keffyls over to cheat the assessors. I do not want to meet him there, and it is unfair to you, so if father decides that I may not go to Town, I am not about to have the vapours and cry ‘Injustice’ or whatever one does when unfairly-used in a family.”

“Justina, are you afraid of Irvin?” asked Caroline, pulling a towel around her.

Not as much as I am of myself if the worst came to the worst, thought Justina.

“Somewhat,” she owned. “He broke squares (was out of order). However, when I am dressed female, he is the epitome of courtesy, and he takes the trouble to talk to me. He seems to take, without punishing anyone, what I mete out: for example, I told him that the ball was money ill-spent and that it should have gone in paying for a diplomatic post for Julius, where he would have to do nothing for a fat salary. I also told him that if it were not for his imposing a ball upon us, father would not have lost his temper with me during that delivery and fitting. I sent Devenish to keep an eye on what he was trying with Orre upon father and he guessed that it was not our brother’s idea, but mine, and seemed not to mind.”

“He likes you more than Honoria; indeed, he likes you, which is plain to see,” stated Lady Caroline. “That which really gave him away was his abstention from dancing with you at the ball, I thought. He also looks at you with eyes that shine. I am not being reproachful, and thank God Honoria has not noticed it, but it is a fact.”

“Carrie, I beseech you, come to London with me,” urged Justina suddenly, “Aunt Lizzie will not mind and two can feed as cheaply as one. Let it be for the purchase of your trousseau –,”

“Dear sweetheart,” sighed Caroline, taking her sister’s face in both her hands, “mother and her brothers and Aunts Nesta and Winfrith arranged among themselves to obtain and order various elements of it in the Towns that serve the districts where they live, and these things shall be their wedding gifts to me, so that there will be no more expense. Our aunts and uncles are already agreed on my trousseau, and I cannot change that, for I am expected to be grateful that they have undertaken the expense. I have no say in the matter of what they will chuse but they know what goes into a trousseau and have divided the purchases among

themselves, bearing in mind that the items are for a Duchess and not some jolly mopsey (short dowdy woman) of a country squireess. They are most particular not to be like Magnificat at Matins (ridiculously out of order), and if I as much as affect to make a choice about a thing, they will be offended to death, for they have even taken the trouble to ask what I do not like and what hues and items do not suit me. If I go to London with you it shall be as a duenna and cannot be for a trousseau, besides, with what monies will I buy it? You are the one to have a wardrobe which Aunt Lizzie is already ordering. The trouble with depending on the charity of well-meaning relations is that one has little choice in what they do or buy.”

“You said duenna. He is offering his sister as one, can you imagine it? How am I to slither free out of this? You and Honoria, I recall, were merry as grigs when it was your time to go to stay in Romeville with Aunt Lizzie. Why is my case always different? Irvin told me that I had a coming-out ball because girls becoming young ladies love a coming-out ball – yet I did not: I endured every moment as a Calvary and –,”

“Looked as if you were ready to be crucified?”

“I know, I know. Will you come to Town with me?”

“If our parents and Aunt Lizzie agree. In fact, if I do come with you, there is less likelihood of father changing his mind at the last moment and forbidding that you go,” agreed Lady Caroline.

“That actually would be the best alternative of all, but that which would be wrong about it will be that it is unfair. I have noticed: ever since I passed the age of twelve, father has treated me abominably. Will he do the same when I am older and Selina is in his line of fire?” assessed and wondered Justina.

“It is because after Honoria, mother just bore girls,” said Caroline. “Honoria herself escaped for she is so ceremonious and ever so respectful of father, which he sucks up like pap, whereas you are not such a sycophant, and he hates that independence of manner; it is akin to insolence in his book.”

“So he would pre-empt any impudence on my part by pouring abuse into my ears? Am I even going to consider respecting him after that? When I was a little girl he was a stranger and I was of no interest to him. Now, he would cross me if he can, or insult me. Is there an explanation?”

“Indeed, but it is not a very good one,” owned Carrie. “When you were a little girl you were up in the nursery and he saw you not, partly because he did not want another daughter. Then you became strong enough to help in the household appurtenances, and being a gifted charmer of horses, you went romping off to the stables where you did and still perform tasks as well and as willingly as any man. You also reached adolescence – an age when girls and boys do not always behave well, and our father, honour him as I should, has not been a model of virtue, so he thinks that everyone is like him and has the most prurient mind. We all have to be very careful what we do or say in his presence, those of us who have access to it; there was a time that he used ever to shout at Devenish for waiting for dead men’s shoes (awaiting an inheritance) and threatening to disentail him. It will be Selina’s turn soon. While we are children, we are safe, but when we become adolescent girls and young women, we are considered as possible material for the harlotry, which is a danger to his honour and the reputation of his house.”

“Yet he has done enough to damage all that himself,” noted Justina.

“Such truths will only land you in a bigger briar than you are already,” cautioned Caroline, assisting her sister pull on her gown over her chemise, before turning her about to lace her in it at the back.

“We are caught in a vicious circle,” sighed Justina. “We grow up and wish we could be a thousand miles away from our families that stifle us so, but we can only accomplish that feat by wedding and having a – family, again, with all the troubles that families bring.”

“Nearly there – brush your hair and I’ll braid it,” directed Caroline.

Thus, together, the sisters turned Justina back from a breeched stable hand into a passably dressed young woman, and Caroline went with her to the drawing room, where the Duke was, for the Duchess and Selina were out weeding and watering.

“You both came with salt and spoons (dilatatory),” growled the Duke.

“Had I not been on hand to help, sir, Justina would have been even later,” defended Lady Caroline, modest but dignified.

The Duke, enthroned in his grand and carved chair, rose and began to pace an old but valuable Turkey carpet.

“Bah!” was the first piece of – it could hardly have been called wisdom – that was expelled from him. “So, it is arranged. You are going to London with your mother’s sister. She leaves on Monday and will take you with her. I hope that you have all those gewgaws that seem so necessary to females, to take with you, for if there is something lacking, at the rate things are made in this house, it will not be ready, and there is no time to order anything from any tradesfolk nearby.”

Then he launched into a disquisition, none too delicate, about the dangers awaiting young maids in Town, about what young men did to them, about what could happen if the aunt, whom he did not trust, was momentarily inattentive, about how a good virgin’s reputation was ruined so that even her family could not shew its face in public again, and about being very careful not to ruin Caroline’s prospects of marriage for so much money hinged upon its successful conclusion. In effect, his speech was about his honour, his family honour, and his financial honour: Justina’s virtue took second place. By then, his wife, both his sons, and Honoria had joined them, absolutely bemused about what was going on. For one who had complained about the few extra minutes Justina had taken to change her clothes to make herself correctly dressed at her father’s command, he wasted upwards of half an hour delivering himself of advice about which his children talked all day, for even in the country, they committed indiscretions enough to educate a young lady, and they were all steeped in the concept of family honour, so his verbiage was redundant. The tragedy of this family was that no-one could tell him to be silent and go off to their waiting dinner, for to begin with, he was making Justina and Julius late when they started work in the afternoon. All the same, when the brother and sister finally set off to the stables, not long after, they were visited by Lady Caroline herself, who recounted to Justina that she had aired the notion of going to London with Justina because their father was worried that her younger sister would be reckless, and that the Duchess had liked the notion so well that she began by breaking the news gently to Honoria, under the guise of asking her opinion, with a particular regard for her slightly jealous nature. She even passed the idea as her own, so as to preclude that the other contest it too strongly, for were Honoria to know that Justina had made a request to Carrie, there was sure to be quarrel, strife and misery. She had also written a note about it to her sister, who replied

at once, deeming it a wise idea and even going so far as to say that it would keep Irvin at bay, as if she too had seen something about him with respect to the young Woodville that had put her on the *qui vive*. Not that he was expected to pursue his wife's sisters all his life, but he could well evince an unholy interest in them until the novelty wore off. This she wrote by return of courier, but whereas she was not averse to the idea, Honoria sulked, and went and told her father, but what she said was not clear, for when the Duchess went to reveal the plan to him and supposedly consult him about it, he responded with remarkable promptitude in the affirmative. Without meaning to speak ill of Honoria, sometimes, when one went to complain of another, it could work to one's own detriment. Caroline was extremely pleased that the proposition was meeting with no disapproval at least, and went skipping back to the potager to put in her few hours necessary work for the day.

On the morrow, Lizzie Ashlington herself arrived, for there was no more time to be lost in dithering. She had reserved horse-teams for her journey along the route and paid for them in advance, her own horses being the last to take her up, so that she would return with them, to the greater convenience of all. Her presence necessitated the return of the two sisters to the castle buildings and she immediately declared that it mattered not how Justina was dressed, so Justina wore what she announced before all her family was her 'cover-slut', whereat Aunt Lizzie whooped with laughter and her father looked resentful, disgruntled and angry, for his daughter had not forgiven him that round of abuse and just because he had asked her to have no hard feelings, and she had verbally consented, it did not mean that she had really obeyed or would ever forgive him. The plan was revealed to Aunt Lizzie whose home and hospitality it was that they were impinging upon, but she agreed, and Honoria, who was present, stormed out and shut the doors with a slam. Yet Lady Ashlington's consent meant immediate action: she was sending on all her horses ahead tomorrow and so if her nieces had steeds they wanted in Town, these had to go to Orre's now. Justina warned her about Orre wanting Jezebel, whom she now had, and the Duke of Hearne was so self-absorbed by her unforgiving side that he scarcely noticed that she had acquired a new horse and besides, he ignored their talk as feminine nonsense, with the result that he missed parts of it that were actually quite interesting to both a father and a man. Caroline having no mount of her own, her brother Devenish gallantly lent her his favourite, named Bumper, not because he literally had an odd kick in his gallop, which actually meant that a person was eccentric, but after that which all men relished, namely a full glass, a bumper, drained when a toast was drunk. As for the notion itself of the two sisters, the Duchess again alleged herself to be at its origins, while her sibling did not care if the Devil himself had advised it, but the aunt was still concerned about Honoria's behaviour, even if she did not offer to take a third sister along. All the same she knew her brother-in-law the Duke, and after details were settled, and some of the ladies of the house walked her to her conveyance, lent her by Lady Orre, she admitted openly that she was not enthusiastic about Honoria, because that belle could be abrasive rather than demure with menfolk and openly treated other ladies as if they were rivals, which if true, was not to be exhibited, and prevented the making of useful lady friends. After she had gone, the Duchess also disclosed to her two daughters present that Honoria had spent about twice as much of her aunt's money as Carrie, behaving rather freely with another's purse whenever the opportunity arose, so Lizzie was not over-enthusiastic about having her as a house-guest. That was a warning to Justina: if her aunt wanted her to buy something, she could buy it, but

otherwise she was not to ask or amass debts to mercers and milliners.

“I am still recovering from the fact that Irvin paid for my gown,” she grumbled, to Caroline’s unconcealed embarrassment, for the latter could not stop herself from going red in the face, but for their mother, it was a reassuring answer.

That evening after supper, Justina, with the help of Caroline and overseen by Selina who looked forward to her turn, sorted out her effects, and while Caroline adjourned to do likewise with her own belongings, Selina helped the younger of her two sisters to fold and arrange them. None of the three sisters guessed that Honoria went for a private confabulation with her father, from which even the Duchess was excluded, to complain that the whole plan excluded her and thus was unjust, so that she sowed the seeds of doubt about the venture in his head. Thus as Justina lay in bed worrying about how Julius would be able to manage the stables and who would replace him, Honoria went to sleep feeling content and sure that her poison would work, and certainly it did effect the Duke at this moment, for he remained awake thinking of what a coney all those beaux would make of his silly daughter who was sure to become the family whore. Eventually they were all outwardly at rest and inwardly prey to their dreams, not of the sort folk had in order to follow them in their daily lives instead of hope, and which rarely came true, but distortions of what had been endured in the day. Justina saw horses, who spoke to her and asked her why she was leaving them behind.

That next morning the servants fetched trunks down from the attic and the housemaids cleaned and prepared them, inside and outside. Under the supervision of the Duchess, they packed Justina’s chosen belongings while Caroline saw to her own things and Justina went out like a stable hand, with Julius following. Jezebel and Bumper were gone, and that made her heart to ache a little, but then it would a little more when she left all the animals behind, even those being kept for Squire Pye. They passed their morn as usual, to return to the house for dinner, where they were afforded the surprise of seeing their Aunt Lizzie there, looking suave and charming and ever so genial. She announced that she had changed her mind and that she was travelling tomorrow, even if it meant that they had to stop at some strange parish on the way to suffer a service given by a real ‘spoil pudden’ (long-winded preacher) so, her two nieces had better hasten their preparations and be ready at five o’ clock in the morning to depart on their adventure for London. The Duke of Hearne was furious; it seemed that he and she were winding down a quarrel for he had decided not to send either daughter at all and she had struck back with the best of weapons, namely the question of whether he could keep his children on indefinitely without their making acquaintances that could lead to marriage and lower his expenses, or so Devenish enlightened Justina and Julius as they went upstairs to change their raiment. However, while Justina was about her pre-prandial toilette, Selina came to visit her, and told her that she had overheard the footmen speak: yestereven Honoria had gone to ‘papa’ and begged him to prevent the folly of the London trip, for it had twice failed to find them spouses and Justina was not likely to set the Thames alight where the marriage lottery was concerned. Their father had been ready to refuse Justina her venture to the Town, so there would be no need for Caroline to go and mind her, and it was Honoria’s doing. If Selina owned that she was aware that she was carrying tales, she did not want Honoria to do likewise when it was her own turn to visit London, for Aunt Lizzie was sure to ask, one of these years, and as Honoria had failed owing to her own fault, and even lost a place in the Palace, she was obviously determined that not only should her younger sisters fail too, but

that they be not given even the chance to succeed. So Selina had told Devenish, and he rode over to Sir Robert's, to see his aunt, who arrived at once with a change of plan, countering the refusal which 'papa' had ready. Justina embraced Selina for her intelligence so cleverly exercised as well as her intervention, and the end result of the affair was that Justina and Carrie were still going. As for the stables, Devenish was to replace Justina during her absence, and in any case, there were fewer horses by two to care for. Selina was extremely excited, as if she had to make up for Justina's lack of response to this success.

"But what is to do about you?" she marvelled, bewildered. "One would say that the Devil owed you a cake and paid you a loaf. You look like you have the hips (morbidity depression)! After all that confusion, you are finally going to London."

"I ha' been held so long with my bill in the water (kept too long in suspense), that I am still incredulous," replied Justina, looking weary.

"One cannot gainsay that," agreed Selina. "Were it I, I'd be quiet as a wasp up one's nose with excitement. I'd be cock-a-whoop! Imagine going to London and being a grand lady, or going where they go, and visiting plays and the uproar (opera), and having all the aristocracy in the land to dance with, not just Orre and Stopford and what-call whom you see at every local hop. Imagine the shops and the fine things come over from France and the Italian lands, and slippers of Spanish leather, and – O, I cannot think. Aunt Lizzie will ensure that you know everybody and as you are the daughter of a Duke – maybe that could raise a laugh – 't is not like some clodhopper (lit. ploughman) going to Romeville for the first time and pretending all his geese are swans, to gain entrance to a crush. That is a place where one can take one's noble blood to market and it is indeed worth something. Justina," urged Selina, taking her sister by the shoulders and shaking her, "rouse yourself, chickabiddy, a new era is about to begin in your life. What would you rather do? Rise early and go shovel straw and manure to the dunghill, or be awakened by a comb-brush (lady's maid) bearing a tray with cocoa and soft manchets sprinkled with sugar on the crust? Lady Orre talks of such things as if they are bread and cheese (very ordinary) and we never even see them."

"I hope I don't kick out any hind legs (make a rustic bow)," joked Justina.

"That's the barber (approbation)!" whooped Selina, and Justina embraced her.

"This is happening because of you," she credited. "You who, at the height of your thirteen years, know a great A from a bull's foot. Now where did you learn to say 'that's the barber'? It is London street talk."

"The lads from the manors nigh pick it up off relations who go to Romeville and would be raffish, more sauce than pig," said Selina. "I have one favour to ask of you: don't tell Carrie I found out about Honoria, and for pity's sake, don't tell Honoria."

"Would that my elbow be crooked and never come straight, if I fail you," promised Justina humorously, and hugged her. "Has Devenish made such an oath?"

"Made? He suggested it," snorted Selina. "He also told mamma to teach me a little, but she has to give all her time to papa. He thinks that Honoria will be surly as a butcher's dog. I will also have to help her in the garden, and as long as I say neither muff nor mum, it will be all right there."

"Neither muff nor mum?" repeated Justina, under an anxious frown.

"Ever since the notion of you going to London became a serious business, she goes into the garden and sings the black psalm (weeps), even if we are working there together. She

thinks I do not know, for I sing to myself, but I see it all,” averred Selina.

“This whole affair is beginning to make me sad,” sighed Justina.

“Honoraria is just a mopus (dull, stupid, moping person),” dismissed Selina.

“Actually, Honoraria must be dismally unhappy,” said Justina.

“Then why spoil things for everyone else?” objected Selina.

“That is what very unhappy people do,” answered Justina.

“You aren’t in clover, but you don’t turn melancholy as a gib-cat or squeak (turn informer) on your own or let on (betray) your own sister,” objected Selina.

“Of all of us, she should be wedding first, and then she will be away from here, making marriage music (having babies) and other troubles of her own,” philosophised Justina.

“Being stuck in the briers which others planted, feels different to the miseries whereof one is oneself the author. I learned that in the stables, which are not set out as I would like them to be, but I cannot correct them, for we lack the money for to rebuild and thus reorganise them. They are laid out according to what father inherited and he could not have cared a curse about how easy or neat it was in there.”

“The stables are a mess, are they not?” agreed Selina.

“You could say that they come from Needingworth, like most of father’s ideas,” grunted Justina.

“You don’t call him papa any more, but father,” noted Selina.

“He’s not my papa, but like as not, he is my father,” answered Justina, then took her sister’s hands. “I shall miss you while I am away. I know that I do not see you for most of the day, and that you retire shortly before I do, but I shall miss you, Selina. I shall miss Devenish, Julius and the horses.”

“No, you will be enjoying yourself too much to miss anyone,” insisted Selina encouragingly.

¹(Prince Titi: name for himself in a satire by Frederick Prince of Wales, George II’s son)

²(manchet: white bread)

EIGHT

So according to Selina Woodville, a new era was beginning, and in a way, she was right. Enduring the touch of a man's hand on the inside of one's thigh, going through the motions of a coming-out ball, and finally being presented to the Quality, where-to one theoretically belonged, were all part of the next phase, good or bad, in the movement ahead in a female's future, when she found the company of the opposite sex and lashed or enchained herself thereto, for better or for worse. Such were Justina's thoughts when she went to bed that evening, even if she was too restless for sleep to come immediately, and such were her ruminations again under a dawn sky on the morrow as she dozily made ready for her journey, donning a new summer riding habit bought cheaply off a Scotchman's cart, neither dowdy nor natty but good enough for a travelling gentlewoman, and then partaking of breakfast. Carrie was there, and her mother arrived, in tears, as was a mother's wont, but the others were still asleep, and Justina wanted to be especially sure that Selina was at rest, also asking her mother to watch over her youngest child. Later, as the two sisters waited on the gravel with their trunks and bags for Aunt Lizzie's carriage, the younger told the old one that to make their mother promise to look after Selina was about as much use as to give a goose hay, but if Lady Caroline inwardly agreed, she did not answer, for it would only confirm Justina's anxieties, and now was not so much the time to be anxious about what and whom one was leaving behind as eager, even with trepidation, about the path that awaited one through Society. Then in the quiet of the early morn, as the wind swayed among foliage and grass, and the birds gradually awakened, one after the other, in their forest fastnesses and park cribs to sing joy to the new day, there was a rumbling, of man's making, for not a cloud hung in the skies, still dull and greyish in the north west. In the drive, the Viscountess Ashlington's equipage, smart and large, with liveried attendants and even visible from afar, a crowd of outriders. Justina felt a small thrill of agitation animate her, for all the trips she had ever made from home were to attend weddings, funerals and christenings in the families of both her parents, but only since she was fifteen, because there was no room for children and younger adolescents at such events, and no-one had ever thought of cousin Justina as a bridesmaid or a flower-girl. This was not going to be one of those expeditions, when one ate a great deal and kept one's mouth shut, unless interrogated by some older person who always asked impertinent questions – but perhaps they would do so in London too.

The new era was indeed beginning, as Aunt Lizzie descended from the cabin of her conveyance and embraced her sister, telling her not to snivel for they were sure to see each other again soon, and while the mother watched and fussed, luggage and ladies were loaded on the coach, which set off, quietly crunching on the gravel as its wood- and metal-work creaked and squeaked, to gain the speed of a trot in the drive. Mechanically the daughters waved kerchiefs at their mother, until she was out of sight. Then they turned back, all, to one another, and laughed nervously, the aunt asking of her niece how she felt at having escaped her father at last.

"Match! Quoth Jack when he kissed his dame! 'Tis indeed a little that way, is it not?" acknowledged Justina.

"I had a silly thought," included Caroline, "to the effect that 'tis a pity that Irvin left before we did, for what if he were to have called here today or tomorrow to see father, and dutifully take me walking, only to find that I had travelled away with Justina?"

“My dear, all our silly thoughts are generally about men,” said Lizzie Ashlington.

Not that they talked all the way; even thô they were seated, the motion of the vehicle made them tired and they were not spiritually at ease, for even during daylight hours, especially when a vehicle traversed forest land, there was the danger of highway robbery. A lone horseman would probably not attack a well-guarded conveyance, but sometimes these men made a profession of working in gangs, when they generally tilted against the very rich, for otherwise there would be very little swag to share out. In any case, the Viscountess’s crew had instructions, if ever facing such an assault, to shout out the words ‘the music’s paid’, which meant that they had already been robbed and that there was nothing more to take. In all her days of travel, she had had this happen to her once, and the ploy had worked, so her outriders were extremely confident men, and not likely to give up and flee if the worst came to the worst; besides, all were born on the estate of her dower house and owed loyalty at least to the families they left behind there, who were sure to be turned out owing to the cowardly behaviour of a son. Justina was interested in another matter, to wit, what sort of horses they were to have when they stopped to change teams, and if these had been properly cared for, so she always descended to watch and inspect when there was such a halt.

Not that the ladies were bored or just concerned with their fears. Their aunt was a fountainhead of anecdotes about silly events involving grand people whom they would meet in Town, and they also amused themselves with card games, but not Society’s favourite, namely, whist, which needed at least four players, and Justina, not a great reader of the History of the Four Kings, learned a new one or two. Then during quiet moments, there was the view from the window of the lush English countryside, ripening for divers harvests, be it of cereal or fruit crops, the presence of flocks and herds, the latter like white spots on green if seen from a distance, did much to allay fear, for when such scenes were visible, they were crossing open ground with very little cover behind which to hide and stage a criminal surprise. Travelling south east, it was noticeable that the breed of human became bigger and stronger, with better clothing and a good shirt and waistcote on his back, of linen and jennet respectively, but in the bigger towns, the people were inclined to be shabby and even dirty, while the streets were often so narrow as to block out the sunlight. Lady Ashlington explained that this feature was a scourge of London Town, in many areas, where the people were small, undersized and thin, with cheese-cutter legs from the rickets when children, and scald-heads, but this was among the very poor in rough districts, where the young ladies were not likely to roam, even if behind some very fashionable thoroughfares there were indescribably wretched rookeries of poverty and filth, where crime more or less dominated, but the plight of the poor was becoming a less acceptable matter and ignoring it, as rich folk did, was about to become a thing of the past, for the concept of charitable assistance granted only to the ‘deserving poor’ was no longer valid. There were no deserving poor: by this it was thought that only the industrious merited aid. In fact, there were two features, as magistrates, beadles, constable and various parish officers had found; firstly the Englishman was a lazy beast and would not work if he could, and secondly, any artisan with any sort of skill was ready to take work if he could obtain it. Between this contradiction, laboured countless good souls mostly from the merchant orders and among the Quakers, to try and better the lot, especially, of abandoned children, many of whom ended up at work found for them by the parish of their birth, and so, when one had one’s chimneys swept, or one bought a

length of silk, or sent out for a laundress to come and perform a ‘lag’ or several weeks of accumulated washing, one came close to this world, hidden from the Quality, but which was more than ready, or elements of it were, to burgle their houses. Thus when they arrived in London, they would find a horrendous mixture of affluence and abjection, and if they had any sense, they were not to become involved in anything that concerned the expenditure of monies that they did not have – for that was where the affluent could lead them. Caroline already knew this but Caroline had a calm character, whereas Justina was more impulsive, so Justina needed to be warned about miserable apprentices and eloquent but rich Quaker ladies, and turn away from both.

“I subscribe to three charities, including Captain Coram’s Foundlings’ Hospital, and the Charity School of St. Andrew’s, Holborn,” said their aunt. “I give what I think I should be able to afford, so don’t feel obliged to empty your purse at the first sorry sight that prays you money, for there are thousands, and many are also pickpockets. Always keep the backs of your gowns pinned up and tied, for there is a thief called a ‘curtail’ who specialises in cutting off the spare cloth at the rear of ladies’ skirts, and most skilful they are too, operating in a crowd or if one pauses to look at the display in a shop window. Justina, my dear, your father lectured you long and loud about the mischief of lecherous men of your own order. I am telling you about the mischief endemic to man.”

“I want to go home,” wailed Justina, but was only funning.

In fact, they were too far for that already, because the journey took two days and they were well into the second day of it to turn back. All that remained was an afternoon and the early evening, according to their aunt, and not every part of their progress had been over good roads so that they were well tossed about and fatigued enough for Lady Ashlington and the older of her two nieces to take a nap, not because it was their intention, but because sleep overcame them towards this last lap of their progress. Justina escaped this condition, for the closer to London they came the more unnerved was she, and watching Carrie loll about in an innocently soporific state, she began by considering the lecture her father had read her, the like whereof, as far as she could recall, he had not seen fit to read Caroline when the latter went to London. She did not for a moment believe that there was any loving fatherly concern for her welfare and virtue; she had been merely singled out for his displeasure, as always. On the other hand, he was not entirely a fool and capable of sensing irregularity in behaviour or attitude, particularly it if were in the realms of association between man and woman, for he always imagined the worst and he always said the worst in that respect, as his verbal abuse heaped upon his own daughter shewed. Carrie had owned that she noticed Irvin liked Justina; what if the old Duke had seen it too? Thus Justina herself began to wonder how far the presence of both her aunt and the ducal betrothed would deter the seasoned and experienced libertine that the rakish Duke supposedly was. Effectively, if he decided to pursue the younger sister, the older one could not really stop him, but her presence could serve to make him wary of Justina, who determined to inform him that Caroline was with her at her request. If he was respectful of that fact and she had misjudged him, her sister being about her would not harm relations between any of them, and his support of Lady Ashlington’s invitation to her younger niece was genuine and there was no sinister ulterior motive behind it. It was not as if Irvin was a kind soul with a reputation, notwithstanding all else, for charitable benign intervention, and she could well suspect that when he bestirred himself thus, it was in his own

selfish interests. Justina had no desire to be pursued by her future brother-in-law, for she loved Carrie and she did not want to wreck the prospect of a much-needed marriage which would bring solvency to a debt-riddled household. All the same she did not feel guilty about it, but she was not sure whether it was flattering or sickening, or whether she should suffer shame at becoming the object of his notice, about which neither was allowed to do anything – she hoped, but a rake would not care. Worst of all, he was pleasing to her eye, which said poor things about her judgment, for he was a man of bad reputation where women were concerned, and she could not stop thinking about him, the closer they came to London.

Late that afternoon the sudden emanation of stink and putrid stench from the outside brought the dozing ladies sharply into a state of wakefulness, even as Justina reached for the windows in the door panel, to shut them as quickly as she could. They were passing through a zone, explained Lizzie, and Caroline nodded, for recollecting it all, where the men who fetched the nightsoil from the houses every morning and the carters who ran a business recovering slag and refuse, even domestic, came and threw it upon man-made mounds in certain spots in what effectively made a ring about the City of London and the City of Westminster, known collectively as London. Thus anyone who travelled to London, whether by the humblest of means, namely his own two legs, or in the grandest style, was treated to this foretaste of the capital by breathing in the noisome air of its effluents, and how those whose home villages were nearby, especially on days when the wind blew in the wrong direction, survived, was a question no-one bothered to ask.

“I don’t suppose that the price of land here is very great, or the value of any freehold worth much,” quoth Justina.

“Not if the place is redolent with the contents of every withdraught (close-stool) and rogue with one ear (chamber-pot),” agreed her aunt, laughing. “Were you thinking of investing in dirty acres? These are the dirtiest you’ll get.”

Thereat they laughed and bid one another be patient until the area of evil smells that were the creation of man had been left behind, but the air was not sweet for long, for presently they were in the suburbs where they tasted the smoke of sea-coal, the favourite in every stove and hearth and called thus because it was brought from Newcastle by, sea. This was about the worst time of day for it: the best was early in the morning, when the night had let the atmosphere clear and clean itself up. That was why, in the new developments in Westminster, towards St. James’s, the streets were being laid more broadly for the most part, unlike the warren that was the City, even after it was rebuilt following the Great Fire not a century ago, with roads leading up to great squares owned by rich landlords, whose houses dominated them, and the styles were leaning away from the red brick and white stone of the Dutch style which had joined Charles II on his return to his throne, and favouring Vitruvian models, with broken or full pediments above windows and doors, pedimented porticos supported by Doric columns for the most part for their capitals were the easiest to fashion. The best of these were available on leases so long that they were as good as freeholds, and revocable if the lessee died in case an heir wanted no more to have to do with the property: that was the joy of such business, for there was no set form and the lease could be drawn up to please the freedom of the person taking the property. While Aunt Lizzie explained this, as a preamble to taking them to her town home, they passed through humbler and dingy domains, but the coachman knew better than to use thoroughfares that were dangerous, and not just owing to the human

element cowering in rags in the street: some houses were so flimsy, owing to jury-built rooms added to their upper frontages that these were likely to fall down upon the passer by and that also meant passing vehicle. Justina watched all go by from the windows and heard her aunt utter the word ‘freedom’, which suddenly filled her head: being away from home suddenly signified the best meaning of this term. There was no stentorian paternal voice keeping them all in a state of frayed nerves, there was no strictly followed timetable for each day that kept her shuttling from castle to stables and so on, there were no complaints that she was not doing enough in the potager. She was as good as free here, even if there were rules and conventions of Society at its pinnacle, which spelt social ruin if she broke them, but as she was determined to mind herself and do nothing rash, and certainly not dress man-fashion, she considered herself to be free to enjoy her Season in Town – and who knew what would sprout from it? Selina had been right: it was a new era in her life.

Era or not, certainly all was new, she marked that much, as she stepped down from the carriage and entered the house in the wake of her aunt and her older sister. This was no old castle and there were no great joists in the ceilings or vaults created by hammer beams, but stucco and gesso – pretty and plain or gilded plaster work – with white and gold painted panels and plenty of gilded carving that was not always symmetrical but somehow in harmony, such as the apron of the marble topped console table in the hall and the mirror above it in a gilded frame that could not be divided into two equal halves but was a marvel of the carver’s art. There was something at once light and solid about furniture and furnishings; Aunt Lizzie seemed well to like her woodwork to be in mahogany and parcel gilt, with French style cabriole legs and ball-and-claw or peg-top feet with interlacing splats or ladder backs to the chairs or compleat upholstery of the *bergère* style, with the ‘broken’ armrest, tripod legs for the occasional tables and even the great sofa table in the drawing room, and carpets woven to match the pattern on the drapery. Lady Orre could boast about ordering an entire dining set from Ince and Mayhew: this whole house, for as much as Justina saw of it on her first entry, was a master cabinet-maker’s masterpiece. There were a number of pieces in what was called the ‘French’ style, and some ornamentation, such as the club foot or the leaf scroll adornment were directly taken from French pattern books.

“They send us their lovely fashion dolls every year. We model our furniture on theirs to some degree. Why do we go to war with them?” wondered Justina.

“That is a good question which not even the greediest bone in the bodies of Pitt or Newcastle will answer,” said the Viscountess, noting that her young niece went to look at the gilded bracket clock on the mantel, for its face read that its movement was by S  n  vart of Paris, from which she soon came away with a shrug.

This house was as nice and as rich and as freshly appurtenanced as that of Sir Robert Orre, there was no denying that. Even the public rooms were of as respectable a size as those in any English manor. Further upstairs they went, with Lady Ashlington promising Justina a full tour of the house on the morrow. Already there seemed too much to assimilate, even with an interested glance, with silverware for all the portable lights and some of the snuff boxes or *bonbonni  res*, and enamels or worked hard-stones set into caskets, not to mention vases and Italian style *tazzas*, a sort of open cup with a wide bowl on a worked pedestal, all objects of which some had lesser examples in most of the manors Justina knew, and which had once graced her own home, in her distant and vague recollections. On a first evening

there was too much to view and admire, even in her own rooms, whither the chief housemaid took her, and where a lesser servant helped her undress. Her trunk was already there and two more girls came to unpack it: Lady Ashlington was expected and so tea and water were ready, the one served in individual rooms and the other carried. After a dusty journey when limbs were more or less cramped for want of adequate exercise than lack of space, a tub was a welcome way in which to end a day and dress up for a light and toothsome supper, in a dining room where all was finely arrayed and very bright compared to any chamber in Great Hearne Castle. This was all part of the new era, as Aunt Lizzie announced what were her plans for the following morning. At first they would go to some warehouses and shops, take a light meal at home, and attend a *matinée* at Mrs. Poyntz's, where there would be a fair shew of people of fashion, especially menfolk. Justina felt a little like butcher's meat for sale, and wondered how it was when black men and women were auctioned off in the American colonies for to work on plantations and in the planters' homes, but there were matters of supposedly greater importance to remember, as her aunt called her to attention and told her to cease musing in a dream. For the morn, they would all wear 'short' gowns, such as cleared the ground and shewed their shoes, with no need for more than a horse-hair underskirt to hold out the petticoat and the gown itself, as well as a lace apron to match the fichu laced over the bodice and perhaps a cap if it were chilly, but a *bergère* hat would crown all. For the *matinée* however, they were expected respectfully to wear hoops and full dress, with a sack back and train, and properly trimmed and curled hair. Justina thought to let those moments come when they did, and gave them little attention for the present. The evening was not spent seeking places of entertainment but Aunt Lizzie went through all the invitations and call-cards which had arrived during her absence, duly filled in her engagements calendar, and happily promised Justina some busy weeks ahead.

It all began just as she said it would, for the housekeeper shewed the sisters around the place upon the morrow after breakfast, which was served privately in each resident's dressing room. Even if all proceeded at a set pace, there was an impression that it was leisurely by comparison to the life Justina led in her family home, but as the younger sibling found when they went from room to room to view its location and its purpose and found intaglio table tops and walnut chests inlaid with marquetry and all a manner of ornaments, which some called 'objects of vertu', such as the many but matching items on the study desk, these small things made of mother of pearl and covered with tiny silver-gilt scenes and people and trees and boats in a style known as *piqué*, she thought that by the time she was become used to all these items, which were a commonplace part of her aunt's everyday life, it would be time for her to go home, hopefully with a letter from a gentleman for her father requesting an interview so that he could formally offer for her. Even Caroline, who had stayed here before, owned that she did not recall everything, but confessed that in her childhood, she had seen their home even more richly garnished, which gave a little twist of pain to her heart. The trouble was, their father had not sold most of the family possessions, for Devenish had a list of them from an old ledger, and could buy back one day, he hoped, those exchanged for money, but his Grace had given a great many things away as presents and bribes which had brought forth nothing and no-one recorded gifts whether in bona fide or otherwise. Then fortunately it was time to go out, and off went the sisters to don hats and buckled shoes with little heels, and take a small cape were draughty old London to become chilly. Lady Ashlington was charmed

at how fresh and dainty they both looked, for the fashions were very becoming to ladies now, with an emphasis on grace and elegance and movement.

Movement there was: their aunt took them to drapers, mercers' warehouses where they even ordered cloth to be woven for Justina according to her precise desire, milliners, glovers, and haberdashers, for there were streets teeming with the finest emporiums which were patronised by people of fashion, of whom the Viscountess actually met with a number, and promptly reminded them of Caroline while presenting Justina, who was unanimously declared to be very pretty if 'a little sun-kissed', but a Season in the shade and enough face powder would correct that – and it was not just Lady Polwarth who said so, but also the Duchess of Devonshire, who was most eminent and wed to a very worthy peer, involved in the government of the realm. The charmer herself did not take this very well, and of the three ladies was the only one who did not smile; she found that these females had arrogated unto themselves greater airs than were they worth, and when they were out of sight, said outright that they deserved to be roundly slapped for their pains. Her aunt may have chuckled but warned her that this was only the beginning, for this afternoon there would be more, and the day after that and the day after that. She was right, of course, but Justina encountered so many personages from the Quality in a single afternoon, and was much remarked upon by the company in a complimentary way, that, as the Viscountess put it, the game was worth the candle. They met with the Marquis Grey and his wife, Lord Spencer who was eyeing Miss Poyntz as a prospective bride, Mrs. Delany, who knew everyone, every convention and every mode, the Coke family, the ducal spouses of Queensberry, the Waldegraves, the Rockinghams, whose name was Watson but as one of them had wed the daughter of Charles I's great minister, Lord Strafford, called themselves by his surname too, so that their adult spawn were Watson-Wentworth, and not forgetting various daughters of the old and fortunately late Duchess of Marlborough, 'Mount Aetna' as she used to be known, who were all titled and in and out of scandals mostly of their own making, as the result of the vile and heartless upbringing she had given them. The omnipresent Mr. Horace Walpole was present, pouring poison on much, as was Lord Chesterfield, the Earl of Bristol who was also a bishop and a most strange character, being a Hervey, the Grenvilles – a large family of many ramifications always spoken of as a collective – and the Pulteneys were also in evidence.

So it went on, as some took Justina aside to ask after her father's affairs and were told that he was practising economy but doing well for it and nothing else, others consulted Carrie about her return, as if wondering whether she was back hunting again, whereto she replied demurely that she served as her sister's duenna and never mentioned that she was already spoken for, for then she would have had to reveal by whom, while Lady Ashlington went about all her cronies and their cronies after the manner that ladies of her age did, when they arranged the next generation of peers, ministers, generals, and governors, that would rule this nation and conquer colonies for her – admirals were not in the count: the Navy was not a popular service and the lesser sons of lesser gentlemen entered it; the creation of those who would supply its content was not decided by the aristocracy in advance. Of course everyone knew that Lizzie Ashlington was rich, but that her Hearne nieces were poor, and so they would be receiving a bride with no fortune but good health and an excellent pedigree, for these Woodvilles had survived the hecatomb of England's finest nobility that the Wars of the Roses had caused. That evening there was more social exertion, and the sisters were

presented about accordingly, meeting some of the people whom they had seen in the afternoon but also more, and Justina found herself seeking Irvin among the throng, but only recognised Annesley instead, arm-in-arm with Lord Northingham, but affected not to see either. Nor did she tell Carrie about it.

The business of staying in London and what it entailed had begun in earnest. From Oxford Street to Cheapside, during the morns, Lady Ashlington took her nieces to acquire a new wardrobe with accessories and accoutrements for one of them and add a gewgaw or two to that already purchased some years ago for the other, which was being brought up to date by the seamstress at home, who worked in the laundry offices, mending linens and lace. High fashion demanded a positively wasteful necessity of varied objects, such as yellow damask, for yellow was the mode, quilted petticoats shot with silver or gold lama, fine Saxon linens delicately embroidered in white silk, white Flanders lace, black Chantilly lace, Venetian and Spanish veils, French and Italian fans whether embroidered or painted and mounted on sticks of ebony, ivory, mother of pearl or tortoiseshell, scented Spanish leather gloves in divers pastel hues, figured dress-lengths from France and velvet especially from Lyons or Milan, not forgetting tufts and plumes made of feather, muffs stitched with the same, hats of plain or covered straw, shoes in satin or kid, shifts and stays and chemises and unmentionables – because Justina wore them still, even if few females thought of it except for horseback riding, sticks of perfume, Cologne water, respectable yardages of ribbon and lace which were necessary on hand to change any garment just by altering its trimming, and Justina did not believe that any woman could acquire so much. There were even nightgowns or a sort of informal robe, quilted waistcotes to wear under it instead of stays, stocking and garters which really did not have to be so elaborately decorated and thus costly, and caps, whether for the house, which were tied under the chin with ‘kissing-strings’, or saucy little things that crowned the head and were beribboned, for the former type still the mode after a decade ago and but demoted to the cold and the country. All this while, Justina was being further and further introduced into Society, for it was not just how many people one met, but how often one met them, to make them interested in one in order that they would put the right sort of menfolk her way, for sometimes this took a broad hint on the part of a relation, or a suggestion from a house that exercised political patronage – Hearne was not rich but if the right fellow wed his daughter he would occupy a shire post and do exactly as he was bidden – and then, there was that remote possibility that some gentleman, comfortably off, who wanted a mother for his future children, should just care about the look and the build of the heifer, and if she had been properly bred, without caring about money. Justina had to keep circulating and circulating until she was noticed, whether it was at an assembly, at someone’s *levée*, or during a morning call, either one that she was making with her aunt or one she was attending in her aunt’s own drawing room.

Indeed, an entire week passed in this busy manner and many of the items ordered at tradesfolk’s warehouses or emporia were already being delivered, so that the range of her finery on display increased, as did the entertainments that she was able to attend, which could also consist of an expedition to visit Princess Amelia at Gunnersbury – this could end in a long walk in the gardens if it were fine, except that visiting a royal person meant wearing a hoop, yet a long walk while wearing one was most uncomfortable – or a drive to the Tower, for all newcomers just had to see this place of gory memory, and if there was a party it was all

the more droll, or a musical outing by the gardens at Chelsea, near the river, which was a great success, for Lady Ashlington persuaded Lady Salisbury, who was hosting the event, to call on Justina to sing, and it was generally accepted that she had a voice that was an asset to any musical event, such as a *soirée*. There were also more serious enterprises, such as viewing St. Paul's Cathedral; then there were those who suggested going to view the lunatics in Bedlam or watch harlots beat hemp in Bridewell or even go and view a felon, any felon, being hanged at Tyburn gallows, where Widow Proctor had erected benches for the spectators and hired the use of them for money, but best of all was a Sunday service at the chapel of the Foundlings' Hospital, where the organ had been donated by Mr. Handel, and the choir was composed entirely of the children who were sheltered there. The program of events that summer was endless, at least so it seemed in Lizzie Ashlington's engagements' calendar. There was a planned visit to the Greenwich Observatory, where on one wall were two huge round clocks in wooden cases, made by the brilliant Thomas Tompion, which kept time for the meridian, which was marked outside in the grass by a white line – and after viewing all this, they sat down to a picnic with a sizeable company. There was another picnic, if the weather permitted, being held at Kew, by the Princess of Wales, Princess Augusta, but one had to be careful how much attention one paid to her, for she was carrying on the tradition of her husband who, as the King's heir, was his mortal enemy, like all heirs in the House of Hanover. There was court at St. James's, but St. James's park was a place they began regularly to frequent of morns, and met up with acquaintances from the world of fashion, just as there were Wandsworth and Hampstead Heaths, whither Justina took Jezebel and a mounted groom, for a good hard gallop, always returning with sparkling eyes and a radiant smile.

Then there were the tea-gardens, which was a euphemism for the park which belonged to Lord Ranelagh, that he had opened to the public and in which, of certain nights, the orchestra played in a Rotunda, a vaulted room nigh two hundred feet in diameter, where one could also buy things to eat, and there was dancing for one and all. This was a location where the orders of Society mingled, but it was not for the momentary levelling of the degrees in it: under the beautiful trees with their coloured lanterns, men, in particular of the upper ranks, found sport with finely dressed females whose charms were for sale, so it was wise to go there and wear a mask, as most men out on an adventure did, and as many lovely harlots likewise to advertise their availability. To those who had nothing to hide were such accessories unnecessary, and in any wise, one visit to Ranelagh was a necessity in the rising career of a belle out on her first Season in London. Lady Ashlington's advice was simple: the three of them were to stay close together, except if the young ladies were dancing, and once that was over, they were best advised to join one another again, and stay on the principal pathways as they strolled, for one reason only: if they went beyond among the shrubs and bushes at a distance from the joyous company, they could well come upon couples copulating upon the grass, and there was no other way of putting it. If Carrie smiled and lowered her head to hide her embarrassed face, her younger sister forgot herself and let fly a guffaw, but then they were at home when this mistake was committed, and no-one else but the sister and the aunt were there to witness it. All the same, when they did go to the Gardens, Justina confessed that she was truly tempted to wander, but she did not. By then, they had been staying with their aunt for not quite three weeks and Justina had two matters on her mind, the

one not very often but obtrusive now and again, and the other growing more and more weighty, as more and more wares that had been ordered for her were compleated in their manufacture, all at the cost of her aunt. The first matter was the strange fact that they had not seen Irvin, but she would have been ready to bet that she would have found him behind a bush were she to have gone to stroll alone at Ranelagh Gardens. The second matter was all this expense at which her aunt put herself for the sake of her unmarried nieces, and turned them into ladies of high fashion without the ridicule that high fashion sometimes brought, with a particular purpose in mind, and so far, it had not worked but she kept on trying. It occurred to her to dare talk of this, of an evening at supper, for the subject had begun to bother her.

“Aunt Lizzie, I am not ingrate, but I have a question: it is about this gesture you make, every time one of us reaches a particular age, which costs you a pretty penny and you spend it without counting,” she said. “I have so many new and fine objects, and so many hundreds of guineas poured into the making of me into a young lady who may easily frequent the richest circles. I wonder of me why you make this – this sacrifice, even if it does not always end in success.”

“Well, in a way it has, for when Orre and his family suggested Carrie through Mortlake – or was it the other way about – Irvin knew who Carrie was, for having seen her in Town, and agreed at once,” she declared. “Indeed, if Louisa Mortlake was at the bottom of it, it was because she had encountered Carrie here, and deemed her appropriate as a wife for her brother, disreputable as he is, so I dare to arrogate credit enough for it to myself,” beamed Lady Ashlington.

“All the same, you did not answer my question in full, dear aunt,” persisted Justina. “I am veritably embarrassed by your generosity, and there has been no limit to it.”

“My dear, I am not really counting, but I have not spent half as much on you as I did on Honoria, whom I was attempting to place at Court and that is indeed an expensive business as far as wardrobe is concerned,” assured her aunt.

“Very well, but why perform you this act of generosity, and repeatedly?” continued Justina, dismayed.

“Justina, little honey, I have only one son, and I wed a rich man who left me a very generous jointure,” explained Lady Ashlington. “My sister your mother wed a man who made her poor and gave her many daughters. This is my way of helping them, for he doubtless blames her for having them and them for existing.”

“That is a close assessment of his attitude,” intoned Justina.

“One of these days, I will probably invite Honoria back, to finish what I tried to begin, but she is not easy, and has a will of her own,” mused Aunt Lizzie. “I tried to teach her what she should look like when folk call, even if she must listen to all that they say: she was such a bum-fidget that it irritated even me. I acquired for her some embroidery things, and she began a work, but she never finished it, and all miffy, left it behind when she went home. I have kept it, for to make her compleat it if I have her over here again, but if you want to look at it, and try your hand at it, then I pray you, do so. I notice that while Carrie sews, you do not ply a needle.”

“I can sew a saddle to repair it, and likewise damaged tackle, but I was taught to embroider and then all at once we had to give up our servants and Julius and I ended up replacing them,” said Justina, “about which you know.”

“Then renew your skills on Honoria’s work and let us hope that they will never be lost, for things will happen for you to use them in order to please yourself and make your fine house even finer,” invited the Viscountess.

Justina had no reason to disagree and felt that it would be rather fun to go back to feminine pastimes than clean paddocks of manure and pull out ragwort, even if she had no objection to grooming horses. Thus after the meal, Lady Ashlington adjourned briefly to her own dressing room and fetched out the work basket she had put together for Honoria, to no avail, and gave it to Justina, watching with interest and pleasure as Caroline, who had remained a capable needlewoman, figuratively restarted her sister on a course that would lead her to better her female accomplishments at least while she could remain here to enjoy them. As for the younger of the sisters twain, she made a modest commencement, with easy stem-stitch, but then spoke of her intention on the morrow.

“As we are not out late, for once,” quoth she, “I will take an early ride tomorrow morning, so may I ask for a groom to accompany me, and that the stables have Jezebel ready, even if she is not exercised?”

“Of course, my dear,” agreed her aunt as always, for, as always, she asked permission, these not being her servants to command. “Carrie, you have a horse here, but you go out on him rarely. Why not accompany Justina?”

“That horse is Devenish’s Bumper, and I cannot control him so well if he is sparkish, and has not been lunged or given a run,” replied Caroline, “whereas Justina can exercise horses, indeed, a stableful, at that. For her, Jezebel in the morning, directly out of her stall, is bread and cheese.”

“I have become very brawny,” laughed Justina.

Thus was the matter settled and explained: the Amazon briefly abandoned her refined pursuits to arrange tomorrow’s session of early morning exercise and returned to her frame, as demure as any man would have liked. Then true to her intention, she retired for the night, but was a little melancholy as she thought of home: returning thereto after her time here in luxury and ease, let alone repose, made her heart tighten. Her usual life had taught her one thing, and that was, even if servants could be thieves and rogues and tale-carriers, they had a hard life, and she was never likely to be harsh to those who had her sort of work to execute, if ever in her future she were to have any of them to direct. Sometimes too much misery made one tired and one fell asleep in spite of it.

There was nothing especial about her departure from her aunt’s house the next morning. The sun was low in the sky and the sky was nevertheless a bright gold because of it. Her escort was in half livery, and as he waited for her with her mount, his colleagues rode off taking out the horses from his mistress’s mews, including poor Bumper. When she asked where they intended to go, he replied that they were bound for Tothill Fields, but away from the Artillery ground, where there was some good galloping to be had and not as far off as Wandsworth or Hampstead, and safer than the way to Lamb’s Conduit Fields. So she agreed that they, she and he, should follow, for it would remind her of how she exercised the horses at home and she felt that she should not like to be too far from the memory of her life there, so that she would not much rue the end of her life here, despite the poverty, the pale and twisted people on the streets and the smell of bad drainage in many areas. In fact, it pleased her to help, for she also took charge of Bumper, who was more used to her hand than that of the men

leading him now, so merrily he was ceded to her. All the same, after they had crossed the remaining township and reached Tothill, she wanted to fly off in another direction, fleet across the fields, while they meant to take a turn towards the north and the Ranelagh estate – for it pleased the men to see grand fellows in wigs askew coming home in sedan chairs after falling asleep behind a bush. So she gave Bumper up and they parted company, she and her escort turning southward and the others going on. Once past the Artillery Ground, the mare, feeling the soft dust of a good path under her hooves as she cantered along, and sensing that speed was on her mistress's mind, grew frisky and mettlesome, prancing and dancing and waiting for to be released. Justina knew what she wanted and she had all her energy and verve, so gradually the rein was released, until there was nothing to hold her. A horse that took off in all directions, or so it sometimes seemed, when suddenly given the bridle, was a horse who had been ill-schooled and was not yet at one with its rider; a horse who had its head but still waited, knowing what was to come, was a polite horse, with whom its load was in harmony. Justina, riding side-saddle, gave the mare a small tap on the flank with the inside of her heel and that was just the signal the excellent creature wanted, for the bit was slack, the leathers were slack, and even the equestrienne's hold was slack. Nor did she shoot off like something expelled from the equipment on the artillery ground, for she was not bolting out of fright. She paced herself and grew faster and faster and faster still, so that even the chaperon had difficulty in keeping up with her. Jezebel was a mighty mare indeed and together, horse and rider flew away together into the realms of ecstasy.

It was as Justina was taking account of just how pleasurable this was, when she thought she beheld a brownish streak out of the corner of one eye, and even if she refused to be distracted by others from her simple pleasures, she turned to see – what resembled a darkly clad horseman astride a great bay mount thundering along the grass as if to encounter or intercept her. Regretting that she had outpaced her escort, Justina swiftly wheeled about her mare, as if to return to him, and there he was, sure enough, hurrying along, but when she glanced over her shoulder, she saw that the big dark horseman had turned after her, and was hurtling along as if it were his intention to catch her up as swiftly as he could, and what foul play he intended before she reached her approaching guard, she truly did not want to imagine. However, a voice sounded behind her, and it had a familiar tone.

“Lady Justina! Lady Justina!” hailed the mystery rider.

It was the voice that had sung Italian words down her ear and its owner seemed to be trying to catch up with her, so she slackened, but did not stop until her groom was nigh, whereupon everyone slowed down to a whirling trot, as the servant whisked himself out of the way, the lady turned to view her pursuer, and the last-mentioned veered aside for he had been coming after her a little too fast.

“Lady Justina, O, in faith,” expelled the Duke of Irvin, sounding breathless.

“Why do you pant, sir, when it has been your valiant mount who has run this far?” she challenged, and the servant with her bowed his head to conceal his mirth.

“Dear lady, do you never begin your day with a greeting?” reproved his grace.

“I have had a phrenzied fright, sir: I first mistook you for some well-mounted bravo or some abductor,” she rejoined.

“Upon m' soul, have I the air of a rum padder (well-mounted and well-armed highwayman), that you should imagine such a thing? I thought that you were of the sort who

lived too close to the wood to be afraid of an owl (one who does not frighten easily),” he replied, sounding reproachful, while she was confounded at his sudden appearance.

“What are you doing here?” was the best she could think of saying at this moment.

“Why, the same as you, but being a man, I need no chaperon,” he answered. “Shall we ride on a bit of ways?”

This suggestion was made merely to enable him to talk to her without the groom listening, for the way in which they were all presently juxtaposed caused him to seem as a part of their conversation group. So she obliged him by turning her mare about again, and he likewise realigned his steed, but she still turned to look over her shoulder and beckoned to the other to stay close to them both. Of course Irvin saw.

“Don’t say that you still think me the purveyor of crimes and ravishings and rapine at whose imaginary presence you took such fright?” he snorted, more derisive than angry.

“Never mind that. Where have you been all this while? You left the country before we did and I assumed that you came here, but then I could have *presumed* wrongly and you went to another shire,” she pursued.

“Not so; I have been all this while in London Town,” he confirmed with a twinkle.

“Why, I have been about the haunts of the Quality for coming on to three sev’nnights, and I have not seen you. I have seen enough of your sisters and brothers-in-law and I have even seen your dear friend Anus-ley, but your grace, never.”

“That is because I have been playing least in sight.”

“How can you do that when there are events where the guest is announced after he leaves the receiving line to enter the company?”

“By requesting the hostess to dispense wi’ that formality. They don’t want their daughters to wed me, but they are still afraid enough of me to do my bidding.”

“You make a fine betrothed. Your intended is in Town, and you chuse not to call on her, but you waylay me on a morning ride. I do not intimate that it was no coincidence you came here but playing least in sight in this landscape is not difficult to do and I would never ha’ recognised you had you not wilfully come after me and called me by name.”

“I will make good that lapse, if a lapse it is, for when your sister has met any of mine, all she has done is smile and curtsy to Vinnie because she is a Countess and nod to Lou because they are equals yet and Baronets don’t make the weight, as mere cap acquaintances might, without even a pause to exchange words as could future sisters, whereas you always contrive to come trailing after her with your attention on something else so that you neither see nor greet them at all. Lavinia says nothing of it but Lou is certain that you bear a grudge since her spouse danced with and laughed at you during your coming-out ball.”

“I work with horses; horses bear grudges against those who misuse them right until their dying day,” she dismissed. “Besides I am not engaged to any of Carrie’s sisters- and brothers-in-law-to-be, and their connexion wi’ me is even more distant.”

“Are you reprimanding me for neglecting my betrothed?”

“Actually, you are right, sir, so to do: let her have a foretaste of what is awaiting her,” she sneered. “As for her civilities without ardour to your grace’s sisters, do you really think she is fool enough to expect that they will be her friends after she is wed to you? Let them all establish terms of amicable reserve among them, and the man shall have his mare again.”

“You talk of my family, my sisters, as if you know them,” he scoffed, with mocking

mirth, but she shook her head.

“Siblings don’t interfere in the marriages of one another, and when they do, blood ties determine how their judgment devolves,” she stated. “We are likely to be very much beholden to you all our lives long, so we keep our heads, and seek no familiarity with the sisters of the man to whom we are going to be so deeply indebted.”

“Are your brothers past masters of the noble art of duello?” he inquired.

“Devenish had fencing lessons and can probably defend himself with respectability, but in those days, the ribbon ran thicker than it does now,” she replied. “In poor Julius’s case, as full dress obliges men of his birth to wear a hanger, he does, and that is about the whole of it. Why, did you want them fighting, for some reason?”

“Not so, but your la’ship has a good parrying action of the tongue,” he noted, at once frosty and a little covetous, his gaze hooded, and it affrighted her. “I note that you do not ride astride here.”

“Even if I wore linsey-woolsey, with leathern stays, like barrow-bunters and the mobocracy, I would find myself standing in my own way when I cleaned out stables and the like,” she answered.

“When I saw you first go down with that mare, because Ned Fool Robert Orre threw rocks at her, she had no tackle on but a halter and a bit of rope. How did you guide her?”

“Leg cues, which cannot be given side-saddle, and so when I exercise the horses, I dress accordingly. They judge me not, so neither should you.”

“Did I ever judge you?” he recoiled.

“Did you ever! You used me as if I were some easy wench, or were you having fun at the fact that I probably looked as if I bought my boots in Crooked Lane and my stockings in Bandy-Legged Walk (to have crooked legs)?”

“Have you seen yourself dressed like a stable hand?” he asked, narrowing his eyes.

“I don’t have time to admire my debased image in a mirror. Why? Veal will be cheap, for the calves are gone to grass (spindle shanks)?” she snorted.

“Anything but,” he dissented.

“You always knew I was a girl, did you not?” she shot.

The Duke nodded slowly, looking dignified under the lie of his gold laced tricorne.

“Then why did you fumble?” she snapped. “Don’t say it was only a game, for you were bargaining for my sister then.”

“If I remember rightly, at that moment, the whole cake was dough (project failed) or almost,” he retorted.

“So you took revenge with indecencies upon the younger sister, who was indecently clad so deserved it, and instead, should have been in white and gold and all maidenly, to go shovelling horse-dung and wash *pavé*,” she grunted.

“You really should not use words like fumble. I grant that yours were special circumstances that obliged to dress as you did, but your idiom has always been somewhat at fault,” he decried suavely.

“If I may not say fumble, what am I to say? Should I describe exactly what you did, but that would be rather long-winded, and it strikes me that I haven’t heard a single apology from you about anything, so, althô I will tell her nought, I know at least what my sister may expect. I suppose it will be her fault, in the end: she will be big-bellied making feet for small

shoes, and what else could you do meanwhile, after all?"

"Continue to talk with such unbridled insolence, and I will spank you," he threatened coldly, sounding and looking sinister.

"I've heard of flogging cullies (men who like to be beaten), but folk who will flog in order to enjoy themselves? "Why, what a fine teacher you make, even if it is not nouns and pronouns that you purvey," she smiled acidly, but he was horror-struck.

"Where in the name of Old Harry (the Devil) did you learn language like that?" he demanded humorously, but not really surprised.

"My workmate is a man of one and twenty, and sometimes he and the neighbouring squirearchy's menfolk meet over a cool tankard or negus and talk bawdy, so he relates what happened last night, to me while we work," she related. "The explanation is as easy as tilly."

"Thank Heavens for that," he smirked. "Do you want a short gallop?"

"No. My chaperon cannot keep up with us and I would rather go home now," she declined. "Be pleased to feel under no obligation henceforth: I will not even say that I say you. One tiny question, *thô*, how can someone of your – er – build, and all dressed in black, hide in a room full of silly prigs dressed in pink satin and all priding themselves on being no higher than five feet six inches?" she pursued.

"By not being in the same room as you," he answered plainly.

That was a fair answer, but she did not gain his consent to let her ride home with the stable hand, and rode at her side all the way, at first at a fleet canter, and then, on the cobbled streets, at a noisy trot, or a necessary but brisk walk. He did not talk at first: there was a myth that if a woman was left in silence for long enough she would break it but Justina knew as much about spurious man-made myths denigrating womankind as the next man, and sternly held her tongue. All the same, by now, they had passed a number of early morning pedestrians of a patrician look and she almost wondered aloud about what sort of tattered state was her reputation for being with him, but he sensed from her observation of them that there was something not quite right about her thoughts, and sought to examine them, commencing with the most basic of matters.

"How find you this great and much vaunted Metropolis of ours?" he asked.

"Dirty, except for certain parts, rather malodorous, but interesting, and equipped with places to visit for pleasure as much as exercise, but riddled with abjectly poor people, of the like one comes upon in the country as vagroms, except that they seem to be part of the scene here permanently, and if one asks what they are, many are in a profession of artisanship, but very decayed for want of steady work and the gin they consume in vast quantities, which I am told, is the fault of the landowners, who will readily sell corn for distillation than for bread, as they obtain a better price for it, and knowing my father, he is doubtless among the sort who do, for few among the rich or the Quality care for their fellow man. There is a treatise by St. Clement of Alexandria which is entitled 'The Rich Men who are Saved' and althô there was no gin or laws to restrict its distillation, I am sure that the present Duke of Hearne meets not the conditions that will include him."

"Why, I *am* knocked," he marvelled.

"He was persecuted in his own land and went to live in Palestine, which was no longer Israel, but, I believe, the population that used to be there before, and something else, which made me to wonder, why we read of Kanaanites and Jebusites as such wrong and evil people

in the Bible,” she mused, with a dissatisfied frown.

“That is because they did not write the story,” he answered. “He who writes the story gets to manufacture the truth. The Old Testament is full of it. Where in Deuteronomy are listed the nations it is permitted to wipe out, the Babylonians are missing, *even if* we are told that of the antient races, *even if* all are cousins one of the other, they are supposedly the worst. Why is this? That is because the most reliable version of the Old Testament was written while the Chusen People, as they called themselves, as the Pilgrim Fathers called themselves, as Cromwell’s Puritans called themselves, and as Scotch Presbyterians still call themselves, were allegedly enslaved in Babylon, so including Babylonians among the peoples to be massacred into extinction would have been impolitic, considering what else they had written about that kingdom, which must have allowed them great latitude in freedom of speech and penmanship if that is what they could say about it. Take the New Testament, and the life of Christ, as recorded by the Evangelists: in some details, they agree like all the clocks of London. I don’t deny the existence of Christ by any means, but four different stories of the life of one so great and important, by men who lived close to his time, and were worthy and holy men, enough to be canonised by the church? In those days becoming a saint was serious stuff, and saints were genuinely saintly: not like now, when one needs but have the right sort of politics, amass a fortune enough to pay the piper by one’s will, and the thing is done.”

“You know your Bible inside out and they call you a rake? Admittedly you are not godly, and you dare to criticise what you read almost to the point of unforgivable blasphemy,” she genuinely disapproved.

“Maybe that is why I give Nature a fillip (indulge in wine and women) and the Bible as well. Yet to return to London, which in the country is regarded as some sort of Babylon, even if I suspect that Babylonians, in their own idolatrous way, were more godly – god being in the plural. To begin with they were not all slaves to gin, I am willing to wager on that. How do you really like London? Plenty of pretty things to buy? Fine shops as far as Cheapside with wares that make the mouth water? At least a score of fashionable mercers who will weave you a length of cloth to order, and a gross more of drapers who will sell you the finest Irish poplins and French damasks, flocked with fine velvet to boot? Not forgetting the silversmiths who purvey objects of vertu from snuff boxes to glove cases imported all the way from Naples? Every foreign tourist, howsoever hateful of the poke-pudden (Englishman), gives London credit about it being the finest market in Christendom. All that is left is for someone to come along and say that we are but a nation of shopkeepers.”

“There is a danger that, despite the smell and the misery that one sees from one’s carriage window as one travels to Cheapside, or for to be given thrills of fear in the Tower, one could like it well, but I am already telling myself that I must see the Quality as a kind of well-populated trap, for otherwise I will rue it most fearfully when I have to go home, having become like my Lord Mayor’s Fool (fond of everything good),” she averred.

“Dear lady, you belong to the Quality,” he reminded.

“Albeit monetarily a bit kim-kam (out of order),” she stated, “and that means that I do not wholly belong to it, but in a somewhat reduced form.”

“Do you think much of home?” he inquired.

“When alone at night, after my prayers, when I seek Divine blessing and protection for my brothers and sisters left behind, and hope that my father will not do something to bring

pinnock to pannock (cause ruin)," she owned.

"Your sister Lady Honoria is not forgotten in Town: when the combination of Orre and Mortlake suggested that I seek a bride among the Hearne daughters, I wanted to make sure, at the risk of offending you, that they did not have her in mind. When she was here a few years ago, she distinguished herself as a very highty-tighty maiden, and altho I sat in many a parlour circle including her, she noticed little beyond herself and the immediate interlocutor with whom she was arguing. You pray for her too?"

"She is very unhappy," said Justina.

"Absence makes the heart grow fonder," he grunted cynically. "I would say, saving your la'ship's favour, that she is most unhappy of all in herself."

"Then if I mention her in my nocturnal prayers, perhaps God will help her assuage her pained soul," she said simply.

"That was spoken like a naïve singleton (simpleton)," he disapproved. "God, if He ever helps anyone, is supposed to help those who help themselves. Whatever reduction of infelicity she enjoys will have to be set in motion by herself, trite as it may sound."

"It sound more callous and insensitive than trite," she declared plainly.

"That is interesting," he ruminated aloud. "Folk, usually younger than me in age, rarely dare counter what I say, for they are either too unsettled by my presence, or afraid that I will eat them alive. They do not calmly argue away as if it were the most natural thing to do."

"I was not arguing, I was offering commentary that was dissentient."

"Now you sound like a splitter (lawyer who splits hairs)."

"Perhaps I do argue, for I am not bird-mouthed (apt to mince matters) and, perhaps it is because you always have to come out with something disagreeable, whether a deed or a postulation, but I know I should not, for it is to you that we all look for to save us, so you pretty-ish well own our bumkins (bums)," she retorted, now sharp of tone and truculent of manner. "So in the name of Lady Caroline, your intended, and the antient House of Hearne, which is more squeak than wool (more shew than substance), I apologise."

"That took courage," he mused. "Now, with your permission, to return to your prayers, do you pray for something in particular, something you have set your heart upon, Lady Justina, or do you pray because they baptised you Christian?"

"I have two most important pleas, but why should I disclose them to you?"

"I pretty-ish well own your bumkin, remember?"

"You don't own my soul, but here goes, otherwise you will imagine something lurid and sordid and fetid. I pray that all the money my aunt has spent on me, to bring me to Town under the eye of Society, will be handsomely paid off by an offer from some decent fellow, even if he is handsome bodied in the face (ugly), but with a fine estate in land; I would prefer that to a rich tulip, and a beau. I also pray that in my absence my father will not sell or give away something from our home, even if there is precious little to part with, but we have a fine pollarded oak dining table, and in my room is my little cabinet, which is all small drawers and very sweet, with pollarded elm and an ebony inlay. Once Lady Orre made much of it and I said nothing, even if my mother came whining to me the next day wailing 'Make sacrifices' in the hope that if I gave our grasping neighbour the cabinet, she would let us have some spending cash. I told Julius to mind my affairs but he can be such a jingle-brains and I don't want to come home to find all my favourite effects given away or sold for the vainest of

silliest reasons.”

“And that is all?” he asked, looking as if he did not know whether to laugh or lament. “The trouble with you is that you have no ambitions.”

“Ambitions are for men, to become Vice-Admiral if one is a middy (midshipman), or to be like General John (Marlbrough who won Blenheim) if one is given a lieutenant’s commission, or to seek a post in government if one was born to a rich dukedom, like you,” she answered. “Of course, a Quality lady, in the midst of things, may, like the Coke sisters, aspire to becoming Chief Mistress to the Royal Wardrobe or Mother of the Maids (Head Lady-in-Waiting – slang: Mama in a brothel), but such posts cost more to occupy than the fee they generate, and I chase prestige less than the practical comfort of knowing that one has a full purse at the end of the day, for my father has chased prestige all his life and lectured us all many a long hour about it, which has sold us nothing in the market.”

“Is this what the repetitive drudgery of being a stable hand done to you?”

“Perhaps, but I like horses, and the worst part of my day thus is when I must stop everything to run home and ready myself for dinner. It is better when we have a full day and must take bread, cheese and cider from the kitchen door.”

“S Death, you are now far from London Town and its fashionable habitations,” he remarked and reeled back in his saddle.

“I am about to return to it nimbler than eels in a sandbag, for we are not far from my aunt’s abode,” she noted.

He uttered an acknowledgment, with a small nod, but was quiet after that, while she looked about her at every house they passed, which finally made him curious, so that, as they prepared to pull up before the door that was their destination, he asked her a question.

“Is there something the matter?” he wondered, his expression hard.

“I wonder who is curtain-twitching,” she said.

“In other words, it is damaging to be seen with me?” he sneered. “Why, we are almost brother and sister.”

Justina gave him a thoughtful look, for she would have liked to tell him how she really assessed that statement as the flimsiest of excuses, for, despite what he had said of Honoria, he probably meant to wed one Woodville sister and have all the others, but stark and explosive truths often provoked more damage than cure, and he doubtless knew as much, which, to her, explained his smug demeanour. She was caught out, and she would be again, for the whole family was in thrall to this man and his endless fortune, otherwise, had she a grain of freedom of power, she would have reckoned his pennies for him – and if she had for a moment thought that he was intruding upon her innermost thoughts out of sympathy, she was a fool, who was much mistaken, for all he wanted to know was, her secrets, which were a passport to controlling her better. Candour would not promote the continued engagement of her sister so she had to retreat and leave him victorious, for being afraid to say more and thus seeming rude to him. On the other hand he had indeed guessed rightly about her inspecting the house frontages for how many folk had seen Lady Ashlington’s niece ride early in the morning with the disreputable Duke of Irvin, but she dared not tell him so: sometimes she had to agree with him against her will, and sometimes she was best advised to keep her mouth shut, as she did even when she espied her aunt at an upper window, watching them as they arrived, for she must have heard the horses’ hooves slacken nigh her house, and sure enough,

they stopped outside it, so Justina indicated her to her unwanted companion. At his most charming, he bowed in his saddle and removed his hat in salutation, in reply whereunto Lady Ashlington smiled and nodded, all of which was distraction enough for Justina to vault off her horse, hanging on to her skirts and train, lest they betrayed her and remained behind, caught on a piece of saddlery. At that, the Duke looked down at her, shaking his head, a merry smile upon his visage, for he knew that her gesture was one of escape, but then she turned and beamed at him, not with satisfaction at outsmarting him, but to trap him in another way.

“Now I pray your grace to call on Carrie,” she invited. “I am sure my aunt will approve and welcome you.”

“I will call, but I would that you were present,” he stipulated.

“Me? I count for nothing,” she dismissed. “A very good day to your grace.”

As Lady Ashlington, whose appearance was that of one in ‘dishabilly’ with floods of lace and the pale silk of a wrapping gown, did not send out a footman to invite him in for tea, or even coffee, he saluted her once again and rode off, with another smile for Justina, so she sent her horse off with the groom and went indoors, whereupon a footman magically appeared to let her in because she was alone.

“I went for a gallop over Tothill Fields and he spoilt my ride,” was Justina’s greeting. “Good morrow, aunt. I would have been back much later for I would have stayed out longer.”

Her aunt only laughed, and ere long, all three ladies were taking coffee in the salon after breakfast, while Justina told her story, and Caroline laughed heartily at her for thinking that Irvin was a possible abductor, while Aunt Lizzie commended her on insisting that he call on Caroline after all, but without inviting him in.

“That is for you to do, aunt; I cannot arrogate such privileges unto myself in your house, but it will not do for him to refrain from calling him on his intended, so I dared insist on that much,” quoth Justina.

Of that, had their aunt to approve, but then the question was left as to why the Duke had not manifested himself earlier. So, Justina recounted the major part of their colloquy, but omitted the fact that the Duke had kept his distance from Honoria whom he seemed not to like, even if she owned that he had stated he could remember her. Also absent from this account were the probing inquiries into what Justina most prayed for, and the fact that Justina was afraid that her stint in Town would briefly make her homecoming difficult as well as her presumption that the Duke was going to treat himself to all the Woodville sisters, one legally, and the others in ‘criminal conversation’ or adultery. However, she did reveal that they had disagreed about what she called ‘a trifle’ and she told him that she had to concur or stay her tongue, for he as good as owned them all.

“You must be civil to him, Justina,” counselled Carrie, firm but gentle. “He will end by not liking you.”

“He must not be encouraged to probe and be nosey, nor should he be allowed to flirt,” countered Justina.

“I know, but I’d rather he flirted with you than pursued someone less sympathetic,” quoth Lady Caroline. “There is no harm in flirting if it keeps him agreeably occupied. As long as you don’t make a fool of yourself, or are taken in by what he says.”

“He is very easy to fall in love with, or even in lust with, to coin a phrase,” stated the Viscountess. “Let him flirt with you, for what he said about your being almost brother and

sister is nonsense now, but it may become true later. Humour the man: he is hobbyhorsical (whimsical), and I'll bet a hat that his latest whim is to pester his sister-in-law, whom he will not scruple to tumble if she lets him, beware of that."

"I was really of the opinion that he lay low to save Carrie's name – and mine, for who would wed Irvin's sister-in-law," owned Justina, "except the unscrupulous with a hand on their half-pence (have an eye on the main chance), thinking that the alliance will bring in the plate fleet (make them a fortune). All the same, 'tis shabby of him at least not to call here privately."

"Perhaps there are people from whom he would keep knowledge of his betrothal, until it is too late, for if they know sooner, they may desert him," pronounced Caroline, with a rather tristful air.

Justina, who had not penetrated this mystery, turned to her aunt, who seemed disconcerted, and went to sit by Carrie and take her hand.

"Those are things of which brides-to-be shall not think, at this stage," she sighed.

"You see, once the jig is up, there is no sense in deserting him, so she will stay on as my secret rival, and I'd rather not know who she is, honestly," sighed Caroline.

"That is how it is among the Quality," concluded Lady Ashlington. "Often, thô, a spousy will sow his wild oats until middle age and then settle down as a humdrum (husband or wife) with his humdrum, as proper as can be. There is no accounting for men."

"In the beginning it is all rather hypocritical, thô," observed Caroline. "I know how many days go to the week: a hypocrite fathered me and a hypocrite will wed me, but the latter has the advantage of being rich."

"Does he live far from here?" asked Justina.

"Within a spit (the depth of a spade blade) and stride; you could walk to it," supplied her aunt. "He did not come far out of his way to see you to your door."

"What a relief," sighed her younger niece. "He lives in a big house in a square and he owns all the freeholds, or so I know."

"That, my dear, is the height of fashion, if one can manage it," confirmed Lady Ashlington. "Irvin owns much property, in London and some four counties, as well as his family seat, which is partly enclosed and brings him such an income as would keep him at hack and manger without his needing to touch the rest. The interesting thing is that he enclosed land upon which copyholders and lesser husbandmen eked out a meagre living, barely able to pay rents and now they live on there, deprived of their land, but as land-workers in his service, tending the great cornfields and herds that he owns and that brings them a decent wage, so everyone wins in the end. Not his the sort of enclosure that dispossesses the tenant and drives him homeless to the towns to swell the ranks of the mobility (the lower orders of no fixed address)."

"The sort that is usually sucked into crime owing to want," said Justina, "about which all country folk are warned, if young, when they say that they don't want to man father's patch but go to London to make their fortune, like Dick Whittington. I hear that complaint all the time from our grooms who are old, and smoke a pipe or two after church on Sunday with their peers in age, bringing to the tavern all their troubles to tell."

"Well, Irvin's enclosures are what you call 'responsible' enclosures. He has not contributed to the criminality of any large town," said Lady Ashlington. "'Tis said that he

even owns land in France, Paris, to be exact. There was a rumour that he was told to sell up, for a poke-pudden should have no land there, among the enemy.”

“The French dared tell him to do that?” cried Caroline.

“Nay, puggy (term of endearment for child), it was our own government,” groaned the Viscountess. “Still according to the rumour, the reply was: ‘let ’em trundle’ (get lost!).”

“That is the correct reply; an Englishman may buy land where he wants,” snorted Justina. “’Tis more honest than taking it from different coloured people just because one thinks they are savages, like the so-called pilgrims did in 1620 on the Mayflower to establish a New Israel. Just what did the Mayflower when she returned home? She joined the ranks of the navy that was loyal to Parliament and turned against the King. I have no idea why we ever still call it the Royal Navy for there has been very little that is royal about its earlier behaviour, and since then it has distinguished itself by no more than robbery on the High Seas. The Governor of South China had a nickname for Admiral Anson: our late beloved hero himself, to wit, Le Gran Ladrone, after the principal land mass among the Ladrones, islands so named for being pirate infested.”

“One cannot imagine Chinese Mandarins as having a sense of humour,” chuckled Carrie. “The things you know, Justina.”

“The things I read, you should say. When I was with Irvin, I mentioned the writings of St. Clement of Alexandria, and from what I understood, he seemed not unfamiliar with them. He may be a rake, but he is a learned rake, and he knows his Bible better than any guidepost (clergyman), even if he is totally irreligious and ungodly,” related Justina.

The two other ladies exchanged glances.

“Now you really have me surprised,” confessed Lizzie Ashlington.

Actually, the matter which surprised Justina herself was how Irvin had found her today about Tothill.

NINE

The Duke of Irvin, now having surfaced in the scuff of Society, seemed destined to haunt their whole day in some way, for when they went out to walk in St. James's Park for their morning exercise, they encountered Lady Mortlake, who came boldly up to Caroline and asked her whether her brother had not made a nuisance of himself during her ride earlier, and no-one among the three ladies corrected her about the identity of the person he had encountered, but assured her that all was well, wandered off on their way and left her feeling as if she had been treated like an inquisitive nuisance, while they debated how she had the story wrong, for either she was wrapped up in herself too far, correctly to hear anything recounted to her, or her brother had deliberately misled her himself. While in the Park they also learned from Lady Orford that there was to be an extraordinary debate in both Houses this afternoon, and so Lady Ashlington took her nieces to the peeress's gallery, where she was allowed by sufferance, for her son was not yet wed, to bring a peeress of his own, for to watch how the current Administration of the land functioned or malfunctioned in most cases, or at least, to listen to speeches, but before they entered the Parliament buildings in Whitehall, which had not changed since Pym led his gang to war against the monarch, judicially and illegally murdering Lord Strafford on the way, the Viscountess paid one of the ushers serving in the Commons to come and seek them if Mr. Pitt spoke, for no matter what he said, whether or not one agreed with his policies, and whatever one thought of the kind of figure he presented, his speeches were worth listening to, for he was one of the land's greatest orators, if typical in his prejudices, for he hated the French and was a fervent advocate of war with France. Why, then the French ambassadress was watched for the fashions she was dressed in, nevertheless, and why gentlemen had clothes ordered in France which, when they wore in England, earned them insults in the streets, made little sense to Justina as she settled down by Caroline, with Lady Spencer at her side, from another visiting party, but not unfriendly at least. Before she could offer any commentary on these anomalies, two tall gentlemen in black entered the chamber of Peers below and she recognised one of them: it was Irvin. The other, whose features were slightly less refined and whose manner was grim, apart from having a longer nose, was the Duke of Whitfordshire, the reputed Catholic, but also a relation of Irvin's himself. Justina could remember that he had attended her ball, but she had not met him.

"Take a good look at your family, Carrie," she joked, lowering her voice, so that her jest remained private, and her sister sighed.

The debate actually grew quite furious, and Justina had no idea that the peers could be so rude and crude, but it had its civilised moments, and one of these was when the Duke of Irvin stood up to explain why Sir Robert Walpole had not liked to go to war any more than the Cardinal de Fleury, for it cost money, and that waging war for colonies was enough, for one could rob the native princes or chiefs or use their men instead of hiring Hessian troops, but entering a war brewing on the Old Continent was not always a successful thing, as Denain had shewn. The English had this tendency to win battles but lose wars and with it, credibility. At last, the old Country was able to feed her own population – partly because that population was voluntarily killing itself by the excessive consumption of gin – for right until the later Stuart monarchs had misruled this isle with the collusion of divers ministers, England had not produced enough food for her people, and doubtless the successive governments hoped that they would starve to death in winter to set the balance straight. As there could be no standing

army in England – the Civil war had taught them that – they had to rent cannon fodder from the German states, which did not allow the ministers to be rid of a surplus population, but that was all right, except that the German princes wanted gold, and obtaining it from North America and especially India, was the way to maintain this solvency. It was a very superficial policy, for one day the red man and the dark-brown man would turn, and send the white man back to starvation and insolvency on his island, unless he found someone else to bleed of their fortunes, but it was working so far, so they were invited to confront the French at a distance, limit their support of Frederick II of Prussia to words, and remain on fair terms with the Court of Versailles, for after all, what would happen if the French ceased to send Fashion Dolls over every year? Irvin spoke well, but he was censorious of everything the government was doing and even if he advocated certain actions it was with reservation, but he was droll. His idiom raised much laughter on both sides of the House and Lord Townshend swore that it would have given Pitt an apoplexy to hear. He was most adept at silencing those who would interrupt him, and if someone rose with a challenging question he was able to turn it about so that the challenger found himself having to answer some weakness in his own argument. Not that he was merely pacific: he knew a thing or two about money, for more war would make the currency fall in value and imported goods were going to be more expensive than ever.

When he finished speaking, and silenced his opponents, Lady Ashlington suggested that they should depart, and home they went, to ready their toilettes for a rout at Lord and Lady Waldegrave's, where Irvin did not decide to remove himself from the rooms in which the Viscountess and her nieces were and instead, went directly up to greet them the moment they entered after being announced. As a shew of good faith he took only the safe aunt on his arm, as the sisters followed, knowing it was a ploy, and once he had deposited them in a conversation circle, he left them to obtain for the nieces their *carnets de bal*, into which he had already inscribed his name, once in each one. For all that had been said of his reputation as a rake, it was not true that he was eschewed like a plague-carrier except by bored young wives who wanted an intrigue without the complication of a 'tomorrow', for every belle whom he addressed for a dance was at pains to find a place for him in her carnet, and Justina marvelled at the mystery of his talents at remaining hidden under their noses, while participating in dancing, parlour circles, banquets – tho' granted these were held at many separate little tables – and even musical *soirées*, when surely someone had asked him to sing. For the resourceful, there were doubtless a hundred ways to hide in plain sight, curtains or vases on pedestals to dash behind, the other end of another set in which to prance, a sore throat that could do no justice to song, and, as he had said, the precaution of being in a different public room whenever possible, such as the card room, a greatly popular place with the company, but where the sisters Woodville could and would never venture. The ease with which he moved among all these notables, who knew him and bowed with outward deference, doubtless to his money, belied the supposition that he was not considered marriageable, nevertheless, and had to resort to aristocracy in desperate financial straits to find a wife. Justina tried to watch him without his noticing it, and knew that she was not as seasoned as was he in the art of concealment, but she perceived that he was a terrible flirt, sometimes genial, occasionally tart, and to all intents and purposes, popular with females for his stunning, macabre good looks, but that probably contributed to his fame as a philanderer.

Unlike their fellow aspirants in Society, Justina and Caroline were careful to remain

unobtrusive where he was concerned, in particular the former, who wished to seem suitable not just to gentlemen but to their hawk-eyed mothers. Except when dancing, they remained together, for that was why Justina had brought her sister to London, now that Irvin was apparent, and it occurred to her that he was probably surprised to see Caroline present, which constrained him to enjoy himself away from where she could see him, and also, that he guessed she was here to protect her sister from him, so he hid himself from the younger one too. Now and again he did indeed disappear, but Justina watched for him, for her own sake as well as her sister's, which was why and how she found out that he never danced twice with anyone, and that all his partners, as far as she could see, and all she could not, were merry in his society, except one, most notably so. This was a tall, young matron, blonde without pallor about the eyes, with a gait that was noble and haughty, and built of a mould that would have served for a plaster goddess, but also of a rare and celestial beauty. Clad in gleaming yellow figured satin, she seemed golden from head to foot, but for the ivory of her bosom and throat, around which she had tied a stark, black velvet ribbon, which was her only neck ornament, even if there were diamonds in her comb and at her ears and about her wrists. She certainly had much male attention, that too Justina made sure she noticed, but the reason for being an exception to all of Irvin's jolly female partners was that she was grand and grave; indeed, she never smiled once, and the young onlooker, of whose existence she doubtless knew nothing, wondered why. It was true that Justina noticed her because she was effectively spying on Irvin, but she began to wonder who this golden belle was, for in her own opinion, she was the epitome of female beauty in any time or clime. Of course she had been about here hitherto, of course she was seen in Society previously, but Justina was gradually coming to learn of faces and names and every time she went anywhere, discovered that there was a crowd of them that she had missed from the last time. All the same she was astonished at herself for not having much noted the presence of this beauteous female. She became curious, she asked after this object of her attention, and the person whom she chose to question was Mr. Horace Walpole, who was a man about Town, and who knew everything and everybody. He was also most astute, so she needed to have her wits about her when she spoke thus to him, but deeming frankness to be the best policy, went about her business accordingly. Besides, like her, he did not happen to be dancing, and was within easy reach.

"Pray, Mr. Walpole," she began, "I am still finding my feet, and I am most surprised of me to have missed noticing so lovely a creature."

"The Quality abounds in creatures who are lovely for one reason or another," he intoned, for he was very much a waspish man of the world.

"That will I not gainsay, if you have noticed it," she agreed, "but pray, who is the golden goddess dancing with the Duke of Irvin?"

"In Malay, gadis means 'virgin' and we use the word goddess for one," he sang. "I take it you were referring to her looks, for she is a widow."

"I am not probing into her affairs: I merely wish to know who is who, as a newcomer here," she owned.

"She is the Lady Deborah Herriard," was his cryptic response.

"Herriard as in the Herriards of Northingham?"

"The surname of her late spouse. He had an Admiralty post, and the Lord knows how, but those fellows make themselves rich as Croesus faster than a cat on a hot back-stone. She

too, was an heiress, and when he died, all his moveable property became hers by will, whereas all her fortune reverted to her, there being no children of their five-year long union. He was besotted with her, and one can see why, even if one can also see why one should endeavour not to be.”

“He was a younger brother of the Earl of Northingham?”

“That would have made of him Irvin’s late brother-in-law, in a way, for you are aware of who Lady Northingham is?”

“One Lavinia, also known to her brother as Vinnie.”

“So you are in the know at least that far.”

“And through marriage twice over, she is sort of related to the Duke?”

“That would be the sum total of the official relationship.”

“If she was moneyed, why did her father not protect her brass with a use (a trust)?”

“He did, but with her husband’s consent, as the law demands when a use has not already existed for some time.”

“So it is still in operation, and she may wed again as she pleases, without damage to her fortune. Why has she not?”

“Circulate a little longer in Society and you will find out for yourself, for those are things of which one talks only if one’s shoe pinches one (one is drunk), and one still muddles on (one still drinks on) notwithstanding.”

“Dare I ask, why should she have wed a man who was obviously a second son, with her attributes, her fortune and her looks?”

“Her father wed late, and when he had her, he was already as old as the itch (extremely old), so when she was as antient as nineteen, he awakened and wed her off to the first who asked, and the Herriards were neighbours, so the thing was done.”

“The victim of senility?”

“If one wished to be charitable, one could say so. Those families carry a great stroke in government circles; they would probably have bought him the post of First Lord of the Admiralty, once he had done his stint behind a desk with a quill in one hand. She had her hand on her half-pence, for were he to have lived, there would also ha’ been a peerage in it. As times go, she is Lady Deborah on her own account and papa’s earldom is gone to a collateral, as provided by the letters patent of his peerage.”

“I know that you, sir, and evidently no-one else will talk of why Lady Deborah has not wed again, but I now watch as she comes off the floor, and there is nobody, no group of admirers, no horde of aspirants which I would expect to see awaiting a lady who is such a beauty, with a fortune and doubtless, parts (qualities and virtues).”

“Perhaps they fear that they will end up as bishops (fly or moth burned in a candle flame),” he dismissed, and bowed, as if wanting to leave her.

“I too, have a dance,” she replied. “Thanking you, Mr. Walpole.”

Thus they parted, and Justina fell in with one of the Greys, who was next on her *carnet*. As she went with him to take her place in the set, she passed by the Divine Deborah, but the latter did not even see her, which put a smirk on her face, and her demeanour amused her partner. Not that he talked of the female, but she wondered what he knew, or what many people of the Quality knew, about her, but would not say. All the same she turned her head to glance after the belle, and unknown to her, there were those who were watching, for when she

came off the floor after this set, her aunt waylaid her.

“What ha’ you been doing, Justina?” she asked. “When you took the floor just now, you turned and smiled towards or at someone, and it truly put a pestilential vexed look on Irvin’s face. I saw him, but he did not see me, and I also saw that he was looking at you.”

At that moment, the Duchess of Newcastle interrupted, hoping to be paid homage to, and in any case, she was born a Godolphin. Aunt Lizzie was so annoyed by her presumption that she saw fit to be rid of her, and made jokes about the fact that her name was famous only because an ancestor of hers, who also happened to be a minister, but that was overlooked, had imported an Arab horse called a Barb, with which she could not compare. Being the wife of a noted peer and a Pelham was not necessarily protection in Society if one tripped over the wrong sort of person, and the Viscountess was obviously the latter, so the Duchess slid off to save face, leaving the former to round on her niece.

“There’s a beauty with whom I espied Irvin dancing a bittock ago, and I asked who she was, but was told only the half of it, for I am to find out the rest myself, the matter being of the sort no-one should speak about if sober, and as I took the floor, she passed me, but did not even know I existed, which I found droll, for she was very dull and preoccupied, and this is not the place for that sort of megrims. I cannot believe that I have not much noticed her before, because she is very lovely –,” answered Justina, but her aunt cut her short.

“What is her name?” the older one asked.

“Lady Deborah Herriard. She is the widow of one of Lord Northingham’s brothers –,” Justina began to explain, but Aunt Lizzie interposed again.

“I know who she is and whom she was wed to: she has been a widow a goodly while and shews no sign of wishing to wed. As for your not noticing her, she was at the musical picnic we attended near Chelsea, by the river, and there was a crush, but your attention was elsewhere, for they made you sing, and thereat you were nervous, even thô yours is not a good voice to beg bacon and I’ve heard worse than that. Actually she made herself rather obtrusive, for she would not sit, and Whitfordshire – you saw him with Irvin in the Lords – said that she thought her tail would catch the chin cough (said to someone sitting on wet ground). The ground was dry, I recall, but Black Benedict Whitfordshire would have his joke at the expense of Mistress Princum Prancum (fussy woman). Incidentally, he is even worse than Irvin and being a suspected papist, is not received everywhere. Irvin is, and his rake-hell habitudes are his affair.”

“Does that mean he can be in the same room as his mistress and his prospective wife and no-one can tell?” wondered Justina.

Thereupon Lizzie turned even paler under her white face powder.

“Great Heaven, Justina, no-one knows who his mistress is even if he is suspected of having one,” she croaked.

“The golden goddess – cloven (spuriously virgin) goddess,” mused Justina. “How did Walpole know?”

“Walpole knows everything, and the Lord knows how.”

“This time I think someone who had a drop in the eye (drunk) told him.”

“Somehow, I do not think it was Irvin himself,” quoth Lady Ashlington. “Ohh, Lord, Justina, we have gone through years wondering who it was as Irvin’s habitual cockatrice (mistress), and along comes a mere child, and has it in one evening. Deb Herriard, of all folk!

For all I know he was having her while her spousy was still alive.”

“Why does he not wed her? It will just be a case of cuckolding the parson (sleeping with a fiancée before wedding her),” suggested Justina, “instead of hurting my poor sister.”

“In all the time that this female has been in Town, and amid Society, house parties, hunting parties, expeditions, and all, she has never been big-bellied or even cast her calf,” mused the Viscountess. “I know there are machines (condoms), but she was married for five years, and her husband was Joan Thomson’s man (uxorious husband). If she was playing at uptails all with Irvin as well, he would not have needed a machine for her husband would have been left, standing Moses (when one man is left holding another’s baby) for his seed. Yet to hump two men increases the chances of making faces (having a baby), except that she did not. One dare not ask the question.”

“She is barren?” dared Justina.

“That is why Irvin needs someone other than his private bangtail to be his wife,” rued Lady Ashlington. “Just do not tell poor Carrie, I beg.”

“May my elbow go crooked and never come straight,” promised Justina with a tired sigh, lowering her head, and also feeling a little sad that Irvin’s taste was not for dark-haired, dark-eyed, sun tanned belles with a bucolic look to them, but for refined beauties made of gold and ivory, against whom she knew she stood no chance, and all that nonsense with her in breeches was pure male filth that made her feel more degraded than ever.

The rest of the rout went mechanically on until the end, which was when the guest of the highest rank, because he was also a Duke, departed, and that permitted everyone else to leave too. As for Justina Woodville, she was wretched, and she was totally ashamed of herself for feeling disappointed that the man betrothed to her own sister would not appreciate her kind of looks, for what they were worth. She decided to be more reserved with him in the future and behave as properly and as formally as she would need to with a patron to whom she owed some financial debt. As she had told him bluntly, he owned her family’s posteriors, but, albeit true to that, she would treat him with the reverence due to such an owner, and never speak to him like that again. She also hoped that it would be a long time before she would need to put her resolution to the test: with luck he would remain too busy with his delicious Deborah to bother with his mild and steady but self-effacing betrothed, pretty as she was, and the truth was out: he did not really find her sister particularly attractive. It was a lesson in humility and she deserved it in the circumstances.

Contrary to all her expectations, Justina was put to the test the very next day, for their first morning caller was the Duke of Irvin himself. Actually he was come on the pretext of leaving his card, but if anyone would see him, he would be honoured to come upstairs to the Viscountess’s drawing room. The Viscountess had little alternative but to send for her nieces and there was Justina before him, while he was charming as ever, especially to Caroline, but not too much, for theirs was a marriage of convenience and gallantries would look false and out of place. The pretext, if he needed one, was to ask if his sisters could come and visit his bride-to-be, and ‘Vinnie’ was particularly keen so to do, but he gave no reason for this enthusiasm, and Justina could not think of one – but she would have liked to ask if his dear Vinnie was bringing all the *hoi polloi* of her husband’s relatives, even by marriage, and their widows, for darling Deb would have a vested interest in finding out about Caroline and bettering her at what she could do as well as filling in what she could not. Of course, Justina

said nothing, even if her head was a mine of thoughts, all of them uncharitable, whether directed at her brother-in-law to be or at his belle, and that was the politest word she could think of for the lady, beautiful as she remained. The trouble was that Irvin had had her for so long that he was probably used to her and not likely to give her up for someone as trumpery as a mere wife; when he tired of her it would not be in favour of his Duchess but another mistress who was probably younger. He did talk about his sister Lavinia, nevertheless, as if to introduce her and her character to the Woodville sisters, who had only met her face, and made nothing of it, and he seemed to bear some affection for this his older sister.

“Hers has been a dull life, even if that would convene some,” he revealed.

“She looks so worried,” noted Lady Ashlington. “She should cease, for it causes her to appear weary, and she will age before her time. She was a beautiful young woman, and she still retains her good looks despite the lyings-in and the approach of middle age, for she has nothing to fret about: there are no tales about her spouse being a boor or a wencher, so she is surely not unhappy in that regard?”

That was a direct hit at him, and the kind of life he was reserving for her niece.

“No, no, she has the most placid of fellow a girl could have wished for; no philandering, no hard words, no nonsense. When they are at home upon his terrain, they are like a pair of yokels, Jill and her John Trot, but fretting is in her nature, and she is naturally modest. You spoke,” reminded Irvin, “of her beauty. Well, she never even noticed she had any and around her, I am ashamed to say, no-one paid much attention to it. She was brought out one summer, she did her round of the Season, seemed more at pains to stay out of the way than be the centre of all attention, and in a few months a bland young bull presented himself as a cow-spouse – if your country leanings will pardon the punning. He was the Earl of Northingham, more of a clodhopper than a puzz (man about town), and what could be more respectable, so we all said yea, with a cheer. There ended a dull career of courtship.”

“Actually she is to be envied,” quoth Caroline.

“For the very simplicity of the proceedings, and also for the fact that, she has married a compleat drumbelo by the look of it, even if he knows a great A from a bull’s foot,” credited the Duke blandly.

“Most marriages are more complicated, if not in their fashioning, at least in their aftermath,” commented the Viscountess, in defence of her older niece.

The younger one sat still and silent soaking up all she heard, but without making any comment even if she wore a thoughtful air about all that was said. Such ponderings created a look of concentration upon the victim of them, but there was no speech in accompaniment, so Irvin occasionally cast her an odd look, but probed no further, and did little to try and make conversation with her, for it was not really his place so to do. Her aunt noticed too, but made no remarks while he was present. After he had gone, and Carrie had adjourned to fetch her needlework, Lizzie told Justina that she was not to overdo the shock and disapproval of knowing his sordid little secret: both he and Carrie would suspect it. Not that the young lady argued or tried to justify her behaviour, she just acquiesced in the advice she received, but when Lizzie fussed as to what Irvin might think, she tacitly owned that she did not care a jot as long as she did not jeopardise the wedding and the payment of the Hearne debts. In the end, everything was all about money.

On the morrow, Justina, after a full enough day, decided to go for another early

morning gallop, and asked to take Bumper, who, she said, must have been feeling pretty well ignored, and besides he was not as fast as Jezebel which would allow her chaperoning groom to keep pace with her and so he did. She had a good hard ride, and Bumper, altho exercised every morning, was steaming with sweat as she rode him home. Her route homeward took her near St James's Park, where the earlier pedestrians were come for their morning stroll, their vehicles parked on the purlieus, but as she was on horseback, she would not cross these grounds nor had to, for long, taking herself past Buckingham House then to turn north east through Green Park, where there was another bridle way leading to the reservoir of Chelsea Waterworks. Yet to reach it, she had to pass by an avenue of two rows of closely planted trees beside a pathway itself an avenue too, so that there were four rows of trees in all, with shadows in plenty. Here was where she prepared to change direction when she descried both Irvin and his sister Northingham, he on horseback and she in a cabriolet with its hood down, for the sun was not strong yet and she intended to stay in the shade of the trees until her drive home exposed her to the rays of the solar orb. They seemed to be in a most animated confabulation, and whatever he said seemed to irritate her, so that her voice grew louder and louder, and Justina distinctly and passionately heard her utter the name 'Lizzie Ashlington'. At present that name was deeply connected with the Woodville sisters, and so Justina reined in, planning to go and interrupt them in order to confound one or the other, or maybe both. However, she also reined in the impulse just as fast, for even as she began to wheel her mount for to go and accost them she found that she was suddenly blocked out of their view and they out of hers, by a combination of perspective and the lie of the trees, so that it occurred to her not to advance and encounter them at all, but to stay exactly as she was, that was to say, where good old Bumper was, so she summoned the groom and whispered to him to range his horse alongside of hers and wait out of sight with them, while she went to do what she detested most in folk like her father and Honoria, who both listened at doors, but now she would do alike and eavesdrop in a public place, even if she already felt ashamed of herself. Her riding habit being dark, she was able to slip closer on foot to the carriageway unnoticed coming from the rear in any case, and halted behind a tree trunk as soon as she could make out their voices with sufficient clarity.

"— looking at her during every assembly which you and she attend, there will be a scandal without your even having touched her, and by Heaven, dear brother of mine, if touch her you do, we'll never stop paying for it. Irvin, I don't condemn you even before the event, I only beg you to be careful, to be distant, and not, my dear fellow, to be susceptible! You'll distress everyone, yourself, me, that poor girl Caroline, Lou and her Orre connexions and the entire Hearne family. Be prudent: if you tease and flirt with the girl too much, she may conceive a fancy that you desire her and then she could thoughtlessly encourage you, leading you both over a morass of ignominy, so have a care, Lionel; be cautious."

"Have you done?"

"Almost, and don't take that bored tone, I speak only for your good, and I do indeed understand your predicament, for I have had a close look at her, dark as a gipsy, but she really is a special creature: there is one made like her every century in the whole world and we have the ill-luck for her to fall into our faces. I can guess what she unwittingly does to the hearts of men. She has a pert air and a rude expression, even if I have seen no pertness and no rudeness out of her, but the men seem to hope she will tease them to the point of insult, even if she is

oddly restrained, and I say odd, for I do not expect a wild child like that playing the prim and demure part on the stage of Society. However, she is only seventeen and is not worldly wise, being a clumperton, and if she does not accomplish something foolish, she may trip you – unwittingly – into doing something even more foolish than that. I for one, found her presence disconcerting from the start and was glad that you made such an effort to evade her, but now you and she are encountered, I cannot help but think what could happen were you both to – to – to commit – er – indiscretions together.”

“S Death, Lavinia, I have never heard you, the epitome of all that is commonsensible speak such arrant nonsense during my whole life.”

Justina now realised exactly what they were talking about and decided to withdraw, but then thought better of it.

“When one sees the Viscountess and her two nieces together, they strike one as a cheery and happy set, so don’t go and spoil it. It is obvious to me that Caroline is in Town to see more of you, so go see more of her, don’t go after her sister.”

“Vinnie, it is exactly what your gipsy bugbear told me to do, come call on her sister.”

“And she may have meant it, but if you go on as you have commenced – why, in all those weeks I thought you were hiding from her, all you did was watch her as if she were a tasty morsel –,”

“On one moment you are glad I eschew her, on the other you attribute mischievous motives to me towards her. You are looking one way and rowing another, Lavinia.”

“Well, I have *looked* hard at you *look* at her and you don’t *look* at all. You leer.”

“Gemini, what next?” he groaned, and there was a rattling of tackle.

Justina resolved that what she was doing was despicable and true proof of the old rule, that if one listened deceitfully to the private chat of others, one was sure to learn something that galled one in some way. She had had enough, so she returned carefully to her mount, scrambled into the saddle, and set off over the grass to meet the path towards the reservoir without having to skirt the enclosing avenues of St. James’s Park again. She also did not look back, so that if they espied her, it would seem as if she did not know that they were there. Then she went home, all the bubbles knocked out of her spirit, to eat a lonely breakfast, before she joined the others in the drawing where they all took coffee.

“They may say what they like about Chinee Tea and chocolate; Mahometan gruel (coffee) is the thing for me,” sighed Lady Ashlington with pleasure, after her first sip.

Her nieces agreed with her because this was a product that they never purchased, for it was beyond their pockets. For Justina it was the most pleasant time of the day, when they sat in private and had each other for company, but it did not last long, for even as they were still on their first cup, their first caller came, and the Countess of Northingham was announced.

“She’s early,” noted their aunt, “I do not expect her until much later in the morn, and I have a Grenville first on my list. Thankfully she never stays long if ever she comes here, and she is only come because of you, my dear Carrie.”

“I don’t like her very much, so if I may slip out and flee before she is shewn up, then all will be well, and I will not sit with a face as long as a fiddle when Carrie has to give a good account of herself to his sisters,” Justina excused herself, and as neither her sister nor her aunt saw anything illogical in this, the footman waited until she had sped off to hide in her rooms before he went below and fetched up the Countess.

As Justina had been very light-footed in her escape, Lady Northingham had a surprise on finding that she was absent, but commented that she was sure she had seen her ride over Green Park, with a groom of course, towards the reservoir, and that she was perched upon a shining, dun-coloured mount. All they did was confirm that that was Justina; they did not say whether she had mentioned them or not because she was not supposed to know about them, but then the Countess explained all by revealing that she was already far when they sighted her, and that she probably did not know they had, for she was facing away from them, which was why the question was being asked now. After that, they spoke of the wedding, which had to take place at the bride's house, and as folk from the groom's family would be contributing, she was here to discuss a few preliminaries. Before she commenced upon them, she inquired where Justina was, and the reply was honest.

"Will she be joining us?" wondered Lady Northingham, and there was terseness in the inquiry, so Lady Ashlington was tart of tone in her reply.

"Only if she is needed," she said. "If you were with your brother out in St. James's Park, where, then, is he, and will he be joining us, for all that?"

"It was just an idle question," dismissed Lady Northingham, in conclusion.

Their discussion began in earnest but it was more a monologue as the Countess made a series of suggestions, which had Lady Caroline sitting at the sofa table to take notes in her neat handwriting, and such seriousness pleased the visitor very much. The Viscountess offered her Madeira wine and tipsy cake, but she declined, and when she had said all that she needed to at this early stage, she took leave. She never mentioned Justina again, not even to leave the standard message of goodwill, and there was no converse excuse ventured for Justina's absence. When Justina came down again, she said plainly that she did not think Lady Northingham to be one whose acquaintance would be conducive to finding her a stable and moneyed spouse, and no-one contradicted her or asked an explanation for her flight: after all, both had sensed that the Countess was not altogether sympathetic towards the younger sister, who would have had a reason to eschew her: perhaps on their mutual presentation at Justina's coming-out, there had passed a wave of contrary motion between them, to borrow a musical term, but no-one sought to probe further. Besides there were other callers to face, and perhaps more useful the Justina Woodville's interests, which had not done very well hitherto. That behoved her to try and enjoy the rest of the day as well as all the company it threw at her, during which she was rather grave, unlike her usual, humorous and sometimes boisterous self, which was under curb in London Society, but its absence was noticed by her relations. At the evening's ball at the Duchess of Richmond's, where the cream of the Quality were invited and that included Lady Ashlington and the Woodville sisters, Caroline commented upon her sibling's solemnity, and was told that she had to look, at least, as if she had finally grown up, especially at this place. There was no answer to that, but that hoyden Justina had wit enough to know when to please herself or be pleasant in the face of the multitude, but Lady Northingham's remarks had made a deep impression upon her, firstly in that they revealed the fear that Irvin had a predilection for his intended's sister, and secondly in the accompanying attitude that the Countess did not like the said sister and was inclined to attribute her brother's weaknesses to the faults of that other. Justina was also keen to see if Irvin himself was acceptable enough to be received here, for these were the Gordon-Lennox family and descended from Charles II and his Breton mistress, Louise de K roualle or, the

Duchess or Portsmouth. Their lineage did not impress anyone named Woodville, but they were very *haut ton*. However, once they were inside the sumptuous public rooms of their hosts, among the first persons whom they cast eyes upon was the Duke of Irvin.

“For weeks, he played least in sight. Now, he is as ubiquitous as is God meant to be omnipresent,” commented Carrie herself.

Not only that, the Duke caught sight of them, or affected to, and approached, to greet them and give his betrothed a very correct *baise main*, which did not involve his mouth coming into contact with the skin of her hands at all. As for her younger sister, she bobbed him a courtesy and stepped back, to leave the field to his affianced wife, while looking around for his sisters, especially the older one. Even so, after exchanging inquiries about health and condition with Caroline and the Viscountess, in which colloquy Justina just doggedly failed to participate, he turned to her, albeit that her attention was visibly wandering about the room as she scanned it for potential victims she could discuss with her aunt.

“Lady Justina, I was riding on the edge of St. James’s Park this morn, and I fell in with my sister Lavinia, who was come driving, even if her sour apple tree (crabby husband) had already rid ahead with their daughters. We saw you, but you were not on your phantastic black,” quoth he.

“I do not recall seeing anyone I could recognise,” she lied. “The horse I had belongs to my brother Devenish who lent him to Carrie for her trip to Town.”

“It is a pity you did not turn about: I was bestriding a fine piece of the best blood that I acquired from the Russian Ambassador when I was in Paris some five years ago. The colt had no name, but being warm-blooded, had a superb golden coat, with a bloom upon it, so I named him Doubloon. You are a horse-minded person, I think that viewing him would ha’ given you much pleasure.”

“I am sure it would have. What was the horse you were on when your grace gave me a fright at Tothill Fields?” she pursued.

“That was Bouncer. He is a very honest fellow. The chestnut you will have seen when I used to call on your father is Puck –,”

“O, him! We used to call him ‘Smirking Sam’,” interposed Justina. “I ha’ never seen a horse that smirked but that one looked as if he were about to laugh at us.”

“He probably was,” said Irvin suavely. “Did you like him?”

“Aye, I *did* ride him,” she admitted.

“He’s a handful, but equines know whom not to make a May game of, and you have a good hand on a horse’s mouth,” he credited. “A pity that you brought horses of your own, otherwise I would ha’ put my entire stables at your disposal for your morning ride.”

Remembering Lavinia Northingham’s caution that she was likely to make a fool out of him, she just made a curtesy that was polite but ambiguous, and stepped back, leaving him to offer his elbow to her aunt and her elder sister. As he turned away with them, she pranced off and went to fetch herself a *carnet de bal*, which Irvin was now procuring for Caroline and for her, but he had to return the latter, for she could be seen, her back turned, walking off in a hurry. She was giving in to his intrusive sibling, that was true, but her real reason was her own sister, and the fact that Lavinia knew her brother better than she did – except that it made no sense by his choice of golden mistress, who was a perfect English rose with an ivory complexion. Why he had tried to make conversation with her eluded her too: they talked

horseflesh like men, until he offered her the use of his stables and spoilt a harmless chat, even if the offer itself meant nothing on the face of it, and the hidden meaning she ascribed to his generosity was the reason for her escape. However, the elusion was not compleat: a little later, when the young Earl of Orrery was writing his mark in her *carnet*, Irvin came along and reserved a dance, a sedate minuet, which put her in his hold somewhat. She was not pleased but she could do little about it but refuse, and that was forbidden, for Caroline's sake. All the same, while folk, long used to one another as superficial friends and acquaintances in the upper echelons of the world of fashion, went about greeting and chatting to one another, or making up a temporary circle to discuss the latest play, or the fact that some peer had officially made an actress his mistress and that his wife was furious with rage, she roved about in search, less of partners, for she had all that her *carnet* would allow, or husbands, for that would weave itself behind her back between some parent and her aunt: indeed, she sought the Divine Deborah, Lavinia's quasi-sister-in-law. Why Lavinia did not scold her brother for coupling with this entity and still wedding Caroline Woodville, she knew not but had much to think on the subject, and really would have liked to scold the matron Northingham about it, but then she probably did not know, for Irvin, unlike Whitfordshire and all his peccadillos, was discreet. Whitfordshire was not here: the Richmonds were too grand to invite him, even if he could buy them out several times over, and better the pedigree of Charles II, whose surname was the French translation of Steward, his ancestors having been high stewards of Scotland. Justina would have liked very much to tell her hostess that her spouse was the descendant of a Catholic mistress of a secretly Catholic king, and yet they spurned Whitfordshire, even if Catholics they were not, but of course, she held her tongue.

She held it again when it was, later, her turn to dance with Irvin, and althô he did not have to part much from her during the interlude, she was not very encouraging when it came to conversation, which was just as well, for he was indeed a very fine figure of a man, and that stern look which overcame him, when she responded ill, became him well. By a strange coincidence, his next partner was Caroline, and he jocosely complained to her that her sister was ill-disposed towards him, whereupon the older sibling said that she was only being respectful, in not rattling on like some brainless adolescent.

"Perhaps Lady Justina would have been more forthcoming were I a horse," he jested.

"Depend upon it," confirmed Lady Justina from nigh, and there was laughter, but now there came Horace Walpole to dance with her, for so it was designated in her *carnet*.

The two new couples separated, but Walpole took Justina into a different set. There, as they waited for others to arrive and the dancing to commence, she spoke to him.

"Do you recall, sir, what you said that no-one would reveal about a golden lady who is not here – unless I ha' missed her – unless they were bit by a barn mouse (drunk)? Well, I believe I know what it is," she said.

"Don't let it trouble you inordinately; everybody does it," he replied aerily.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" she almost squawked.

"It is *de rigueur* to have one, even if one does not really want one. It is the height of fashion," he explained.

"Very well, if a man is single and shy of getting spliced, he has our kind and sad understanding, but adultery is a mode?" she demanded, lowering her voice and leaning towards him, a shocked look on her face. "Is it also a mode for a female to have a bull?"

“No, I fear, we are not gone that far,” he shrank.

“Sauce for the gander and sauce for the goose, sir,” she recited, “even if I do not relish either, for I have never heard anything so absurd in my life.”

“Fashion *is* absurd, dear lady,” he acknowledged.

“When will it be a fashion to commit murder, I wonder?” she mused. “Is this fashion one that must be advertised? The last time I heard of anyone not being too fussy of what folk knew about him, he was not admitted to balls such as this one.”

“That is the thing. A fashionable gentleman shall have one but not say who it is, or let there be much discussion about the thing. It suffices that he has one, indeed it is necessary, say the dictates of fashionable behaviour.”

“Is that why the Duke of Newcastle has no children?”

“O, no, the Duke aforementioned is afraid of catching everything under the sun. He is so hypochondriacal that he could catch cold by lying in bed barefoot. Either he or his bitch wife are of barren stock.”

“Are these – er – accessories of fashion who are discreet mistresses kept or just for the visiting in order to stay modish?”

“Both, dear lady, but the latter is more practical, and the case of the person with whom you opened this conversation.”

“The discretion, then, is to preserve their ability to be received in Society and their acceptability everywhere?”

“Sometimes it necessary for the sake of secrecy, for spouses could be involved. The gentleman of fashion will not tell his wife, but sometimes the mistress is a respectably married lady herself.”

“This all the height of hypocrisy. Next, you will tell me that they are in love, too.”

“Love is a complication that is fortunately not a condition precedent. I note from your la’ship’s disgusted expression that you have no romantic notions whatsoever about the relations between man and woman, where society is concerned?”

“I was not born at Little Witham, sir. Why should any decent female consent to being the tool of this ridiculous fashion?”

“Vanity, lust, folly, I know not: your la’ ship knows better than me the workings of the female mind.”

“Mr. Walpole, sir, when a female agrees to be another man’s mistress because it is the fashion that he should have one, her mind is not working, I can warrant you that.”

“Nor, I think, is that of a man, if all he does is keep a mistress to comply with the latest fashion; *de rigueur*, I said.”

The dancers were in place and the music played, so the set moved according to the paces devised for it.

“Are there any men who do not comply with this tyranny of the modes?” she asked presently, for the dance allowed it.

“There may well be, but that does not shew either,” he averred.

“What happens if wife and mistress meet? Pluck ’em Fair?” she pursued.

“Evidently such meetings are discoursed but if they take place it is recommended that both remain civil, at least,” he answered. “The ideal is that the wife knows not at all that she is confronting a rival for her husband’s bed.”

"I have a sister about to wed, and I can be sure that old habits will die hard," she snorted, her voice acidulous and sharp.

"My name is Twyford, madam."

"Even so, the man does not give up his mistress when he weds, for after all, why cease to follow a mode just because one has jumped the besom."

The gyrations of the dance parted them, and when they were together again, they were too active for talk, but as soon as she was afforded the opportunity, it was he who spoke.

"Has your la'ship told your sister of what you know?" he inquired.

"No, and unless it becomes absolutely necessary, I will not," said Justina.

"What constitutes an absolute necessity, pray?"

"If the object of the discreet secret is insolent to my sister and behaves high in the instep with her, as I imagine such a person might, for she was there first, for the husband goes to her out of wish and not out of duty, and, just because she feels she has power over his affections."

"This is your first Season. From where did you learn all that?"

"I put myself first in the wife's shoes and then in the mistress's, especially a mistress of long standing, who expects loyalty from her lover despite his vagaries into the areas of Sacrament and what is legally recognised."

"Sometimes it is better not to know," he said in terms of gentle advice.

"In that case, am I free to go make an Irish beauty (a woman with two black eyes) of her?" grunted Justina, and startled him, so that it was just in time that the motions of the dance parted them, for he looked quite shocked.

"One thing," she called to him a moment later, "if this is such a secret, how did you know, thô you would not tell?"

"How did your la'ship find out?" he challenged.

"Observation and coincidence," she ceded cryptically.

"Idem. I have nothing to do all day but observe humanity and if you observe for long enough, the object of your attention gives up its secrets," he said, as they finally faced each other in the set, because the dance was at an end, and they bowed to each other.

There was now to be a pause, for refreshment, and Mr. Walpole politely inquired if she needed anything, but was extremely relieved when she declined, and took his leave of her. Justina strolled off to seek her aunt or sister, but joined the confluence of folk flowing towards the dining room, only to find Irvin at her side, which at once made her think of his sister's exhortations to exercise caution.

"What has a puzz like Horace Walpole that inspires you to make conversation with him before and during the dance, when with your humble condumble, you were –,"

"Like Mumchance, hanged for saying nothing?" she interposed.

"What inspiration to chat has he that I lack?" he persisted.

"I quizzed him about this fashion among you gentlemen. *De rigueur*, he called it. Whether one wants one or not, one must have a mistress. Wives are of no importance but to have their shapes spoiled (be made pregnant)," she replied.

For an instant, his grey eyes glittered enough to dazzle, and he regretted having asked such a question.

"I thought that you were come to Town to find a husband, not seek a lover," he shot.

“If the husband is obliged by fashion to frequent a draggletail or someone else’s spouse who is loose in the rump (of easy virtue), then by coming to Town, I have ridden post for a pudden (exerted oneself to no purpose),” she answered.

“Lady Justina, do not sing small (claim to be less than one is, not conceited) and thus give yourself away to the first comer, just because you feel as if you burthen your aunt’s purse and have this erroneous notion that I own all your scuts, (bums) because I am paying off a few of your father’s debts,” he advised gravely.

“What I was talking about did not really concern me, but it is a bad market here for a woman from the greenmans whose father is a man a-hanging (in trouble). They are not going to see that the Duke of Irvin is putting all to rights, they are going, with their *de rigueur* mistresses, to see that Lizzie Ashlington repeatedly brings her Cambridge fortune nieces here to find themselves some coney to settle down with, but now I find that that prospect affrights me, for I have to share my husband’s bed with some *de rigueur* slut,” she retorted.

The Duke looked angry, for he was not fool enough to have failed to guess that she had found out about him and his private affairs, even if she had said nothing of it to her sister, and if she had, it was too late for the latter to withdraw. She spoke of herself, but it was to disguise her sister’s predicament at his hands, and she knew that he was not going to give up his beautiful mistress for Caroline. Meanwhile the shifting columns of folk entering the dining room allowed her to join one which moved faster than the one he was in, so she left him behind, and pretended that it was unwitting, to shake him off. As she reached the tables, she found her Aunt Lizzie already going to install herself with old Lady Downshire at one of the banqueting tables, and the former encouraged her to go find to eat and then join them. When Justina did so, she found them speaking of masquerades, for there was to be one at Ranelagh again, and even the two dowagers did not want to miss it, for there were sure to be all a manner of folk to try and recognise, such as Irvin and Whitfordshire, who were always in black and each of them a ‘jack o’ legs’, which meant that both were unfashionably tall.

“She’ll be there,” said Aunt Lizzie. “If ’tis warm, the shameless hussy does not even wear a domino, all she dons is a mask on her face, and that is because she would like to be recognised, so her beau may go give her a green gown (grass stains on clothes after a bout of sex on the grass) like a common hedge whore (among the commonest type of harlot, who goes behind a hedge with her clients).”

Justina, brought up to believe that the talk of the elderly – except her father – was wise, seemed caught short by this sort of disquisition and its idiom, but she sat with them and said nothing, thus learning more about the generations and the scabrous things they knew.

“I thought the object of a masquerade was not to be recognised,” scoffed Lady Downshire, “so that one could get up to all sorts of paw-paw tricks (naughty tricks – usually used for children).”

“If you hide yourself too well, the apple of your eye will pass you by,” sang Lizzie Ashlington. “I wonder what her terms of endearment for him are: ‘come here, you nauseous toad, my hell is hot for your devil’.”

“Personally I prefer the appellation ‘my filthy fellow’, for ’tis most *à propos*,” quoth Aunt Lizzie’s friend. “He’ll be recognised, unless he wears red owing to some addled whimsy, but then it is the accepted colour of harlotry and may be taken as an invitation. Bah, I ceased to try and fathom out men the day after I was wed.”

“That which I rue is that if he has a *maîtresse en titre*, he will not give her up for a wife. What man you know gives up his bad habitudes on marriage, especially if he is past thirty and long established in them?” grumbled the Viscountess.

“Some men are in the way o’ habitually visiting cavaulting schools (brothels),” Lady Downshire commented. “At first it was because they had no homoney (wife) to warm the bed for them, but with the years, going to a punk (harlot) becomes a practice, and wife or not, they will go because they have always done so.”

“And the Devil knows what sort of scabbado (V.D., usu. syphilis) they bring back,” loftily snorted the Viscountess.

“Know you which of our virtuous wives is Irvin’s convenient?” tried Lady Downshire. The answer would have engendered the question ‘how’ and endangered Justina.

“You know how it is: there are so many suspects for so many reasons, and in the end, perhaps he does not just have just one but several,” evaded Lady Ashlington.

“That would be more like him,” agreed Lady Downshire thoughtfully. “Why is it that it is always the fine ones who sink so low? He is dashing, if a little too tall, but he is become *déclassé* because of his foul morals and no-one but the desperate will wed him.”

“Puggy, you are talking to the aunt of the desperate,” reminded Lady Ashlington sharply, but Lady Downshire raise both arms.

“*Ma chère*, I know he is not your niece’s choice and that she is the instrument of her father,” pacified the other, and turned to smile reassuringly at Justina, who seemed surprised and consternated by the nature of their talk, two respectable matrons of a certain age, but whose innocent stare reminded the speaker of what they had been chatting about when she had joined them, in the hope that it was innocuous. “We are far from masquerades, now,” she observed, “and talking pack-thread (bawdy).”

“Sweets, we were talking pack-thread then,” intoned Lady Ashlington dryly.

Thereafter, in honour of Justina as a maiden, they changed the subject about what they would wear to the Ranelagh masquerade and included her in their prattle, but she had learned that when two dowagers came together and knew each other as friends, they were likely to converse as improperly as two men, but whereas a girl could not go among the latter, she was just as easily corruptible in her mind and intentions by the former. Afterwards, when the aunt could have a private word with her niece, she urged her not to speak of Deborah Herriard to anyone, including that female’s relations by marriage, such as the Duke of Irvin’s sister. In fact she entreated her not to tell anyone that she knew what she knew, but Justina owned that she had already confessed it to Horace Walpole.

“O, that matters not a jot; he knows everything and says nothing,” dismissed the Viscountess. “Whatever else you do – or not – pray never even hint to Irvin that you know where his affections lie, or even pass sly, barbed remarks that you lament for your poor sister. He will at once guess that you are somehow come by all his sordid secrets and it will become difficult for Caroline.”

“It will become even more difficult for my father and the whole family,” understood Justina, unable to muster courage enough to own that she had already hinted enough and that as the result he had probably divined that she knew all; in effect, she had already done what her aunt had urged her not to do or say.

Effectively she felt as if she had tied the sword of Damocles over her own head, and

her anxieties in this regard would only be resolved by the behaviour of the Duke over the next months – a long time over which to worry – to end when he wed her sister at last. Meanwhile the prospect that the Divine Deb would probably attend all events bright and beautiful held by the Quality, did little to enliven or reassure her. She would have to keep her mouth shut and her countenance under control, while she regretted that she had spoken to him in any wise, and rued the fact that so fine a man was indeed so diabolical that, feared and courted as he was in Society, he was seen as unfit to marry. For the present, she had to look forward to the masquerade at Ranelagh tomorrow and the possibility that she would be able to guess who was under the masks and domino that interested her most, namely, Irvin and Lady Deborah, and feel wretched about the whole thing, from the fact that the woman was in Carrie's way and likely to remain there, to the supposition that girls who looked dark as gipsies – notwithstanding the application of face powder were not to his taste – and if she was loyal to Caroline, why that idea kept annoying her, she could not answer. As it was an irritating conundrum thus, she brushed it aside for the present.

The morrow came and one of the duties – if it could be called as such – the sisters performed was to chuse their outfits according to the recommendations of their aunt, and having put that out of the way, they could go on with the rest of their day. Masquerades, and masked balls, were very little different, except that in one case the guests dressed up in costumes, and Sultanas and Greek shepherdesses from Arcadia were very popular, but not Greek heroes, for that involved shewing male legs that may have lacked in muscle and were sure at least once to produce the call 'calves fall, veal will be cheap', but the one thing they had in common, rendered by the masks and even cloaks that folk wore, was informality. There could be much more flirting and accosting and merriment than at any convivial confluence of folk, whether of Quality or among the wealthy burgesses of mercantile London, many of whom were as rich, and periodically filled balls at the Mansion House with wives as laden with diamonds, as any Duchess. These events did not just leave initiative to the male, as might a formal event on both sides of Temple Bar, where the City officially began, for a lady could commence a parley with a gentleman, and folk could ask for a dance without first having been introduced. There was thus an admixture of the orders, too, but not just of rich City folk among the aristocracy, for the 'half-world' of socially unfrequented folk came flocking, the fancy men to hope that they would seek a protectress even for an expensive night that could pay a bill or two of theirs, and the belles for obvious reasons. Not everyone was there to listen to the music and admire the coloured lanthorns in the trees which looked so pretty and innocently sweet after dark. The grand and lofty loved to mingle with the low and disreputable: princes had a penchant for prostitutes, everyone knew that. Ranelagh and a mask allowed all their dreams temporarily to come true and the gentlemen to encounter their *de rigueur* mistresses with impunity. This anonymity particularly favoured ladies who had banned lovers with a measure of safety, as some paid belle kept a big husband or a choleric father distracted, about which he would not want to talk in the end in any wise. All the same the menfolk moved with greater facility than the females so Aunt Lizzie accordingly warned her nieces to beware, and exercise just a little prudence while enjoying themselves, for some folk wanted no more than to dine and dance with a fine specimen of the opposite sex and matters did not have to become complicated.

This anonymity was not total, as Justina discovered that evening, as she and her family

donned black velvet masks, garnished with spangles and feathers, and light silken dominos of the same hue, over their ball-gowns, for no sooner had they begun to enter the throng than did a lady in a purple domino and matching mask greet them by name and raise the latter part of her disguise so that they could recognise Lavinia, Countess of Northingham, who promptly shewed them to her spouse, who had donned a small mask but no domino for he did not care if he was recognised or not, and believed these entertainments better suited to the fancies of the young, not sedate men of middle age, comfortable in Society and relaxed of manner, even if Irvin's relations-to-be made him disconcerted, like one who did not exactly know what to make of them. He had made himself unnoticeable at Justina's coming-out ball, and since she was come to Town, she had seen very little of him, even when their aunt took her nieces to call on the Countess, which only lasted five minutes. It seemed that he was busy and always had something to do, but as he lingered now, Justina was surprised, and even more so, when he asked them a round of well-worn questions in the ill guise of making conversation. Justina ensured that she did not answer a single one if generally addressed and only if she was solicited so to do by name, thus she said little. He owned he had been told that she liked horses, and she could guess by whom, so he tried to talk horseflesh with her, but she was not forthcoming, partly because Lavinia was all but in a panic that her spouse should pay her so much attention. However, just as shy folk often seemed cold to third parties, the Earl attributed Justina's coldness to shyness, and seemed satisfied with her answers, for by nature he was a country gentleman rather than a noble of the Town, and like to chat about country matters, from hunting to parish roads, but horses were his favoured subject, and it was not often that he came across a female, and one so young, who knew as much about them as she did, so it fascinated him, and he persisted. His dear wife fidgeted away with what aunt and older niece mistook for embarrassment at the subject of chat her spouse had chosen, but worse was to come, for Lady Ashlington suggested that he lead her two young relations about the gardens, unto the various sources of amusement, where they could enjoy themselves. His lordship, who would soon have been bored in any wise, agreed, for not he could unburthen himself of his somewhat derogatory views on the entertainments of London Town and its accursed Season, which he had to keep every year, when he would rather have attended the hay and the corn harvest-home ceremonies like a good landlord.

Thus off the sisters went with him, comfortable fellow in his middle-aged dependability, as he amused himself revelling in recognising folk in their disguises and poking derogatory fun at them; she in the gold laced hat was Lady Northumberland who liked to drink, he with the pink and silver clocks to his stockings was Lord Lorne and there was padding for his calves, the Duke of Kingston was ridiculous in his red domino, Lady Garlies was treading a measure with her own footman but did not know it. That begged the question to Justina about how many people could recognise her sister and her, particularly now that they were with Lord Northingham, whose face was almost totally visible but for a tiny mask around the orbits of his eyes. There was one person whom she needed no help to name, and this was a person with blonde, lightly powdered hair, a gold embroidered mask, and a pretty little short gown, which meant that it shewed her diamond and gold buckled shoes, both gown and petticoat of white silk with gold lace and sequined gauze ruches, all assembled to resemble the attire of a country shepherdess, compleat with white crook and an enormous white and gold bow, after the fashion demanded in rich ballrooms and not real life. Over this

she wore a diaphanous white domino, so that her creamy attributes would be on display, as well as her costume, and her fine jewels. This belle attracted everyone's attention not only because she was so distinctive and beautiful, but because her hem lines were raised so high that not only her pretty shoes of yellow kid shewed, but also her gold clocked stockings, and the neat turn of a shapely ankle that no gentleman of sense of taste could fail to notice. Lord Northingham adjudged such things to suit the country maiden at work being reluctant to have her skirts soaked in mud, but here, even for a short gown, this was excessive. She passed just before him and his two companions, and from her gaze that took account of them from head to foot, Justina could tell that she knew who they were, and in the process thereof, the younger sister caught her eye, whereupon the white and gold beauty frowned hard and glowered angrily, notwithstanding her facial accoutrements, and tossing her head, flounced off, but not before sneering at them all in derision. Justina decided that she was a person worth the trouble of hating, as she imagined how ill she would use Caroline once Irvin wed her. Caroline seemed not to have noticed her attention, so she comprehended that the secret was still safe, but Northingham was momentarily discomfited: it was not in his nature to engage in a battle of stares with suave and acidulous folk.

Justina was glad of it being a cool evening – not because the gold and white belle would be uncomfortable ere long – but because she would otherwise have been stifled by her domino, even if it was imported from Venice itself, and that was a state in a warmer latitude. She otherwise enjoyed the sight of the coloured lanthorns in the trees, and was even fascinated by the fact that the lamps lighting the pavilions were in glass of different hues, a simple decoration but one of which few thought: if ever she were mistress of a modestly fine house, if she had to hold entertainments, she would put up coloured lights. Here there was a fashion for everything Chinese, as there was in the salons of a number of folk where she had visited, even if Justina was not sure whether it was Chinese or Chun Hua Englished. From one pavilion there emanated the savoury smells of fine baking, so obviously there were good things to eat here, as well. Lord Northingham took them within the place where there were chairs and tables and liveried men to serve pies and flummeries, while Justina admired the great chandeliers and thought that this was a good place to repair unto when lost for what to do, for they could not remain with the Earl all evening, and already their aunt had deserted them to see friends of her own.

Next to leave was Caroline, who agreed to dance with a resplendently disguised fellow in vermillion with gold galloon in plenty, whom she knew not at all, and his offer to lead her out was so merrily ceremonious as to make her giggle, but her sister nodded, having recognised the voice of Sir Raymond Annesley, so she let herself be led off on this modest adventure. Just as Caroline set off, Justina was disturbed by that inexplicable feeling that overcame a person who was the object of a good hard stare, and looked well away to find herself under the intent observation of Lady Deborah Herriard, for that was the shepherdess and needed no genius to find her out. The Divine Deb was watching Caroline and Annesley with grim satisfaction and a smile, which faded sharply when she found Justina turn towards her, even though she was not nigh, so she vanished. That she knew Justina was aware of her connexions with Irvin was obvious, but that was Justina's own fault, in her broad hint to Irvin himself, and he would not have delayed about warning his delightful mistress about her sharp eyes, her sharp wits and her sharp mind, no matter what her lack of experience in Society or

her age, which for a bride, was not really that young. That this little bumpkin of an outsider, even if she was the daughter of the high peerage, had easily penetrated a closely guarded secret, and was dangerously close to one from whom it had to be kept at all costs, made Justina both hateful and dangerous to both the Duke of Irvin and his bedfellow. The little bumpkin accordingly realised that being clever and perceptive was not a very good idea among the jackals and hyenas of the Quality. However, now Northingham found himself alone with Justina, that same Justina whom his wife did not trust and against whom she had warned her dear brother, as if he were incapable of looking after himself. So she turned to him, and suggested that, unless he wanted to eat a tart, perhaps he should see Lady Lavinia, otherwise the latter might fear that Lady Caroline Woodville's younger sister had devoured him as well. The Earl had no notion as to what was meant by these words, except that he was free to please himself, and he did not wish to be responsible for Lady Ashlington's girls, so he told her that she had a very famous idea and that he would put it into execution, for one had no idea these days what pranks wives could commit and so he had best find his, even if she was not far from forty years old – but when females reached that time of life, the majority wanted to forget it. Behind her back, he was ready with an uncomplimentary joke even about his spouse and Justina liked him all the better for it because it revealed a little about him, about Lavinia who suspected her, and about the wedded state among the fashionable Quality.

In fact it was Justina who sat and ate a savoury tart, which she washed down with a glass of watered burgundy instead of the Englishman's favoured claret. This dilution was the advice of an elderly gentleman in grey silk at an adjacent table and he was French: he told her that the French seemed to drink wine by the gallon but never were drunk, while Englishmen imbibing the same volume of liquid were easily under the table, when in fact that was because they swallowed twice as much alcohol as their French rivals.

"Allongez votre vin, mademoiselle; allongez-le," was his unsolicited advice and she took it, for the French knew their own products and how best to enjoy them.

Here she comfortably was when a tall man in black, for both his domino and his suit of silken tabby¹, but for a silver, blue powdered wig under his gold laced tricorne, came ceremoniously to her to ask her to dance. It would be her first dance of the evening and so she was keen to be on her feet, but she was almost sure she knew who he really was, for the wig was just part of a disguise. The only difference was that his voice was huskier but not deeper, althô that lent it an attractive quality – and was probably part of a disguise too. In fact she was sure that she was confronting the counterpart of the golden goddess – who according to fashionable idiom was not a goddess at all but that was no longer the point. As it was he, and his sister had a morbid fear of her effect upon him, she thought that this use or misuse of masks to admix where it was usually forbidden, could be turned to her own amusement at the expense of various folk, the Divine Deb, Vinnie with the Vivid Visions, or Brother-in-Law himself. So, having nothing else to delay her, she agreed with alacrity, feeling that if Aunt Lizzie could abandon them and that if Caroline trusted Annesley enough because he was Irvin's friend, when she was supposed to be guarding her sister, which was probably why Irvin in his silver-blue wig could close in upon her. She was already annoyed about the creature known as Lady Deborah and she had shewn it enough for the Quality present to perceive that, which she did not realise, instead she persisted in the belief that Annesley was Irvin's decoy. So he led her to the pavilion from which music emanated, the famed Rotunda,

where also there were chairs and tables for folk to listen to the orchestra, and as all was so well-arranged, they could have light refreshments there too, but it was not inside that they went; instead they paused among the company making up sets for to begin a dance. To her surprise while they did so, a female figure in a short domino which opened out over her full bosom, upon which was a spangled patch or two, the great white orbs thrust upward for shew by the cantilever effect of her stays, leaned over and spoke quietly in her ear, her accents betraying her to belong neither to the Quality nor to the provinces but to the '*demi-monde*' of London Town, from the area in the City where the true Cockney was born.

"He's a lick too old for ye, lovely," she gurgled. "Now me, I don't mind, for a fee, at least, but you, you don't look that sort."

Bewildered Justina shook her head but the sparkling eyes of her partner were opposite her, and on his face was a questioning smile.

"What did Cousin Betty (strumpet) the bushel bubbly (big breasted woman) want, pray," he asked sweetly, "that she would have dared address herself to you?"

"That she did for knowing that I was not of her kind, for here one dances but once with a beau and she was hoping that after I had stepped out with you, I would leave you to her," she replied, unable to restrain the tartness that crept into her voice as she compleated her response, for it was a response based on what she knew of Irvin – who only laughed.

"That I cannot; a pretty young thing like you ought not to be left pacing the dirt, among the dirt, alone," he countered.

It seemed all right by and acceptable to the females here, if young, and however well-born or advantageously placed, not to mind if a man called them a 'thing'! Not that she could make a scene about it in public, but it was a matter that came to her notice and she was not sure how far this term of endearment was derogatory or thoughtless, which latter feature did not lessen its reduction of the addressee at all.

"Young? I'm not young. I'm ninety," she teased.

"Where have I read those lines before?" he mused.

"In a French play, uttered by the soubrette part. If I say which play and which character, will I be condemned as a blue-stocking or a *précieuse*?"

"Not by me," he denied and was about to invite her to go on, but she cut him short.

"You look like you know me," she stated warily.

"I swear it, it is the first time that I have been close to you," he declared, chuckling.

"Enough to make a cat speak and a wise man dumb," she groaned. "Until you said so just now, you have not given that impression at all."

"That impression was given by my knowledge of your not belonging to any profession like that of the good dame who would have engaged your help in obtaining her next client."

"Ohh, fiddlesticks," she groaned. "Your tongue is well hung, that is all."

"Believe me, that is not all," he answered with humour. "Do you take exercise beyond the usual stroll in St. James's Park? You have the trimness of one who is much on horseback or otherwise engaged in more lively enterprises."

"In other words, I could be a housemaid?" she challenged.

"That would be a scurvy assumption on my part. You will find that I am good pay (sure to discharge one's obligations) when it comes to a gentleman's duty to a lady," he assured. "What is your favourite form of exercise? Long strolls in rough country?"

“When you said ‘horseback’ you knew you were right, so cease the curly murly talk, pray, sir,” she answered bluntly. “I ride horses, indeed.”

“I ride,” he sniggered, “and horses too.”

At that she took a step back in retreat and seemed annoyed.

“Were it not contrary to my sister’s interests, I would turn you over to that market dame (harlot),” she retorted.

“Come, do not snuff pepper under coloured lanterns,” he coaxed. “I find riding a most exhilarating and satisfying sport. Do you hunt?”

“Not much, but now I have my own horse I probably will be able to,” she said.

“Where I come from, we hunt pests, the gentry take land too seriously to ride over crops in the pursuit of a beast whereof the only use is part of a tippet for a lady, so, if a farmer’s hen house is ravaged, out they will come, even if the local squire keeps a pack for such contingencies, but then, as you know, he is rich, and likes to shew it. You hunt for pleasure, thô, do you not?”

“I hunt whatever flees me,” he gloated.

Irvin was very forward tonight! Justina thought, so it was fortunate that the dancing began. As it was not very sedate, some folk were chattering despite the music and there was much exuberant laughter.

“That sort of hunting is also very good in keeping the shape trim,” he averred, taking advantage of this general informality.

“O, so that is the sort of riding you really do,” she intoned, with a soured smirk. “Now I have it, paper-skull that I am.”

“And I, mistress, have you,” he sang, with emphasis in his voice.

“As you remarked, I don’t belong to the profession of that female,” quoth she, in an attempt to put distance spiritually between them.

“You are blushing, dear lady,” he gurgled.

“So would you, had you a sense of decency,” she rejoined, whereupon he pulled a face that shewed good humour, amusement and a little mockery.

“But I do, which is why I prefer that retort to the usual excuse of ‘sir, I am a little ruddy for complexion from the exertions of the dance’ when we haven’t even exerted ourselves yet,” he accepted. “Behold me ever your humble servant therefor. Yet enough about me; I would know of you tonight: are you beginning to enjoy yourself at last?”

The bobbing about and gyrations of the dance parted them so that she could not reply unless she shouted over several heads, which was ill-behaved and even rude.

“I think so,” she owned, as soon as she was able. “What of yourself?”

“I have no alternative: I am in the most pleasurable condition of looking upon one of the most delightful and youthful little faces that I could possibly ever have imagined before me,” he told her.

“I am glad this dance is going to part us again!” she hailed, prancing off.

When the set brought them opposite each other again, he resumed the same parley.

“You do well to be cautious, I must confess,” he conceded.

“You are not offended; how gallant,” she laughed ironically.

“I have no reason to be; it must be expected that a young miss be wise. Were I to have children, including daughters, who reach your age and are launched in Society, I would be

most sedulous about the good advice that they receive.”

“You have no children, sir?”

“Dear madam, I am not even married.”

“Those two aspects are not necessarily congruent.”

“The astute young lady has most definitely cut her eye teeth. I have neither child nor wife, and before you ask, my affections are not yet engaged in any quarter.”

“I was not going to ask that, for it is the easiest way to invite a lie.”

“Then what were you going to ask?” he wondered, merry again.

Justina was beginning to doubt that this gentleman was the Duke of Irvin, and in the light, it was possible that he was older, just as the lady of the town had assessed, with her long experience of the faces – and other parts – of men.

“What, pray, made you presume that I was ‘being launched into Society’?” she asked.

“What if I were the daughter of an honest but rich flat-cap (Citizen of London), when I would scarcely be ‘launched’ anywhere.”

“The fact is that I saw you arrive with your aunt, whom I recognised,” he admitted.

“And if I said that you were mistaken and that I had no aunt?” she tested.

“Wily, witty, witchlet,” he gurgled. “For that, you win my total esteem.”

Young and bucolic as she was, there was a thing Justina knew: she overheard the tenants talk, the gentry talk, even her own family talk, and that was if a man told a woman her he respected her, before anything else, it was the most crass lie and the most hackneyed phrase in all the history of sordid seduction: a runner up to that was when he told her he was her friend. All the same she made an acknowledgment with a pert little bow and scampered off according to the requirements of the dance, but when they were reunited, he flirted with her no more, and they withdrew from the set, for another was about to form, to take a stroll under the lanterns, beyond which the stars were beginning to shew, for he amused himself by pointing out whatever constellations could be on view in what was early night for a summer sky, and that too, not sighted very well, beyond the Summer Triangle, whereof the points were the principal stars in Aquila the Eagle, Cygnus the Swan and Lyra the Lyre, the first twain having Arabic names, like Altair and Deneb respectively, and the last rejoicing in the appellation of Vega. Whether he knew his sky or just enough to impress a compleat ignorant was another matter and Justina regretted not going out of nights in the country, where the firmament was untainted by city lights, to pick out what she could, lying on her back in the grass, dark lanthorn in one hand and sky map in the other, so as to be able, first, to learn something, and second, to be able to catch out amateurs who just wanted to make a shew. The only thing that spoilt this was the somewhat equivocal conversation that he initiated about the pictures in the heavens when the summer was over, for there would be Andromeda, attached to giant Pegasus, stretching out her arms to her mother Cassiopeia, who was a great W or an M depending on how one saw her, and like Charles’s Wain, otherwise called the Big Dipper or the Great Bear, as well as the Little Bear, which contained the North Star, were visible somewhere in the night all the year round. Andromeda was a great favourite with artists both classical and modern, and was usually painted in the nude – he had a fine Staffordshire enamel plaque of her, copied from a French print, and she had such wonderful legs – perhaps from riding Pegasus throughout the Seasons in the night sky. As the trees somewhat masked their view he offered to take her into the park to shew her more, which she

was going to refuse, even thô he assured her that they would not go far, but a muscular harlequin, in a long black tricorné hopped out of nowhere and, throwing himself on his knees before her, asked for the next dance. So the beau with the blue-powdered silver wig suggested that she go take advantage of this variety offered by a clown, if she promised him a second dance directly afterwards, and she agreed. However the harlequin was no saviour, for he turned out to be impertinent and forward, misusing his clownish disguise to speak and comport himself too liberally, not just with his hands, but also other parts of himself, with the result that she actually preferred the man from whom she had been considering an escape. Fun and games were all very well but she did not like lewd and vulgar innuendo, by word or deed, and thus it was a relief to be rescued by her star-struck older swain, whose husky voice remained too consistent to be feigned at all, and was doubtless really his. He was therefore not Irvin, and he was definitely older. All the same, when he came for her, the antics of the annoying harlequin had tired her out, and she went to him with the haste of one seeking deliverance. Somewhat breathless, she reached for his proffered elbow, begged to be excused to step out, for she needed to catch her breath a little and collect her shattered wits.

“Of course,” he whispered, his voice still audible under the light drapery.

“We may go see the constellations after all,” she suggested, whereupon he turned to her in hesitation, but she could not see his face, and the lighting was too dull as they walked hurriedly away from the Rotunda for her to perceive his eyes. “The constellations, do you recall? If I cry off (back out of engagement or project) from a dance, I may as well make up for it with the stars. It would not be far, you said.”

“Indeed, my memory is unforgivable,” he agreed, “to think that I should have been so easily distracted in this bittock. If we could just take this pathway?”

With a deep sigh, he led her off upon such a byway as her aunt had discounselled the use of as leading to shrubs where folk could well be busy at what some euphemistically called ‘basket making’, and she was so relieved that she went willingly.

“What a creature that harlequin was, to be sure!” she snorted. “Did you know him?”

“Good God, no,” he refuted softly, with a short laugh.

Justina found herself growing bewildered now, as the effects of the harlequinades were wearing off, for there seemed to be something strange about her partner, but she was aware that her mind was in something of a whirl, and so she attributed it to herself.

“I hope that you are not annoyed with me,” she sought to make up for her own flight, “for having gone off with that capron hardy (impudent fellow) and I truly did not guess what was in store for me; why, that he should have repeatedly thrust his codpiece into my gown, and at first I thought it was just part of his costume.”

The gentleman turned on her and the lie of his head shewed that he was shocked; besides he peered backwards and she believed that it was to ensure that the Horrendous Harlequin was nowhere in their vicinity. Then they marched with some rapidity on a quiet walkway even if she rather regretted admitting before a stranger that another stranger had taken advantage of her by thrusting protruding parts of himself into her skirts, which was not really very proper talk.

“The lanthorns are bright here,” he commented, his voice still verging on a whisper, “let us traverse the grass a bit of ways for more sky: the ground is dry.”

Thus they attained a part of the park where there was a clearing and the young lady

looked up at the sky, where the firmament was rich with glittering spangles of their own fashioning and of all sizes and luminosity. Her escort loosened her domino about her neck and turned up her head just a little, as if to adjust her view.

“Aye, it would serve to be looking in the right direction,” she agreed with a chuckle.

“And this, too,” he added, reaching behind her head to untie her mask, while snatching down his domino and with it, his hat.

The starlight and the glow of distant lanterns was behind him, so she did not see his face, masked as it still was, but she grew alarmed, which stalled her, except that, before she could as much as open her mouth to ask what was happening, he had swept her into his own arms, while his lips enclosed themselves about hers and his tongue parted them. So astounded was she that at first, all she could do was stiffen, but in a few moments she felt her blood rush and her heart pound away in her breast, itself pressed close upon his, while his hands had slipped under her domino to embrace her about the back and her tiny, little waist, yet protected by the bodice of her gown. All at once she recollected herself and tried to struggle, her hands seizing his shoulders to push them away, and for a moment she almost succeeded, for she was strong after so much time forking straw and shovelling horse manure and chasing frisky colts who thought that being caught was a game. His domino slid from his neck but that deterred him little; instead, he struggled back, and caught her by the back of the head, fervently to force his kiss, as if he knew full well that soon, she would succumb, and slip her arms about his neck as her senses acknowledged pleasurable sensations. Indeed, he was right: Justina began to enjoy the blandishment, but when he nibbled his way down her throat, she was suddenly thus roused as to his having gone too far, and recommenced her fight to be free of him. His hat had long fallen to the ground and now his domino followed, but he only kicked it away, endeavouring to hold her fast, and laughing as she writhed, for she almost took him with her, but as their bodies intertwined, in her attempt to break free and his fight to detain her, she became aware that his clothes were made of velvet, *not silken tabby*, for the pile of that fine fabric was unmistakably under her fingers – and was that silver wig indeed dusted with pale blue powder?

“Ohh, no!” she cried. “’Tis not you, ’tis –,”

As she uttered her exclamation she had wit enough to reach for his mask, whereupon he flung her from him, releasing her at last. Justina did not wait to discover what was his identity; instead, she gathered up her skirts and fled back towards the crowd, clutching to her breast her opened domino. Yet just as she reached the purlieu of the company, she halted precipitately, for her mask was gone, left behind with the creature in black velvet. Soon he would be on his way too, so she thought only to hide, and ventured off the path to pause behind a wide tree trunk, where she intended to wait until he had passed by, and then retrace all her steps to seek and retrieve her mask. To her great shock, she sighted, from her hiding place, emerging from among the dancers and looking anxiously for someone, the blue-powdered, silver-wigged, tabby-suited gentleman! Yet just then, along came Black Velvet, tying on his silk domino, whereupon the other, in his silver blue coiffure, gave a start and favoured him with the most hostile and evil of looks. The two kept moving until they confronted each other, and exchanged stares of extreme dislike, before Black Velvet tossed his head and sauntered off: now his domino was just at his throat with its white lace ruffle, and his wig was powdered with grey instead. Even their hats were different: Tabinet wore

gold lace on his whereas that upon Velvet's head was laced in silver with gold beads. Indeed, Black Velvet was also younger and a little bit taller.

Mechanically she ran a hand over her mouth, as if to wipe away the kisses, and then hurried back to the place where they had been administered upon her. The precious mask lay on the grass and so she culled it, shook it and tied it about her head, as she scurried back to the safety of the throng, at the edges of which she was surprised to find the blue powdered gentleman awaiting her.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," she panted, for she had been running part of the way. "I have had a most curious experience. I believe that there are two of you here tonight."

"O, no, young madam, there is only I. Then, there is an arrant blackguard."

"Well, then," she sighed, "I suspect that I have just encountered the latter, whom I was fool enough to mistake for you, after some untoward experiences with that Harlequin, from whom I was perhaps *too* anxious to get away."

"Pray, pray, sir, forgive us!" interpolated a familiar voice, and Aunt Lizzie arrived bustling upon the scene. "Excuse us, I beg. As for you, young lady, your sister has been nigh distracted just seeking you, and don't say, 'I was in my skin'; why, the shocks you gave us!"

While she was fussing the Viscountess ushered Justina away from the gentleman to whom she had repaired for protection! Indeed, Lady Ashlington tugged on her so hard that when she turned to curtsy her valediction to him, she almost fell over. When there was sufficient distance between him and them, the aunt turned to her niece and grasped her by both shoulders, as if she meant to shake her.

"What on earth were you doing?" she scolded and squawked. "You should never go near that man!"

"Aunt, it was that man to whom I needed to repair because a —," Justina began to protest but Lady Ashlington interrupted.

"That man is an enemy of your family," hissed the latter. "That man would have Irvin dead if he were given the chance — half the chance. That man would thus endeavour to destroy Irvin's wife and her sisters, for that matter. Thank Heaven I found you; thank Heaven that Irvin saw you in time."

"WHO?" croaked her niece, totally aghast.

"Yes, Irvin," affirmed Aunt Lizzie. "It was Irvin who told me to go fetch you before you did something damaging to us all."

"Perhaps I have already done it for want of being told things that I need to be warned of in advance," snapped Justina. "Why is it we as females, who have not reached sedate maturity when it is permitted to know the sordid, are never informed of things that, howsoever vile, if we were to be aware of, we would evade the traps they hold out for us into which we regularly fall for want of warning, and then are reprimanded for 'what are we doing with that man' when we know not of his existence, let alone his significance to us and ours?"

"That's a fine speech you made," snorted Aunt Lizzie. "Well? What is it that you have done so far?"

"I danced with him once and took a walk to see the stars, and his talk became scabrous, so I prayed a dance with another, who was worse — that Harlequin — and so I returned to him, for he was the less indecent of the two. That was when — o, never mind."

“I know,” lamented her aunt, squeezing her in affectionate consolation, “you are right: you young ones are not told things and then affairs can grow gruesome, but at least they have not. That man in the blued wig can be most charming and extremely kind as well as seductive but also so gentlemanly and dependable in his behaviour. Of course he stole your confidence. Mind your eye with him, but on the other hand, Irvin is no better fellow than is he. Until now, I was not in the least part inclined to take sides for they were the obverse and reverse of the same medallion to me, but now that Irvin is to wed your sister, you are perforce on Irvin’s side of the lines of battle, and so am I, too close to him not to give a fouter and be neutral. Now let us get you some claret.”

“Burgundy *allongé*, I pray you,” requested Justina, surrendering with a shrug, and too bemused to fathom out any of this.

It was all the fault of that kiss in any event, that kiss which had robbed her entirely of her equanimity. That kiss itself was her first ever of its kind from a man, and thus of unexpected content, while the results it produced were novel and interesting in the extreme, with one fault: she had not seen the face of the man who had forced upon her this intimacy, and it also made her angry that it had been stolen from her in this fashion. It was indeed a most passionate caress attended with too many liberties, so it galled her to be ignorant of whose lustful advances she had submitted to, but then she had her suspicions about his identity and that frightened her: it was in the voice or absence of it, for he had disguised his in a whisper. That which misdirected her thoughts was the presence on his head of a silver wig, when she would have expected dark hair, and she had almost had his mask off after all. About that part of her adventure she did not say a word, and had no intention to confess any of it to Caroline, but she did indeed want to know who was the older gentleman in blue powder and why he and Irvin were enemies.

¹(Tabby or tabinet: a watered silk named in corrupted form after a district of Baghdad where shot silk was woven)

TEN

Even the light seemed golden in this nocturnal scene, but candles in chambers with biscuit painted panels gadrooned with gilding had that effect, and rendered it either bright or sultry, depending on the extent of candlepower – literally – but if tallow candles were a cheap commodity, even the affluent did not care to burn wax candles with such generosity unless the situation was beyond mere comfort monetarily, and in the realms where those who were really rich could afford to please themselves. Pleasing the self was presently relevant to the milieu and the occasion.

“There is something I would like to ask of you, Lionel,” whispered she, tossing back her shining flaxen locks. “Whither did you disappear this evening at Ranelagh? I had you discreetly in my sights all the time, and then suddenly you vanished totally.”

“I had no idea that I had disappeared,” called his grace, “or that you were watching me,” he added on an acid afterthought.

On those words he entered, and it was into a bedchamber, whereof draperies and upholsteries were in the most lustrous yellow damask. Before him, on an wholly gilded bed with four posters, reclined Lady Deborah Herriard, with silken sheets raised over her breasts to display her shoulders of alabaster – or was it ivory? Actually it was skin and blood and flesh, and flesh was figuratively important now. That was why, at the sight of him, she smiled a welcome and held out a hand, whereupon he sat at the edge of the bed and patted her cheek, which caress pleased her, inducing her to lie back upon her pillows, her sheets temptingly loose about her person. However, his grace just rose, dusting the seat of his black velvet breeches, and wandered back to the dressing room: where there was Deborah there was powder of some sort, which was tiresome if one wore black. Irritated, the beauteous widow clutched her sheets to herself and sat bolt upright.

“Lionel, what are you doing now?” she demanded.

“Dressing, my dear,” he replied.

“Why not do so in the morning?”

“I generally do not don evening dress in the morning.”

“Why do you not spend the night like you usually do? If you go home now, even with a link boy, you could be brutally robbed.”

“The berline is outside: it will have arrived by now,” he intoned.

“Why go home already? Don’t tell me that you are suffering from mere horn colic (temporary priapism)?” she mocked, because she was annoyed.

“What ho, madam,” he rejoined, as calm as she agitated, “I was not sufficiently generous this time, or have we a little trouble with appetite?”

“Lionel, it was a veritable *tour de force*, but why not tarry? I am not tired,” she persisted, for she was worried.

“I thank you, but I have had enough sport for the night,” he declined.

“Aha!” she snapped, jumping out of bed and joining him in the dressing room, “so that’s what you were doing when you disappeared tonight.”

“Deb, go back to bed, or else you’ll catch cold (also means: you’ll repent of it),” he recommended calmly.

With a sigh, she pulled on her night gown, which was a robe dripping with blonde lace, and was annoyed that he did not help her, but he was busy putting a pin into his cravat.

“You still have not answered me,” she complained. “Whither did you disappear?”

“You are beginning to sound like a true ‘whither go ye?’ (wife),” he rejoined, still complacent and collected. “I am certain that when I wed, my lawful wedded will not quiz me thus. You are more of a cross patch than the proverbial crooked rib (cross grained wife).”

“You are not married yet and your wife may go to the deuce!” she cried. “I wish to know what happened tonight. I may only be your mistress but I so have been for nigh on eight years and I happen also to love you.”

“That was a most injudicious thing to say,” he intoned, brushing his hair before he took up his hair ribbon.

“O, now you are wearing your own hair, are you?” she observed sourly.

“Wigs are so uncomfortable over tresses as long as mine,” he said, satisfied with the bow knot, before he rose to take up his coat.

“Many things are uncomfortable, and the way I feel now is prodigiously so!” she barked at him.

“Don’t fold your arms thus, you remind me of a straw hat (Billingsgate fishwife),” he sniggered, his eyes twinkling.

The exquisite Lady Deborah, like any common mortal, failed to see the joke at her expense, and swung out and hit his arm. The Duke regarded her out of the corner of one eye and walked calmly past her into the bedroom, where he picked up his sword belt, lying in a chair, whereupon she ran after him, threw her arms about his waist, leaned her cheek on his back, and began to sniff as if lachrymose.

“O, Lionel, I’m so miserable,” she whined.

Abandoning the weapon and its trappings, he turned to hold and comfort her.

“Lionel, why do you relish this secrecy of yours?” she whimpered, clinging to his clothes and depositing patches of hair powder upon them.

“Deb, be easy,” he commanded, as authoritarian as he was consolatory. “Why, you as quiet as a wasp up one’s nose. You are testy tonight because of what, indeed? You have never asked me before why I have disappeared from your sight, and indeed, I hope, you have never watched my every move. I did not even know I disappeared, if it is any solace to you, and do not attribute these fandillies of yours to my impending marriage. Deb, the fact that a man weds and makes feet for small shoes does not mean catastrophe (an ending). You know why I am wedding and you know that a man may have wife and children, but also a mistress at the same time. ’Tis not a new thing; in fact ’tis the done *thing*.”

“I have never had to share you, Lionel –,”

“O, you *have*, Deb!”

“Well, I knew not of it! It pains me now to find out.”

“You will surely have guessed: a man does not gain the reputation of Town Stallion (debauchee) just because he may have one convenience (a mistress). In any wise, why are you afraid of Caroline Woodville? ’Tis not because she belongs to what is left of the old mediaeval aristocracy, like me.”

“I am not afraid of her: don’t be a dolt!”

“Of what, then?”

“I’ll tell you,” she snarled. “’Tis that sharp-eyed hussy-bitch sister of hers, whom nothing escapes, by God!”

“No need to shout or to blaspheme,” he winced.

“She eyes me as if I were the model for the original Laidly Worm!”

“I swear to you, Deb, I ha’ no notion how she discovered it, but she has, and she is loyal to her sister’s interests. There is nought you can do about her look, dearest; she is a filly in every sense of the word: in her father’s tumbledown world, she helps take care of horses and, like them, has learned to bear a grudge. Just live it down. By the bye, have you a clothes brush?” he requested, after dismissing Justina’s supposed offences.

“There’s another thing and it is *you*,” asserted Lady Deborah reproachfully, going into her dressing room to fetch him the article he had asked for. “You flirt with her.”

“I flirt with whole bevvies of females; I am notorious for it. She is not unique.”

“I know your eyes. When you flirt with that little harlot, they become covetous.”

“Why call her a harlot, Deb?”

“That’s what she will be when you’ve finished with her, ready for all comers. Why do you defend her, in Heaven’s name?”

“Don’t blaspheme, Deb, and Justina of Hearne is not a harlot: she is a girl.”

“You were with her this evening,” she accused savagely. “Chatteris said he saw –,”

“You were associating with Lord Chatteris, were you?” he pounced, as cold and as pointed as an icicle, “here you go, accusing me of infidelity, when you have been a traitress. Chatteris is only my greatest enemy, and my only enemy, that is all.”

“I did not speak to him – it was –,”

“Hearsay,” he cut in. “What is the value of hearsay in a criminal court, madam?”

“You odious lecher,” she snarled.

“Did you not just say that you loved me?” he reminded.

“I’m injudicious, you know,” she riposted.

“What do you love, Deb? The man, or the thrill of having the most notorious rake in the ton coming regularly to your bed?”

“I’ll ignore that,” she said, sitting plump down, with tears in her eyes.

The Duke fastened on his sword belt, took the brush from her hands, attended to his coat, and bent to kiss her forehead.

“’Tis just because I am wedding that you see rivals everywhere,” he said.

“I wish not to degrade myself, but why do you seek elsewhere for a wife and not stay among company who knows your every desire, every inch of your body?” she wept.

“Deb, much as I would like to wed my mistress, first she will make jealous scenes if I rove, and I am not the Town bull for nothing, and second, I can count: you do not have fluxes (menstrual periods) like other women,” he said. “I beg pardon, I cannot wed a barren wife.”

“How do you know it is not you? Or have you sowed a bastard in all four corners of the Isle? I do not come with a bagful of debts –,”

“No indeed, but as you come you are free to go. Caroline Woodville comes in chains, and has to make a hand of whatever she finds. She is a commodity, you are a lady.”

“Fine words butter no parsnips,” she shot. “I am not free to go, and I will prove to you that I have fluxes.”

“Deb, be reasonable. Had you really wanted me to wed you, you would have hinted after your husband died. You are just vexed that I should not first have considered you and then refused, to watch me go chuse some poor wretch who cannot say nay, to drag to the altar.

'Tis not even your pride that is hurt, 'tis your vanity. Now, I had better go, before either of us says a thing that we will later regret," he concluded and went to the door, letting himself out.

"Lionel!" she cried, coming after him, the fronts of her wrapping gown threatening to part, "do you remember how you were? You were as gentle as if you were taking a virgin, and I have never had such joy out of you," she related.

The Duke replied by picking her up, carrying her to her bed, laying the sheet over her, and leaving her thus, but quietly shutting the doors upon her. Only when he was on the stair, he answered her words, as if muttering to himself.

"Aye, I was taking a virgin, and nay, it was not you," he said.

In a pensive mood he left the house, for there was indeed a berline awaiting him, not the large one which had carried him to Great Hearne Castle, but a lesser, no less elegant one, built for the Town. It took him safely home, drawn by its fine team under the guiding hand of his coachman, and once he reached, he went directly to bed, but slept rather badly, not because conscience troubled him about Lady Deborah – indeed, that was far from the case – but with one thing on his mind, not his future wife, not his future with his mistress who was making much ado about nothing, but that tall, slim, dark, bright-eyed creature with the free tongue – and today he had tasted it – the trim thighs, the soft lips and the silken throat, who played with horses and had pushed his shoulders so hard that when they were touched in a certain way, they hurt, and there were light bruises appearing belatedly upon them too. He imagined that were he ever to take her into his bed, once she was over the shock of her defloration, she would doubtless drive him half-crazy with delight, which he was only too eager to reciprocate. When he had kissed her, she had unwittingly kissed him back, and it had been wonderful.

His grace was not ashamed of his lustful thoughts but annoyed by them, for they were most inconvenient to entertain, their object being rather difficult to attain or even, obtain. If she were accidentally to brush against him with just the silks of her skirts, or touch his arm, with two sleeves on it, it would be sufficient for him to need more. Late that morn, his sister Louisa was to open her doors to the fashionable world, to hold an informal *matinée* which comprised of discussion, a little music, as much food as one could snack – or snag – on, from frivolity to the state of the nation and beyond, including representatives from the more sedate worlds of the literati and the law, for in the process of self-advancement, these such social entertainments, on the face of it pointless, were of paramount use to professional ambition and careers, or, if one had any common sense, to those who wished to rise in or into the ton. His grace could safely anticipate that Lady Ashlington and her two nieces would be present: Lou had instructions to ensure that his future wife and her entourage were everywhere there was a member of the Irvin family, because as a bachelor, he could not invite them. He would have attended the event as a matter of course, but the fact that Justina would be present made it not just a duty but an enticing pleasure.

He arrived a little early, and so found the rooms less populous than they were expected to be, but as Louisa Mortlake enjoyed high esteem among the Quality, few folk were so rude or thoughtless as to be late and ere long, her reception rooms were filling. Her brother grew peevish at the speed with which the arrivals developed into a crush, for he feared that he could miss Justina's advent; often enough if an assembly was too well attended, folk could spend the whole time in the same room and not even know that they were there, let alone meet, a

feature upon which he had played to hide from the sisters in the first weeks of their stay in Town better to watch their conduct. The Duke was now well past that, and surprised at himself for feeling this anxiety, ascribing it to a sense of urgency and excitement born out of a fleeting taste of intimacy with the unwitting young lady last night; no doubt it would die away, but while it lasted, he indulged it as much as he could, and enjoyed it if possible.

Justina herself was not especially noticeable, attired in a gown of blue shot silk with a matching petticoat and lace edging on her robings all the way down to the hem, that grew broader over the openings of the skirts, with two tiers of lace on the petticoats above the hem. The same lace made up the scarf, narrowing to the waist and held in place by blue ribands. The lace itself was blond and set with blue spangles, making a typical French toilette, so that the only English part of her appearance was the fact that she was wearing her own hair without pomatum or powder. About her throat was a blonde lace ruffle tied with blue ribbon, and the Duke would have liked to remove it with his lips and his teeth. By comparison to some of the manifestations of the prevailing modes she was rather plainly clad, for it was not just fashion that was on display but splendour, but to Irvin she was nothing if not appetising and so he feasted his eyes upon her, moving about to keep pace with her for a view of her without exactly shewing himself, even when he had to pivot about because someone came into his line of vision, or she drastically changed direction herself. Whether his sister Lou noticed this he knew not nor cared, but she was of the sort who could either ignore the whole or help him to entrap the very quarry herself. She assuredly would not keep assiduous, anxious and anguished watch upon him, as Lavinia was doing, fidgeting with her three-hundred-guinea lace apron and driving herself into a phrenzy, unable to keep her conversation on one subject for more than a few minutes at a time, which irritated all her interlocutors.

There was another who kept the Duke of Irvin under surveillance, even if she did not make such a highly strung nuisance of herself, but she was just as worried albeit for a different reason. Yet as Lavinia was content to sigh and keep her distance, this other went directly to his grace, in order firmly to upbraid him and call him to order.

"I am not imagining it, Lionel," she began, "but you are staring into the window seat at that little harpy."

"Good day to you, Lady Deborah," he greeted serenely.

"I vow, I comprehend you not at all; she is scarcely dressed correctly: she's in blue, the safely chosen hue of a merchant's wife," she at once lamented and carped.

"Yellow would not suit her as it does you, my dear," he intoned, already bored with her criticisms.

"And look at those skirts: pocket paniers!"

"Pocket paniers are all the rage in Paris at the moment, *selon l'ambassadrice*, and perhaps she cannot buy hoops and hip-baskets and full paniers galore on the allowance her aunt has accorded her, unlike you, who may spend in Pretty Fanny's way. Aside of that, pocket paniers are very comfortable; the duchesse de Montachez explained to me how they work," he talked amiably on. "One draws the skirts through the pocket of the petticoats and so produces the effect of a hip-basket —"

"I know what pocket paniers are," she interrupted tartly.

"O, I merely assumed that, despising them as you do, you did not wear them."

"These manifold provocations that you have begun lately to tender may have dire

consequences, Irvin,” she cautioned, narrowing her eyes.

“What provocations, dearest?” he wondered harmoniously, and added, just as mellifluously, “what consequences, pray?”

Deborah Herriard perceived a hard and steely glint in his grey eyes and, althô annoyed, know not to push the subject on what could be a disastrous course, so instead, she scanned the chamber with her somewhat uncharitable gaze.

“Bah,” she spat. “The little trull dares observe us.”

“Firstly, we are here to be observed and second, do we not observe her?”

“She is new to Society and dares regard us with choler and disdain?”

“She is of our degree, she may look at anyone as she pleases. Beyond that, she is sure to be uncomfortable about your presence so close to her sister’s future spouse, for you are hostile to that spouse, and to her, it shews. If you were less inimical –,”

“Ohh! Next you will go ask me to make friends with Lady Caroline and shew her around Town. We are in England, not the Grand Turk’s harem where the oldest wife takes the new ones in charge,” protested Lady Deborah in a huff.

“And what a deal of trouble does that custom evade, I’ll bet a hat,” he mourned. “Yet as you said, we are in England, and in English society, it is reckless for a mistress to be seen dangling around her lover in the presence of his wife, so when I am wed, we would be wise to keep apart.”

Lady Deborah seemed thunderstruck by the laconic frigidness of this utterance, as if he were just stating what time of day it was.

“I would not be ashamed to be seen at your side, but now you say that you would be ashamed at mine?” she challenged.

“That is not what I said, and being seen at my side is a compliment and a privilege,” he rejected. “As this is indeed England and we are not *chez* the Grand Turk, while you are not my wife, we need to keep up appearances and preserve the semblance of propriety, otherwise it will not be just Lady Caroline’s sister who eyes us with whatever adverbs you attribute to her action. Very few folk know what are the connexions between us, Lady Deborah, so shew less huff and ding in this place to begin with.”

Althô he sounded so stern, he put a smile on his face and bowed to Justina Woodville, who rose and curtsied, even if her countenance wore a look of mild mockery.

“I have a good mind to ask her if she has no M by her girdle,” growled Deborah.

“I do not recollect you greeting her first,” he commented.

“I cannot greet her! We have not been presented.”

“Then she will not greet you,” he replied. “She may be a tuskin (yokel), but she is the daughter of a Duke, however ridiculous the *ton* finds him, and degrees of rank are directly concerned. Now cease jiffling in annoyance, or else she will stare all the harder, and then you will draw unnecessary attention to yourself. As for her staring, do you not stare too? It is rude, but that is how the Quality shews off its supposedly superior breeding and infinitely bad manners. Now that she and I have exchanged greetings, it behoves me to find her sister, who is my intended, and duly pay my respects.”

“Lionel, I have never in all our years together, heard you speak to me like this,” she reproved. “Such words and such a tone both injure me and do me injustice, know you that!”

“Does it occur to your la’ship that you are being fractious and demanding in a way that

"I too have not known in you?" he retaliated. "Here we stand arguing and reproaching each other, for reasons whereof some are spurious, and you are manifesting a trait that I have never suspected in your character, which is jealousy. Until I was to wed, all was well; but surely you knew that a Duke of Irvin, who had but sisters, needed to marry at some stage in his wretched little life? So let us have it your way and play by your rules, but if you lose, don't come yammering to me."

"This is not a game, Irvin," she hissed.

"I am the one who is about to wed. If I know anything, I know 'tis not a game," he rejoined, and left her.

As she watched, he strolled off to the window seat, much to her dismay, for she had expected him to leave the room in search of Caroline, when instead, he went directly to Justina, and bowed to her, so she rose out of respect for his rank, for as a female, she was not obliged to rise for a man, even one who was twice her age albeit dashing with it. They exchanged greetings and he asked her where he could find her sister, whereupon she raised a hand to indicate a knot of people not far to one side of her.

"As my Aunt Lizzie says, 'in her skin'," she answered, eyeing him from head to foot.

"They are in a circle: I cannot intrude unless invited," he evaded, and noticed her observation of him, which yielded a spectacle of studied finery, all black silk whereof the edges and coat cuffs and waistcote were finely embroidered, also in black, but with a curiosity which surprised her, for at the upper edge of those same cuffs was a narrow band of grey fur that grew quite dark in the centre, as if the pelt had a dorsal stripe.

While Deborah watched him tarry with the younger Woodville and grow incensed, he turned his back on this fountainhead of jealousy, and asked the other a question.

"Has your la' ship seen something strange?" he wondered.

"Is that fur, or is it a sort of thick plush?" she inquired.

"'Tis the fur of a North American polecat called a mink or a vison, and this grey is extremely rare," supplied.

"Were you at Ranelagh Gardens yestereven, sir?" she pursued, with a mischievous little grimace.

"Indeed and indeed," he confirmed.

"Did some chill come upon you, for otherwise one does not expect fur to be worn in summer," she commented. "Your grace does not strike me as the sort who catches cold from lying in bed barefoot."

"Nor am I, for if I am abed barefoot, I would rather be catching at something more comfortable," he teased. "Nay, this is just fashionable affectation."

"That sounds more the thing," she accepted, "and a welcome change from affectations where-to folk will not admit."

The Duke was beginning to become annoyed by all these barbs, even if he deemed himself free to deal out remarks laden with innuendo, so he loftily ignored her and went to adhere to the circle after all, which was not seated but on its feet, and so, owing to his height, he was noticed, which allowed him to greet the Viscountess Ashlington and bow over Lady Caroline's hand, his back deliberately turned on Justina, to punish her, even if his betrothed managed to look in alarm over his shoulder at her as if to urge her younger sibling to shew more caution with this man. All Justina did was smirk her reply and survey the chamber, as if

seeking things to do or people to plague, and sure enough, Caroline saw her, all at once, quite their propinquity, without the knowledge of her aunt or the Duke, to disappear into a thickening crowd gravitating towards the doors. Whatever the cause for this crystallisation, Caroline could not descry it from her own place and now she had lost sight of Justina as well; meanwhile Lady Ashlington and the Duke of Irvin were become too deeply involved in the parley to be interrupted with the information that the younger one had just wandered off, for he was sure to take umbrage, she having just vexed him a little.

Had Caroline been able to join her sister, she would have found that the crowd whereof that other was now a part, was gathering for a specific purpose, to wit, to eye out of sheer malicious curiosity the advent of two late arrivals, one of them thin, foppish, fallow under all his paint and obviously out of humour, and the other taller, heavier, of middle age but still handsome and dressed in a manner that betokened much expenditure and excellent taste, with upon his head a neatly curled silver wig with light dustings of greyish powder. Justina saw both arrive but not recognising the first, at once knew the second, from the lie of his chin and the shape of his cheekbones, as well as the way the wig, differently powdered this time, sat upon his head, not forgetting his build and his height. Despite Lizzie's warning, she came out of defiance, mischief and a genuine thirst for knowledge, for her aunt had told her things, but never why, for that was how the older informed the younger and expected obedience nevertheless when even a horse sometimes needed to know the reason for an order. She also wanted a closer look in the daylight, to annoy the Duke of Irvin, to discover if she would be recognised, and perhaps have him loosen his tongue enough to give her his version of the story, which was better than nothing and would enable her to make up her own mind. Yet as she drew closer, his eyes alighted upon her at once, and the light of cognisance sparkled in them; shyly, involuntarily, she smiled, her cheeks and neck gently tinged with pink. Yet he was still as decorous as he had been yestereven, and importunated her with the burthen of his inspection no more, partly because there was too much clamour and a score of folk trying to distract him, most of them registering his surprise at his appearance. It seemed to her that he was rarely seen in this place if ever, and Justina guessed from what Lizzie had said to her that some of the remarks meant that he was bold, for he was not generally welcome at 'Lady Lou's'. That was at once demonstrated by the arrival at speed of Lady Louisa herself, betraying indignation and alarm all over her face. Before she could speak, the sickly scrawny fop extended a spidery, long-nailed be-ringed hand.

"M' deah Lady M, permit me to compliment ye on y' eternal lah'linness, pray, hmm!" he warbled in a totally silly voice, even if he took himself seriously.

"Still putting a hat on the hen in your attempts to be gallant, my poor Hugh?" she sighed and squirmed.

"Aye! Ain't I a pretty-tongued coxcomb," he giggled.

"Coxcomb's the word," included Lord Northingham, having just joined his sister-in-law. "Why, stap m' vitals, if it is not Edgar!" he cried, addressing the taller older and more substantial person, beside the spindly twitching specimen of quasi-humanity. "Are you just returned to Town, or have you been where we don't go?"

"A moment, pray," requested 'Edgar', and put out his hand for Louisa's, over which he sedulously bowed.

"Upon my word, you have a confounded gumption, daring to set foot here," she

marvelled, and her expression seemed displeased.

“Blame me not, dear lady, I entreat you,” he begged, taking a step in retreat, “I would not put your position or loyalties into jeopardy or otherwise compromise them; all was the fault of this rascal my cousin here –,”

“Hee-hee!” tittered Hugh, “ain’t I an egregious devilish agitator! Forgive me, dahling Lady Lou, but wi’ Edgar o’ late returned from his travels, I just couldn’t resist setting the cat among the pigeons. Your illustrious brother is here, I take it?”

“Lady Mortlake, my cousin here assured me that it would be in the best interests of reasonability were I to come here, and when I consulted his kinsman and fellow Pelham, the Duke of Newcastle, the latter agreed. Not that I approve everything that the said personage does: for example, what got into him to add Holles to his name; did he think he would climb up a rung? No, not I one for saying amen when folk steal a distinguished name. Could he not be content with his own? However, he is one to pour oil on troubled waters not pour it on the fire. As for Hugh, I had no notion he meant to be a malicious coxcomb, and if you deem that it is all in his favour, I will turn heel and leave without a word.”

“Malicious? Cousin, you malign me! La, I espy Irvin. Come, we shall have capital sport –,” first wailed then cheered Hugh Pelham, only to be pulled on his coat-skirts as he prepared to surge off.

“Don’t mind him,” said the enemy intruder, who appeared to be the more civilised and civil of the two, “he has been long in the Powdering Tub (the Kingsland hospital near London which treated cases of V.D.), and God knows what all that salivating did to him. He is become a mere zad (crooked back or bandy-legged person) and his calves are gone to grass (spindle shanks), while his character is that of a character (odd, eccentric fellow).”

“There will be no sport of any kind: you know what happened to the lion and the unicorn in the rhyme?” rasped Lady Mortlake. “There will be no abuse of my hospitality, and thô, Lord Chatteris, you are here under the auspices of one who acts fit to sham Abraham (feign sickness or madness), he is less unwelcome here than are you.”

“Of that I am aware,” agreed Lord Chatteris, ever courtly and urbane, “and allow me to emphasise my assurances that if there is but a hint of quarrelsomeness between any parties, it shall not be owing to any provocation that I may offer for I hereby solemnly promise not to offer any. Now pray, under your good guidance, may I pay my respects to your honest spouse? We have interests in the same shire, as well you know.”

He proffered his elbow, but Louisa did not accept it.

“Where have you been all this time, Chatteris?” she demanded.

“In Ireland. I was a guest of the ban (Lord Lieutenant of Ireland),” he supplied.

“Those are not good credentials,” she pronounced. “Ireland has not had a good Lord Lieutenant since Ormond after the Interregnum. You have lands there too, or are they in Scotland, for whatever that’s worth?” she probed, and walked on with him, accompanied by a small company of inquisitive followers, including Justina. “To be honest, Earl, for my brother’s sake, I would rather not receive you, but for my own sake, I would rather not receive your cousin Hugh. I vow, he grows worse every time I see him. How many times has he visited the Powdering Tub?”

“In the family we have lost count, and that does not include the number of times he has been Battersea’d (had his penis treated for V.D. at Battersea hospital),” he replied, “but all

I can say for him now is what he said for himself, that he is egregious and a coxcomb, whereas for me, I say that I cut a most fearsome sorry and apologetic figure.”

“Well! However, your cousin Hugh never apologises,” she complained.

“I suspect that he is beyond knowing what the word means,” he lamented.

“O, fie, my brother has seen us,” she sighed. “He is sure to remonstrate with me later for letting you in here, and so, do you see what trouble you are causing?”

“Confusion on your brother if he holds you responsible,” quoth Chatteris. “I mark that there are new faces in Town and that some of them are good enough to be here.”

“Some come and go, just to cut a dash,” she dismissed, reluctant to be his passport to the changes in people of Quality.

“Well, I was surprised to see a lady here with whom I danced last night at Ranelagh,” he declared. “She was masked but there was that about her that made her recognisable again, I think. It is not the thing to go talk unIntroduced to a lady in a drawing room even if one may dance with her at Ranelagh, albeit that I would be glad to know if it were she.”

“Indicate her; I will name her if I can,” invited Lady Louisa.

“I cannot indicate the lady; but she was with us, and may still be” chuckled he. “A beauty in blue with a waist that could pass through a wedding band –,”

“I know who that is: ’tis Justina Woodville,” she snorted.

“A real Woodville?”

“What’s left of them, aye, but she’s Hearne’s daughter. The man is an object of contempt and pity.”

A number of folk turned and stared at Justina, and thô she disliked her own progenitor, at this moment, Justina hated Louisa Mortlake even more.

“A lack of adequate funds does strange things to a person,” philosophised Lord Chatteris, “such as you will never find out, dear lady. If she is still nigh, could we pause so that you perform the necessities?”

“With respect, is she not a little young for you?” challenged Louisa, and there was laughter, but this was Society at its highest level and a gap was created by its lofty members around Justina that exposed her to the view of both the unwanted guest and his hostess.

“I’m old enough to be her father,” he was saying, meanwhile, “so what is the harm in that, forsooth?”

“That is the point: Hearne could just as easily sell her to you,” said Louisa.

The others began to laugh and there was Justina, isolated in a circle that had formed around her, wondering whether to turn and flee, or face all, but then suddenly, Louisa turned about and with her, so did Chatteris, whereupon they caught sight of her, just standing there. For a moment, Louisa looked a little silly, and in that instant, Justina seized her chance.

“That was very droll, was it not? Vastly entertaining, to be sure,” she carped. “Has anyone spoken of your relations in terms like that of late in your hearing, and you but a mere innocent bystander to a colloquy open to the attention of all your guests?”

“This is the lady indeed,” he smiled.

Louisa baulked, for she felt insulted by Justina’s remark, even if she had invited it.

“The Duke of Hearne lately gave away his eldest daughter, in return for his debts being settled, to none other than my brother,” she announced, in the guise of imparting to Chatteris a confidence. “Thus I cannot be loyal to him and at the same time present to you the

Duke of Hearne's younger daughter."

"Which you just did," Justina spat at her, "and if I may remind your la'ship, age or otherwise, among the Quality, it is customary to ask the consent of the lady first before any presentation be made, whether obliquely or in all honesty. Ask your brother."

Having spoken thus, she turned and walked out of the group, whereof the members parted to let her through. It was her intention to return to her window seat where she hoped her family still was nigh, but as she set off towards it, Lord Chatteris caught up with her.

"First, a little lesson, if I may make so bold, in the ways and wiles of tonnish women," he began. "A lady of Quality, when having danced with a gentleman, at a masked ball, where there was no unmasking, would never let him pronounce her to have been his partner or admit in any wise that they danced, when on the morrow, they both chance to meet, even if they are old acquaintances. 'Tis a most absurd convention, and I do not condone it, but understand your reluctance to silence me as based on ingenuousness and ignorance of this silly practice."

"I feel like I am walking in tantoblins (lumps of excrement)," she sighed.

"Not a word for the drawing room, even if descriptive of many who frequent it," he corrected, with a qualification, "or otherwise an accurate picture of the proceedings. Your courage is disarming and let no-one dare to correct you again."

"Very well, now that we have dealt with my errors of conduct and language, I think I owe you an explanation about last night, for you have announced to the world and his wife that you and I danced together then," she stated sharply.

"There is no need, for you explained all adequately at the time. There was a serious misunderstanding and I fear that you may have suffered more than did I," he dismissed.

While he was speaking, she looked up past him and perceived that she was being duly observed by such folk of her former party as would not have liked her to be near him. Thus he too glanced over his shoulder, and beheld the same.

"Saving y' favour," he recommenced, "your la'ship has earned the uncompromisingly hostile regard of some of your friends and suchlike."

"O, my aunt does not look at me with hostility, sir," she amended, "the expression on her face betokens that her patience with me is exasperated."

"Know you why?" he probed.

"I may not consort with your lordship, but why *that*, I know not," she admitted blandly. "As to yestereven, I was hauled off because my sister was seeking me, and that was no vain excuse, but my aunt was not vastly forthcoming."

"You must nevertheless be aware that the man who is to wed her and I are, if I may theatrically say, mortal enemies? There is no-one who is ignorant of that," he pursued.

"I culled incoherent intelligences thereabout but not prior to yestereven," she owned. "However I was told of no single reason for it."

"There is no single reason, ma'am," he replied. "If you ask the right people you will be given several stories of divers lengths and details about various clashes I have had with your future brother-in-law, which tales will be cited as reasons, but they are only the results thereof, for such reasons, ma'am, are contained severally in a disaffection between Irvin and myself, an incongruity of characters, an incompatibility of minds even socially, and the good Duke's propensity rashly to provoke more."

"Provoke you, in other words. Doubtless he would present me with another version?"

“No, madam, he would present you with nothing, let alone a version. He rarely explains or vindicates himself. His way is to fling his deeds – misdeeds, truly – in our faces and challenge us with acceptance or rejection of them; neither makes any difference to him.”

“He struck me as a man who adhered to convention rather than flouted it.”

“The veneer of appearances always remains, ma’am. The man is hypocrisy incarnate.”

At that, Justina burst out laughing.

“I fun not,” he resumed. “Hearken back to the possibility of different versions o’ the reasons for this implacable hatred between us. If he were to condescend to explain his version of whatever matter, then you would laugh again, for you would be certain to note that my allegations would be more than borne out.”

“If he never explains things then I had better try to catch him in a good mood, in order to squeeze him for them.”

“If ever his mood is good, in the true sense of the word,” he chuckled. “Yet while we await such a miracle, care you to adjourn to the refectory? I am persuaded that there are tables well laden with the tastiest delicacies.”

“A few cold cuts do for me.”

“Madam is an avid eater of meat?”

“We have learned in our family that by hearty eating of lean meat, we fill our bellies and yet seem light on our feet.”

“Is it necessary to remain slim? You don’t want to look like a tooth drawer (skinny).”

“Not just slim, but strong. It is useful when working with horses.”

“Madam works with horses? Did you say ‘work’, indeed?”

“Indeed,” replicated she, and taking the elbow he offered, let him lead her hence.

“I would very much like to hear of this work,” he chuckled.

“You want to hear about how to muck out stables?” she teased.

At that he laughed so heartily that, althô left behind, Lady Ashlington watched in alarm as her niece scampered merrily off on the arm of a man who had been expressly forbidden to her, while Irvin stared after them with more dismay than anger. He should have been particularly enraged had Chatteris chusen to court Justina just to spite him, but then Chatteris could not have suspected his inclinations in the girl’s favour; indeed, in the light of last evening’s events, it would have seemed to Chatteris that Irvin had tried to spite him instead. Yet the Duke saw Justina more than Chatteris at fault, for thô he had gone to her, she had been warned against him, but instead now blatantly encouraged association, but so amiably and cheerily that would have had the most twisted mind in a most malicious onlooker dismiss the whole as innocent and insignificant. Galled but severely restricted by the presence of his betrothed, who could become suspicious or upset were he to go chasing after her sister instead of paying attention to her, Irvin was thus obliged to let Justina and Chatteris escape, but first he turned to Caroline to remind her of the terrible state of hostility between him and the gentleman with whom Justina had bounced off to the dining room. His grace also ordered his intended – or so it was in his tone of voice, even if his language was that of abject entreaty – to prevent Justina from ever performing like acts of folly now that she was attached to the House of Irvin, so she was not free to strike up friendships in whatever direction she was disposed to go. Caroline was a trifle annoyed hereby, for not only was his manner overbearing and his attitude mandatory, but he also seemed jealous that Justina had chusen his

enemy for her companion, rather than merely troubled thereby.

The Duke of Irvin was forced to let half an hour elapse before he was at liberty to wend his way to the dining room in quest of Justina, who obviously had the Devil in her thus to comport herself. As soon as he managed to extricate himself from Lady Ashlington's parlour circle, he was set upon by his sister Lavinia, making a fuss about Chatteris's presence in the house, but along came Deborah and rudely drove her away to claim his company for herself, even if he found her importunating, for he also wished to trap Louisa and berate her for allowing his enemy into her drawing room, even if he was too decorous to do so outright and meant to take her aside in the study first, and certainly not with Deborah as a witness, for Louisa would set Deborah an example with her own rude retorts designed to ridicule him before the lady who professed to love him. Deborah was also already gloating about Louisa receiving the Earl, Louisa who was supposed to be his own flesh and blood. Finally he just had to abandon her to Annesley, who was always ready to do him a favour and nurtured a secret fancy for his friend's mistress, so that at last he was free. Casual but discreet, the Duke removed himself from this chamber, but first ensured that neither Caroline nor Deborah were watching him, by design or by chance.

In the dining room, Justina was seated very visibly for the whole world to behold, with her older companion, and as it was all so obvious, no-one was interested. In her lap was an empty plate and just as Irvin entered, Chatteris chanced to take it from her, most solicitously of course, whispering a joke in her ear as he did. Unto them did his grace directly stride, bowed low to the lady and barely to her companion, who nevertheless made a proper obeisance, but Justina only smirked and gave the intruder the benefit of a supercilious regard, even thô, for being seated, she had to look up at – not to – him rather than down her nose.

"Madam," began Irvin icily, "would you be so good as to return to your aunt?"

"O, well, if I must," she sighed, had rose heavily, tempted to inquire if her aunt really wanted her to return.

"Madam, you are not doing me a favour, so a lugubrious aspect is out of place," scolded the Duke, which she found untoward in him, so she pulled a face and flounced off, watched all the while by the Earl, who began to snigger.

"Share your amusement, sir," invited the Duke coldly.

"Gladly," agreed the other, beaming all over his face, "I was entertained by your intervention, for I was glad to note that you sent not an emissary but did us the honour of coming in person."

"US, is it? Sir, you make very free and forward with one who is about to become a member of my family," reprimanded the Duke.

The Earl took a step back, leaning a hand on his sword hilt for want of anything else to lean it upon, with no significance to the gesture, but Irvin chose to make an issue of it.

"Not aching to be in a man's beef again, are we? What, over a little chit of a girl? You disappoint me, for I thought you regarded her in an avuncular light, for that is how she appears to regard you. Is this your new ploy for the seduction of young fillies?"

"The devil take you, Irvin, you seek a cause for duello in every gesture!" spat Chatteris, incensed. "What malady governs your mind?"

"Telling a fellow he is fit for Bedlam also constitutes a risk."

"O, I forgot, we have not duelled for a long time and your veins are fit to burst with

longing for a blood-letting.”

“You are not a civilised creature, Chatteris. All you ever talk about if ever we meet is when our next encounter will be. Nonetheless, let it not be said of me that I am an uncharitable man: if the urge to have your crust burst is too strong, or you ache for the ache of the sword wound, I am only too ready to oblige, and a glass of wine emptied in your face will provide an easy pretext. However, I would request a delay in the issue of any intended challenge, out of deference to my sister, who has let you into her house, and I do not allow that any knock-me-down doings be arranged here.”

“Pshaw!” scoffed the Earl and marched away, his head held high.

Meanwhile the other inmates of the room, all pretending to mind their own business, were in truth, watching the progress of this verbal encounter, itself as entertaining as any stage play, even if a cloud of mystery enshrouded it somewhat, for the gentlemen did not speak very loudly and it was not known what words had passed between them – nor was anyone audacious enough to approach close enough to listen. Thus when Chatteris stormed off, all heads rose and all eyes turned to watch him depart, before they were turned to pry on Irvin, for which pains they received a disdainful little smirk, before he sauntered out, pausing momentarily to take a glass of claret from an itinerant footman bearing a tray. Both noblemen returned to the drawing room, but within a few minutes of each other, arriving separately and, after their ingressions, moving in different directions, the Earl having already gone to seek his ludicrous cousin when Irvin set out find Lady Ashlington.

Altho the latter was easily found, neither of her nieces was with her, one being with Lady Northingham and Lord Darlington, and the other seated alone on another window seat, slowly fanning herself and eyeing the guests as if they were all objects of freakish curiosity. The aunt pointed both out to him but instead of going to his betrothed, as she had hoped, he marched off to the future sister-in-law, when suddenly something fair and shimmering stepped in his way, eyes narrowed, her hand upon his arm, to stall his progress.

“What are you doing, Lionel?” demanded Deborah Herriard, in tones steeped in acid.

“What do you want, ma’am?” he snapped impatiently back, but when he looked up from her face, Justina had vanished.

Lady Deborah was determined, however, to keep him from both Woodville sisters, for one was to achieve a kind of precedence over her by wedding him, and the other could tempt him to stray from her. She succeeded for the most part of the *matinée*, but when Lady Ashlington prepared to depart, he pleaded duty and was thus able to hasten away to exchange valedictions with her and her nieces. In fact the race so to do was so near run that he reached them in the hall.

“Pray, my ladies,” he said, “depart not without granting me the privilege of leave-taking, at least.”

“My dear Duke, you sound hurt,” said Aunt Lizzie, with compassion.

At that he smiled and there ended all anxiety, for he bid good farewell most pleasantly to his betrothed and her aunt, but when he came to Justina, he took her hand and sighed sadly.

“Caution, child; be prudent,” he said, like some troubled and dissatisfied mentor.

“Am I about to have a peal rung in my ears for some indiscretion?” she sniggered.

“No indiscretion,” replied he indulgently, still holding her by the wrist, “but if I were you, I’d have a care about the society that I keep, for those are follies and dangers wherefrom

I would see you protect yourself when others cannot protect you.”

“God a-mercy, horse, it was a drawing room I was in, not an adventure,” she snorted, to her aunt’s impatience.

“Many an adventure is played out in a drawing room, and today, I am certain that no-one will have failed to mark how involved you were in one such,” averred he with emphasis.

“That is making much matter of a wooden platter, surely?” she objected.

“I grant you the benefit of the doubt on this occasion,” he rejoined sharply. “If you prefer the society of older men, so be it; you manifested this yestereven and today, and innocent it may be, but grant me this answer: what has he let you know of him?”

“Precious little, I admit, but, I can tell that he is a gentleman from his courtly conduct, that he has a sense of humour from his jokes which are good without being scabrous despite the mode for such, and that he is a charmer from his speech, but otherwise I know him superficially,” she recited almost with flippancy and abrasive confidence, thus giving him to comprehend that she was probably acquainted with more than she would say.

“Very well, if you must know him, let it be superficially then, and no better, so it would be best not to consort further with him,” he decreed.

“You are forbidding me to meet him?” she scoffed, as if at his effrontery.

“I have no choice, for knowing him superficially is as much as you need to know him, for if you know him well, it will only cause you pain,” he pronounced.

“Why should that be so?” she defied.

“Forgive the crudeness of my response, and misunderstand this not as a great harvest of little corn, but yours is a clear and unprejudiced mind, Lady Justina, not prey to alarm, and thus you will understand when I say to you that I fairly consider little good will come of your preferring to cultivate relations with him even if he is of a bent to pursue you,” stated he.

“He is old enough to be her father, sir,” intervened Caroline, “so pray be more specific, for Justina will never follow you if you talk around the subject thus.”

“O, that is all right. Lord Chatteris said that his grace never explained anything,” supplied Justina.

“There is a type of man his age who goes after younger females and the younger the better, for it rejuvenates them in spirit and virility, or so they imagine,” rasped the Duke, and Justina pulled a grimace of disgust. “Secondly, there is your sister’s position. If Chatteris elects to pursue you, it will be less out of inclination than spite, and encouragement from you towards amity will allow him all the opportunity he needs,” he continued.

“The spite will not be towards my sister’s position, but towards your grace,” prevaricated the shrewd Justina. “As he and you are enemies, my freedom, limited as it is, must further be restricted to please you, so let us not bother Caroline. Instead, why does your grace not address yourself to your sister Louisa for letting him in here, and not turning him away at the door? That is how these things are done in families, not by venting one’s virulence upon the silly little sister-in-law-to-be. Go after your silly little sister first, sir, or is her husband a jerry-sneak and she liable to practise upon you?”

“Sir,” interceded Caroline, as she saw the ducal ire rise, “Justina is a simple creature, but not a simpleton, and the exploration of concepts and abstracts makes her impatient and testy. She means no insult or rancour in her speech, so pray take no offence, I beg. She only needs to become accustomed to the niceties of relations among the tonnish Quality.”

“Granted, yet there must come a time when her la’ship should come out mentally and physically from the stables,” he derided. “I bid you all a good day, dear ladies.”

With that, he bowed to Caroline and her aunt, turned his back on Justina who thumbed her nose at it, and walked off to mount the stairs and return to the company. Their carriage having been sent for, it was announced, so the three ladies egressed from the house, in silence, but as they were about to board it, Lady Ashlington turned on the younger of her two nieces.

“Justina Woodville, why, I do declare, what a to-do you caused, baiting him so? Is that how the maggot bites (according to caprice or whim)? ’Tis even more perilous than friendship with Chatteris – assuming one can be friends with such a man – and why the cruel stripping of his pretences, which only made him mad as a Greek? He grew cold as ice and his gaze was dead as a shotten herring. You knew exactly what he meant about Chatteris, and you played the fool!”

“Firstly, aunt, it was for him to come out fairly with the truth and not be so bird-mouthed,” objected Justina, “and secondly, I have not heard such circuitous nonsense in all my life – O, notice how he failed to treat the objection raised about his sister’s freedom to receive his so-called enemy, but took Carrie’s name in vain instead. Chatteris said he never gave any version of anything he ever did, and lo, so it was –,”

“Halloo-OOO!” called a silly voice, and on the house steps, there was Hugh Pelham, staggering about and waving a hand. “Know you what they are saying in there? That Irvin and Chatteris nigh challenged each other, but not over the bride, no! It was over her sister. Have you ever heard o’ such sport in all your life?”

“That is a clanker,” rejoined Justina. “Whoever spread that deserves to be put over the door, for if a lie could choke, that one would ha’ done it. Now be off. Shoe the goose. Let ’em trundle. Get lost!”

“I say, you are not a good girl (also means harlot) –,”

“Don’t call me names in the street, you knock-in-a-cradle, peppered off (infected with V.D.) up to the eyeballs. Pize take you (imprecation), go make indentures (stagger about) somewhere else!” Justina called out, and one of her aunt’s footmen began to mount the house steps, so horrible Hugh went within, still somewhat unsteady on his feet.

“Ah, Justina,” groaned Lizzie, exasperated and tristful.

“Aunt, do you realise what sort of family they are, those Irvins, sisters, brother and all?” rejoined Justina. “I have had my share of all of them, in different ways, in a manner you’d not suspect. They are an odious family, they have their own set of morals and it is different for each individual. Don’t ask me how I know, but in company I troll and troll by (one who, esteemed by no-one, esteems nobody) and they do not notice me, so I learn, but if they do notice me, it is even worse. I will not gain sufficient interest from the marriageable men in Town if I frequent the houses of Irvin’s vile sisters, who are so dedicated to his interests as to let into their houses a so-called enemy of his, yet he comes to scold me like I was just out of petty-school. As for Chatteris: I know a great A from a bull’s foot enough to tell you that like most of the *ton* here, he is two-thirds snip (cheat) and one-third story teller (liar), so he’ll not blear my eyes that easily. At Ranelagh – which I’ve heard tell some call the bread and butter (b.& b. fashion: having sex) warehouse, and I wonder of me why – after he danced with me I was much importunated by another partner and thus only too relieved to return to him, which now has me wondering whether he paid someone to be thus a nuisance

so that I would fall back in relief upon his company. I may be country-put, but I'm not Ralf Spooner (fool). As for Irvin, he has not acted after a manner that merits much respect."

To spare her sister's feelings, she would not say how she knew the family of the Duke to be rotten to the core, apart from what Louisa had done today, and made fun of Justina in any wise. There was that conversation she had overheard between him and his sister Lavinia who cautioned him against her, with a description of her that was none too flattering, and a dirty mind to go with it, even if she knew that her brother was a rake, for she was putting the blame on the female part in the much-feared imbroglio. Then there was Ranelagh, and Justina had seen the face of the man who had kissed her with such ferocious lust yet tenderness and consideration. That dealt with the three siblings and she thanked Heaven that there were no more of them. This business of Chatteris also complicated her opinion of Irvin, whom she did not see as entirely free of blame regarding the troubles he invited upon himself, but she did not say so for Caroline's sake, and she could not very well explain her disobliging behaviour to the Duke about what he asked her to do or not to do as a way of punishing him for what he had done at Ranelagh in the clearing under a starry sky, because a man like that did not deserve to be obeyed. Thus when she made her speech about them she had all these elements in mind but she could not explain or confess all.

"Justina, they are not the 'Irvins', they are the Claremonts," corrected Aunt Lizzie.

"They could be named Swab (surly despicable fellow) for all I care," grunted Justina, indicating the waiting carriage. "Shall we start off, or are we to stand in the street all day?"

Lady Ashlington took precedence, followed by Caroline, and Justina boarded the vehicle last of all. While she was patting down her skirts, Aunt Lizzie turned in anxiety upon her older niece and asked if she were not well, and when Justina looked up, her sister certainly seemed miserable, but she hesitated before answering.

"I keep telling myself that I care not for him, and I know that I do not," Caroline said, "so why do I feel upset and injured about what that silly fellow just now revealed to us?"

"That is because you are engaged to the wretch, and frankly, a deceitful fellow like him, for that is what you are having, Carrie, is not worth the trouble of feeling any pain about. Nor had that placket-strung (having V.D.) haltersack any business to come and blow the gaff (carry tales) as he did," consoled Lizzie. "'Tis a blow to your pride, and goodness knows, that has suffered enough."

"I rather fear it is vanity," admitted Caroline, "and I disrelish the notion that folk are going about gabbling that my intended is duelling over my sister, for the human mind being not much cleaner than an open drain, they are not going to put some innocently honourable interpretation upon it. If I ask Irvin about it, he is sure to try and sew pillows under my elbows (soothe with false reassurances) or even squarely say it never happened."

"My dear, folk are always making up reasons for Irvin and Chatteris fighting, most of them spurious. One of them has only to knock his finger accidentally into his own sword in the other's presence and the world and its wife will imagine an affair of honour – dishonour, more like. The trouble is, however, those two do fight periodically and I don't think it will cease until one has moved into another land or otherwise gone to Rot-his-bone (died: pun on Ratisbon in Bavaria)."

"Aunt Lizzie," interposed Justina tersely, "don't invent excuses that are as lame as St. Giles Cripplegate to pacify poor Carrie and exonerate me. I am deeply sorry if those two

Mohawks were going to fight over me but all I knew was that I was taking a snag with Chatteris and along came Irvin and told me to pull it. So I went and the Devil knows what they conjobbed between themselves. I did not sow seeds of dissension or incite rivalries: if they nearly drew sword, it was doubtless a case of mutual insult for no reason at all.”

“I have no doubt, Justina, that you have not perpetrated any discord between them, but the thing piques me in any wise. He is soon to wed, and rather than preserve himself, he would rather duel. By the Lord Harry, he is no husband; he may marry but a husband he will never make,” lamented Carrie. “I would rather lead apes in hell, but father’s debts and mortgages come first.”

“You said, aunt, that they fight periodically,” reminded Justina. “How often have they fought each other?”

“At least four times, but they were already enemies before then, and became so because Chatteris was courting Lavinia, and suddenly gave her turnips,” declared the Viscountess. “That, I think, set the whole business of enmity in motion.”

“Did he poison (impregnate) her?” wondered Justina. “Is Northingham standing Moses for his brat?”

“No, and it did not even go as far as his cracking her pitcher, or so we are assured, but it was a messy business altogether, but Irvin did not fight Chatteris,” averred the Viscountess.

“When was the last time they fought?” pursued Justina.

“Nigh on two years ago – no, just a bittock longer,” supplied Lizzie. “They are often in each other’s beef, for Irvin is too leery to do a man’s business (kill) for him, but Chatteris has given the impression that he would not mind to see his opponent used up (killed), and that which weighs in favour o’ that idea, is that the excuses for their encounters have worn rather thin of late. As swordsmen, *on dit* that they are well matched.”

“Is it known what they duelled about?” continued Justina.

“The first was over Chatteris’s first wife, the second was over some petticoat, the third over some card game, and the last one because Irvin is supposed to have made a slanderous allegation when Chatteris’s last wife tipped off (died),” related Lady Ashlington.

“Last wife?” cried Justina. “How many times has ol’ Bluebeard been spliced?”

“Four, I believe,” declared her aunt nonchalantly, “but he is still childless. He divorced the first one, who is now wed to one of the Willoughby Tarleton family, who was the correspondent in the case, and who has since made her thoroughly miserable. His second wife was brought to bed of a still birth and died of it, the third was a consumptive, which she hid from him, and duly became the crow’s pudden two years later. The death o’ the last one was a mystery, but the gadabouts (gossips) said it was *felo de se*.¹”

“I’ll wager that the ‘slanderous allegation’ was that she was so wretched with such a spouse that she ended their marriage thus,” quoth Justina.

“A little that way, but half the Quality said it, so why he challenged Irvin and not anyone else is what I mean when I say that the excuses wear thin,” noted the Viscountess.

“I’d love to get to the bottom of that mystery, thô,” cackled Justina.

“Scandal and conjecture,” laughed her aunt.

“There is no smoke without fire,” coaxed Carrie. “Me, I’d like to know exactly what I am being made to marry.”

“What a parcel of girls I have with me!” Aunt Lizzie pretended to complain. “Very

well, I need time to assemble my recollections, and so wait until we reach home. I warn you, some of it is quite ludicrous. We may partake of a nice glass of negus and it will help to lighten that which could be a long, dark tale.”

In fact it was ratafia and water, accompanied by ratafia biscuits, a delicacy for the palates of the sisters, who, from country climes and a none too affluent household, had commoner hazels as a treat rather than anything with an almond flavour, even if, in their park, there was also a fine walnut tree, bearing fruit kernels that were generally accepted as the King of the nuts in the European continent and its outposts. Glad to be away from the stifling atmosphere of a convivial assembly that neither were enjoying, Caroline and Justina were also glad to be in their aunt’s drawing room once again, and so promoted good humour in the matron, whom they reminded that she owed them the dismal details of Irvin’s history with Chatteris, a serious subject of which the Viscountess hoped to make as much a joke of it as possible, at least for the sake of Irvin’s future wife.

“I am not sure how to relate any of this or how far it is true, for ’tis mostly hearsay; I know not whether to speak first of Chatteris’s marriages or those confounded duels,” she owned. “I remember mentioning the first countess being divorced and going off with a Willoughby Tarleton. Now with that had Irvin nothing to do – I think.”

At that they laughed, and Caroline looked a little nervous, so Justina reached out to pat her hand in reassurance.

“The fun really began when Chatteris was wived by his cousin, Elinor Pelham, sister to that death’s head on a mop-stick (very thin person) we saw today, his wits askew from the prap (V.D. infection). Now she was acutely fond of Irvin, and, some say, even his natural (mistress). There was even talk that they might wed – but then she married the Earl, not of her own volition. Threats were concerned, they say,” related the Viscountess.

“What sort of threats?” fretted Caroline.

“Divers sorts: to have her by force and spoil her shape, to kill Irvin, all a manner of paw-paw tricks (naughtiness – nursery talk), allegedly, and we don’t know which in truth,” replied Lady Ashlington. “In any wise he wed her of all women, to ward Irvin off from taking as a wife a member of his family, for being enemies over Lavinia, Chatteris suspected Irvin’s motives in courting his cousin. I don’t really blame him; everyone suspects Irvin’s motives. However, Elinor-the-countess-by-force determined to be revenged on her spouse, but she was both giddy and spiteful of character, and would tease her husband with Irvin’s name, noting that had a veritably incendiary effect upon him. She once did it at Leicester House, to the great amusement of the Prince and Princess of Wales. Then she began to grow big wi’ child – but lay in of it eight months after the marriage and extremely large.”

“It was Irvin’s,” whined Caroline, leaning back in her chair.

“Chatteris certainly thought so, and was pleased to challenge your Duke,” recounted her aunt. “They duelled the day after Lady Chatteris and her still-born infant were buried. Irvin wounded Chatteris lightly but had to retire to his estates for a while. As Chatteris was the challenger and also the loser, he was resolved to fight Irvin again as soon as he could make an occasion arise. Well, it did, not even a year later, when the two chanced to meet in the rooms of some expensive bona roba (finely dressed harlot) like Madam Betty Careless, who had allegedly made a muddle of her engagements’ calendar. The story was that Chatteris marched in already undressed, to make a good impression, while Irvin was in the process of

mounting the hussy.”

Justina gave a crude guffaw, while Caroline managed a painful giggle.

“These are things my husband is not going to tell me,” the latter acknowledged.

“Then know them from others,” recommended her aunt. “I have no idea when they really fought, but there was a favourite rumour that Chatteris went for his sword then and there, and that they engaged in the duel on the spot. Yards and yards of buff and bouncing baubles – er – yes. Now let me see, where was I?”

“Bouncing baubles (testicles)?” echoed Caroline.

“Irvin’s lucky that Chatteris did not lop off his stargazer (erect penis).”

“Justina! What kind of talk is that?”

“That of one who lives among animals and sees them mate, aunt. Men are no different, I’ll warrant. Mind you, one look at Chatteris and that lofty stretcher (big willy) would have hung like a lobcock (large, lax penis). Go on, pray, Aunt Lizzie.”

“One thing we know: Chatteris challenged Irvin,” continued the latter, “for he was able to say that he caught Irvin in the act of enjoying his woman just as he came to take possession of her.”

“Who wounded whom?” asked Justina.

“Irvin wounded Chatteris.”

“Poor Chatteris doesn’t have much luck,” lamented Caroline jocosely. “Does he ever win a duel?”

“Listen,” commanded Aunt Lizzie, chuckling. “Having lost, Chatteris was all agog to engage again. Within a six-month, when he had recovered, for his wound was bloody but not serious, by which time the storm had supposedly blown over, he was back, rampaging about and swearing that he would have Irvin’s blood. Yet Irvin was gone to Paris, so Chatteris had to wait, and when he returned –,”

“They fought again,” groaned Justina, sounding bored.

“They butchered each other! It was a whist game and Chatteris came to play against Irvin, who guessed, like half the people in the room, including your humble condumble, that the Earl was making an opportunity for a fight, and of course, the Duke could not refuse,” narrated the Viscountess. “Then it happened, what we were all awaiting: one accused the other of cheating and the other denied it, calling his detractor a nicker (card cheat). Who challenged whom? To this day, there are folk who were by them and cannot be sure; they just say that they challenged each other. Three days later they met on Wandsworth Common at six o’ clock in the morning and virtually disembowelled each other; no withdrawing at the first slash of blood drawn. Blood poured from both of them and still they fought on. Irvin had the last thrust but when he had brought Chatteris down, he collapsed minutes later. He suffered horribly of his wounds, said Lavinia, and it was Chatteris who recovered first.”

“So Chatteris, of course, cried victory,” understood Justina, “hence constituting the need for a fourth duel.”

“My niece ain’t so obtuse,” gurgled Lizzie.

“Granted, and then?” encouraged Justina.

“They waited a year, no less,” resumed her aunt. “There was a little bit of an outcry, wi’ Louisa Mortlake raising a kick-up about how dreadfully Chatteris had carved up her brother and his Pelham cousins whining about how unsporting it had been that Irvin had

wounded their kinsman over and over again. By then, Chatteris had a new wife, and was about to take her to tour Italy. Along came Irvin and capricornified (cuckolded) him. You could say she wasn't much of a wife if she had horns to sell, but she was vastly younger than the Earl, whom she was doubtless loth to wed, and Irvin is so attractive to women."

"So they fought about that and Irvin slashed Chatteris and there was a scandal, requiring Irvin to retire from Town," recited Justina on a monotone, "all over again."

"Actually, the scandal erupted after Chatteris's fourth countess had been found floating in a fishpond on her husband's estate, in pretty clothes and shoes, stark, stone dead, supposedly drowned," recalled Lady Ashlington. "I said supposedly, for the Surgeon's Hall wanted to do a *post mortem*, to discover if there were water in her lungs, and her spouse refused. He is the bishop's sister's son: he could pull a warrant out of his arse if he had to. This time it was an injunction. However, two tales circulated, and one was possibly the unproven invention of Chatteris. First, she was impregnated by Irvin and drowned herself. That holds no water – no pun intended, for she could pass Irvin's seed off as that of her spouse and you know not how many wives do that with husbands up and down the isle –,"

"All with Irvin's seed?" teased Justina.

"Rigsby (roaring girl)!" scolded Aunt Lizzie, laughing. "The second tale was that Chatteris had her ducked," she went on. "The alleged reason for her death was that she had fallen in and could not swim. The pond was rather far for a walk and she had not rid there, for there was not a horse in sight, and no explanation was offered for it."

"That is the saddest tale of them all, even sadder than that of the fair Lady Elinor and her dead infant, put to bed to push up daisies," mused Justina. "Found floating in a fishpond. What a tragic sight that must have been. I hope I never see such a thing in my whole life."

"With all this cuckolding, it does indeed seem as if Chatteris has a genuine grievance against Irvin," commented Caroline.

"Genuine enough, and not much helped by the sequel to the drowning, for it put the Town in quite a major pucker (fright), forcing Chatteris to retire from public life for an entire year," reported Lizzie in resonant accents, "whereas Irvin, as if bred in Brazen-nose College (very impudent), dared tarry in Town, despite pressures put on him to depart, but he would not. After fighting a fellow and being in his beef, he actually remained here, in breach of all conventions to withdraw from notice, notwithstanding the danger of ostracism and the peril of arrest, for a malicious wounding. For his stiff rumped insolence, his name was in the mire; even his sisters were begging him to go, but nay, he would stay, and not by your leave, sir! Shewed his face everywhere, St. James's Park, the playhouse and the Theatre Royal, his sisters' salons, all the Clubs about St. James's, and even at Leicester House."

"The home of the Prince and the Princess of Wales?" remembered Justina.

"He has her protection, and that is his making as it was his saving then," explained the Viscountess. "He has done her a political favour or two, for she is an arch meddler, even worse than her husband, but – now remark this: the other fashionables chose not to invite him to their assemblies and open their doors to him during trig hall (open house days : dialect) or suchlike. Until then, he was regarded as a bit of a libertine and a confounded, infernal nuisance, but thereafter, he was looked upon as he is now, a dangerous and devilish creature with scandal in his train, a veritable rake-hell, in other words."

"A rake-hell, not a rake-jakes (also, a blackguard)," sniggered Justina.

“Literally a rake-jakes is a poor but indispensable person, for he has the vile task of cleaning out the withdraught,” sighed Caroline, “and may not be a bad man after all, even if his work is foul and unenviable.”

“That is so. Folk do not forget notoriety; even now, he is not welcome in some salons,” said Lady Ashlington.

“One could say that his affairs with Chatteris brought him to this pretty pass,” commented. “Is marriage going to make him less ill-regarded?”

“Not entirely, nor is it a certain cure for such incommodelements, but it has been known to help, unless he weds someone as disreputable as he is,” said Lizzie. “A Westminster wedding, when a rogue weds a harlot. That is why he is content to have a fresh country maid, with no connexions with Town and a spotless reputation, even if he has to pay her father.”

“That is the only reason I am prepared to take an engagement ring from him. I’d sooner wed an honest country squire with no title at all. My father does not see things in the same light. Irvin is a Duke and had the Tudors not put all the Dukes in the Island to death and escheated their titles, so that if their families wanted to be ducal again they had to buy the title from the earlier Stuarts or serve the later ones, he would be twentieth Duke or something alike. My father being of the same ilk, it mattered not to him that Irvin was a rake-hell or a rake-jakes, as long as he had the right pedigree and was prepared to pay up.”

“I suspect that even if he had the wrong pedigree and was prepared to pay up, our dear papa would have agreed,” said Justina drily. “How stands Chatteris’s reputation?” she asked, rising from her seat and going to occupy another one.

“O, he remains of the highest ton,” supplied their aunt. “He is a well-respected member of the Quality and has been so since before Irvin arrived on the scene. One could even say that he was one of the leaders thereof, but all the duelling spoilt that somewhat, except that he managed their aftermath rather better than did your arrogant spousy to be. Most events need his presence to be compleat, and no-one gives him the go-by (refuse to recognise, ignore). Today you saw for yourself, even Irvin’s sister refrained from reminding him that as the enemy of her brother, he is enemy to her whole family.”

“Something tells me he would have not dared enter one of Lady Northingham’s assemblies,” scoffed Justina. “Shifty Lou has a traitor’s look and doubtless he can see it. So Chatteris is a bigwig, for all that.”

“And still well sought after, for his judgment is esteemed in all things, from harlots to horses, and he is an integral part of the political scene,” furnished Lizzie.

“Who is the better speaker?” inquired Justina.

“Irvin, but in an abrasive and destructive way. He can destroy any argument: they do not use his talents to postulate anything but to bring a proposition down, or retaliate to one who has objected to something he is theoretically defending or supporting,” furnished her aunt. “However, Chatteris speaks well, and thrives on acclaim. He also has the good fortune to command a winsome manner in and out of the Upper House. Combining that with dignity and sympathy, he has contrived to build himself the reputation of a social martyr.”

“Irvin’s victim?” asked Justina, and Caroline shook her head.

“Exactly that, whereas Irvin is to the ton what a feared knight of the road (highway man) is to the frightened village that unwillingly harbours him,” compared Lady Ashlington. “Perhaps I exaggerate a trifle when I use the words ‘feared’ and ‘frightening’ but he does

succeed in breeding apprehension. No-one can predict in which way he will jump, and that unnerves folk. Justina, why do you hug yourself like that? Have you a pain?"

"I am just chilly," answered the other, whereupon her sister turned on her in surprise.

"Chilly? And you were making fun of Irvin for wearing a band of fur on his sleeve cuffs in summer," she laughed, but was nonetheless concerned. "Don't you feel well?"

"I'll go get a wrap and I'll be as snug as a duck in a ditch," suggested Justina, "well, if we don't wed me off this Season, at least we have learned the history of the Duke of Irvin. Now that we know it, it is hardly a compliment and more like and insult to be fought over by him and Chatteris, so you may cease to feel uneasy or unhappy, now, Carrie."

"After all that aunt has told us, aye," agreed Caroline. "It has certainly cured me of my bout of vanity, but now I have a worry. I am to unite my life with that of one whose own is under threat."

"Be glad! If he's such a rake, and has you share him with a convenient, then the sooner he is food for worms, by his own asking, the better," consoled Justina. "Have your two or three sons from him, and let's all be civil to Chatteris, so he will hold off, and then, to Hell, Hull and Halifax with Irvin."

"How will I know that I do not breed daughters?" whined Caroline.

"Old wives tale: make your womb a salty medium and it favours the conception of boy children," said Justina. "Don't eat sweetmeats and fruit tarts, and salt your food like there was no tomorrow. That's what they tell me when they bring in the hay, as if I am about to wed. One of them, his wife tried it, and all they have had are lusty young churls. No matter what Irvin says, I will be amiable to the Earl, and buy you a little time," suggested Justina, rocking herself.

"Justina, I had no notion that you could be so callous," marvelled her sister, tilting her head, and then growing a trifle ill at ease. "Are you all right? 'Tis not like you to be chilly in any weather or season, least of all summer."

"Actually, I am tired, and sometimes, that makes me shiver," said Justina.

No more was said on the subject, and the ladies made ready to go out and pay visits as designated, when they did not cross paths with either Irvin or Lord Chatteris, but Justina was reencountered with many a possible swain, not in the real sense of the word, but one who was seeking a wife of good blood, even if his notions about the portion she would bring was not clear, but these were also moneyed men, and if they were not going to be of use to her father, they would be of use to her, for she too, needed to wed and reduce her family's liabilities. All the while she was in a good temper, but had a weary look about her, and repeatedly tugged on the lace scarf that hung loose over her shoulders, as if for the little warmth it could afford her, which was noticed by no-one, but that evening, at Fleetwood House, she yawned a great deal, and the Duke of Irvin, who was present among the guests, warned her sister about what he called her exhibitions of bad manners, for the Fleetwoods would not take kindly to a novice to Society behaving as if their rout was dull. Warned as she duly was, Justina seemed incapable of curbing or hiding these signs of fatigue, and after supping a little, she was found by her next partner looking as if she were about to fall asleep, while her hostess remarked to her aunt that she was wearing a rather thickly fashioned bobbin-lace fichu over her bodice to cover her bosom and neck, as one did in winter, so there was some curiosity as to whether some beau had tried to make fresh and free with her in order that she should hide her charms thus. Irvin

heard and beheld all, and thus was awaiting her as she came out of the dance, to remonstrate with her in terms both brusque and censorious, whereto she seemed too listless to reply, and that troubled Caroline enough to take him aside to pray him cease persecuting her sister, even if the said sister remained unperturbed and unabashed during the ducal reprimand, for she was just too fatigued to care. That was not untypical of Justina, but she was not rising with or before the sun and spending the whole day partly out of doors doing heavy work, so that she was drooping with sleep by ten o' clock, and if Caroline was embarrassed, she was still surprised. All the same she remarked to Aunt Lizzie that she believed something to be amiss, even if exhaustion did not sound particularly explicatory or drastic. However, during the drive home, Justina announced that she was glad to be going back to bed, for she had the headache and the ague in her body. There both other females exchanged glances; it was not like Justina to have the headache either, but be one for someone else, and agues were out of the question – almost as a matter of principle.

¹(felo de se: suicide).

ELEVEN

It was not like Justina to loll abed of mornings either, no matter how late they had retired the night before, and so, when the housemaid occupied with her reported to Lady Ashlington, taking her breakfast in her dressing room, that her younger niece was still asleep and somewhat resistant to being roused, she went to see for herself, taking Caroline with her both *en déshabillée*, for neither dismissed this as laziness. In fact they did not find the culprit asleep or even abed; dressed informally in a velvet night gown, over a quilted waistcote for warmth and a chemise, she was wrapped in a coverlet off her bed and lying on the sofa. Her countenance was flushed and her forehead warm to the touch, while her hands were cold; on being asked, she complained of some dizziness in the head and soreness in her throat as well as the canals that led therefrom to the ears – the Eustachian tube – so named after a great papal physician and renowned anatomist of two hundred years ago; she also shivered and owned that she was cold. Here, before them, was the reason and the excuse for the lacunae in good behaviour of yestereven, making the Duke of Irvin's admonitions unwarranted: simply, Justina was ill. The doctor was sent for and the patient told to undress and retire to bed, but she refused so to do until it was sufficiently aired and then properly made up, instead reclining on her couch and requesting a book to read.

Not that she meant to be unsympathetic, but Aunt Lizzie had planned a full day ahead for them all, with certain gentlemen in mind who were to be encouraged in Justina's direction, as well as the obtention of certain specific objects ordered for Caroline's trousseau, which they needed to see before these were delivered at home. Justina could not come along and Caroline did not want to leave her alone, so the entire expedition was an abortive failure from its start. At last the doctor came, and began by chiding his patient for being out of bed, then bled her a little before jocosely pronouncing her illness a trifle better than fatal and instructing her maid to go to the apothecary to have make up a yarrow syrup, borage in electuary for fever, and whatever herbal inhalant was on hand, while otherwise the best prescription was peace and quiet: sleep was the best medicine so if she took a few drops of laudanum, that would do no harm. As for Caroline, she could go out, for Justina was discounselled company, and her sore throat did not let her speak much. So Lizzie had her way and dragged her older niece out on all the planned jaunts, taking care to advertise, in the drawing rooms, that her younger niece was languishing with a chill and a sore throat, which time and the strong constitution of the sufferer would cure, while medicines would only render the suffering bearable. It had been almost a century since the last great plague and althô plague riddled the capital every summer, after the one in 1665, followed by the cleansing Great Fire the next Year, the Metropolis had no longer been visited by this disease, which could sometimes commence with a sore throat, like a hundred and one other diseases. All Justina was, was lonely and uncomfortable.

Of course she was right. Justina was obliged to languish in bed and exist on broths, soups and syllabubs, as well as swallow quantities of physick that did not always taste good, but at least the laudanum ended her troubles for making her sleep. She occasionally grumbled about the boredom of her wakeful hours, for she had not come to London to read in bed, but to seek a spouse, but Lizzie was adamant about urging her to make a speedy recovery, and encouraged her to doze on the one hand, while discouraging her sister to sit with her and catch or carry whatever she had if it were not a banal chill, so solitary she remained. If there was no

limit placed on the number of books she could have, nor any restriction on their type, she was not allowed pen and paper with which to write to Julius, nor was she content with Caroline's assurance that she had written to their mother already to inform them that Justina was mildly indisposed and missing the joy of activity whether it was here or at home, with a particular mention for the younger of their two brothers. Caroline had to pretend as if the malady was insignificant, for the old Duke, who would read the letter first, was going to make a tremendous fuss when they returned home bringing putrid London diseases with them to the countryside and his own house.

Between reading and sleeping, for one often led to the other, Justina had time enough for to ponder and two subjects, in the main, occupied her thoughts. Neither were particularly conducive to peace of mind, but they did tire her and so she dozed much because of them, too. One was whether her London jaunt could lead to overtures of marriage from some aspirant – or more crudely put, whether the effort of coming all this way was worth it, especially while lying abed, for however much her sister and aunt reminded other of her, she could hardly claim fame and recognition. The days passed in the same way and she counted that her face was being hidden from Society for almost an entire week, so that her very existence was doubtless already forgotten there. The other matter which occupied her brain was the Duke of Irvin, a little annoying and condescendingly patronising, rather too haughty, beautiful to look at despite the deathly face powder, meddlesome and rude to a fault, and enigmatic, with a collection of bad habitudes and a bad reputation which had an explanation but no real cure. Her deliberations about him took no specified form and were just idle attempts to assess, if not his character, why he had such ways. Not that she was seeking reasonable justification, not that her thoughts allowed her better to understand him, indeed, it was just a question of inclination on the part of her intellect, as if he attracted it in his direction like some sort of fascination, even if, at this stage, she would never have accepted that much power on his part over her wits.

Altho Justina rather wretchedly deemed herself forgotten by the rest of the world, she discovered, as she began to mend, that this was not so, for the better she became, the more inclined was her aunt to visit her bedside to chat and relate the latest in the drawing rooms, especially that some gentleman – or better still, his mother – had asked after her and seemed pleased that her condition was improving. Of course the whole ton knew that Justina was ill; her aunt had ensured that, and daily she reported on how her niece fared, so that folk began to feel that they were behoved to inquire after her, in particular as she grew well again. Unfortunately, such interest was shewn the most frequently by Lady Northingham, but after her, most solicitous in seeking intelligences about her health was none other than the Earl of Chatteris, who had been so bold as to march up to Caroline, as she stood beside Irvin, and press for the honour of learning more about her poor sister. Indeed, Lizzie was sure that Irvin had not asked after Justina as often or as anxiously, and when he did make a concession in this manner, it seemed as if he were mechanically discharging an obligation, which, once performed, would bring relief, until duty presided over the next occasion. Caroline never denounced him thus, attributing this reticence to his natural reserve, but Aunt Lizzie was not so scrupulous and related what she accounted, while Justina tacitly noted that, in fact, they had hardly encountered the fellow apart from a dance at Vaux Hall Gardens, a brief meeting while calling on her scarcely beloved Lavinia, a passing greeting at Northumberland House,

and finally, a short call here. On the other hand, related her aunt, they had contrived to see Chatteris almost every day.

From all this, Justina decided to assume, altho she did not avow it, and she did not have to, that Irvin had chosen to ignore her, probably as the result of conceiving a dislike for her, because she had been horrified to find who had stolen a voracious kiss from her at Ranelagh Gardens, and then defied his orders to consort with his enemy. Resolving to loathe him in return was silly and futile, for it was childish, and he had no idea if she liked him or not, for he probably did not care, and had better things to think about, beyond the necessity to ask after her if he met her aunt or sister. As she had passed a goodly while thinking about him, she was nevertheless galled to have to recognise that he doubtless never spared her a single thought unless forced to do.

Little knew she what was happening in fact: the Duke of Irvin, notwithstanding outward appearances, or the impression of indifference he had given her aunt, had gone, after calling here, to visit his sister Lavinia, sweetly owning that he meant to require of her a great and special favour.

"I hope that you shall find it in you to agree," quoth he, "as you usually do, but I fear that I must own how you have been known to refuse me sometimes."

These words, uttered in a wheedling and winsome manner, nettled and unnerved her.

"Well, I shall not answer until I know what you are hatching," she said, regarding him anxiously.

"I'm not a hen, Vinnie dear, and do not mean for you to put a hat on me (put a hat on a hen: attempt the impossible)," he laughed. "What a hobbyhorsical idiom to chuse, my good girl. Well, I shall not pretend to comprehend you, nor ask you why. Now I am sure that you know, by courtesy of Lady Ashlington's big mouth, that the filly Justina has been ill?"

"Mildly indisposed, I believe," she corrected. "A chill, nothing severe, like typhus or summer plague – why do you comment?" she suddenly and suspiciously pounced.

"My dear, I had no notion that any allusion to the little frigate (woman) would thus incommode you," he recoiled with a chuckle. "Do you still labour under the misapprehension that I am on the verge of seducing the girl?"

"I am not sure under what apprehensions I labour," confessed Lady Northingham. "Yet you ha' not answered me. Wherefor does the young Woodville's illness concern you?"

"The young Woodville? 'Pon m' soul, you refer to her as if she were a boy."

"She sometimes acts like a boisterous boy; 'tis very bad ton. Lou can't abide her."

"Your head to a turnip she cannot abide Lou."

"Lionel, you are digressing. What business can you have with this girl about her – whatever it was – indisposition?"

"Well, I have a notion about it. Of course she has not been so ill as would necessitate a convalescence, but I hardly think that she will be muchly sparkish when she starts to circulate in Society again."

"That is a reasonable expectation."

"So is one that in such a state, she is hardly likely to recommend herself to the menfolk, which is why dells come to Town?"

"I concede that is possible, but you never know."

"Come, Vinnie, how soon do you shine after a sev'nnight in bed?"

“I don’t shine in any wise.”

“She shines even less than you do, and she has not learned yet to dissemble discomfort for do you recall how she yawned all over the place at Fleetwood House? It looked gruesome rude. She was already ill but it still looked bad. Now how do you suppose it will look when she lolls all over the place henceforth, or has the headache and is irritable because of it, or has a churchyard cough that grates away incessantly in a parlour circle, and instead of attracting beaux who would wed her, earns someone’s annoyed invitation to ‘choke chicken, more are hatching’, now that hatching seems to be relevant? Heed me, Lavinia, at the moment, matters are most delicate for me. I want nothing to happen that will conduce to jeopardising my position. I am to be married to Caroline Woodville, whereas her sister is poised to make a spectacle of herself. That will compromise and disgrace us all; at the least we will be objects of ridicule. Then along comes Chatteris: what, think you, he may do?”

Lavinia, Lady Northingham tilted her head with an expression of inquiry on her face.

“He may do one of two things as far as I can guess,” resumed he. “First, he may make fun of us, using Justina’s behaviour – no, Vinnie, don’t intervene; Justina is a rigsby (romping lad or girl). The second thing I fear even more: if she seems yet unwell, she may find that she has a sympathiser, and if her ailing condition makes her unpopular, she may find that she has a defender or a champion. You may consider that she has a champion in any wise, for he may long ha’ decided to pursue her just to spite me, for she is more susceptible and vulnerable than Caroline, but if she is out of sorts, than he has all the pretexts he needs, and with such affected innocence that it makes one squirm.”

Her ladyship was not convinced, but her brother spoke persuasively, and if she objected, he was sure to invent another specious reason to sway her resolve, while resisting him exhausted her intellect supremely. Whenever he had a design to pursue, he would eventually have his way, whether or not his reasons for substantiating it were good, so she wondered why he always went through this ritual of endeavouring to obtain her compliance. However she did not yet know what she was to comply with, so, hearing him conclude thus, she braced herself.

“What is it that you want me to do?” she asked, on a dull monotone.

“In order to prevent trouble, I wish to send Justina Woodville away from London,” he said, “and her sister with her, for the sake of propriety.”

“You cannot just send them away; they are invited by their aunt, or otherwise you need to tell her to have them return home directly,” she protested.

“The apparent effect is that they are going away for a bittock, but I will invite them to spend time at Irvin, and that is where I need you. I shall not even be there.”

“Lionel, you’re sending them back into the country; they are just come from there, to tarry and savour the Town,” she objected, “and join the hunt for husbands –,”

“Caroline Woodville is come to savour nothing but her trousseau, and already her family has enabled her to acquire most of it; her remaining purchases will be made by the time her sister is fit to travel. As for Justina, that is just too bad. In any wise, given her father’s notorious finances, she could not possibly have hooked a man during a first visit to Town. She’ll have time enough to hunt one down after Caroline and I are wed, for she will come to stay as will her other sisters, when we have house parties. A few weeks in healthy climes and your company, she will begin to become fit to receive the addresses of gentlemen

with honourable intentions. She is not a Town belle: she infinitely prefers the country and the man for her money is the lord or squire who prefers his terra firma to Romeville. She is just a blowsabella restricted by Tonnish conventions because she is here. Further, she is stubborn and doltish, she refuses to take counsel about Chatteris, and that makes her a liability, so I would pray you, my dear Vinnie, to take charge of her on that score as well.”

Here, his sister hung her head: the memory of a jilting was always painful.

“Finally,” he went on, “as Caroline will be there too, I would be vastly grateful were you to take her in hand and have her learn her duties there as my wife and a social hostess. In your own way, as womenfolk together, you may also tell her what to expect from me. Lou would be more forthright, if she is not in one of her lying and deceitful moods for the sake of sport, but her manner of speech one way or the other is more hurtful than yours, Vinnie, for you are a past mistress of euphemism, and Lady Caroline understands such very well.”

“Why to Irvin? Why may I not take them to Northingham?”

“The invitation is from me, not from you. Irvin is your birthplace and you were born a Claremont, so you are only going home.”

“O, but Lionel, if you are chusing Irvin instead of Northingham because you think that Thomas will object to guests staying at his family seat,” persisted Lavinia obtusely, “depend upon it, you are mistaken. He shall not mind in the least –,”

“My dear Vinnie, I never like to be impatient with you but if you provoke me I may err, and a man should not be proud of impatience or bad temper. The invitation is from me, *ergo* it must be either Irvin or Tendring, and as Tendring is rather far, Irvin is the best choice. Now let that be an end to the whole question, pray.”

“What will they say, those girls? What will Lizzie say? She’s a sharp, odiously acute old thing; she is sure to suspect your motives,” fussed the Countess.

“Not as much as you do,” he intoned.

“I have so many engagements to keep –,”

“Write a few letters telling the truth, to wit, that your ignominious brother is desirous of your protection for his wife-to-be and her sister while the latter is fit for Society again,” he all but ordered.

“What if the girls themselves decline?” she tried.

“An invitation from me is tantamount to a command that they must obey, and Caroline knows it even if Justina does not. Then, you will be there so they must consent,” he asserted.

“’Tis such a responsibility –,”

“Vinnie, if you must, take Tom too, for company, and that vagabond you both have managed to produce.”

“Kit? You mind not if Kit comes?”

“Your son is a scamp, but he will keep that wild filly out of the briers.”

“I’d say he’s more likely to lead her into them. She is seventeen and he is one and twenty. What if he takes a fancy to her?” she protested.

“If he does the dishonourable thing, then make him wed her. The marriage will not be barred on account of consanguinity for he will not really be Caroline’s nephew,” he dismissed, “and ’tis not as if she is a traipse or of the wrong degree.”

“Lionel, the way you talk,” she hedged, ashamed of having accused him of coveting Justina when he did not care if the latter fell into the arms of her son.

“By the bye,” he smirked, pacing before her, “I have writ to the Hearnese of the invitation, to tell them of it, rather than ask consent. They will know that my design includes you, and thus, they will not dissent.”

Wry, defeated, she heaved a sigh.

“I vow, I can never keep pace with you,” she sulked.

The Duke bent and kissed her on the brow.

“If you like, I will organise the matter of Kit,” he offered. “Do not vilify me with your expression, Vinnie. When will you be ready to travel? I have to prepare the Ashlington catamaran to release her nieces and they all will want to know when, so we wait on you.”

“Er – as soon as Irvin can be got ready,” she stalled.

“Irvin *is* ready,” he rejoined, narrowing his eyes to mere slits, for he was wise to her tricks. “Perhaps then, it would be better if I chuse the day, which will depend partly on when Justina will be able to travel, and for that I shall go consult with the unfortunate creature who is to be my bride, and the harpy of an aunt they both have.”

“When will you consult?”

“Be easy: I cannot go now, for I cannot go sooner than tomorrow, having already called on them yesterday.”

“Not much of a swain, you,” she grumbled, whereat he laughed softly, kissed her cheek, and went to the door in readiness to depart. “Lionel!” she called after him. “When those girls go to Irvin, where will you be?”

“I shall ha’ gone to Paris,” he announced.

“Are you putting the *hôtel particulier* on the market?”

“Why should I want to do that?” he demanded, serene and sarcastic.

Then he blew a kiss at her and let himself out, but on his way down, encountered the duty footman, who let him out of the house, before which waited his berline. His sister went to the window of her drawing room to watch him and he perceived that she was ruefully shaking her head, because he knew that she was unable to fathom out his ploy, and suspected it to be somewhat more complicated than his avowals about it. That she had still believed he wanted to have Justina was suddenly cast into confusion by the revelation that he was crossing the Channel, and his permission to let her son in on the scene had clouded her view of affairs. All the same, that she was suspicious of his motives shewed on her face at this distance, and he knew her well enough to know that she was a little frightened of the part he had created for her in this situation. His games often had more than one result and once this one was played to its end, it did not mean that she was free of him and its consequences. He smiled to himself: she was angrier with herself at being impotent and weak before him than she was with him for using her, and her imagination was her worst enemy for it bred alarm where there was need for none – or at least, need only for a little. Her reluctance was irrelevant; however unwilling, she would participate in the execution of his plan. Now that he had secured her consent, he went home, to implement other elements of it, which now involved having his secretary write to Lady Ashlington to seek her permission for to let her two nieces, as soon as the ailing one recovered, sojourn at his family seat for as long as it pleased their fancy, and that Lady Northingham would be their hostess.

When Lady Ashlington read this letter, she would know that her permission, so-called, was an unnecessary formality, and no more than a polite turn of phrase, for the Duke

explained the reasons for his invitation in terms that she could hardly contest. Firstly he emphasised that as Irvin was to become Lady Caroline's home, it was better for her to become acquainted at her leisure with running it, rather than as a new and nervous bride; moreover, were she to go to it for the first time after her marriage, she could conceive of it as a horror, understandable in her circumstances, yet, if she were then in fact to be returning to it as a place where she had passed a pleasant rest, she would be at peace. Then his grace remarked that when Caroline finished with her trousseau she was going to have to return to Hearne Castle in any event – in other words she would have to quit London, for there was nothing to keep her there, so it was in her interests to pass a few quiet weeks, almost on her own, composing herself and her thoughts: herefrom Lizzie would divine that the Duke meant Caroline had no business to be about the bustle and glitter of the Town at this critical moment, for her troth was plight to someone whom she little desired, and so, the danger of her finding temptation was accentuated so that she would make a fool of herself, and there was a goodly multitude of folk with which to do so. In any event, if she took what she had of her trousseau with her to Irvin now she could arrange all as she wanted it, so that there would be no inconvenience during her honeymoon with weeks of unpacking after a long journey.

Of course, Lady Justina was to go too, for, at present, she was poorly equipped to cut a dash in Town, and probably wanted to retire somewhere quiet and reposeful. Quite liberally, his grace confessed that he did not consider it possible for anyone to rest at Hearne Castle, so it was as cruel to send her back home as it was to keep her penned up inside a London house while outside Society titillated her tantalisingly and distantly. She would make good company for Caroline if the latter wanted it and that was all he had to say regarding the younger sister, who seemed to be invited on sufferance and perforce, because she happened to be in the way and to keep her quiet, for as matters stood, the invitation seemed principally in the name of Caroline. All the same, Caroline was not behoved to rely on her sister for society for thô he had instructed his sister Lavinia to be their hostess and eclipse herself for most of the time, if his bride wanted, his sibling would be her guide. Lady Northingham was discreet and respectable, never inclined to be forward and not liable to take offence about a trifle, such as if Lady Caroline chose to be alone. Lavinia's presence would signify to Lady Ashlington that the Duke was being very careful about the maintenance of propriety as well as erecting a defence about the two sisters to prove his own integrity. The oldest Claremont was totally obdurate when it came to the promotion of his grace's intrigues, unlike the youngest one, who had few scruples about the subject. The Duke expressed his regret that he would be unable to be his guests' hosts, and duly apologised. Of course he did not mention that Lou could be unprincipled and that Vinnie could be such a bore with her sanctimonious preaching and instead, dwelt somewhat on his commitments across the Channel. In conclusion, he assured the Viscountess that he had informed the Duke and Duchess of the move and that all he now needed was her ladyship's word on when her charges could travel.

On receipt of this detailed but extraordinary communication, Lady Ashlington read it and then took it to Justina's rooms, summoning Caroline along with her as she went, and once installed there, read it aloud for the young ladies to hear, after which she looked quizzically from one niece to the other, finding one disappointed and the other on the verge of distress.

"Well, my girls? What make you of this extraordinary missive?" she demanded, herself quizzical as Caroline bowed her head in misery.

“He is infringing our paltry freedoms,” croaked Justina. “He has put pay to my hunt for a spousy. The scabby tick!”

“And I will go to his house when the time is right, not when he says so because he is already a jealous husband,” lamented Caroline. “I feel trapped before my hour is come.”

“There is one who deserves to wear a forker (cuckold’s cap to hide his horns),” growled Justina. “What I have comprehended of this invitation is there is no way of declining it,” she added.

“No, there is no room for refusal,” agreed Caroline.

“We females cannot refuse when a man gives an order, even if he is the vicar of St. Fool’s and we can see plain as a pikestaff that the order is tilly-vally (nonsense). ’Tis in the Bible, ’tis in the law and half the time they know less what to do than we do, for who, think you, directs how things are done in our stables? Julius, thô I love him dearly, does as I say and fails to realise it for it makes his existence easier, and God be praised, it is in his nature to take the easier way out. This Irvin however, eats boiled pig at home (man is master in his house). As for his so-called invitation, I do *so* like the way he indirectly forbids us to stay on in London, as if the prospect of wedding one of us has made him master of our family,” snorted Justina. “While I certainly delight being an afterthought and an insignificant item from your retinue, who has as much chance as a cat in hell without claws of finding a hug booby (husband). If father wasn’t so odiously distempered, I’d go home tomorrow by post chay and damn his invitation, for I certainly don’t want to stay in any place where Vinnie is sneaking about like John Drawlatch spying on everyone in sight.”

“I came to London to protect Justina from his like of predator, and now, she is demoted to my companion, by someone who has ruined her time in Town,” quoth Caroline querulously, “and must follow me to Irvin, ostensibly to pick up her crumbs (convalesce).”

“Caroline will need a zany,” ceded Justina. “What a relief he is not going to be there, but I vastly disrelish the prospect of sharing a roof with his bitch sister.”

“I wanted my nieces to stay out an whole Season,” lamented Lady Ashlington. “Perhaps this is a blessing in disguise for then I may invite you again, with Selina.”

“And I may finally wear all the fine clothes you ordered,” sighed Justina.

“They will have to be altered and re-adorned, for folk will recognise them and cut queer whids (speak ill of) about your lack of funds even if they sit on the penniless bench themselves and *deservedly* owe their souls to the Elders of Bevis Mark Synagogue,” said Aunt Lizzie. “In the ton, they affect not to remember your name or your face, but they know that that was last year’s ball gown and blow the gaff all over Town about it in scarcely a charitable manner.”

“What a waste of your money,” grumbled Justina, which made Caroline blush.

“What a waste of you, my child,” sighed their aunt, glancing down at the missive in her hands. “He apologises most profusely for not being able to attend, but he knows he’ll not be missed. Why, this letter is like a general’s list of orders to a commander about the next move, and how to execute it and what not to forget. By the way, he calls tomorrow, to gain our foregone conclusion of a consent. In all honesty, I feel quite insulted by it.”

“Fancy that he would have Carrie learn to run his family seat,” grunted Justina. “You should ask if you must inhabit the Duchess’s apartments there,” she suggested to her sister.

“That would be like running before one’s horses to market,” objected Caroline.

“I fear that I must agree,” assented their aunt. “In some houses, the apartments of master and mistress remain unchanged, but for interior renewals of decoration, generation after generation. In others, these change back and forth: children will take rooms used by not the parents but by grandparents. I have no idea of what happens at Irvin.”

“Wherever Carrie sleeps now, let her learn her trade of *châtelaine* so that Irvin will no longer just have a master, but a mistress,” asserted Justina.

“He has those in any case,” rued Caroline.

“O, stow that kind of talk, I meant his home, not him,” laughed her sister. “I rather regret that he will not be there, for then I cannot give him my cold that I took,” she joked.

“That’s enough of that,” interposed the Viscountess. “You need to rest. Heaven knows when he will impose your expedition upon you.”

“Such favours are like being given roast meat and being beaten with the spit,” grunted Justina, subsiding back on the cushion of her sofa, but she was most disappointed at Irvin’s interference and when her aunt and sister left her alone with her book, was almost disposed to weep out of bitter disappointment, for her visit to London was ended and it was all Irvin’s fault. First he had imposed upon her a coming-out ball that she disrelished and did not enjoy, and now he did the opposite and curtailed her progress in the ton towards matrimony, just because he had to go away, using every sort of vain excuse to remove her from the Town, so that she would not fall prey to Chatteris, all of which suited him and him alone, for that was how she analysed the affair. He did inconsistent things, he did things only for his own convenience depending on how circumstances interfered with his life, and he cared not how this incommoded others over whom he had power, which he minded not to misuse. She did not believe for an instant that the invitation to Irvin had to do with Carrie’s habituation to the place, but that that was a veil for his real reason, to wit, to hide the younger sister where Lord Chatteris would not be accessible, even if he wrote of her in secondary terms, which did not flatter vanity but cleverly covered up true motive. Thus she was relieved that she was not going to have to meet him when he called on the morrow.

In fact, when that morrow arrived, she felt well enough to rise and dress and even have her hair curled, so that she was wandering about the house while he was in it, and even on the stair when he departed, leaning down from the upper storey to ensure that he did, and careful to spring out of sight lest he turned his head towards her, for when he was in the hall, taking hat and cane from the duty footman, he glanced twice at the staircase, and seemed to listen for noise, but she did not move so he heard no footfalls. In order to discover what was to happen she went to the drawing room after he had departed, where Caroline revealed that he had wanted to know if she was on her feet again, so they did not lie, whereupon Justina believed that he probably thought she was watching him go, even if she said nothing about it, for she deemed it vain and presumptuous in him to imagine that she had such an interest in him – but then she did, and had so to admit to herself, secretly feeling a little foolish. In fact she was annoyed that she allowed him to exert such a figurative grip upon her thoughts, and felt guilty about it for as Caroline’s sister, she had no business in evincing any sort of interest in her older sibling’s affianced spouse, and this guilt made her ashamed of herself.

She also learned what had been planned for her, but that was how life ran for females especially if they were young: only widows with money and not many children had any freedom. The arrangement was that she and her sister would leave London in a week exactly

to the day, accompanied by Lady Northingham. All three would travel in the latter's rather capacious coach, and, with carriages bearing baggage and servants in their well-guarded train, make something of a royal progress, for instead of halting at inns to pass the night, they would pause at the houses of acquaintances, whether or not these were at home, with their consent, of course, and friendly enough with the Countess to let her use their splendid mansions. The Duke had in fact organised all this altho no-one said so if they all guessed it, and in anywise, during his call he had let slip that the journey was planned thus for Justina's sake for one did not accommodate the enfeebled in public lodging houses. In that week of preparation, then, Lizzie and Lavinia exchanged visits and intelligences to coordinate matters and smooth out any inconsistencies, but the greatest one was the true reason for the invitation, for both knew the Duke enough to doubt those which he had given. No-one consulted Justina, but then, the two ladies met to talk over matters usually with the Duke himself present, so that they could not really discuss him freely and so confined themselves to routes, sites and sojourns. These discussions were often over private dinners given at his behest at Northingham House, so that Justina was not even present, having been left behind to rest and recuperate, even if she said that she had had enough of rest and recuperation for a full regiment of wounded. All the same either Caroline or the Viscountess reported back to her what was said, and not a single occasion lacked mention of or inquiry about Justina's progress towards better health. At no stage was it ever a question of whether such improvement allowed her to participate in these colloquies, and that galled her somewhat, but her feelings were ambivalent: on the one hand she rather resented that decisions were being taken for her even if it was the fate of woman to suffer that, but on the other she was relieved not to be close to Irvin, for any encounter could provoke an utterance or an event that enlarged scope for thoughts she already deemed forbidden. So she resigned herself, and if she began to go out it was only to take the air, wearing over her gown and petticoat a hooded, waisted jacket cut as a sack, made of silk and trimmed with a small frill on the edges, as she walked in the street to the nearby square which, mercifully, Irvin did not own.

In fact it was an ironical relief, for when Lizzie next took Carrie to Ranelagh Gardens and Justina had to stay behind, she was unable to stop recalling the touch of the man in black velvet whom she had mistaken for Chatteris, and planted in her mouth her very first amorous kiss. However, her sense of values, priorities and wits were confused, inconsistent and self-contradictory, for she was at once glad that the Duke would not be at his family seat yet she did not look forward to going there because he would be absent from it and there was no explaining that sort of aberration, even if it fatigued her intellect. That she was a victim of the fascination he exuded was a fact, but she did not understand how it was that Caroline was immune to it, even if their aunt could admit, impartially, as an elderly lady beyond caring for men, that he was a fine fellow with a certain charm. That only made him more odious, of course, and then they were told he was departing for Paris, so the two sisters had to write him notes of thanks for his hospitality before he left, and Justina had the greatest difficulty in composing hers, even if Caroline's was a perfect model of maidenly formality. In the end she managed a note but three lines long, stiff and impersonal, as if to someone she had never even met, over which her aunt shook her head, but that was the best that she could do, for the next attempt was even worse and sounded even more forced. Thus the first choice was retained, even if Justina owned that it was not her first endeavour, and that she had lost count of how

many times she had tried and how much time she had wasted over this small labour.

What they did not know was that when the notes were delivered, immediately and by hand, the Duke was there to receive them, for he had not yet left his London house, let alone the country, and that he pounced on them, opening both in haste but casting that from his betrothed momentarily aside to read the one from her sister. They did not see the dismay or the disappointment on his face at its brevity and content, but worse, it annoyed him most because there was no alternative but for anything his future sister-in-law wrote to him to be short and frigid. Apart from that he feared that Justina Woodville was being purposefully cold towards him, as a message that she knew what she knew and he was not to do it again. After all, she had pulled off his mask, and seemed to recognise what she could perceive in the penumbra. He replied to neither missive nor needed to, but he stowed them away in his desk even if neither had any value, and on the morrow, contented himself with his own departure. The day after he was gone, so were they, escorted by the inestimable Lavinia Herriard, Countess of Northingham – for whom her brother had also, incidentally, spoiled the London Season.

TWELVE

It was on the third day of their expedition that Lady Northingham arrived at her birthplace and her brother's family home, with her two *protégées*, during which progress, she had spoken a little of her own household. She had three sons, apart from the Heir, who was now in his majority and in the Inns of Court to learn a little law in order to prepare him for his parliamentary career even if he did not seriously follow one, for every peer was a lawmaker as a member of the House of Lords. The Inns of Court were shut for some of the summer months, and so he clerked for Judges, because his father did not want him in Society, particularly the *ton*, after an incident some years ago with gambling debts in a *bagnio* in Covent Garden, and made him promise to learn his trade of governing the land correctly before he strayed among the beaux again, which he had kept, for having been so handsomely bailed out. There was a younger son on the Grand Tour with a tutor, and another, a mere boy, at Oxford ending his studies but now on vacation and thus at home with his sisters and their teacher and a pride of servantry to take care of them, which at their age, they relished more than an introduction into the Quality. Lady Northingham explained that there were intervals of some years between each of her six offspring, owing to an idea of her husband's that if births followed each other in quick succession they weakened the mother who thus bore feeble infants who scarcely ever made it out of babyhood, and all her brood had survived so far, even if the youngest one was still nine years old. She also talked of Lou's children, which Lou wanted hidden, for she had had the first one in the first year of marriage and that put an age on her that she did not want folk to know of, for the *ton* did not keep records of who wed whom when, and she hoped that such facts about her were forgotten. Then there remained Lionel Claremont, who at four and thirty, was still a bachelor with not even a bastard to inherit even by will whatever bastards were allowed to have willed to them. Justina winced: the man was double her age and nothing could reduce that, while only a dozen years the senior of the woman he was destined to wed.

Justina herself contributed little to this conversation; it was her sister who furnished the trite details about a family that were not really very interesting. All she did was look out of the window or sleep, and some of the landscape was dull, with sunken pot-holes, chalky blisters and puddles, such as made her wonder aloud why, and the answer was that these were the results of mining activity underneath. Certainly this had had an effect on the health and size of the local population in the poor villages nearby and put a different complexion in the diversity behind the expression 'Merrie England', where all the world was not lush, green and healthy. In fact she always seemed to be awake and attentive where the landscape was ugly or the villages populated by folk rendered ill or insufficient from their toil, but as Lady Northingham did not want to talk about it, she asked no questions and wondered to herself if there was some authority that could take care of these folk, and what sort of parish dues those who could afford to pay them had to mete out to feed these people when they grew too old to labour. It was as well that she had not been behind the fine shop fronts in London, beyond the City and into the lanes, or the rookeries towards Tottenham. The drive to Hearne from London passed through arable land and meadow pastures; the drive to Irvin from the capital passed through all sorts of hell and she was glad when it finally ended at a little after midday, following a full morning of beautiful views in lush countryside. Awaiting them was a copious collation, but the Countess ate very little, consuming instead, vast volumes of green tea, a hot

beverage on a hot day, dish after dish, which made no sense to Justina, who thought that she was going to sweat and stink for the whole stay if those were her practices. Fortunately she had no objection to open windows, but along came the servants and immediately put perfume burners in all the sills, liberating light fumes of crushed herbs to deter flies, moths, stinging insects and other pests apart from the human kind, even if the useful bee rarely came into a house, and was actually encouraged here by the choice of flowers in the gardens, where it stayed at work.

The sisters were not inordinately tired as the result of their travels, and seemed to be curious enough to want to go out into the park, far enough to view the house, inspect the garden and roam through the woodlands which made up the land around the habitation, for the rest was given to husbandry of divers sorts. Justina also wanted to see the stables and Caroline would have been glad of a tour of the interior of this edifice, but all such enterprises had to be deferred until the Countess decided that the moment was right for them and that was on the morrow, for all she did now was sigh and lie upon a great sofa. Not that they really wanted her to accompany them, but they wished not to seem rude on this their first day in her old home, especially as she had been made to give up the marvellous entertainments in London Society for their sakes.

All the same, even tho they had not seen very much of the place, the sisters Woodville were inspired and impressed by all they had viewed so far. The mansion itself was a great rectangle in pale stone, its frontage punctuated by long and wide sash windows, each alternately supporting a triangular pediment or an arch. Near the corners was a row of pilasters, before the doors a portico, and above, upon the roof, that which had looked like a dome, from what they could see of it from the carriage windows. That dome lit the hall, the corridors and all the stairways in the daytime. That which was not panelled in white and gold sported a colourful canvas with an antique scene of much activity upon it, and everything was elaborately embellished in gilding, whether paint, gesso or gilt-brass, if not actual and precious silver-gilt, but the whole assemblage had the impression of vast space and consummate simplicity. Neither sister had seen such a building and it interested Caroline to ask Lady Northingham when this had been erected, as well as by whom. Languidly, Vinnie replied that the foundations had been laid in the reign of Charles the Martyr, which told the siblings on whose side had been the House of Claremont during the Civil War, that the King's eventual Surveyor General of Buildings, Master Inigo Jones, had made the plans, and that it was among his earliest attempts at design, for his talents at making sets for King James I's burlesques and King Charles's masques had been only slightly superseded by his fame in the art of architecture, for he had built a serene little home for the Queen at Greenwich – which she was said to haunt, except that she returned home to France to die in the Louvre because her doctor prescribed her an excessive dose of her usual sleeping draught – but she was an old lady by then and not cut down in her prime. Master Jones had not supervised the construction and would probably have raised an eyebrow at the paintings, but then he had conceived the Banqueting House in Whitehall for which Rubens had sent over a painted canvas for the ceiling. Otherwise his will and ideas were respectfully and closely followed, down to the pattern for the marbles on the floor of the great entrance hall.

The drawing room, the dining room, the entrance and their own apartments or lodgings, as these had been conceived in that time, were all that the young visitors saw on that

their first day at Irvin, but this was enough to manifest to them how far apart were the circumstances of their own existence from that of the Duke's. Indeed, he was vastly richer than their father had ever been at his best, but, apart from being brought up in the lap of luxury, he had obviously been bred to have good taste, with so healthy a respect for the achievements of the past that had enabled him to have the house entirely refurbished without changing its appearance radically, even if it was he who had ordered the splendid furnishings to be fashioned, calling cabinet makers to the place to add to what there was and thus design each new piece to suit the room in which it was to go, so as not to clash with the older objects and embody the spirit of the times without a jarring modernity. Of course everything was beautiful and executed with all the most costly and exquisite materials available, in particular where there was marquetry, left over from the walnut furniture of the later Stuarts, with a fondness for exotic woods, and the addition of ormolu where it would look best, such as on pieces added by a French master of inlay, who reproduced some of the patterns on old objects in the new ones he made, but with a tiny adjustment, so that they would be masterpieces in their own right. Yet not withstanding all this attention to magnificence, the paymaster demanded of his specialists, more artists than artisans, to take great care to ensure that beauty was subordinate to comfort and convenience.

That night, when seated together on Justina's bed, the two sisters giggled somewhat about the grand style in which Irvin lived and where-to Caroline was to become accustomed. Jocosely, Justina forbade her to invite their siblings and parents from Great Hearne Castle, who surely would not know how to behave amid all this elegance – indeed Justina had her own doubts about herself – and papa was sure to relieve himself in one of the *chiffonnières*, the costliest, of course, with the malachite top. Caroline confessed her apprehensions about running a monument like this one, for she was unused to precious objects and the servants were sure to know more about them, and mislead her – and what if Irvin was like their father, who scolded his wife and children before third parties, or even in public, on the basis that, fundamentally, all men were alike? She was going to have to learn all about these things of value, about the tasks of each man and woman working here, from scullery to park, and as there was such a great cohort of persons in service, the prospect she faced in marshalling them, ensuring that journeys were smoothly organised, preparing for huge house parties and arranging opulent hunting breakfasts, banquets and Christmastide balls, was most daunting. Irvin was born to it and could maintain proficiency in some of it, but as he was a bachelor, he was not obliged to know what she was supposed to be expert at – and her mother was to have taught her all that, but their mother had taught them nothing. Splendour and wealth seemed to have its price: Caroline hoped that her future spouse would ease her into this his world and not just cruelly shelve its weight upon her ignorant and unwonted shoulders.

Just to what extent this splendour ran, they saw for themselves the next day, when after breakfast, which they all took together below, Lavinia proposed that she take them about the several hundreds of feet of rooms and corridors, from the linen rooms in the attic to the cool and clean cellar where her brother's wines, brought here from varied places, some as far as the Alpine slopes of Styria, were stored. The exercise became exhausting both spiritually and physically, for she talked about the great damask drapes in the master bedchamber, the huge enfilade on one half of the ground floor, the secret cavities in the superb desk in the Duchess's dressing room, with its ebony and mother-of-pearl inlay, and of course, the pantry,

which was the pantler's province – some called him a butler – where there were stored some several hundreds of pounds of plate, silver and silver gilt, much of it Britannia standard, which was purer than sterling, or with a Paris assay mark whereof most pieces were of a higher grade too. There were also a superb collection of enamel boxes in precious mountings set with gems, as well as antique medallions, all this amassed by the present Duke during his trips to the continent, not forgetting the perfect, whiter than white porcelain from Saxony, manufactured after the manner of the Chinese themselves. The Duke did own Pottery from London and even the village of Chelsea, but did not favour English soft paste porcelain which was new to these isles and, in his opinion, bad, for being mixed with bone and crushed marine shells. Justina did not even know that they made porcelain in Britain: all she was aware of was that it was imported from Chun Hua.

Later in the afternoon they relaxed, but the Countess was suddenly tireless in her brother's interests and deemed relaxation to be a walk in the gardens, she who had spent hours on a couch pouring dishes of tea down her guttering. The term 'gardens' here signified areas beyond the neat paths and parterres, such as the orchards, both decorative and functional, the rosary from which they distilled rosewater and perfume, and the park. Not that these tours in such places were detailed or extensive, for she only wanted to shew them where everything was so that they could later go and see for themselves, and amuse themselves without being lost – such as when she just pointed beyond the pretty orchard and told them that there was the potager and the physick border, nigh which they did not venture. Then she ordered tea under the colonnade, and told them of things she had not shewn them, in house and outside alike, for there was the summer pavilion, the Chinese bridge, the picture gallery and the library. If Caroline liked to fancy herself an artist there were materials enough, here, for her to paint and draw in any medium she chose; if she preferred needlework, the late Duchess's worktable was always kept stocked for lady visitors to the house, who came if the Duke's sisters were in residence. For whatever else they needed, they had only to ask it of a servant or the Countess herself.

There was a serious side to this invitation and the matron reminded them of it at supper, when she cautioned Caroline about the necessity to look over the books soon, and begin learning how to keep the house. Lady Northingham assured her that it was not difficult or demanding, exacting or awkward; she did not need brilliant intelligence for a competent and adequate performance, but it was not just a matter of giving an order: even she, a duchess, had to ensure that it was executed correctly rather than delegating it to a paid minion. All the same they would not begin on such drudgery immediately, and indeed, the next morning they visited Justina's favoured haunt, even if at home it too was drudgery for her, namely, the stables, for at the end of their visit thus, the Countess intended to take them on horseback about the rest of the park and into the woodlands that adjoined it, so they had been told to don riding dress. If they all had energy enough at the end of that, they could go on to the village, and take a 'luncheon' at the pot-house, on bread, cheese, beef and ale. Justina and Caroline exchanged amused glances, for they could not imagine Lavinia and her frippery mannerisms, hardy *thô* she may have been, seated at a scrubbed table at the local tavern with a tankard of beer and a lump of cheese.

As was expected of her, Caroline evinced more of an interest in the remise and the two carriages always kept there, one a berline and the other a simple trap, while Justina preferred

to look over all the horses, from the great ones who worked the land and had feathered feet and Roman noses, to the sprightly sort used for pleasure and the hunt. Yet once she had admired the heroes of cart and plough, she was a little disconcerted, for she was certain that there was one she recognised, apart from her own black mare, because of a description of him she had been given: a distinctive, magnificent, and golden warm-blood, with a bloom on his coat, the stallion named Doubloon. Before him she went and paused to stare, in slight bewilderment, but then the Duke of Irvin was at liberty to keep his horses wherever he pleased without their necessarily awaiting his arrival there. The stallion, aware of her notice, bent towards her, placid and splendid, with all the dignity of his species, but she said nothing to him, or of him to the stable hands, even to confirm that it was Doubloon in the first place. Nor did she remark on his presence to Caroline, who knew not of him in any wise; meanwhile Lady Northingham called on the stablemaster to saddle up. A fine bay gelding was brought out for Lady Caroline, who acquiesced with alacrity, even thô the fellow snorted at her rather rudely, it seemed, while the Countess's own white-grey palfrey was prepared for her, so Justina pointed out her own Jezebel as her ride, but althô the grooms acknowledged her remark, they drew out for her none other than Doubloon.

"But I already have my own mount," she protested, "and she is black."

"Irvin left instructions," said Lady Northingham, mounting her steed with the help of steps, which were afterwards taken for Lady Caroline to use. "The golden horse is a calm tempered beast, if too fast and too tall for a lady, but I see that your mare is a big girl, and thus my brother sent this animal here for you because you ride harder than most females."

Effectively Doubloon had been sent all the way here from London for Justina's sake. That fact turned the pallor of a recent invalid a beetroot red, but Caroline shook her head in warning, to guide her to silence. Reluctant to seem rude but horrendously embarrassed to be favoured thus before Caroline by the latter's own future husband, Justina relented, but mounted the golden stallion all the way from South Russia by herself, skirts and all. She wanted very much to talk to Caroline about this strange circumstance, to ensure that her sister was not offended, but even if many opportunities so to do were not lacking, the courage was. This small feature, which her sister had the grace to ignore, rather spoilt the ride for Justina, who was very quiet all the time and seen to have lost her appetite during their meal which they took on horseback outside the pot house, and the Countess was so troubled thereby that she wanted to return to the mansion at once, but Justina assured her that it would displease her to disrupt the program of events thus, and so no more was said. Prudently she curbed her discomfiture and tried to be cheerful, but she remained nervous and watched Caroline's every move and twitch, but could only reach two alternative conclusions, namely that either her sister blamed no-one and accepted the deed as a politeness – which was highly unlikely for Carrie was not be so naïve – or that Irvin's attention to her vicariously through his finest horse may have offended Caroline a little but she was going to ignore it, for matters grew needlessly exaggerated if long dwelt upon with unwarranted resentment.

Neither of the sisters spoke about Doubloon, but Justina decided never again to ride him and that evening, slipped off to the stables to tell the stablemaster that despite the Duke's orders, in future, they were to saddle only Jezebel for her, and her excuse was that she did not ride as well as his grace thought she did, so she was best advised to remain on a mare. The trouble was that Jezebel was more spirited and less gentle with them and everyone than

Doubloon, so if they suspected that things were amiss, they did not ask. As paradoxical as they sounded, the instructions were not delivered in vain, for the next time the ladies all rode out together, the black mare was fetched for Justina, and a most mettlesome creature she was seen to be, even if her load could coax her into obedience. However, the stable servants also brought Doubloon for Caroline; perhaps it was their idea of a joke, but the joke came to nothing, for Caroline did nothing, and Justina said nothing.

Lady Caroline's dedication and application were to matters of responsibility, and fired by the sort of enthusiasm that was based on the wish to have one's tasks and duties over and done with as soon as possible; she had neither the time nor the inclination to fuss about horses, and so she pressed Lady Northingham to instruct her as to how matters operated in this overwhelming residence. Justina wanted to stay and watch and listen, but her sister suggested that she amuse herself elsewhere, allegedly because household accounts on a warm summer's afternoon would bore a patient recently recovered, and otherwise for fear that Justina could grow too interested and absorb the lesson better than her, as often happened when someone was just present and did not really have to study a problem. A little piqued, Justina obliged, reluctant to provoke her sister, who must have suffered over the matter of Doubloon, even if she fortitudinously did not shew it. On the other hand she wondered what had possessed Irvin to insult his affianced wife in this manner, by favouring her sister for all to see, but, after wandering about the rosary awhile, with thoughts of him for company of dubious value, Justina propounded a theory, which she meant to keep to herself: the more Irvin favoured her to the detriment of his betrothed, the more would he propagate hostility between the sisters, even if one did not wish to wed him but had to, and when Caroline became affronted and then jealous of Justina, she would not just blame the younger sibling for trying to steal her spouse-to-be but also complain of it to her family, who were sure to condemn the supposed miscreant, even the very liberal Lizzie Ashlington, and so Justina would have no-one else to turn to – but Irvin himself.

Aided by the sun's warmth and despite her *bergère* hat, such unhealthy considerations brought a blush to Justina's cheeks and quickened her pulse, in addition whereto she grew angry, anxious, indignant and miserable. The Duke of Irvin was as troublesome as reports of him led everyone to expect, and all her ideas about the matter of the golden stallion were justifiable. Irvin was wanton and wasteful, thoughtless and careless, selfish and self-indulgent, seeking but to satisfy his most immediate whim without a single thought spared for consequences, whether to him or to others. Not everyone enjoyed a socially accepted reputation for baseness and could still ride out most storms he created – of which the last Chatteris affair was a fair example, meditations about which made Justina restless and peevish enough to wonder whether she could learn to hate him, for such animosity would enable her to rid herself of the fascinating hold he had on her imagination, which only brought forth guilt, and robbed her at present of the peace and pleasure of strolling in a rose garden, for instead of complaisance and good spirits, she was a picture of frowning perversity and ill temper erring about the rose bushes wondering what on earth she was doing here. Thus, notwithstanding the privacy and luxury of this place on the one hand and the prospect of facing her father's lunatic and irrational temper on the other, Justina at last conceived a desire to go home.

As she roamed, she took little account of that which she was really come to see, being

too sullen and too full of antipathy impartially no notice and admire. Not that her ire and disaffection vexed her so much as to make her rove blindly into the wilderness, for she became aware that she was away from among the roses and proceeding through the park towards the boskiness wherefrom emanated, her country ears told her, the gentle rush of water which could only have been going downhill, for streams did not make noise in summer. Yet this was cursed ground, and gave no pleasure when walked upon; the location of the trees was unsatisfactory, for the sun was importunating to the eyes, obliging her to cut a meandering course over bumpy terrain in search of shade and none too comfortable in shoes made for walking on Town pavements, but she knew she ought to have changed them into hobnails before stepping out. All that seemed to fit together correctly: these were Irvin's trees and the shoemaker was one he had recommended to her aunt. At last she was in the thickness of the copse with the knotted antient boles about her as dwarf cedar, acacia, magnolia and cypress all twisted picturesquely, but obviously not indigenous to this island. Soon she discovered why they were planted here for she came out from among them to the banks of a small watercourse, bridged by an exotic structure painted red and stained black, the colours bright, for his grace ensured that his passions and possessions were well taken care of. In fact it was very like drawings and prints she had seen of those in far off Chun Hua and not at all stylised to please European or Britannic tastes, but she was resolved to like nothing in this place, even if she went to stand on the bridge and watch the water flow. As long as some Claremont had not had it diverted hither, it was God's waterway and there was nothing wrong with it: the rest belonged here as much as she did; she had been dragged away from the Season under false pretences, and now even her sister did not want her listening to the manner in which this demesne was managed, so she had no business being in this place. Below her, the water was clear and the sunshine illuminated the variegated pebbles and stones on the waterbed under the shallow flow, giving her the thought that she would like to bathe her feet a little, so she retraced her steps to return to the bank, seat herself and take off her shoes and stockings, before lifting up her skirts and petticoats and underskirts in lace and batiste, right above her knees, in order that she could step into the water. Forward she went, until the stream swirled about her limbs, for she was at the deepest part of it and all that was left was to wade on to the opposite bank. For a few moments she enjoyed the cool water and its freshness below the surface which was warmed by the sun, and started off for the far strand, garnished with thick tussocks of grass, at which she looked up at last. She also emitted a short scream and was so startled that she almost let go of her clothes, for on the grassy verge was a man on horseback.

"Aaagh! Who the deuce are you?" she croaked out in fear and anger, when she had recovered her voice.

"I might just ask the same of you," he retorted icily.

"'Tis none o' y' damned business!" she shouted at him, backing carefully away.

"What are you doing here? This is private property –,"

It was not easy to walk in reverse so that she could keep her eyes on him and ensure that none of her expensive clothes were wetted, but he took advantage of her predicament, even if he had a lofty look about him, for he was truly enjoying the glimpses afforded him of shapely, slightly muscular thigh, well-turned knee and ankle, and smooth, firm calf, even if above all that he could see that she was wearing lace-edged drawers, which was the rarest thing he had ever beheld in his life.

“Dare you ask me,” he scoffed, “and pray, what think you that you are about?”

“Have you no shame, staring at me while I am in a delicate state when you should be turning your head? You are no gentleman!” she snarled, turning and rushing up to the bank from whence she was come, there to drop her skirts.

“Your kind depend on our stares,” he sneered, “and as for your purported delicate state, I’d ha’ thought that it was more *indelicate* than aught else, on which aspect, I daresay you firkins of foul stuff see fit to survive. Next you will tell me that you have a chastity belt on under those drawers – and I have a bone in my leg (a humorous but lame excuse)!”

“A firkin of foul stuff usually relates to females who are fat and coarse; I am neither. What are you? *Half gammon* and patter (g. and p. : language of the underworld)? And what mean you by ‘my kind’? You know me not.”

“So, he brings them home now, eh? That is why she wrote me so cryptically entreating me to hasten here as soon as I could,” he mused, looking through the little, but old trees, at the house. Are you alone here?”

“No,” she rejoined. “Who brings *whom* home now, and why do you want to know whether I am alone? Are you the Captain Hackum, with his pack of bravos, and would pillage the house and ravish all the women?”

“How many women?” he pounced.

“Blurt to you, sir!” she riposted.

“How many guests?” he rephrased.

“What of the hostess?” she evaded.

“Where is the host?” he demanded.

“We have a goodly crowd of stout male English humanity in house and stables alike and as many firearms as you and your canting crew,” she persisted. “As if the host will keep the like of you away; on the other hand, if Chatteris has sent you for him you are come for a horse ladder.”

“Chatter who? Where is the host?” he demanded.

Justina now wondered after the wisdom of admitting that the host was not even in the country, so she fell silent.

“Answer me!” he roared, riding over the bridge with a furious clatter and rounding on her as if to ride at her.

As he rushed his horse at her, Justina only seized his bridle and brought his mount to a halt, but with such vigour and strength that the gentleman was thrown sidewise and almost out of his saddle.

“Hussy!” he cried, enraged, swinging his whip at her. “Bitch! To think that I should be insulted by one of Irvin’s – ohhh!”

Justina replied by snatching the reins out of his grasp and smacking them, in turn, against his thigh, whereupon he then also emitted a scream, but then flung himself from his horse’s back, as he charged her, brandishing his whip, but she only drew the animal, over whom she had full control, between them.

“Now hold up!” she commanded. “This is the Duke of Irvin’s land and as you will not say who you are, I will treat you like a trespasser, and first, destrain your horse, and then protect myself, so if you are hurt, you have no rights against me, for I am a guest and you, two-fools with the bad manners, are an intruder.”

“Intruder?” he expostulated in anger. “I have been sent here by my mother, who was born in that house yonder!”

“One of the housemaids, doubtless?” she taunted, peeping at him under the horse’s neck which she raised for the purpose.

“She is the Duke of Irvin’s older sister, harlot!” he thundered. “Now give me back my horse this instant.”

“Your mother is Lady Northingham?” she recoiled. “I have met both spouses and they could not possibly have spawned a huff and ding paper-skull like you, who hits women with whips, and whether or not they are of the athenasian sisterhood, it is wrong and cowardly, and I am not a harlot, you pox-ridden, clapped out, puddling, backgammon man (sodomite) of a makeweight not worth a pissing candle (small inferior makeweight)!”

Despite this torrent of abuse, something she had said made him refrain from assaulting her, and he eyed her in amazement.

“How do you know my mother?” he demanded.

“She brought us here, hulverhead,” she sneered, “and would be the best judge o’ whether you are as you say, her son or not. Now give me that whip, or I’ll set the horse on you, and I know exactly how to.”

Reluctantly, he ceded it to her, a trifle bemused.

“Now let us go into the house and prove a thing or two,” she pronounced. “Walk ahead of me; let us see if you truly know your way.”

“Mamma is in the house –,” he began to question, but she cut him short.

“Stow your palaver,” she growled. “If you were any child of the Herriards you would arrive in a carriage, not from the backwoods on a horse. You’re a poacher or a highwayman and that keffyl is stolen.”

“Do I look dressed like a poacher or a paddist (highwayman) to you?” he challenged.

“A royal scamp may dress as well as a king,” she rejoined.

“I did arrive in a carriage; ’tis bowling about the front of the house with all my impedimenta! It was such a glorious day that I thought I’d take to horse for the last lap.”

“And if my aunt had been my uncle, she’d ha’ been a man,” she scoffed. This approach is nowhere near the road.”

“I saw you among the trees so I changed direction to find out what you were. I am the Northingham heir, my title by courtesy is Viscount Kettering, and my name is Christopher, so I’m called Kit.”

“And you make a noise like one (a kit is a tiny violin used in dancing lessons). The only thing missing is a caper merchant (dancing master).”

“Look now: I have introduced myself, so why not be civil and at least say who you are?” he proposed.

“My name is Justina Woodville and my parents are the Duke and Duchess of Hearne. My eldest sister Caroline is to marry the Duke of Irvin, about which you cannot be ignorant,” she supplied trenchantly. “You may as well also know that I don’t really want to be here, and that we are all come to this place on your uncle’s order – I beg pardon, invitation – after I took cold, instead of being allowed to finish the Season in the peace of my aunt’s house. My desire to quit this God-abandoned hole has just been aggravated by the foul verbal abuse whereto I have just been subject by a close member of my future brother-in-law’s family

bungling around a garden stream, and sneaking about woodland. Now walk faster! You are none o' the Hastings sort, are you?"

Her companion began to laugh, even if he accelerated his paces.

"What if I peach on you to my mother about how you hate it here and want to go home?" he threatened. "I am your host's nephew."

"Perdition upon my host and his plaguey family seat, and upon you," she retorted.

"What if I peach upon you to my uncle himself?" he cackled.

"You may also go milk a pigeon for all I care," she growled. "Now could we have silence, fat-face?"

As they traversed the wood and the park, he was silent, but as they entered the rosary he turned to look over his shoulder.

"You live too close to the wood to be afraid of owls, eh? The way in which you handled my horse had me floored with surprise," he said.

"I am not susceptible to oil of tongue," she snorted, "did I not say hush?"

"Listen to you: you can't be older than I am," he chuckled, "so mind how you speak to your elders, namely, me."

"You make as good music as a wheelbarrow," she growled, "now stow it."

"What happens if it is proven I am Viscount Kettering?" he shot. "Will you apologise?"

"In the reign of Queen Dick," she sang.

"What if I apologise for mistaking the scene for Irvin's now bringing home his punks, making you 'one o' them'?" he offered.

"For what 'tis worth, you may go apologise to the Devil," she dismissed.

"You're a sparkish little 'un," he chuckled. "From your language and your handling of horses, I take it you have brothers?"

She did not answer so he turned and smiled at her.

"You also have the comeliest pair of legs I've ever seen. Girls who can be laced as tight about the waist as are you usually have catsticks (skinny legs) and look lean as a shotten herring (very skinny person)," he approved.

"Too much sauce, bully fop (brainless, silly fop)," she scolded, and made a rude gesture to him, whereat he was truly offended.

"That is vulgar, and rude!" he cried.

"So is the presumption that every female on these grounds is Irvin's punk."

"Not every female, just the fine ones, for he does have good taste in women and change being the most inspiring of aphrodisiacs, I can't think of a greater change than you are from that golden swan whom he visits."

"Just go to Hanover," she replied, in disgust.

The young man, now a little out of patience at this unfailing process of insults launched at him, fell silent and glowered, feeling affronted, and deciding that the most tiresome of women were those who offered resistance to overtures of friendship, forgetting, of course, in his masculine way, that a female was free to reject his overtures as was he to thwart the attentions of anyone, whether or not as a ploy. Quietly, then, they reached the house and entered by the colonnaded terrace, where the intruder turned again to Justina.

"If we meet any servants, they will greet me," he boasted, as she tied his mount to a

pillar with the dextrousness of one accustomed to such manipulations.

“They may greet you and stuff you like a Michaelmas goose; ’tis all one to me,” she answered, poking him in the back with his whip and sending him within.

Grimacing, he walked before into the house on a confident stride, whereupon she pointed him towards the study, but when they entered it there was no-one, so she had to go to the hall, where the duty footman sat, and on beholding her companion, greeted him as ‘Master Kit’, which caused the latter to turn glowing with pride to his captress, who ignored him and told the man to arrange for someone to deal with the poor horse outside the house, before asking where the Countess and Lady Caroline were gone off too, so he replied by shewing them into the library before leaving to recover the animal. Within that chamber were the two ladies, and both looked up as Justina herded in her trophy and announced him.

“Lady Northingham, this *thing* says he’s your –,” she began but the Countess held open her arms and interrupted.

“Ah, Kit! My darling boy,” greeted the fond mother, who was nevertheless content to leave her entire family with servants at her husband’s family home, far, far away, or so noted Justina wryly, watching them embrace and feeling a trifle sick, which shewed on her face.

Her sister gesticulated at her to control her expression better but the Viscount beamed at her in triumph and mirth.

“She thinks that I’m not your son, mamma,” he cackled.

“Justina, I have summoned my son here as a specific surprise for you,” quoth the Countess sweetly.

“O, he gave me one, and called me a harlot, among other things,” sang Justina. “So now we have to be all friends, do we? Here’s your whip.”

Tossing it upon the library table she brushed past her sister, who had advanced to her, and made for the doors.

“There was a mistake, mamma,” said the Viscount, but the object of it waited not to hear the explanation, and walked out.

In fact she went to her rooms, and encountered servants taking great quantities of luggage to some made up apartments, which struck her as interesting, but she stayed not to watch, for she had things to do, for when her sister and the Countess came to her lodging to fetch her down, she was nowhere to be found. Having realised that her shoes and stockings were still by the stream, she changed into walking dress, washed her feet, donned stout brogues, and then set off down the back stairs to egress from the house from one of the exits provided by the enfilade of chambers. On Caroline’s advice, the Countess left Justina alone. Thus, when she met the family again, it was in the drawing room before supper, as they chatted briefly, and on her ingress, Kit rose, his mother smiled and Caroline casually asked what she had been doing all this while.

“Walking, reading, washing, dressing and then coming here,” recited Justina, seemingly in a good mood. “Was your lesson with the household books useful?”

“We stopped all that when Kit arrived, and his baggage too; so much of it, I vow, as much as a female,” gurgled his mother.

“I know; I saw it,” said Justina.

“Kit would like to apologise to you,” continued the Countess. “You were right to be defensive with a male who was a stranger to you.”

“Perhaps we should just forget the whole matter,” suggested Justina crisply, lest Kit punished her by describing how he had found her.

“O, no, I insist: I owe you this much –,” he persisted, but she cut him short.

“You owe me a deal more than an apology,” she said thus. “The subject is closed.”

“Come, come, you must be friends; I called him here especially to keep you company,” interceded Lady Northingham.

“Actually, she’d rather not even be here,” smirked Kit, taking revenge. “She told me that she would rather go home.”

“Justina!” gasped Caroline, shocked, for she put her hands to her face.

“I’m only here because I happen to be in the way,” stated her younger sister. “There was no need to invite me if Caroline was coming here. I don’t mind being excluded.”

“My dear, my brother told me that your health –,” blurted out the Countess.

“Your diplomacy, madam,” interpolated Justina, alarmed and angry, for Lavinia was making a blunder to please her that would only affront Caroline, “is of the nauseous ilk.”

Now Lady Northingham grew irate, and rose from her chair.

“Justina, you are monstrous rude and ill-mannered. You may go from the room,” she ordered, in a stern huff.

“And having done so, do I also stand in a corner with my face to the wall?” carped Justina, on her way out. “I don’t seem to have left the schoolroom, by all accounts.”

When she was gone, supper was announced and Caroline felt that this was treating her sister truly like a child, by sending her to bed without any – whatever meal it was, but the hostess was also having misgivings.

“I think you had better go to her,” she proposed, squeezing her hand, as they trooped off towards the doors.

So Caroline hurried off as the Viscount led his mother to the table, but when the older sister reached the door of the younger one, she seemed to be expected.

“Why can you not leave me alone?” called Justina from within.

Justina saw no-one thereafter that night, not even a servant bringing a sample supper, for at Kit’s suggestion, Lady Northingham forbade anyone to take her anything, hoping that she would be sufficiently chastened by the morrow to accept with alacrity her situation. Of course they all meant to facilitate this by receiving her well and acting as if nothing had happened. As she was none the worse for wear after missing a meal and being shut away without company, she had herself put to bed early for, indeed she was tired; later Caroline crept into her rooms to see her and found her sleeping, so the matter was ended for the day. For all the spiritual fatigue engendered by the vexations of the afternoon and evening, Justina slept well and awakened early, but dozed awhile, until she was fully conscious of all, but found that the only folk who stirred were the servants, as the clock told her that no-one of the Quality would be about for at least an hour. Accordingly she washed in cooled water left in her ewer from last night and donned her riding habit, to go to the stables herself and ask for her own horse, whom she helped in tackling up. Then, she rode off.

Knowing better than to stay out too long after the bad impression she had given of herself yestereven, she turned back after riding about for something like three-quarters of an hour, but she returned at a gallop, as far as the land would allow, for she enjoyed the speed and needed to make good time. She was close to the park when she discerned a horseman

coming towards her on Doubloon, so irked but curious, she reined in to observe him, and perceived that it was Kettering; at any rate it was not Irvin who was dark despite the grey-white face powder, whereas his nephew was fair and sandy-haired, handsome in a more obvious and agreeable way. As she proceeded his way on a slow canter, her mien grew dour, while he strove to encounter her, but whereas he had to accelerate she had to slacken, whereupon he hailed her, wishing her the time of day. Her first instinct was to ask if he would dare to ride that horse were his uncle in residence, but instead she just let him reach.

"You don't strike me as the sort who is abroad early," was her greeting. "After seeing you curled and crimped and powdered and painted and perfumed in the drawing room yestereven, I was even surprised at my own recollection that I had, the same day, seen you atop a horse, for those unmentionables did not permit such exercise."

"If I bestrode anything in those, I'd ha' put to risk not just my attire but also my manhood," he jested. "Did I really look like such a fop?"

"Unutterably so," she confirmed stiffly.

"I note that you're still surly as a butcher's dog," he chuckled.

"I have no reason to be cock a whoop all of a sudden."

"My mother was sorry she sent you off, and it made your sister sad."

"I was not, for ten to one, I'd ha' become worse."

"And I still haven't apologised."

"Then do you want that I tell you where to put your apology?"

"So you are indeed worse after all."

"No, 'tis you. The more you harp on about it, the worse you'll make it."

"So just forgive and forget, eh?" he offered putting out his hand as if he would shake hers on it in some sort of agreement.

"Neither," refuted Justina, her hands remaining as they were. "Keep up appearances to keep the peace. Pretend, in other words; your uncle would approve."

"Ah, him. Crass hypocrite, that," he mused. "The dread Lionel."

"Do you call him that to his beard?" she challenged.

"Without the prefix 'dread'. After all, can you imagine anyone calling him Uncle Lionel?" he laughed.

"Your younger siblings aged nine would be ill-advised so to do for it would also be ill bred in them," she assessed.

"Have you met any of my siblings, as you call them?"

"Nor the offspring o' that woman Louisa, assuming she has any."

"That woman Louisa'? You don't much like our family, do you? Aunt Lou has children but they are very young. They don't see Lionel for he does not like children, indeed; children and small dogs."

"Does he see a difference?"

"Well, both scream and yelp, so perhaps not."

"I have no experience of small dogs, but I have of noisy men, like my papa. Now, I will take my leave of you, for I am going in."

"Why? Have I annoyed you again?"

"I am merely on my way back –,"

"But I was coming to find you," he protested. "I rose especially early in order so to

do, for I was struck by contrition. I was gregarious and forward enough to send to you a housemaid to invite you to a ride, but she told me that you were long gone.”

“Why were you struck by contrition?” she demanded, alerted by one of his remarks.

“It was my idea, after you were sent off yestereven, to omit sending you a tray with some supper on it,” he owned.

“You are your mother’s hedge-bird son,” she pronounced frostily.

“Admire my honesty at least, in coming clean,” he cajoled.

“Er – no,” decided Justina, refusing to be friendly or even to compromise. “Before the others we are nice and polite. Otherwise, stay out of my way. The fact your mother called you here for me is your mother’s fault, not mine. Now, I am off.”

Briskly, he turned after her, to join her on her way to the stables.

“I don’t know the horse you are riding,” he said.

“Nor you should: she is mine, not Uncle Lionel’s prize stallion on whom we are perched because Uncle Lionel is not here – but next you are bound to say that ‘Lionel’ is such a court card (gay fluttering fellow) that he lets you ride all his finest horses,” she mocked.

“You are still angry with me for all those things I called you,” he sulked.

“A gentleman would not use such words even to the women for whom they were coined,” she reproved.

“In all frankness, I deem you to be right. I can’t think why I was so illiberal of language,” he admitted.

“Blame your uncle Irvin: he is a notorious Town stallion, so it is only a matter of time before he brings the belfras (harlots, often amateurish) home to stay,” she assessed.

For a while he waxed pensive and was mercifully quiet, she thought.

“You are an interesting filly,” noted he. “Most dells your age make a vast hog shearing of it when they are introduced to someone whom they imagine to be eligible, but you don’t shift an eyelash.”

“That is because you don’t strike me as eligible as yet, and it will make nonsense of the generations,” she rejoined.

The Viscount heaved a sigh of relief.

“I assumed the worse, I waxed abusive. Then of course there is your singular manner, but now I know what the reason is, it is no mystery,” he said, but she asked for no more details and there hoped to end the conversation. “Every female I come across courts me sooner or later, and I begin to expect it of all of them. Even if they commence with repulsion and antagonism, the next morn, they are distant but mildly flirtatious in a condescending way. They don’t just pike off on mares that hold their tail bones aloft, a genuine case of antipathy.”

“Then you are a consummate oddity, befriending with assiduity one who would anathematise you,” she rejoined.

“That is because you’d be more fun on my side than against me,” he owned merrily. “’Tis boring to be at odds with an abrasively frank person like you, and besides, all the way back yesterday, you handled that horse as if –,”

“Pray, Pax is Latin for a candle (shut up),” she interposed. “Let us return to the house and see if there is any breakfast left: the absence of a supper tray last night makes the stomach worm gnaw. I cannot starve indefinitely.”

“Just on that note,” he recommenced, confronting her with an air of urgency, “mamma

referred to your health. Have you been ailing of late, for you look healthy enough to me.”

“I am,” she confirmed, and proceeded to explain how she had been made an adjunct to her sister’s train and on what flimsy pretext. “I daresay I sounded petulant and jealous last night but your mamma was close to sounding at the school of placebo (playing the sycophant) and my sister cannot but too happy as second fiddle to her younger sister’s sniffles, if exaggerated by her own spousy-to-be, which tune his own sister sings. If I seem angry at being my sister’s adjunct, it is an act, which you have exploded by telling the world and his wife that I would rather be elsewhere than spunging off the Duke of Irvin.”

“Did Irvin tell you that you were being invited because of your sister?” wondered Kit.

“It was all in a letter to my aunt.”

“Well, he told my mother an odd tale and he is not one to make up Banbury stories of cock and bull,” disclosed he. “I ought not to tell you but the cat is nigh out of the bag, so ‘Gip’ quoth Gilbert when his mare farted, and you may as well find out what sort of a person Lionel is, that is to say, if one can indeed number the waves. Are you acquainted with Lord Chatteris?”

“Four duels, four wives, and your uncle’s enemy for a good reason, althô I can’t help believing that your ma was lucky to escape, after learning of the last Lady Chatteris’s end, poor thing. I suppose it is that Chatteris whom you mean?” she rolled out in bored accents.

“The verisame,” he affirmed. “Irvin is afraid that if you are left to your own devices, even with your aunt to watch over you, and she will put her own amusements first, Chatteris will pursue you, and that would much compromise Irvin, who is wedding your sister, for even if Chatteris pleases himself to make an honourable offer for you, think what a predicament my family will be in. It is not unknown for there to be age discrepancies as there are between you and Chatteris, especially as he has no progeny and needs to breed, which he cannot do by chusing a reputable widow close to his own years, even if he has more in common with her than a fertile girl just out of the schoolroom. That would make it seem that you are here because of Chatteris and not just in your sister’s train, and as for your sister, she is here because of you.”

“That is perfectly ignominious,” she snarled, reeling, for she was truly appalled, “has your mother told Caroline?”

“Lord, no; she knows nothing o’ the sort, and nor should you.”

“But Sir-Long-Tongued-As-Granny here just had to empty the bag (tell all),” she carped with a hint of bitterness. “I can’t tell if you were trying to gain my confidence, but know that I feel no better for any of it – and last night you squalled to good old Vinnie that I wanted to go home,” she groaned.

“She cannot let you do that either, for Chatteris will present himself to your father as a suitor for you, and your father will agree, for the money,” he declared, whereat she glowered at him in interrogative bewilderment. “Aye, they went through all that, did Lionel and mamma,” he resumed, before she could speak. “My mother resisted – if you’d pardon the expression – the necessity to quit the London Season, and even proposed that if you were better off picking up your crumbs in the greenmans, then you should go home to your parents’ castle, but such were the reasons he gave.”

“What if Chatteris went to papa behind my back? The great Duke of Hearne gladly gives away even what is not his, and the last thing he asks is his children’s consent.”

“O. Welladay,” was all he could reply, somewhat stunned.

“You are a despicable bleater, Kit, you are a blabber. You have as much hold on secrecy as a colander on water,” she snarled. “On the one hand I wish I did not know any of this, but on the other, I think I need to. Why has Irvin run off to Paris when he should be in Town, holding Chatteris by the toe?”

“If his presence is unaccounted for at least one day, it will be said he is off having both sisters and cuckolding the parson with one of them,” replied Lord Kettering. “He needed to be seen leaving England, for the sake of your reputation, and owing to his own bad one. He is protecting himself first of all, I grant, and he could not explain it to his intended any more than he could move you here without her as well. Now you know all, so mind your eye, for in such a surly mood as you are become, you could have a quarrel with my mother as much as with your sister, and yet again, I beseech you, tell her nothing of Irvin’s real reason for this.”

“She is already a trifle piqued at the arrangements made for the second fiddle; that horse you are riding? He is one of Irvin’s favourites and was sent here for me to use. Since we all found that out, I have rid him not a single time since and thank God I have a ride of my own, for without a horse I would surely die.”

“I know about this animal being sent here for you; when I asked for him at the stables I was glacially told so. I am only astride him because Lionel is away and Lionel never lets anyone ride his horses, so I took shameless advantage. They also told me at the stables that you only rode Doubloon once and no more, so I already know your story. Otherwise, you are very honoured. Irvin has never treated a female like that in his life. Once that golden tasty (appetiser) of his asked if she could ride this animal and he declined on the pretext that it was too recognisable and would thus betray their association.”

“Don’t say ‘it’, say ‘he’. A horse is no different to a person, and can comprehend disrespect as much as language,” she chided. “Is he not recognisable here?”

“In the greenmans folk ride everything, Johnny Bums (pun on jackass), plough-horses, even a large billy-goat,” he dismissed. “It makes no knobs. Has my uncle paid you inordinate attention in Romeville?”

“Not that anyone would notice,” she said, consciously leaving out the kiss at Ranelagh Gardens, “for all I could tell, I was the silly little sister not dissimilar to a pestilent child.”

“There is a curly murly confusion. It is like a pestilent child that he treats a woman he does not want,” he mused. “The fact of his reputation blurs the vista but it could just be that this horse is his gesture of goodwill to your family,” he assessed, “and a manifestation on his part to accept your sister in his.”

“Do you really believe that?” she rejoined, pulling a face, as they entered the stable yard, hooves clattering on paving.

“No, and you do not,” he comprehended.

“What I believe is horrible,” she shuddered.

“That he would have you break your knees (be seduced)?” he guessed.

“That he would have my own sister end by hating me, so that my whole family will take her part and rightly so, leaving me no-one to turn to but him,” she said, “and thô ’tis none o’ your business, I ha’ told you this, so that if ever it happens, there is at least one person who is aware of the fact that I predicted this invidiousness, even if you are not the most discreet creature in the world and how you can clerk for a judge eludes me.”

“That does sound like him, aye, but if it were so, why should he send for me while he was in Paris? I am closer to your age than he is!” he objected, as both simultaneously dismounted, she obviously before he could come to her and without steps, which the grooms were clearly used to refrain from bringing for her, at least.

Justina went to Doubloon’s head and patted his nose.

“I beg pardon about all these silly things,” she said to him, and he seemed to be listening, even if it made the Viscount laugh, but she neither scolded him nor justified herself.

At first, he stood and watched in surprise at how she assisted the men in untackling both horses, but then he too joined in, for the sake of appearances, especially when she carried a heavy saddle on her shoulder to the tackle-room, followed at the run by a stable lad who attempted to take it from her, which he eventually did, but even so, Kit noticed that when he participated, the hands eyed each other as if they were dealing with an amateur who had never touched tackle or done a chore about the stableyard in his life. He noticed this difference in their behaviour to him and to her, and commented on it as they strolled back to the house.

“That is because they know you are lazy as the tinker who laid down his budget (basket) to fart, but they do not know me,” she explained simply, without resorting to the truth of the matter, that she was accustomed to accoutring, and putting at leisure, her mounts – and those of others – by herself.

As they walked, he inquired how his uncle had managed to become engaged in the first place for, apart from being admittedly nosey, he could not imagine ‘Lionel’ going a-courting in all seriousness, particularly for a bride. So Justina recounted how Lady Louisa came to interview Caroline and was very insolent, according to her own judgment even if Caroline bore all with the silent patience of a martyr, as the result of negotiations between a neighbour and his cousin who was Louisa’s spouse, followed by a visit from the Duke himself, including her accident with Jezebel in his presence, when she omitted to own that she was dressed man-fashion, all the way to her coming-out ball, which looked as if the Duke had paid for it but he was being reimbursed in instalments out of two terms’ rents, which brought a heavy atmosphere down upon them, for Kit was embarrassed, but then they were entering the house in any case, and despite the interior being bright and airy, the heavy atmosphere aforementioned, according to Justina’s reckoning, suited it. Breakfast was still not ready and nor was the Countess, even after the equestrians had changed out of riding dress, so the Viscount offered to take her about the only place she had not yet visited, and that was the picture gallery. Before they went thither, she went to Caroline’s door to ask if the latter were dressed, and when her sister replied by appearing on the threshold, fresh in sky blue and white, she asked, rather drily, if the other wanted to join them. Caroline answered that she had been shewn the place by the Countess yesterday and that meant she declined, so, still dour, Justina went with the young man supposedly imported here to keep her company, which she did not really want. Accordingly he took her thither, explaining that there were two galleries altogether, the one containing canvases of value collected by divers Dukes of Irvin, including some pieces from the collection of Charles I, from which even Cromwell bought – or retained – some pieces, but he was not complimentary about these acquisitions, for he used words like charity, prestige and investment, rather than good taste or fondness for art, while the other gallery was devoted to members of the Claremont family and a few notable adjuncts allowed among them. Justina really wanted to see the latter but asked to be shewn both

collections, for in spite of herself, she was eager to view a likeness of the present Duke, but dared not own it.

It was fortunate for her that her guide was too ignorant and uninterested to dwell upon the virtues or otherwise of Great Masters so called, for perhaps he had had too much of that sort of language rammed down his throat when younger and ordered to appreciate what he did not like. Thus he preferred to begin with the family portraits, which was much more droll, for these were people, mostly dead, among whom he had been as good as brought up, and he knew all sorts of uncomplimentary anecdotes about them which he revelled in telling. While the Art was housed in three huge chambers, the family lived on under their canvas faces in a great long hall, where were vestiges of a style of panelled woodwork with geometrical patterns current in great houses rebuilt during the reign of Charles II, called strapwork. All the same, even if she was more interested in the Claremonts than the Art, Justina was almost embarrassed by the vehemence with which her guide carped and jeered his way through the portrayals of this race, even the very earliest, such as the Dowager Duchess of Irvin whose spouse, already Tenth Duke, had fought at Agincourt in 1415, while the earlier Irvins represented after her were depicted in a stylised manner until the reign of Henry VIII, when they were Dukes no longer. Among this earlier set was a likeness of the Earl of March who was the true heir to the throne after Richard II, deposed by Henry IV, father of Henry V, the victor of the great battle aforementioned; in fact there were too many real heirs in English history while other monarchs occupied the throne for any dynasty after the fourteenth century to be regarded as legitimate or legally monarchs of this land. When Kit said as much she thought that it was the product of rebellious and youthful ideas in his immature head, until he revealed that it was Irvin's firm belief, who thought that as William of Normandy was a bastard, his claim to that Dukedom was spurious and false, as was the promise he forced out of Edward the Confessor to make him King of England when that other died. By now they were inspecting portrait after portrait executed by Master Hans Holbein, wherein the modes of the time flattered the already beautiful women and made the men look ridiculous, except that some had themselves depicted in armour, of the highly decorative variety both engraved, and inlaid with gold, so that a few actually looked handsome. Now there were no more gaps and every generation including offspring, often crowded into a family likeness, was present and accounted for.

All at once, Justina stopped, for before her, large as life, was a portrait by Sir Antoon van Dyke, all blue satin for jerkin and gaskins alike, with slashed sleeves and a magnificent lace falling band that matched the cuffs, folded back from the wrist, not forgetting pale buff buskins with a similar lace to garnish the boot-linings, worn over stockings. There was a mass of shining black hair that was longer than fashionable, with a tiny moustache and a little beard at the end of the chin, on what was the face of the Duke of Irvin whom she knew. At present there was a mode for ladies to have limnings made of themselves as Mary, Queen of Scots, so why should Irvin not pose as a cavalier – except that how could Sir Antoon, who had died in 1641, have been resurrected to paint him?

“Aye, that 'un has everyone confused: how could anyone be such a throwback on one of his ancestors?” noted Lord Kettering, coming to her rescue. “The first Duke of Irvin, of the second creation and not because he bought the title: the King was so moved by his iron discipline and stalwart fidelity during the Civil War that he revived the Dukedom. Probably

the last of the Great in the Irvin line. His dates will shew you that he died on the scaffold by courtesy of warty Oliver a month before his royal master. A fine way to celebrate the New Year, but then Christmas was already declared a fast, so folk had little to be festive about.”

“A bridge of gold and silver (easy passage) to Heaven,” she commented.

“This man was a gentleman: he loved and was true to his wife, who is that beauty in black velvet just beside him, and, as you will see from her name, of German ancestry: she is a Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, who are the southern country cousins of King Frederick of Prussia. She had seven brats by him and hard as times became for her and them, never wed again, for God knows how many of Cromwell’s generals offered for her. She would not give Claremonts what she called ‘half-breed garbage’ for half-siblings.”

“She must have loved him,” commented Justina.

“Her letters to him are surprisingly formal, but he worshipped the ground she walked on,” replied he. “She used to belong to the household of Charles I’s sister, who wed that Prince Palatine, and he and the Habsburgs set in motion the Thirty Years War. On one of the embassies our King sent to Holland where she had taken refuge, this Duke met this belle and wed her. As she probably had the black ox treading on her foot (knew poverty), she agreed, but as she stood by him his whole life long, and thereafter, we will never really know if she loved him, as you said.”

“That’s how I’d like to be, with a husband who adores me but whom I may treat like a devoted dog, secure in the knowledge that he will never err,” she mused.

“You’ll never find such an animal in this day and age,” he replied, with a crack of laughter, “besides, in those times, uxoriousness was the fashion at court, owing to Charles I and his little Henrietta Maria. Now –,”

“It is *de rigueur* to have a mistress, even if one is supposedly not really so minded,” she pronounced on a monotone. “Most of the time both sides have to make do.”

“See here,” he invited. “This beauty? She was French, hand in miserable hand with her reluctant spouse. It was arranged by the Crown, and suited her but not him, for she wanted his money and he knew it, so he tampered with her dower rights to have the last laugh. She spent the rest of her life fighting her son in court for them and died with her keys almost under the threshold (bankrupt). She was the shame of her own family, those whom she spawned and those who spawned her: and when she was put to bed with a mattock, it was but the gluepot (parson) reading the service and the verger who opened the vault with two labourers, who attended her burial. The French are good at recognising a lost cause and to them, she was one. That son she left behind? He died under General John at Malplaquet, which we almost lost and had the French not marched away the next morning, we would have, but not a word o’ the pudden (say nothing of it). This Duke was my dear uncle Lionel’s grandfather. Next to him, is his dissipated clipnit (dirty ruffian) of a father.”

Justina came to look and owned that there was a visible resemblance.

“In habitudes too,” averred Kit. “Here is his worn-out Duchess.”

Side by side, in their respective frames, the parents of the present Duke looked out at them, he in his high wig with its heavy grey powdered curls, his Garter Robes and star, and a smirk, his countenance raffishly handsome but rather world-weary and his grey eyes almost identical in shape and glint to those of his son, while the Duchess, simple in ice pink silk, her gown, with a bodice that plunged to her tiny waist and held there by a diamond buckle over a

chemise, was as beautiful, sharp and hard as the stones in it. Grim of aspect but calm, she had eyes as totally lustreless as was her black hair bright – like the tresses of her second child and only male offspring. Justina noted this and went to inspect her name.

“Lady Cointha Theresa Maria Philomena Whitfordshire de Malleverer,” she read out, “and no mention of her being the Duchess here.”

“The dual coat of arms at the top of the portrait,” indicated Kit.

“Whitfordshire? Popish?”

“The de Malleverer branch is not, but her mother was. She is a Whitfordshire on both sides. When they do not know whom to wed, they wed cousins, and become inbred examples of the highest aristocracy that attracts gap-stoppers like him,” answered the Viscount.

“Why is her married name not indicated, *thô*?”

“That was the plate put upon this portrait when Irvin found it among her effects after she died,” supplied he.

“I don’t understand,” owned Justina.

“She was a widow bewitched (separated from own husband),” he said. “After Louisa was born, she put herself over the doorstep and stayed in properties of her own settled on her to her own use, and had every Popish peer behind her, not forgetting the whole Whitfordshire tribe. She never saw any of her children again, lived alone like a nun, became increasingly difficult to approach, communicated with her family and men o’ business by letter, and, when she died, ensured that as little of her property passed to her offspring beyond what was directed by the law and the terms of the uses, which she could not change.”

“Pretty in a hard way, but not much of a mother,” grunted Justina.

“Not much? Not at all! She hated her children, for they were *his*, were they not? Children are brought up by their nurses and other hirelings at the best of times, for mothers have a few minutes a day to spare for them, but the late Duchess of Irvin had none at all. She never even wrote to ask if they were well or ill; one would ha’ said that she did not care if they were alive. It is probably just as well, for they were well regimented by tutors and masters, and better off than in houses where parents tend wantonly to interfere in everything under the mistaken impression that they are doing good but in fact, are determined to have their own way. Imagine what it would have been like to live with a mother like the lady in pink, Lionel’s mamma.”

“He knows,” she commented, “for he will have lived with her awhile.”

“He never talks of his parents. All of us do, but not Lionel. My mother says it was terrifying ever to meet her in a corridor or about the house: she would look at them and glower, as if they were objects of abomination, and they would cast their glances to the ground and scuttle out of the way. She never sent for them, as mothers do, often at a set hour, when we are all dressed up for the event: she never set foot in a nursery. Louisa never knew her and never even cared to ask: all she understood was that a family consisted of a distant fellow called a father and then, nurses and tutors. Neither mamma nor Lionel talked to her of a mother, and there was no portrait of her: that she took with her until her son, already Duke, brought it back here again. She never attended my mother’s wedding, even if she was invited, nor her husband’s funeral, of which she was informed, but Irvin wrote to her as if she were a stranger, not ‘Dearest Mamma’ and the like. She never answered.”

“Was the late Duke troublesome as a father? I ask, for mine is. Fancy that she should

just have left her family.”

“She had the money and the influence. Were she at the mercy of his goodwill, he would not have let her go.”

“Eh, wives can be their husband’s prisoners. I wonder whether Irvin will become like that, after what his own mother did, or just ignore her so that he may go play his own games.”

“I suspect that your sister’s calm character will bring about the latter situation,” he declared, more as if it were a hope. “He’ll leave her in peace. Now look at this,” he invited.

Thus she moved on to another full length portrait of a fine male figure, all in black.

“There he is, Lord Blackheart, as he used to be called before inherited the dukedom, and his graceless, for a while soon after he inherited it.”

Justina contemplated the picture and her heart beat fast, so she leaned down to peruse the name-plate.

““Lionel Amadeus Dorian Terentius Claremont, Seventh Duke of Irvin’,” she read out. “Terentius?”

“The only one of his mother’s names that could have been made into that of a man’s,” he explained. “Sometimes he acts as if he could not give a fig for his heritage.”

Staring up at the pale, stony countenance, with its tight mouth like the raw scar of a newly sealed wound, Justina exhaled with pensive confusion.

“He’s sneering, even in his portrait,” she whispered. “What is that scenery behind him, with the chimney?” she added, for there was indeed a dark sombre landscape as his background, in which she could perceive in the far distance, the tall smoke stacks of a plain building partly hidden by trees.

“He owns mills and mines apart from arable,” supplied the Viscount, “and before you are at the house top from the vulgarity of it all, many peers are turning to shares in if not complete ownership of such things as commercial concerns, which evidently bring in the plate fleet if the harvests fail. Of course few will mention that they are sticking a middle (finger) into the world of merchants and swear if asked that they are merchants of eel-skins (no merchants at all), but my dear uncle Lionel, being the first Irvin to own a mill, dared put it in his portrait, unlike his pa, who sits like a peer, in ducal robes, even if he was the first Irvin to buy a mine.”

“So Irvin just went and bought an whole mill? A going concern?”

“He actually bought about five of them.”

“With money? Outright? How rich is the poltroon?”

“No-one even wants to try and guess; he has his thumb in every pie and an oar in every man’s barge. His stewards are under orders to engage in the new farming methods. At Tendring, they high-farm so extensively that they earn more from the enclosed parcels than all the rents put together, and Tendring is among the highest rent-producing estates in the country. He’s more interested in making money than being a Duke.”

“For all the ostracism in some houses and refusal to give him daughters to wed, he must wield a great stroke (have great influence),” she assessed. “Not a fellow to be crossed, by the sound of it.”

“It may be unwise to cross him, but Irvin is not a petty-minded and spitefully vengeful person,” credited the ducal nephew. “There is nothing vindictive about him, so far at least, but I would not like to be one of those families who will not invite him to their assemblies

claiming that as he is a rake he is bad ton, or who ask him to rise in support of them in the House of Lords, but will coyly refuse him their daughters to marry, for what he may do to them in the future if anything, we cannot predict. Actually we cannot really predict anything that my uncle will do. They say that women are unfathomable and do all sweet Fanny's way. So does he."

Just then, there were footsteps and the Countess entered, to greet them with serene cheer and express her joy that they were together and in friendly association, at that. Such did Justina regard as nonsense but this time she did not speak of nausea, and went with her ladyship to take breakfast, finding Caroline awaiting them, in readiness for that, her first meal of the day. All the same Justina raised the subject of the picture gallery, which Kit had not shewn her.

"That is because he does not know or care a bean who those old masters are," gurgled his mother. "Nor does he give a slit groat about his uncle's porcelain collection. Remind me, I will shew you later."

Justina decided that she would rather go and flounder among the old masters herself if the fancy so to do ever took her, but she was curious about the porcelain collection, which seemed an odd choice for an English Duke who was also a rake.

THIRTEEN

During the days that followed, Justina grew to achieve a measure of peace within the household, remaining on terms of civility with her reluctant hostess, and affecting amity with the latter's son, even if at times it seemed rather forced, while abstaining from all that could vex, disconcert or shame her sister. She amused herself in three ways, in the main, to wit, out of doors, in the society of the Viscount, or by herself, in which case it was no secret what she was doing: either she was with a book, reclining on a rug in the park and wearing a *bergère* hat, or she was wandering about the galleries looking at the canvases and the porcelain. The latter was a great surprise to her for she would have expected pretty models of delicate nymphs or Thetis or bacchantes or other classical figures, all female and all scantily clad, like that which Chatteris had described of an enamel of Andromeda that he possessed, but that was not the case: the lord of this manor had a taste for pastoral groups, all so pretty, little shepherdess children carrying a lambkin or a kid, pairs in *fêtes galantes* dressed either in the height of modern fashion or a fanciful Italian theatrical style, like Harlequin and Columbine, and even personages from the milieu of the farm, like the peasant leading his plough-horse, the milkmaid with her pail and an arm about a fetching cow, and a goatherd tooting on his pipe as kids frolicked around him. When she looked under these pieces many carried crossed swords printed on in blue paint, others had a trailing W and then there were the initials D.V. or the interlacing X's curling as they joined vertically, signifying respectively, Meissen, Berlin, Mennecey and Vincennes-Sevres. There were also pottery fruits, vegetables and flowers from Chelsea. Justina never tired of these pieces, finding some new and interesting detail every time she went by them but most fascinating of all was the choice and the person who had exercised it: what had prompted the rake to select these innocent and innocuous subjects which were almost girlish in their type of taste? It was as if a counter-balance was in play, as if some concealed instinct compensated for his ways – or she was just reading too much into it all and he merely liked beautiful things. All the same, in looking at them, she was looking into him, or trying to.

That was why the collection in the picture gallery was less interesting, for it was the work of many generations and not at all indicative of the Duke's favour; each generation had left its mark and he had not changed the order or given preference to any type of art, or even put them in chronological order, so that the Mantegna Madonna his father had brought back from Italy had been hung up after the portrait gift of the Earl of Strafford when he was still Viscount Wentworth, Lord Deputy of Ireland, painted last century by van Dyke's hand as a copy of a fine likeness in armour, one elegant hand held out while the other clutched a Commander's baton. The collection itself was already priceless and Justina was not surprised: as was vulgarly said, the Duke was born with a silver spoon in his mouth even if his mother refused to hold it there. Men of Quality went on the Grand Tour and sometimes also women, but Justina had not, while Kit and his uncle certainly had, and would have learned about the different schools of art and their masters, but even so, here, at Irvin, every painting bore a brass name-plate upon it with the title of the work and the name of its executor, as well as a catalogue, in which all entries were in exquisite secretary hand, neater even than copper plate printing, so that it was difficult to know which trained hireling had left off and another taken his place. Kit never actually shewed Justina the pictures; all he ever told her of them was that a few minutes would suffice to see them, and in fact her first viewing of them took

much longer. Nor did her sister wish to accompany her; the excuse was that, as Duchess of Irvin, she could see the paintings every day of her husband's life, if she wanted to, and the Countess had already gone through the catalogue with her. So Justina took the time and made the effort to go on her own, little, private Grand Tour herself, and resolved that however bored she became, she would give each painting a good look at least. She was right to be so disciplined with herself for she had heard great things of the Italian Renaissance artists and found that she probably liked them less than what they were supposedly worth. The earliest ones from the schools of Verona and Florence were all represented here in abundance, and the name-plates were all from Bobby Orre's notebooks when he went abroad, from Giotto to Mantegna: Giotto's manner of painting eyes made even angels look mean and nasty, and from that did she always recoil. The great rivals Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarroti ended up side by side and as their work was mainly religious, she was confused by their techniques and not really interested, for there was, in her view, a stylised quality to the humanity that issued from their hands, even if this humanity was quasi-divine. Raphael was more gentle on the eye but Caravaggio was too stark: on the other hand the Titian portraits and the Tintoretto scenes from antiquity, with personages dressed up in the latest fashions all brocades and ruffs, made her smile and as went with the latter's name, she liked his colours.

If Justina was fascinated how luscious were the deep red velvets painted by Cranach and the costumes which the Germanics wore, the pale-eyed pallid insipidity of his beauties less amusing than their attire. The draughtsmanship of Dürer would have pleased had not she found his style to be rather grotesque, but she liked some of the later Dutch and Flemish work, especially of interiors in which she would rather not have lived – and in the midst of all of this was a resplendent painting of beautiful Anne of Austria, Queen of France in the last half of the sixteenth century in the most elaborate gown and the most exquisite pearls, devout and austere princess who allegedly made up for her useless marriage to one of Catherine de Medici's sons by doing good works. She seemed, in her gorgeous gaudie gown with its spectacular brocading and her neatly braided hair wound with pearls and bound severely atop her head, to dominate the scene as much as did Lord Wentworth, but then there were always Master Bosch's grotesques to wonder at, as a broken egg walked and buttocks peeped out of a drinking cup among other curiosities of which at least a hundred were crammed into a single picture. Almost all of Bosch's paintings had been commissioned and bought by Phillip II Habsburg, that King of Spain who rotted to death after trying to conquer England and massacre folk suspected as of Moorish origins after closing Moorish baths in Spain – to the disgust of the governor of Andalusia, the Count of Mondejar, who refused to obey such brutal orders, which was very Spanish of him and to the lasting credit of his compatriots. Phillip obviously had a twisted mind, but how on earth had a Bosch painting escaped his clutches and ended up in an English country home? It made the collection of Peter Lely's court beauties, who all looked alike at first sight with similar wrapping gowns and long blond hair somewhat strangely dressed in front, rather tame and affected, like portraits taken of a cattle market but less innocent. The same went for the belles striking attitudes for Sir Godfrey Kneller, but there was a difference between these models, all aristocratic court ladies in pairs and poses: most of them were gifts to tempt a possible marriage which obviously had not taken place, or just part of an exchange of portraits when folk were having a liaison.

Jumbled up among this were canvasses by Francois Clouet, court painter to Henry

VIII's contemporary, François I of Valois-Angouleme, Master van Rijn's sombre pictures where light played with shadow and there was more of the latter, with brushwork that all were told to worship but that she found a mess, Master Vermeer's perfect floors, and luscious flower paintings executed by unknown Flemish nuns. Among the later pictures displayed and catalogued were the well populated and elegant works of Watteau, with charming ladies in sack back gowns and shimmering silks, looking more like the human animal than those fashioned by the Old Masters whom everyone was ordered to like. Among them, two fleshy fatty pink belles without much on by the Jewish artist Rubens, even if he was also supposed to be Flemish, somewhat spoilt the scene, but one was an early attempt at Perseus's rescue of Andromeda, with Pegasus just standing there, in the shape of a massive Dray with enormous dappled cruppers, which only proved that folk could only paint what they knew to paint, and she liked the big horse any way, for he even had been equipped with a bang tail, as carthorse breeds could have. To Justina, this canvas was a masterpiece – because of the very lifelike horse in it! It seemed, from the order of things, that it was the present Duke of Irvin who had fetched back the Watteau paintings and the dray, as well as the floral still lives which the nuns had executed. There was definitely more to him than met the eye, especially greyish white face powder, but she did not ask about it either to his sister or to his nephew, for both would wonder after her curiosity in a different way each one, and that would communicate itself to her sister, who would be the most worried and even disaffected of them all. Meanwhile she tried to learn as much about 'Lionel Blackheart's' character from his chosen possessions, as if his tastes would cast light upon it.

Justina did not pass all her time thus, but only that when she was not wanted otherwise most of it was spent on horseback in different ways. Sometimes she was wandering about with Kit, because the Countess expected it of her, and althô he persisted in his friendly airs, she was not very encouraging, even if she curbed her irascible or unaccommodating manner towards him. Mostly however, she accompanied her sister when the latter rode out with the Countess, who then called upon the steward to take them about as part of Lady Caroline's schooling as mistress of a great estate, for even if she was not required to marshal the lands, she was to know what was where, who was who, and how matters of all sorts were dealt with. The fields all had names, like those on the estates of Great Hearne Castle, and she needed to learn them so to help her along this course, the steward brought along a plan of his master's vast grounds. Neither Justina nor Caroline found this dull, but as they were amusements to the former, she tended to absorb more of their content than the other. When the visits became long, often they were conducted by a type of vehicle imported from the Germanys, which was open and could easily seat four, called a landau, in which a picnic was also packed, so that the ladies could stay out all day if need be. Similar were the long walks with gardeners, foresters and bailiffs, whether about orchards or the villages and hamlets which the Duke owned, and the only part of this operation in all its forms which disorientated the sisters was the fact that everyone stared at The Future Duchess, who must have been the one riding or seated by Lady Northingham, for she would take precedence over those behind or those sitting to face backwards, like Justina and Kit. For all that his state of judicial clerkhood was worth and valid, he shewed the most levity and jocosity of their party, not really interested in observing but more inclined to joke wherever the opportunity so to do presented itself, and sometimes he was even amusing to them all, except that Caroline was noticeably dull and somewhat less

than her usual, placid, resigned self, for gravity weighed upon her brow and she did not always look very pleased with what she saw. Justina did not ask, but one day not long after the drives and rides had commenced, she was moved so to do. The Countess was taking a short nap in one of the parlours, Kit was amusing himself in the billiard room for Justina did not want to play, but Caroline was wandering about the gardens like one lost, and her sister spotted her from a window, gaining the impression from her gestures that she may have been weeping. The younger sister did not wait: she was only in the library and the vault from the window over the lavender bushes to the path outside was nothing for her, skirts and all, so she threw up a sash and leaped out. Caroline did not even hear, but then Caroline was far away, wiping her eyes. She only looked up when her young sister neared her at a run.

“Yes?” was her cold reception.

“I haven’t wept yet, but this place has that effect sometimes,” said Justina.

“What know you? You’re just a child!” scoffed Caroline, blowing her nose and composing herself once and for all.

“Children go to the schoolroom and on walks to learn about the garden and the forest,” answered Justina with validity. “While you are being honed and primed to become mistress of this great place, I follow and learn in my own stupid way, for after that tour of the Claremont portraits, any illusions I might have had of wedding a fellow whom I did not find too objectionable and could keep me at hack and manger, all faded. Even if we have long known that girls grow up to wed according to their parents’ will and how thick the ribbon runs, and that romances are the province of a country swain because their marriages are four legs in a bed, whereas ours are something more, I was finally brought to earth, out of my world of horses and shovelling straw bedding, that my fate could be like one of those ladies in the canvasses upstairs, if I were lucky enough to find a spousy who would take a Rochester portion. Well, that is you, and your husband-to-be, rake and all, has a delicate side to him: that I found from his choice in pictures and his collection of porcelain. Perhaps he will be delicate towards you –,”

“That is not what I care about, you – you Grinagog the cat’s uncle (grinning simpleton), it is this huge estate and all its facets! I will never be able to keep up with them,” wailed Caroline.

Justina was visibly surprised at this sort of behaviour from her perennially imperturbable and well-tempered sister, who was an example to them all at home in goodwill, resignation and family duty. Instinctively she took a step back from that other, whose tears threatened to flow again, but which she valiantly swallowed down.

“All the fields have names, even those farmed by yeoman tenants,” protested Carrie. “I cannot remember a single one.”

“Caroline, all fields have names, even ours,” reminded Justina.

“I know, saphead,” snapped Caroline, “but I have never been required to know their names, *even ours*,” she appended on a mocking tone. “Do you know them?”

“Actually I do,” said Justina, “by force of habitude and going out more than you all, beyond the park with Julius, so the fact that there are a plethora of names to know here does not surprise me. Carrie, you are not going to be allowed to run the lands: if you so much as point your nose in that direction you will be told that Irvin is not subject to petticoat government. All you have to know is how to manage the house, and the fields and their

names are there for you to be able to find your way about your husband's lands if ever you have to. Make a copy of the estate map with all the fields and grounds drawn it: trace it if you like, and hang it up in your room. By sheer dint of staring at it every day, you'll soon know where everything is."

"I am not even sure I can run the house, and you know servants: they mislead the new, and they always pilfer. It is all very well being taught to be polite to the domesticks, but I have heard of no lady of a manor who has not complained of fingers in the ragout or the roast carved from the wrong end so that the best pieces become leftovers for the servants' hall. Nay, they do not steal silver or what shews, but children's toys disappear, as do kerchieves and even sheet music – do you recall what Lady Orre said? As for food, if the servants did not steal and just ate what was prepared for them, we'd ha' twice as much to live on. This place is a paradise for their thieving kind and I don't know how I can control anything here; the Duke is certain to notice and he will berate me as a careless and weak wife. Answering him that he has enough money not to be a pick-penny (miser) about food is neither clever nor an excuse," complained Caroline.

"I know; they are in and out of the lady's perfume bottles, they lift (steal) small things like vinaigrettes and bubble boys (lady's tweezer case) which the mistress of the house thinks she has lost and never again finds, for how many times have we had guests who have asked us if she dropped this or that tringum (trinket) in our house – and we know what has really happened, for that is why there are so many laws on the statute book that make damage to property and theft of it a crime – and these are not poor starvelings who steal a chip in a potage (a thing of no importance) to buy dinner," agreed Justina, "or gin."

"That is all very well, but it only makes my position worse; one cannot be after every one in a household of a hundred servants," lamented Caroline.

"Now listen here, Carrie," stated Justina, "you are so overwhelmed by all this that you are even on the high ropes with me. We are all aware that you are marrying the mixen because of the muck and that he is going to carve you a great muck-hill on your trencher, which in Irvin's case, means he is a rake, and that he has big houses that you have to manage as best you can, for they will pilfer when you are not there. By Goles, I would wed Chatteris tomorrow to relieve the family debt, to get out of the stableyard and settle somewhere for good, were it not for two features, the first being that he is enemy to your spouse and marriages do not make good treaties between foes, that has history *not* taught a crowd of Kings, and the second being that his fourth wife was found floating, dead, in a fish-pond. I sometimes try to imagine how must that poor woman looked: was she on her back with her silken skirts billowing about her and her pretty heeled and buckled shoes on her feet, or was she face down in the water, her nose half-eaten off by a carp? Her widower refused that she be ottomised (anatomised), so we know not if she died by drowning or was just dumped there to look like the victim o' such, or if she was thrown into the water to her death, or even, if life with Chatteris was so vile that she took her own life. Irvin is not Chatteris –,"

"What if he is worse? What if he expects me to keep his houses running like those splendid clocks we saw at Greenwich, made by that – that George Graham fellow –,"

"Actually it was Thomas Tompion. There is a Tompion grandfather in the study."

"I know there is a long-case clock in the study but I have not studied its dial."

"Nor I, I just read the name when I was passing, on the day I was thrown out and went

walking, to run into Vinnie's dogbolt son. We have a Tompion too, Carrie."

"I thought you liked Kit –,"

"I thought you liked the idea of doing your duty and wedding this man, to leave home, to help out with the debt, and to make the rest of us a bridge of gold and silver out of there. Why are girls so happy to have a *fiancé*? Firstly, we don't want to end up as spinsters on parish relief when we are old, and secondly, we will have a house of our own, no matter what he is, as long as he is of our degree wherever that is possible, to be mistress of it until he dies, unless childbed does our business for us. You may think me a paper-skull and a jingle brains but this much I have discovered for myself since Irvin descended in our midst and following that, going to London, and coming here, for the house and its former owners have told me much about the life we lead. You'll get used to running the mansion. You'll learn the names of the fields. You'll know the faces and the names of all the people on this estate. You'll even learn what orders the Duke gives his steward. It will all come in time, so fret not your gizzard over it."

Carrie put her hand over the lower half of her face.

"There is too much of it all," she sighed. "If you are poor it is grim, if you are rich, you are afraid. Irvin is the reason for that; he is intimidating. Do you remember the names of any of the fields here?"

"Er – actually – um – some of them, but Carrie! I am used to it; I know all the names of all the fields back at home and I know the name of every face on father's estates. The other reason is that I am not nervous about learning anything, and because of that, I remember things, whereas you are quiet as a wasp up one's nose about it all, so you become anxious and your memory refuses to be your ally," analysed Justina. "You are also annoyed with me: I should not be here and the fact I am makes you think that you fail at your new lessons in being a wife."

"Why do you say that of me? I am not angry with you," snapped Caroline.

"You are already shewing it now," said Justina. "Perhaps I should leave you to weep alone, but you are visible from the house, and I know not whether Kit can see you from the billiard room which is off the enfilade and that faces the garden, while if Vinnie goes seeking you, she will lean over windowsills too."

Before Caroline could say more, Justina turned and left her, at a run, but when she went to the house to find her sister, only to be told that the latter was gone out to the stables. Indeed, Justina had taken a groom to accompany her, but she was off for a good gallop, almost as if she needed on her sister's behalf to learn how to find her way about the estate, and so she did, for when she returned, the servant felicitated her on knowing the lanes as well as if she had lived here all her life. Thus she did to shew Caroline that it was not so difficult to explore one's way around Irvin, and so she told her sister, who was none too pleased about it, but hid her annoyance. All the same, the fact that her sister was assimilating simple things about the house and its extensive grounds gave Caroline the notion that it was not a good idea to exclude her from the sessions with the Countess and also, the steward, over the Duke's books, for those to do with the house were separate to those to do with the estate, and the steward had access to and understanding of the latter. If Caroline was not unfamiliar with household management from helping her own mother at home, she was at first lost over the array of the lands, but Justina tried, in private, to console her: it was a little like running the

stables, but on a much more huge scale. Justina also sat aside when the Countess gave instructions to the butler and the housekeeper, who would obey her, but these were for Caroline to learn, and no-one bothered about her younger sister. That which seemed to fascinate Justina the most were the general monetary accounts, for it seemed that if properly husbanded, riches bred riches, how they could be spent generously without inroads upon their sources, and how properly to preserve and increase them. Flicking through the latest copy of the account book from a Lancashire cotton mill meant nothing to Caroline, and as the steward thought she did not understand it, he left her alone, which idea she fostered by not asking questions about any of it. Comparing the rent books with the ledger of incomes from farming, be it the milch kine or the grain crops, was not something which Caroline was required to do, but Justina took the occasional peep. From what it cost to keep the house lit in the evenings of spring, summer, autumn and winter, to the order for seven and fifty new glass panes for the conservatory, it was all fascinatingly a part of another world which she was glad briefly to invade. Some of the chairs dated from the end of the last century and needed real tapestry work for their upholstery, affixed with a series of bright brass studs: the tapestry was ordered from the Gobelins manufactory outside Paris and the brass studs came from London, with an upholsterer to affix them, but the man who repaired the German harpsichord had his cabinet in Bath – which begged the question: why, if Justina had to recover from a chill, had she been banished to Irvin and not sent to what the Romans named Aqua Sulis, famed for its curative waters, and Beau Nash with his strict code of dress? Most entertaining of all was the fact that the Duke paid all his bills immediately without any problems about depletion of funds, but never with dissipation: the Duke lived like a duke but only became all the wealthier for it. Seeing Justina smile over a leather bound gold blocked account book, bearing the Duke's coat of arms, Caroline finally felt exasperated by her sister, even if she had called her in to join them, and upon that same evening, came to her room while the younger one was dressing before supper.

"You seem to like all this," she commented.

"I feel like a page boy momentarily trying out the King's throne," answered Justina. "How easy is everything for him, and how well he lives. That he should have gone and wrecked the peace he could have had by letting his grudge against Chatteris grow more violent is a tragedy, even if by one account, it is Chatteris who would pursue him but then a stoic philosopher once said that it was usual to hate a man whom one had wronged, for Chatteris courted Vinnie for to wed her and jilted her, but Irvin dealt with the matter without a duel, even if there have been knock-me-down doings since."

"I meant, the work, the ledgers," corrected Caroline.

"I meant that too."

"Would you like to wed Irvin?" demanded Caroline brusquely.

"And you would not, now, after seeing what he is made of?" rejoined Justina. "Carrie, you cannot cry off, for if you do, Irvin is going to have to wed one of us, even Selina, if he can wait a year, for girls do indeed wed at fourteen."

"I wonder if I will become like his mother," fretted Carrie.

"Cease this: we are lucky someone will take at least one of us off our father's hands, for we are difficult to place, sure as louse in bosom," stated Justina. "We have a portrait gallery and I should have paid more notice to it, but all our ancestors are dull Johns-and-

Joans, whom I always thought we would emulate, and hoped that when it was my turn, my hug booby would not be like our father, who has not been a good parent or husband or duke or anything, for that matter, but wasn't that a girlish dream! Now I come to this haven of gold and light, and find that the shades who lived in it were far worse than even he was. Aye, I'd wed Irvin if you suddenly break squares, but only to keep the money he is bringing to save us all and let Devenish be his agent, thus enabling him to take control over father's head."

"Where did you discover that about the agency?" recoiled Caroline.

"I was playing like a brat with the books and one of the files among them had a correspondence with his trampler about us," beamed Justina.

"We are caught in his web!"

"Only until Devenish inherits. He does not want to underwrite us forever."

Caroline bowed her head.

"The man will have his mare again (all will be well)!" Justina tried to cheer her. "I am sure that all brides who are promised to rich men have recurrent moment of fear when they say it is all up with them and the idea of wedding the intended."

"You talk like a sage who has been shod all around (knows all about the married state)," groaned Caroline, "and you are but seventeen."

"The married state itself is not worth shoe-buckles. What the married state can buy is a horse of a different colour," answered Justina. "I learned that. I am neither sugar nor salt. I like horses and I do not mind being a stable hand because we have no money but I will not be one for ever. I will marry the mixen because of the muck."

Caroline had tears in her eyes. Then she turned from her sister and left her room. A little later Justina went downstairs to wait the call for supper, and fully expected to find Carrie, who had been dressed when she visited, but instead, there was Kit.

"I saw your sister leave your room and expected to find her here," he noted.

"So did I," confessed Justina.

"She looked tiffed (annoyed) and her cup was too low (low spirited)," he remarked, turning on her an inquisitive regard.

"This deep exposure to the Irvin fortune has disorientated her. There is so much, and there is so much to remember," replied Justina.

Kit heaved a sigh. Then he bid her be seated and when she was, proceeded to explain that his uncle had long had little care about his heritage otherwise he would have been wed long ago, and only recently had his sisters and brothers-in-law managed to persuade him to consider matrimony at last. All his life he had been building on his fortune, for his first care was all his land, here and elsewhere, and his second his properties, so that he expanded his wealth skilfully if selfishly, with a due regard for material wealth and its proper preservation, which meant that all his tenants had finely maintained dwellings and a peal in their ears if they did not tend potagers or farms correctly. From an ivory triptych in the chapel at Tendring to new benches, looms and frames in the mills, if it was an object, he troubled about it. What his family had achieved and stood for was irrelevant: from legends of bravery in the Wars of the Roses or valorous deeds in the Civil War, to the political stances faithfully taken by his ancestors, nothing mattered to him, and he had already changed sides twice in the House of Lords to prove it, even if he always spoke well of Sir Robert Walpole. As for the manner of persuasion employed by his siblings and such, they used his love of property and

asked him bluntly if he really wanted his beloved ground and buildings to pass to creatures who were not begotten of his own seed. At first he had ignored them, and then all at once he charged them to find him a wife as soon as possible, even if she was the ugliest witch in hell, as long as she could bear children, and that, hopefully would be proven by coming of a fecund family. There had been social obstacles but then there were the Hearnese and if there were six healthy offspring who were legitimate, it was suspected that the Duke had sown a wild oat or two but never recognised it to date. The Irvin title was in tail mail, the most restricted of inheritances, to wit, only sons of the previous duke could inherit, not even daughters or nephews and thus the risk was that the thieving Crown would claim this wealth so sedulously increased. That was why he was ready to help the Duke of Hearne out of his troubles, and when they all thought upon it, no-one knew when Lord Chatteris would strike next, and if Irvin would fall dead as the result. That notion put a shiver up Justina's spine and she prayed Kit speak of the subject no more.

Unfortunately, this conversation, together with what Justina was learning about how the Duke of Irvin lived and thrived, only served to revive her preoccupation with him. His bad reputation and his exclusion from certain houses seemed not to matter to her; in fact she even found herself worrying about Lord Chatteris's threat to his life, and hoped with all her might that the Earl, just to make trouble, had not, meanwhile approached her father, who could be extremely wrong-headed and obtuse with it, and agreed to let the fellow have Honoria, who was as awkward a person as the Duke her parent, and would refuse absolutely to give him up, arguing that a marriage thus would make brothers-in-law of the enemies and end their hostility – or even if Irvin refused to continue, opening himself to an action for breach of promise for marriage, Chatteris could well afford, she thought, to take Irvin's place where the Hearne debts were concerned. That worried her enough to begin a letter to Julius, to ask if there had been any other matrimonial approaches to the family and if they were by or on the part of the Earl of Chatteris, to be very careful in dealing with the same but end by refusing, or otherwise the arrangements with Irvin would be ruined. Just to deter any headstrong ideas taking hold of her sisters, she related the tragedy that befell his fourth wife and she emphasised the fact that he had been wed four times, was still childless, outwardly charming compared to Irvin, but that was the part which affrighted her the most: his first attempt at marriage had ended in his jilting Irvin's older sister. She also begged Julius to be discreet and inform only Devenish, who would decide what to do about warning their parents. Thus, that evening, as they sat and read aloud and played music and chatted, she wrote diligently away at her missive which she requested the Countess to order a man to take to the village to be carried to the posts, and she was ready to pre-frank it as an express. Foolishly Caroline asked her what she needed to write an express for.

"To protect the family from any foolishness," evaded Justina.

"What sort of foolishness?" demanded Caroline, suddenly and strangely unreasonable. Justina did not want to talk of Lord Chatteris before Lady Northingham.

"There are some folk who will compromise the Duke your spouse to be, and they must not be allowed to go put fine words that butter no parsnips in our father's blockhead ears," said she and suggested that the subject be closed.

"Is that not for me to know and for me to write?" demanded Caroline, petulant and high-pitched, to her hostess's surprise.

“Not in your over-excited present state of mind,” said Justina. “Later I will explain.”

“Why do you not sing instead of writing alarmist letters?” snapped Caroline.

“I sound like a cornrake and cannot hold the notes. Give it another sev’nnight,” invited Justina, “if we are still here.”

“There is no reason for you not to be,” said Lady Northingham comfortably.

So Justina was able to finish her letter and address and seal it, whereupon the hostess at once entrusted it to the butler to take away and have sent, pre-franked as an express, on the morrow. Shortly after that the group broke up to go to bed, and Caroline followed her sister to her room, exigent for an explanation. Justina remained very calm.

“Do you recall my telling you that Chatteris wanted to see Irvin dead or reduced? What if Chatteris approached father for one of his remaining daughters?” she postulated.

Caroline fell silent and so Justina told her of how Chatteris could break Irvin’s bloodline by interfering with his attempts to wed if his father-in-law was as stupid and greedy a person as Hearne, of how if he asked for Honoria their cake would be dough, of how it was necessary for someone with wit at home to stay warned, and that it was the only way to defend their own family and save the impending marriage. Caroline listened, felt stupid and immature compared to her hoyden sister and walked out. It was not a triumph that Justina was left to savour: indeed, she was conscious that before the defending and the saving, she was protecting Irvin himself. For a while sat she and pondered this with some guilt in her heart, but then she dismissed it: what if she also protected him after all? In any case all this was just the fanciful mental flight of one just out of adolescence and if she continued to let him influence her thus, she was creating a mental prisoner of herself to which he held the keys, and he was promised to another, even if he would steal nigh incestuous kisses from her in Ranelagh Gardens.

On the morrow, the letter had gone and everyone had forgotten about it, especially Justina, who, while on her way to the study after breakfast with the ladies, espied Kit on his way to the ball room carrying at least three swords and wearing kid shoes. Albeit not particularly interested in what he was about, she had sufficient knowledge of the pastimes and education of young men to guess that he was practising, perhaps, some aspect of the art of duello, and so she called to him to ask if this were so. It being no secret, he invited her to come and watch, if she liked, as long as she did not mind the ignoble sight of a gentleman in his shirt, for he was going to have to doff his coat, and as it was summer, his waistcote too. He tarried on the stair and related how his father had enforced upon him, first with a master and then for the sake of it, years of drudgery in the practice of strokes and skills, so that he was quite an expert, and when he was about his legal affairs in London, he had access to fencing studios where he could try out what he had learned on partners who were opponents for the sake of the sport, pursuing the acquisition of further familiarity of this ability with some enthusiasm. Otherwise he seemed glad to tell her of his hard work and all his progress, and she expected that he would like her present so that he could shew off a little. So she attended the session, and as she was the only one who did, he was free to chatter and joke, for one of the things that demonstrated fitness was the capacity to talk while engaged in the fastest movements, and if that left one panting, one was below standards. Sometimes his jests were a little bawdy, which liberty, she suspected, he would not have taken before Caroline or his mother, and when she asked him if she could invite either of them to the next time he took

to the floor, he agreed but declared that his mother had never been interested, and that Lady Caroline probably would not be, but she was free to ask. Justina resolved to do so in any wise, as if to create a distance between herself and Irvin in Caroline's mind, which was deeply unsettled by the fact that her sibling was able to assimilate features about Irvin's home ground that surpassed her.

As he was alone, Kit could only practise positions and thrusts in a theoretical fashion, and twist his foil or parry an imaginary adversary, but before he ran about staging fights with himself, encouraged by her laughter, there was a long series of rigorous exercise to be performed with or without the weapon, of which there were three, the simplest being the foil, and for more competent artists, the *épée* and the sabre, the different requirements of which he was happy to shew. Yet it did not please Justina to be a dimpling spectator, for from time to time she would pick up any implement and join in at least for the physical exercise, not minding at all when she fell over tangled in all her skirts and petticoats, which was rather often, even thô he told her that when she bathed this evening she would find herself covered in bruises and her maid would go 'O Lawks-a-Mercy' which sort of response he imitated and had both in fits of mirth. Not that she could master very much at first, but Kit put to her the question whether she had ever joined swords with her brother, which she had to confess was sometimes the case, for thô her eldest brother had received a full education but for University, her younger one, who was in fact her elder, had not, and so Lord Devenish had been his haphazard tutor in duello, but as poor Julius had no-one to practise against, he requested his roaring girl of a sister, Justina, to help him out. Hereat Kit was not at all scandalised, like some of her family had been, but delighted and thereafter she was his fencing partner even if he always won and she hardly knew what he was doing, althô he instructed her as they flew along and told her to refrain from this or always watch for that. There were three things he noticed: she was never stiff but always supple, she did not tire, she was extremely strong not just for her size or for a woman, but for anyone, and she was agile and active. Not that all this exercise resembled convalescence in any way; tacitly she was aware that she expended more energy here than if she had remained in London. As for the Viscount, he was well impressed, and thus decided consciously to teach her some rudiments that would help him practise, for he perceived that she had wit enough to learn by imitation, except that if there was a technique to a turn that needed to be learned and could not just be copied, he would halt and shew it to her. When she complained that she was only slowing him down he denied as much, and assured her that all that was happening was that he was analysing his movements better because he paused to improve hers. As she already knew some of the positions, of how to hold the weapon, and how to use her knees, the introduction to the art was unnecessary, and so forth they boldly went, he enjoying himself and she trespassing into the man's world with glee, so that now she really could not invite Caroline to watch. Then, after about five such sessions, she dared come to the next one in a white lawn shirt and a pair of buckskin breeches whereat he whooped with laughter.

"Don't fun at my expense: they are my best, but they used to belong to the younger of my two brothers," she asserted. "Heaven knows why, but I secretly packed them just in case – and here we are. Besides the shirt is cooler than a gown in figured linen."

Kit Kettering raised both hands: he was not going to say another word. Actually he did, for after they began, Justina was found to be faster on her feet, with more rapid gestures,

and so he jocosely announced that he liked her better dressed as a female for then she was not so free of movement and liable to ‘thrash his jacket’ for him. In fact she could not beat him, and she knew that she could never achieve such competence as to permit as much, but the activity was fun while it lasted, and it did not last that long, even if she preferred riding out over the estate and just riding in general. He may have teased her a little about her attire and the ease it allowed her, but it seemed to him that she was as comfortable in it as she was in female dress, for women, when dressed man-fashion, tended to assume exaggerated liberties of movement and swagger or otherwise seem affected, and not just wander about at ease. He thought it was possible that Justina sometimes dressed like this just to save money in her family, because country dress for men was cheap even among the gentry and expensive even for the squire’s wife. To probe about such matters as her family’s indigence was not only insulting but improper, so he held his peace, for it was her prerogative to make revelations hereabout and not his to explore them. After all, who else would wed his uncle Irvin? In any wise, the event of her performance being ameliorated by her change in raiment was not sufficient excuse for him to reveal to the others what she was doing, he was not of a malicious character so to do for the sake of landing her in bad odour with his mother, and coming from a family with many siblings, he lacked a bent to carry tales. Even better, he could practise more actively and attain his best levels of performance, while she was infinitely patient, as if she knew that the acquisition of any expertise was more practice and sweat than knowledge and talent, which meant that she did not play the fool and endanger both of them. All the same, he found that the harder he pushed her, the more she found resources in herself, and was able to recall what she was told in such a measure as to execute it, well or clumsily, so eventually he threatened her in jest.

“Brace yourself, sir,” he cackled, “for tomorrow I will fight you in earnest.”

“I am scarcely ready properly to fight anyone, least of all, you,” she laughed. “These practice bouts are capital sport, but beyond them do my capabilities hardly stretch, make no mistake. Now we need to halt, for I must wash and dress, otherwise we will both be late for breakfast, and your mother may make sad havoc about it.”

“The noise that we are making, thumping about the floor, is that of folk at duello or other violent sport. She is not liable to be foul-minded,” he said, “beside the doors are open and the servants may pass if they wish; the fact that they have not is irrelevant. Tomorrow we will use foils, which are easiest of all to use, and put buttons on their tips, so no-one will be hurt, which is not the object of the exercise. You have an aptitude for this, so it is a veritable pity that you are a girl.”

“Aptitude?” she scoffed. “That is as true as candle ate cat, and you are a graduate from the school of placebo. Now I must brush and lope: I do not wish to meet your mamma in the corridor, and so I will, whether I use the main or the back stairs.”

On that note, she gave him a swordsman’s salute, and was about to put down the *épée* that she was carrying when a voice behind her called out:

“*En garde!*”

Justina moved on an instinct, pivoting on her heel, her arm poised to parry any blow from whatever direction it came and found her blade clanging with the heavier sabre of the Duke of Irvin, himself, in shirt and waistcote, already, as if dressed but for the fray! As she could not stave it off or bend it back she slid out from under it, which was a skill in itself but

the worst part was at the end of the stroke when she had to spring aside before the blade swept down upon her. This she executed with exemplary speed, but her shocked fencing partner, meanwhile, awakened from his surprise, and pounced to attack his uncle, enabling her to make good her escape from what otherwise would have become a most unequal lock, which was when she espied the coat of stiff silk and silver lace laid neatly in a chair.

“What are you doing here?” cried Kit, “you black-clad blackguard, you? I thought you were in Paris!”

“I finished what I had to do there and came home,” the Duke said, sending his nephew scurrying back. “There! *Touché* already!”

“You drew blood, theoretically,” ceded Lord Kettering.

“I baked your bread (killed) for you, bantling (baby),” corrected the other, and continued, for Kit, *thô* dead, would not stop.

“Did you go to Versailles?” asked he. “Did you see the King and his doxy?”

“I also saw the Ambassador to his Britannic Majesty, which is my best alibi for any Englishman. That is not a good king,” lamented the Duke, “for he heeds not the advice given him by his great-grandfather, Louis XIV, who said not to emulate his own passion for building or for making war. As soon as the present monarch came of age, he abandoned the pacifist policy which Cardinal de Fleury and Sir Robert Walpole were adopting, in concert, for he and his court-cards thought it would be fun to go to war. War is not fun, war is ruin, and if he does his arithmetic, his kingdom is not yet out of the financial slough into which the last king plunged it. As for building, demolishing, more like. The palace he inhabits is beautiful: he is full of plans to tear down this fine staircase or change that sumptuous wing or put up silly gentilhommières in the gardens, and then he has a *bourgeoise* for a mistress, who likes to play politics as if she were a palace *intrigante* and even if she has good taste in dress, or tries to be kind to the Queen, who is a shadow, she is out of her place. Offend her and you are out of Versailles. You know the French branches of the Whitfordshire family? Well, both are giving up their houses in Paris and retiring to the country. The lands and the landfolk need our help, they say, and the King and his court do nothing but hunt and go to war. ‘Ours is no longer a healthy nation’, they tell me, and even counsel me to sell my property there.”

All the while he was in combat with his nephew, a much lighter and sprightly man than was he, but by no means as graceful, and thoroughly fascinating with it, as Justina thought, seated on a chair beside the coat, which exuded a light fragrance of linden. Kit was concentrating so hard on evading and parrying him that he could hardly reply.

“When did you get back?” he managed to gasp out.

“Yesternight, after the witching hour: did my column of rotans (wheeled vehicles) not awaken anyone?” the Duke answered and asked.

“Didn’t hear a thing,” confirmed Kit, and dashed aside to escape being cloven in the skull – figuratively.

“Apart from the domesticks, no-one knows I am here,” the Duke said. “Now –,”

Having announced his next move, the master of the house made a flicking movement with his wrist and Kit emitted a cry of dismay, as his *épée* flew from his grasp and fell with a clang before rolling in a fan-shaped course over the floor. Enraged and exasperated but admiringly so, the nephew threw himself on the uncle who reeled back, laughing, his hands held out at either side.

“How do you that, you rogue?” he cried. “I’ve tried it a thousand times, I’ve even tried it on her, and she didn’t even know, for her tol (sword) remained in her fist!”

“‘Tis not just knowing the technique but being able to put it to good account,” said his uncle. “Whitfordshire can do it, so can that French rogue to whom he is related; why, ’twill not set the Thames alight.”

Kit only growled and picked up his sword, wiping his brow on his sleeve, while Justina watched with a smile on her face, her heart beating fast – until it suddenly dawned on her that she was admiring a man promised to her own sister, for the Viscount challenged the Duke, but not to a duel.

“And never an M by your sword belt? When are you going to pay your respects to the lady?” he demanded.

“What lady?” dismissed Irvin aerily. “When I came in you were duelling with a strap-ping young stalwart.”

Even so, as he spoke, he turned to see what had deposited itself on the chairs and that was when Justina felt that she had been a fool to stay and watch, for she should have crept out and run off, instead of letting herself be fascinated by how the tall black and white clad figure stirred itself out of his customary lethargy and fought with such grace and elegance for all his height and weight, for Irvin was not a slim man, and built on a large frame. All the same, Kit narrowed his eyes at his uncle and tilted his head, as if to tell him to cease being awkward, but his grace turned to see, and Justina’s heart sank, for she heard the rapid approach of footsteps and the rustle of skirts which meant that all chance of escape was lost and all avenues – only one – therefor were barred. The Duke paid no heed to this and went to the young lady, looking her up and down with obvious appreciation, and raised eyebrows, as if to chide her for her behaviour while dressed man-fashion when she had been at home, but he put out his hand, for her to put hers in it, while she rose, and suddenly grasped it to give it a good, firm, hard shake, and a squeeze, crushing his fingers against his signet ring, whereat he winced, in pain, provoking Kit to burst out laughing, while the culprit herself feigned innocence for now she needed every ounce of it, as his grace nursed his graceful digits and Lady Northingham barged into the ball room.

“La! Lionel!” she squawked, astonished, stopping short so suddenly that Caroline, who was at her heels, almost fell into her and she perceived that before her brother stood not a boy, but – “why, Justina! Look at you – indeed, Lionel, you are back – Great Heaven, I scarce know whom to address myself to and what to say. My dears, what are you all doing, and Justina, why on earth are you so improperly dressed? For shame, child, there are laws in this country against that sort of thing except on the stage.”

“Well, Irvin just sent my foil winging across the room,” replied Kit, “and before that, I was teaching Lady Justina how to use a sword.”

Caroline hid a smile and curtsied to his grace, who bowed over her hand and took charge of the situation, for he first apologised for having surprised them all, and then explained how he returned late last night after everyone had retired, but that he did not want to make noise, so that some of his luggage was being unloaded now.

“I was sure I heard carriages and horses, but then I thought that I was dreaming of London,” said his sister.

“They set me down with a few duds and my valet, and the rest is come now,” he

replied, and sure enough, there was a distant sound of thudding about. "Imagine that late at night in a sleeping house. Were I alone, I'd ha' suffered it to happen, but the stuff could wait in the remise and besides, the men now are fresh, whereas last night we were all exhausted."

"Aye," acknowledged the Countess, "I was bemused by the presence of impedimenta all over the hall."

"As opposed to dementia, which Irvin carries around in his head," interposed Kit, coming to stand near Justina, who received a smile from her future brother-in-law, even if he held his betrothed by the hand.

"Your energy, Lionel," marvelled the Countess. "Up and dressed already, and fighting duels with Kit? You have the constitution of a bull."

"One usually says 'ox'," corrected her son with a wicked cackle.

"Kit was practising and I took a hand," quoth the Duke, sheathing his sabre, but his sister was truly rather worried about Justina's appearance.

"Caroline," she recommenced, deliberately failing to address herself to Justina, "does your sister always dress like that?"

"At home, I help one of my brothers to groom our horses, and we are also housing those of a neighbour who has water in his shoes, so that he will not lose them. It is too much work for the few old grooms we have left, and one lad the same age as you," explained the culpable party, turning to the Viscount.

"Justina works as hard as a man," defended Caroline, embarrassed, but not sure whether it was by her sister in breeches before the rakish intended, or by the fact that a Duke's child served his household as a stable hand. "In dress, she has no alternative, for the work is more arduous than in a dairy," she added, but had to turn to her sister, and in tones that were a little crisp, continued, "Justina, I had no idea that you had packed men's clothes as well."

"I provided for every possible contingency," said Justina sheepishly.

"If she wears skirts, she is not so fast," protested Kit.

"I will fight you, my dear fellow, so let us not compromise the young lady anymore," the Duke intervened, "and her young la' ship will no more offend your sensibilities about propriety, Vinnie."

With that, he indicated the Countess to precede them and led Caroline out, but could not resist a sidelong glance at Justina, who was about to follow, but the Viscount gestured her to hang back.

"Figs," growled she, and the Duke of Irvin's glittering eyes began mischievously to twinkle as he turned away.

"That was a bad business," muttered Kit, coming to her side.

"I cannot imagine worse," agreed Justina. "I had better go up and change as quick as a cat on a hot back stone."

"And so must your humble condumble," appended the Viscount, as both followed the others out. "Just so that you know, notwithstanding that he is an old dog at it, and very skilful, I would much rather practise with you."

"Thank you," she replied.

Ahead the Countess was talking to her brother about Paris and in the hall, went on into one of the salons, but Justina and Kit both ran one after the other, up the staircase, to go their separate ways to their rooms. A little later they all came before the breakfast table, smelling

fresh and looking neat, even if they were a trifle tardy and Justina's hairstyle in a severe knot at the back of her head, with no embellishment upon her person but for a lace scarf and a lace apron. All day and until that evening, the younger Woodville sister took great care to remain as unobtrusive as possible, while Kit was free to distract his uncle, which incidentally invited the Countess to scold her son for needlessly occupying the gentleman returned from afar to his betrothed, almost as if she was unable to account that it was a betrothal following an arrangement rather than a wish. However one of the lines of inquiry followed by the importunating nephew was why, while the London Season was in full swing, the Duke had returned from abroad to rural climes, whither he could easily repair after the Quality left Town for their estates, to rest, harvest, shoot and hunt so that the capital was empty unless one followed politics or was in office. Irvin very capably and artfully managed to abstain from answering on several occasions, but, being too clever to excite suspicion by evading it altogether, he eventually conceded a vague answer that infallibly ended all further probing: he had matters of business to attend to. Justina was loth to accept that or to pretend that his presence did not matter, so when everyone had retired for the night, she went to Caroline's lodging to remind her sister that they had stayed here for over a fortnight already, and to ask when they should leave. Caroline indeed comprehended the risks of outstaying a welcome, in particular when one was burthened with an unnecessary younger sister who could be in the way, but she emphasised the inadvisability of an immediate departure, which would seem as if they were leaving because the Duke was here. Justina wished that she could confess to her sister that that was indeed the case as far as she was concerned, but she knew better and thus did no more than firmly register her wish to go home, or to Aunt Lizzie's, soon.

On the morrow, as she could no longer practise with Kit, Justina went out on horseback for a good ride before breakfast, and was most solicitous about her solitude, chusing less exposed terrain in order not to be sighted, for fear that another rider would appear and join her, which she could not prevent if such happened. If anyone came after her, she saw nothing of the kind during her ride, but deemed that he still would be so when she returned and thus, when back in the stable yard, cast her gaze over the box doors, over which the residents hung out their heads, to watch her and all else. Nevertheless, one of them looked particularly hot and when she drew near him, there was sweat coming off him, while his heart, which she knew to feel for, was beating fast, but steadying its rhythm, as if after a fast gallop. Into his box she entered and placed an ungloved hand upon his back, finding that it was damp with good honest horse sweat, which had an agreeably characteristic odour of its own. Someone had indeed been out and ridden this horse very hard, and this horse was Doubloon, grunting and blowing to regain his breath. That was all he could tell her himself and she dared not ask more of the stable hands, but just patted the horse, before she led her own to be housed and untackled. With haste and stealth, she returned to the house: Kit was up, practising his strokes so she went to him, and he complained of being abandoned by his lazy uncle Irvin, farting abed, who had not come, while neither had she, even thô he knew that now, she could not oblige him even if she wished to.

"My mother affects to be shocked at your appearance and my uncle looks at you goats and monkeys (gives you lascivious looks)," he grumbled. "Don't think I did not notice."

"I fear my sister did too," she sighed.

"Be wary of him; he is sworn in at Highgate (very sharp and clever). He could chuse

to amuse himself by going after you. Now you're guinea gold (dependable), you'll not let him do that to your own sister."

"I'll not let me do that to my own sister," she asserted.

"What if we pretended to be – er – on walking terms?" he suggested.

"Walking out together? To deter him? What if it has the opposite effect and inspires him to make you cornuted (cuckolded), he thinks?" she objected.

"That is also like him," he agreed, his shoulders sagging.

"I am going upstairs to change: we'll see how the wind blows," she said, and departed.

Even if she left him casually, she fled to her rooms on tiptoe, locked herself in and performed her toilette in order to be fresh and neat in time for breakfast. It was a fact that stable hands exercised horses every morning, but Doubloon had been given more than his fair share of that, and she was afraid that Irvin was come out after her. There was no finding out for sure, for the house was quiet, and the Duke did and said nothing notable at breakfast, nor did he eye Justina in any particular way, or ignore her, or tease or taunt her. She was just the younger sister and left as such. However, now that he was here, Caroline sat in with him as he gave instructions for the housekeeping, as he saw his steward, and as he gave tasks to his secretary, with Lady Northingham as a duenna, leaving Justina and Kit alone, which was not altogether proper, and both young people remarked as much to each other. Nor did this condition seem to bother the others, as they found out later in the morning when the Duke took his betrothed for a walk in the garden, where they were, and they ran off and hid. This alarmed Caroline, who feared an intrigue, but Irvin dismissed them as two children playing together, and they overheard. The expression put indignation on Kettering's face but made Justina laugh softly, even if she waited until her sister and the Duke were out of earshot before she commented.

"Just children," she snorted. "That uncle of yours rises early (is astute)."

"I have a good mind to make him eat his words," growled the Viscount.

"I would not like that," she replied, "even making-believe."

Lord Kettering made a face, but when she narrowed her eyes at him, straightened up, pretending to look content.

"Sing, 'O be easy,' and grumble in your gizzard (be secretly annoyed)?" she snorted.

"Justina, have you ever been kissed by a man, and not just a peck on the cheek either?" he asked suddenly.

"I have, once," she owned, "and don't even think about it."

"What I am thinking is, what was he like?" he cackled.

"I don't know," she growled.

"Hey-hey! He kissed you full, and you don't know what he was like?"

"It was a masked ball, folk were in a park and it was dark," she averred with a frown.

"Was it with your connivance or a stolen kiss?" he guessed.

"Very much in the nature of Grand Larceny," she asserted, "to hang for."

"You are not flattered?" he asked, amused.

"That is how they kiss the pretty housemaid on the stairs," she riposted angrily.

"It is the way of men," he sang. "That must ha' been a prettyish strong attraction he had towards you."

"I never had time to tell him where to shove that prettyish strong attraction," she shot.

“Don’t be bitter; I know a hundred females who dream of such romantic mystery.”

“That’s not romantic, ’tis lustful, and degrading.”

“You are no less crude,” he reproached, “we are well past Sir Robert Walpole’s day: his language was so bad that Queen Caroline, who swore like a trooper, had once to correct him to mind his tongue before her daughters the princesses.”

“I work with horses and grooms, so I am no better,” she stated. “Now you know.”

Kettering bowed his head and together they went in to be called to dine, but he still grumbled about being compared to a pair of children when he was with her, and was dull during the meal, while she was prudently neutral, notwithstanding Caroline’s alarmed and questioning looks levelled at her throughout the repast. These warned her to eschew her own sister and the Countess that afternoon, for Irvin vanished with his steward on horseback and Duke as he was, with an army of folk to do his bidding, as country folk said, there was no manure better than the master’s foot, while he was too bad ton to hold grand parties for the bloodsuckers of society to enjoy themselves at the endless expense of his boundless fortune and hospitality. She thought this a good thing and wondered if she should recommend it to Caroline later in the day – but in private. When the Duke reappeared he gave his nephew a fencing lesson, upon which the ladies spectated, even if it was extenuating for Caroline, to watch strange gentlemen undressed down to their shirts, which kept her face in a constant state of flush, but Justina, who was clad like that for the most of the time when at home at Hearne, seemed brazenly not to notice this flaw or care about the nicety. Then the gentlemen separated respectively to remove the effects of summer and strenuous activity from their bodies, and Justina adjourned to the library. Ever since she had seen the younger female dressed in breeches, Lady Northingham had barely addressed a word or her, and as Justina could only just tolerate her presence, the one no longer invited the other to join in as she talked to Caroline of life at Irvin, and the other did not need even a hint to stay away anymore. So they parted and all Justina could think of regarding the chatter of the two ladies was that one should speak of soon leaving. The coolness of the library with its peaceful atmosphere drew the younger sister under its spell and she needed no company, but she did make a bad beginning, even if there were thousands of titles to chuse from, with gold blocking on the spines and a feather brush passing over them every day, to prevent mustiness. From time to time she pulled down a tome to inspect it and encountered variety in the form of Welwod’s ‘Sea Laws’ to Marianna’s monumental history of Spain, and versions of Aquinas’s misleading treatises whereto the Romish church still clung – and this in six different languages, none of which interested her to peruse. Yet an English translation of the ugly and beautiful, the foul and specific, trenchant, bitter and acrid, thoroughly improper but extremely moral Satires of Juvenal interested her as she stumbled on the tome by accident, and paused to look over them, surprised at what Latin authors, which she had long been led to believe were ever respected, really wrote.

There she was, on the library steps, before the open doors, panelled with bevelled glass, of a walnut book case, whereof the prominence of its break-front was supported by a fluted column with Ionian capitals, when the smell of soft leather became admixed with that of linden soap and honey-suckle water. Pressing her lips tightly together, she was aware that she had been joined by another presence whose approach was as light as a cat, in spite of leather shoe soles and heels instead of pussy-cat paw-pads, and the creaking of floorboards

which would have begun complaining under the weight of a big man rather than a small feline. Slowly she raised her head, but not completely, so that she was peering through her dark eyelashes at him, as he paused near her. A pale hand with elegant movements, issuing from a fall of Dresden lace, inside the broad, black, silk cuff, turned back over a coat sleeve and held down with diamond studded buttons in button holes edged with a splash of floral embroidery, was extended towards her and gently took the tome from her hands. That was when she glanced fully up, to behold the creature she sought many times to evade, standing at her side and frowning with disapprobation as he read the words and name on the spine, before shutting the book with a snap and staring with stern disapproval into her face, which was still, at least, at a safe distance.

"I take it that you don't really read?" he declaimed icily, restoring the little volume to its place upon the shelf, where it had left a small gap, that air was encouraging its neighbours to encroach upon.

"You make me sound like an illiterate, sir," she objected, coldly offended.

"Only illiterates gloat over scabrous passages in great authors," he snorted.

"I was not gloating," she denied, through her teeth.

"And of course it was not a scabrous passage," he mocked.

"It was not scabrous, it was downright dirty. Women of rank were relieving their bladders at the feet of statues of deities as they came home from a drinking bout," she rejoined bluntly.

"Don't be vulgar," he snapped.

"I did not write that account of such an event," she riposted.

"You quote it out of context which is unforgivable, unintelligent and not very literary," he derided. "That is the way of critics of literature, and what they are is very aptly summed up in the 'Essay on Criticism' by Mr. Pope, which I doubt you have ever read."

"Your grace doubts correctly," she stated.

The Duke eyed her, studying her face with a glow of surprise in his eyes.

"In that case, the lacuna in your education needs to be put right," he pronounced. "I will chuse you some books or passages and you may read them."

"Very well," she accepted, whereupon he paused, and stared suspiciously at her. "Is there something amiss?" she wondered.

"No, but I expected you to refuse," he owned.

"By the erroneous impression that I would do the opposite of everything that your grace recommended?" she postulated.

"So you will study, in spite of yourself?"

"No, sir, I will study in spite of you, for it was you who expected a refusal, even if I am curious as to why you had come to that foregone conclusion."

"Folk refuse often out of spite itself, or to be contrary,"

"I am neither spiteful nor the latter," she refuted primly, "but perhaps you keep company that is and expect everyone else so to be. On the other hand, when folk refuse to do a thing, it is not out of spite or just for the sake of it. One should not be another's too humble servant, and sometimes, a refusal is to protect the self."

"Vinnie tells me that you want to go home, and she has long had the impression that you merely go through the motions, for you would rather be elsewhere," he revealed, "and I

thought that you would like this place for to rest in. You have even written to your brother, so much do you miss the air of the stable yard.”

“I wrote to him to warn Devenish to keep my father from entertaining any offers from your good friend Chatteris for either Honoria or me, and to take charge of his debts if such offers endanger your offer for Caroline,” she replied. “I was exceedingly troubled by such a move on his part, and thus sent off an express to my home to keep the situation at its status quo. I said that my father would endanger everything if he chose to be headstrong about this and insist that he knew what he was doing, and that we were ill-advised to wed this Earl for we would end up floating in his fishpond. I described what I knew of the sad end whereto the last Countess came, and as I was sure that my father would open and read Julius’s letter before poor Julius was even allowed to look at it, I said that I hoped he thought better of his own daughters, even if we must wed to save being a liability at home, than to force us into a marriage with a man we had reason to fear, and who could sow discord in the whole family, especially now that the Duke of Irvin is to join it.”

The said Duke, while listening, was taking books out of another bookcase and when she stopped speaking, he turned briefly to her, his air severe.

“That was not unintelligent,” ceded he.

“I am not very well-educated. I have horse-sense,” she replied. “There was not much time spent on my schooling. I just go into the library at home and read whatever there is.”

The Duke put a small pile of books on the table.

“There,” he announced, as if in conclusion. “You may commence wi’ those.”

Justina promptly jumped down from her place on the step-ladder, picked them up, thanked him and marched off to the doors, uttering her excuses.

“Are you not going to see what they are?” he demanded, with an urgency in his voice that betrayed his wish to stall her.

“I could not care a bean: as I know little compared to your grace, I am bound to presume that what you have chosen is adequate for my ignorant and whatever-else-you-called-me state,” she answered with studied dullness. “If I find that your grace has nevertheless underestimated my capacity or the extent of my nescience, I will inform my sister and she will surely pray you to change your choice.”

While speaking she was making on rapid steps for the door.

“Wait,” he called, so she halted in her tracks, but honoured him by turning to face him, for to listen with her back in his visage was rude.

“What is this method of yours, madam?” he asked. “If you are not disregarding my presence, you either freeze or flee when you are in it.”

Justina was sure that he wanted her to refer to the Ranelagh kiss.

“It is all part of the tradition that accompanies the family-in-law,” she said. “A person weds, but his or her relations are not supposed to like the spouse or the family he or she brings in tow. Already your older sister is weary of me, and, altho she was instrumental in finding Caroline for your grace, your younger sister has acted towards me in a manner most shabby, which I cannot complain of for I will offend the money, namely, you. Lest these strictures provoke me not to like your grace in turn, despite the fact that you are our benefactor, and that Carrie figuratively gets a lumping pennyworth (Lit. marry a fat woman) in you, I deem it wise to morrice (decamp) before things turn truly bad.”

His grace was unused to such directness of speech and was taken aback.

"That is nonsense," he refuted. "It is not a tradition for married families to dislike each other or their members to do likewise –,"

"You think us more squeak than wool (more shew than substance) and that my father keeps a swannery (all one's geese are swans), for in effect, he brought his nine-pence to nothing, and as for married families, one doesn't even have to go that far, for just take married people: my parents dislike each other intensely, even if my mother is afraid of my father. They still managed to make marriage music (have babies), and –,"

"Wives are different," he countered. "Lady Caroline may loathe me if she wishes, but you may not."

"That sounds perilously close to an order –,"

"It *is* an order," he asserted, his countenance quiet but his eyes flashing.

"What is the penalty for disobedience?" she inquired.

"There will be none," he decreed.

"So your grace really means to turn and wind the penny (make much of one's money)?" she derided.

"Why did you really write to defend your family from Chatteris? That he should approach them directly is something even I did not think of, for I presumed that your father would know better than to entertain him," he probed.

"Firstly, my family knows nothing about your affairs with Chatteris, and even if they did, my father is capable of running with both hare and hounds, or thinking that he can. He is too clever, he knows it all, he is a man," she said.

"In doing this, you are actually protecting me," noted he.

"That is an incidental result of my warning, but I hope it is treated as such and does not provoke my father to do the contrary, because he knows best and no-one tells him what to do," she replied. "Pray excuse me, now," she added, and pivoting about, departed, leaving the doors ajar for the duty footman to close after her.

Actually Justina was feeling as if she had been treated like a silly adolescent, too troublesome to be really pursued, and thus deserving of little more than a shew of disdain. In any case his order was ridiculous, and his annoyance too stark to let her labour under further misapprehensions that he intended to pursue her now, for at closer quarters, he doubtless found her rather tiresome. All the same, she did not toss her books aside and ignore them just because he had chosen them on the assumption that she was haphazardly schooled; instead, she laid them on her bed and decided on the order in which she should read them, which was in fact a question she should have put to him, but she would not approach him if she could help it. However, among them was a tome by the choleric Dr. Smollett, named 'The Adventures of Roderick Random', and she was aware that many folk believed the quasi-hero to be none other than Henry Fielding the Magistrate, but it was also a book she knew, so while all were dressing for supper that evening, she replaced it in the library herself, even if she wanted to tell Carrie of how the latter's husband-to-be treated his sisters-in-law, but did not, for it was an immoral thing to cause contention. However, when she stole back to her rooms, she found Caroline therein, awaiting her, to admonish, reprimand, advise, scold, beg discretion, lecture and even weep: the idea that she was playing the fool with Lord Kettering had made Carrie very miserable, and she was here to condemn such wickedness and demand

an explanation for it, while also discovering for how long this sort of thing had been going on and what the two of them really did those mornings when they were supposed to be playing with swords and Irvin, indeed, Irvin, had found her dressed like an actress in the ‘comic breeches’ part. Caroline’s words and treatment of her, thô well meant, stung and wounded her deeply, but she managed to remain doggedly silent, and instead of inventing a tarradiddle either to allay suspicions she knew would not fade, or to exaggerate and shock her sister with nonsense that never happened, but which she was more likely to believe, for such was human nature. So Caroline pestered her, but she insistently remained silent, albeit more galled and vexed when the other owned she was here in good faith to caution her inexperienced, young sibling even thô the Duke had counselled her to leave ‘the girl’ alone. Caroline had the future all foreseen: Kit would break her heart, and not wed her despite that, and even if both his father and his uncle forced him to do so there would be a terrible scandal. Only then did Justina answer and invited her sibling to go ask Kit himself, which was the more difficult of two evils, and assured the other that there was nothing between him and herself, for the simple reason that she did not really like Irvin’s family and wanted as little as possible to do with them.

“Instead of chountering at me, would it not be wiser if you were to persuade Irvin to let us leave? In all honesty, I imagine that it will be flinging the helve after the hatchet (take another useless step) to go to London, so let us return to Hearne,” recommended the younger sister, and younger sisters generally wanted to go abroad to have fun, not go back home to drudgery and horrible parents, whereat Caroline was rendered speechless with surprise.

Those words made her flounce out of the room, and Justina was left imagining that, after her sister’s wedding was over, she would not be glad to see her young sister in Town if ever the latter came to stay with Aunt Lizzie or if Caroline herself came back to Hearne as a guest, or that if Justina were invited to stay at Irvin by the Duke and Duchess, so she would plead some lame and flimsy excuse, for there were bound to be others there from this family and all they did was lead to discomfiture if not trouble. She was angry with herself for responding to friendly overtures from Kit, and even for putting on breeches in his presence, but she was also angry with her sister, which made her wretched and rather spoilt her evening. Her silence was thunderous, and Lady Northingham, who had been sedulously ignoring her since the moment of having seen her dressed man-fashion, took it into her head to mean well, and like all who did that, performed more harm than good, incessantly asking her and her sister whether there was anything wrong, until Irvin mercifully intervened and gently told the Countess to cease pestering ‘the child’, itself not a flattering allusion. Later, over tea, Kit endeavoured to discover the reason for Justina’s bad mood, or rather, her sad one.

“I am in trouble about you, so the longer the distance between us, the better,” she confessed, hoping to ward him off.

“Why? What has happened?” he persisted.

“Kit Kettering, you are as dense as a nine-inch plank. At times like these, one usually abandons the game,” she recommended.

Finally and belatedly he understood, and felt rather sorry about everything, but there was no making peace with Justina, just withdrawing from her and leaving her alone. Not that he knew what was going on enough to propose a remedy or an alternative, but wisely, he kept away, and behaved correctly when there was music after supper, for that evening, the only

words that fell from Justina's mouth were sung, some of them in duets with Irvin, while Caroline was called on to play the clavichord or the harpsichord – in the vastest of the vast drawing rooms, there were both. One thing was clear to all: Justina was very glad to retire to her room when Lady Northingham suggested that the day was very probably over for them all. Yet as she went to her apartment, Justina noticed that Caroline was following her, and halted, turning to confront her.

“Justina,” whined the older sister, “I have spoilt your evening; I only meant well by you, you know. You cannot still be angry with a dear and loving sister?”

“I am more angry than ever I would like to say, and I do not wish to hear another word from your self-indulgent misinformed lips upon this subject again,” stated Justina calmly.

“That is cruel and harsh: my dear, we must clear the air between us,” proposed Caroline reasonable. “Let me come and we may have a coze about it, otherwise I shall be severely wounded –,”

“Well, I already am, and so let this be an end to the whole,” concluded Justina, “good night, Caroline.”

Leaving her sister miserably in the corridor, Justina hastened away to her rooms, and shut herself in. Neither were aware that, through a small gap in the doors of his lodging, the Duke of Irvin was watching and listening. Caroline had made the error of accosting her sister just outside them.

FOURTEEN

Justina learned a lesson from this unfortunate situation, to wit, that she was never going to be able to confide in her sister about Irvin's misconduct at Ranelagh Gardens, or that, even, he had someone tucked away named Lady Deborah Herriard who was related by marriage to his own sister. If Caroline was putting gross interpretations upon her association with the giddy and silly Kit, who if Julius's age, was more of a younger brother nevertheless, but a nuisance with it, and not to her taste, there was going to be no useful result in telling her anything. Meanwhile Justina thought to avenge herself for this by making Caroline a little miserable, for there was nothing like guilt and remorse to cure self-righteousness and well-meaning damage, but there too, she had discovered something new: all her life she had known Caroline but never seen such a propensity in her as she had now, but there had been no occasion for it hitherto, and she was disappointed in this trait. So she shunned her sister as much as possible and repulsed all overtures of friendship in the latter, while evading the opportunity of conversation wherein Caroline was concerned, which meant that when in a family group she was rather taciturn, like an adjunct who was out of place, which was how she was beginning to feel and it very swiftly weighed on the nerves of everyone. An entire day of this went by, but it was not very difficult for Justina, who was not particularly well-disposed towards the Northinghams and knew better than to encourage Irvin, so adding Caroline to this rogues' gallery for the present was no effort. Caroline did not respond with wrath or ill-will; on the contrary, her sister's dullness embarrassed her before the others, but it was irreproachable, for no-one could fault the solemn, even if they did not know that Justina was laughing on the other side of her face at their confusion. All the same she discerned that Irvin was unaffected, and even grew quizzical at her cold restraint. Even so, on the morrow, she determined to approach Caroline – whereupon Caroline would be full of anticipatory relief – only to ask if she had told Irvin that it was high time they went home.

Even so, on the morrow, matters did not commence in Caroline's private chamber but on the way to the stables, for a good ride and the welcome company of friend Jezebel. However when she arrived in the stableyard, there was Smirking Sam, otherwise named Puck, standing tall and proud, with Irvin bestriding him, also tall and proud, whereupon she paused abruptly and was roundly and soundly smirked at by horse and rider. The latter doffed his tricorne and bowed in the saddle, the former snorted; in reply Justina bobbed a curtsy and muttered a greeting.

"Your la'ship has just missed a comic event," the Duke announced merrily. "I took the liberty of trying out your horse, the one Sir Robert Orre coveted," he owned, and sure enough, the black mare was out of her box, her bridle on but her saddle being changed. "As soon as I took up her gob string (bridle), she started off by prancing sidewise in all directions. How does a little chit control this animal, we all asked ourselves, for all my stable hands assured me that she was as meek as an Essex lion (sheep). I am not unlucky with horses: they seem to tolerate me and not play the Jack, but she, blood and 'ouns! Had I not leaped for it, she's have had me launched like a stone from a catapult."

Justina deemed that Jezebel would probably have been just as difficult had Caroline tried to ride her, for she was sure that the horse had the memory of something bad in her friend and mistress's head towards certain folk.

"She has not been exercised," said Irvin, as Justina swept unassisted into the saddle.

"It is of no consequence," she answered him.

"You exercise horses, do not you?" he understood, whereat some of the heads on his men turned in mild surprise, but then she rode the mare directly from the stables before anyone had exercised anybody. "I pray you, come with me eastward a spit and a stride towards the great hanger," he invited, "then do as you please. I have a matter to see to, but I'd be glad o' your company for a part o' the way."

Justina was in his stables and on his land and staying in his house. Justina could not very well refuse and besides, she was supposed to be going out for amusement. So off they went together, whereupon he turned to her, for she chose to lag behind half a length, and not be his companion as such.

"Do you prefer to ride this early?" he asked.

"Sometimes," she mumbled.

"Every morning is more often than sometimes," he corrected, eyeing her, "except when you were duelling with Kit."

Justina did not reply; the Duke of Irvin's servants were evidently his spies, so she resolved not to comment on any aspect of her practices lest he was better informed about her than she was about herself.

"Your sister seemed strangely unnerved and concerned about you yestereven," he recommenced, after a while of weighty silence. "Sisterly tiff, or major disagreement?"

"I hardly know," she shrugged.

"Yet you were mightily monstrosly vexed with her, so I wonder why, for you always seemed so harmoniously in accord with each other."

"I do not respond well to being lectured, especially when it is all a misunderstanding and three blue beans and a blue bladder," she said, chusing her words with care so as not to prejudice the marriage, "but I am the only the silly little sister, so she may speak as she believes, howsoever erroneous. It would be different with you: few would dare."

"My dear, if she lectured me for something she thought I had done wrong, she'd probably be right," he half-joked. "Yet as you said, you are the younger sister, and no matter how many eye teeth you have cut, your elders will always deem it incumbent upon themselves to caution you. Kit is a giddy fellow and certainly giddier than are you; that is why his father has put him to work and will not allow him into the world of the Quality until he has learned to mind his eye. Did your sister fancy that you both were turtle doves?"

"In my family, we don't believe in turtle doves," she intoned, "and as far as all aspects of the word fancy go, there is none on my part."

"Not that I doubt your excellent judgment, but he is not as mature as are you. He gets that from his mother: my dear sister Vinnie can be such a dolt," he commented. "Nor mean I to pry into the affairs of any heart, but he is my nephew and I know the length of his foot, but it is true that when one thinks one knows a person well, one suddenly can find that one does not know them at all. God knows what maggot has possessed him even if none has possessed you, and perhaps that was what your sister was fretful of, even if she put the saddle on the wrong horse."

Justina was tempted to laugh, but the effort of controlling this resulted in a tortuous, twisted, suppressed smile, and that was all she had for him, because she could not answer for Kit, even to call him tomfool. What he saw was compleat indifference and derision,

whereupon he chuckled.

“Even better,” he nodded, “I can see that you need no cautioning. You are a shrewd young miss, who knows an ace or two more than the Devil.”

“I’d not take the praise that far,” she stalled, for this, too, could have been a trick to make her cocksure and thus careless where he was concerned.

“That is a very surprising answer,” he stated.

“I was wondering that your grace, of all folk, should think me to be shrewd,” she said.

“I have good reason to support my conclusions,” he declared. “My very own stable hands tell me that you have very good observation when it comes to the state in which a horse may be, and how much you can discover from it.”

Justina guessed that his men had told him how she had found that Doubloon had been ridden hard after she had left and brought back before she returned. All she did was cast him a brief, sidelong glance, so he went on.

“By the bye, you have only been riding the horse which you brought,” he said. What is amiss with the others? As you ride a man’s horse, it cannot be on grounds that they are too tall: Doubloon, for example, or Bouncer, the bay.”

That was to confirm the hint about the fact that she had verified Doubloon’s condition and that the men had duly reported it.

“I apprehend that your grace forbids others but the grooms to ride your horses.”

“Who told you that?”

“Your nephew. He should know.”

“I also know that the moment he could, he rode my golden stallion. However, he arrived after you did, but you only rode the gold one once and after that never again. You objected to that horse being saddled for you, but when in London, I had the impression that you were interested in him.”

“I was and am, but I never expected that you would send him here from Town for me to ride when you were aware that I had my own mount,” she responded directly.

“Correct me if I am wrong,” he invited with acrimony, “but did the fact of his being sent for your use constitute an offence to your sense of honour?”

“There was never offence, but alarm.”

“Alarm?” he cried, astonished.

“That my sister be affronted or upset, for you made no especial provision for her, and instead, for a third party.”

“She rode my horses, did she not? Was it not adequate that she had a choice?”

“You sent no special favourite of yours for her.”

“How should she have had that idea?”

“Don’t be too clever,” she retorted.

“This is a clear case of ‘much ado about nothing’. I invited her here, and you were but in her wake. Surely an invitation to her was of more value than a horse for you,” he scoffed.

“O, I should have thought of that,” she answered, with emphatic sarcasm.

Not that he was content that she believed him, for he looked irked.

“Now that you are better informed, will you ride my horse?” persisted he.

“That poor horse! He must be offended to death, from what he can understand.”

“I shall be offended if you do not.”

“What I do is not important enough for you or anyone to be offended at.”

“I did send him for you,” he reminded sweetly. “Don’t refuse, I pray.”

“What if I respectfully desist?” she propounded.

“Do you respectfully desist as a matter of prestige,” shot he disdainfully, “because you have desisted before and so intend, for no other reason, to desist now?”

“You are accusing me of striking attitudes,” she protested, shewing annoyance.

“Females often do,” he stated. “Their favourite is to seem to reject what they most want, in order to tend a challenge, but if that is done too often, they may find that there is no one left to come back and try again. If you always repulse those who try to tend to you the hand of friendship, they will one day tire of it.”

“Friendship? Is that what it is, indeed?” she mocked.

“You are not always very convivial with Kit, for example,” he proposed.

“Did you not just talk to me of how giddy was Kit, and turtle doves?” she rejoined.

“Besides, when we first met, he used upon me language that conveyed his belief I was a harlot, and even if it was a mistake, I deemed him too hasty to condemn, just because a person is a female, which I am not sure how to forgive if I must at all. Has he told you of it?”

“Every word,” he confirmed, and her face took on a heated blush as well as an angry look brought about by the recollection, which he observed pensively for there was a hint that she felt insulted to be mistaken as a woman who associated intimately with him, and who thus, by Kit’s reckoning, had to be a harlot for it.

“Are you going further in this direction?” she asked all at once.

“Do I gather that you’d fain be rid of me?”

“I merely remind that the ways may soon part us, sir,” she professed with an air of innocence, “lest we have overshot them, for your grace’s enthusiastic devotion to the task of counselling one as obviously as doltish as myself, even if you affect that I am shrewd, may have brought about this mishap, and we are beyond the spit and the stride that you mentioned when we set off.”

“O, the spit and the stride will end soon,” he assured, and she just looked at him.

“They have finally finished unpacking my trunks, and at last have unearthed a little present I brought back for Lady Caroline,” he said. “Today I will give it to her.”

“I suspect she will be very pleased,” she answered.

“What, no inquiry if there is a *cadeau* for you?” he teased.

“There could be one for your sister and your nephew, but what have I to do with any of that?” she rejected.

“Well, there is, and there is also a feeling on my part that you are determined not to belong to my family,” he rasped. “I am telling you now, so that you may grimace or be vexed, and when it is presented you, you may be sufficiently composed to shew the usual appreciation that one is condemned to exhibit when receiving a gift.”

“Why make a gift with such ill will unless there is an underlying wish to make one ashamed of oneself?” she even smiled.

“Did I succeed?” he asked, with a haughty look.

“Not really, aside of which, if that is the reason for your making a gift, why make one in the first place?” she wondered.

His grace was rather irked by this cheerful and brazen ingratitude.

“You are right: perhaps I should refrain from making you a gift, for it could offend and upset your sister,” he agreed with a sneer, and with that as a sour valediction, wheeled his horse off behind her to set forth to her right.

“Caroline is such an easy excuse,” she hailed. “Wives always are, for husbands!” she whooped in his back, and as he cringed with annoyance, he obviously heard.

It was at breakfast that they met again, when his grace was pleased to disclose that he had invited Justina to ride with him for part of his excursion, adding jocosely that they were going to make a perfect pair of siblings, for all they had done was quarrel. Lady Northingham refused to believe him and dismissed the tale with a peal of mirth, but her son gave his uncle credence and Caroline was alarmed for thereafter she watched Justina all too carefully and was ignored for her pains, which meant that the younger of the sisters knew of the surveillance she was under. As for Justina herself, she neither confirmed nor countered what the Duke alleged and wore what was becoming increasingly annoying to her sister, her hostess and even Kit, namely, a totally bland expression on her face, which shewed and betrayed nothing. The Duke looked at it with a tacit admiration: it took a score of years to breed that on the visages of Quality folk and even then they could not hold it indefinitely, as Justina could hold hers, even if she was not a quiet and mild person. As before she said very little, which was becoming quite a game, for her sister tried in vain to involve her in conversation and the Countess endeavoured to chat to her, but Justina was most unforgiving to the Duke’s sister for earlier affectations and sometimes appeared not even to know that the latter was speaking to her. In fact she wore out Caroline so thoroughly that after breakfast the latter entreated her to cease her hostility to one who only meant well, but Justina was only seventeen years old and enjoying herself in the world of adults whose age demanded a shew of respect towards them, even her own sister.

It was Irvin who prevented his betrothed from making matters worse by seeking her out where she was in the library, and presented her with a thing he had brought back for her from Paris, in the shape of a scarf, exquisitely fashioned by the lace-makers of Chantilly, and must have cost a tidy sum, the notion of which brought heightened colour to her cheeks. Justina, watching, noticed that he cast a few stealthy glances in her direction, but failed to be provoked, wearing her mask, which annoyed and palled, and that itself was so very droll to her. When Caroline invited her praise of the item she duly obliged with alacrity but directed her approval towards his good taste, with no hint of friendly association with her sister, so the latter achieved nothing. Before he led her out, Caroline asked him if he had brought anything back at least for his family, but he answered that only she had been on his mind in this respect, and Justina knew not what to believe, for he might have told her a foolish lie about a present for her only to pique her into rejecting it, but then it was odd that he had come with offerings for guests and not relatives. Caroline went to shew the scarf to Vinnie, who made a great fuss of it and her brother’s good taste; she overheard all as she sat in the library reading Mr. Dryden’s ‘Absalom and Achitophel’. However, it turned out that he was come home with objects for them all, as she found out when Kit wandered in, impervious to the fact that the ignorant needed peace in which to study, for Justina mentioned Caroline’s scarf and asked glibly if the uncle had a *cadeau* for his nephew, only to be shewn a most stylish citrine swivel fob, and told that his mother had two sticks of her favourite perfume and handkerchieves in her favourite lace. Lou had a parasol but that would have to wait until he saw her next.

“He truly is an odd fish,” he disclosed. “He came to us all hugger-mugger, and told us not to talk of it to the Woodville sisters, as if it were a great secret, and now we see that he had one for his intended after all. In the circumstances I would ha’ thought that you’d be content to be omitted than be embarrassed by some frippery gewgaw.”

“In fact I am,” said Justina, “and I am not just saying it to save face, but why did he not just give them all out together, when we were at breakfast? Did he fear that I would wax vapourish at being omitted? I have no place here, I have mentioned it time and time again. Besides he is out of all patience with me, so what better retaliation than to dole out his gifts and leave me with nothing?”

For all that, she still did not know if Irvin had really brought her home a gift, or was just testing her. The matter was not important, so she gave it no further thought, but the subject was indirectly discussed at dinner when the Duke spoke of his encounter with His Majesty’s Customs and Excise Services at Dover, even thô his papers and an inventory of all his purchases with their prices indicated in gold Louis and English Pounds Sterling was compiled and in order. As it was their right and he was a man of birth and power whom they could otherwise not approach if out of their uniforms, it pleased them to go through all his belongings and those of his servants with the utmost care, turning the contents of every bandbox, trunk, and carpet bag upon the wharf without a care as to cleanliness and quality, but he was not alone, for they meted out this treatment to a Countess whom he scarcely knew and when she reproached them, grew all the worse with her, detaining her an entire day and pleasing themselves with throwing about her effects, so that it was wiser to stand in silence and let them paw their ignoble way through one’s things. He did not even inquire of them what they were looking for, even if they kept stating that they were in quest of excisable goods or contraband, and they affected an interest in his swords, for being weapons, but as every gentleman wore a hangar, and he was an Englishman coming home, it was not really easy to accuse him of trafficking in weaponry, while he neither smoked a pipe nor took snuff, so there was no tobacco upon him, and the cellaret under the seat of his various carriages had enough drink for a journey rather than cases and cases of imported and thus dutiable goods. Far from being pleased that he was not breaking any laws, the customs inspectors grew more and more savage in their search, for they gained a bonus on their salaries if they caught anyone, and thus began to hint that a gratuity or two would probably release him, so he told them that he would raise the subject in Parliament to make it legal, and he already had their names – whereupon, with ill-grace, they bundled him off, with orders to clear his garbage from the wharf in half-an-hour.

Thus, when he arrived here, his baggage was in compleat disorder, and took some unpacking and tidying out. The Countess was horrified, but then this was the same old story and they had all faced it before, except that as England was on the threshold of a European war with France, one brewed in the Indian sub-continent, and there being troubles in the Americas, the services at the ports servicing traffic to and from France were worse and probably enjoying themselves humiliating the great or the rich. The tale he told was meant to occupy them, rather than entertain, and his sister and nephew interposed aptly, while Lady Caroline deemed it her duty now and again to say something sympathetic, but her younger sister sat and listened with evident interest, and nothing more than a cynical but small smile on her face. As was usual during any conversation, even one monopolised by a person who

had something special to recount, it was customary to turn and look at those who interposed, so no-one had to notice Justina, except that occasionally she found the Duke studying her, even as he was speaking, and on those occasions she lowered her gaze, sometimes in humility, at others in humiliation, depending on the nature of his stare. He noticed her silence, but his sister and nephew did not, while *her* sister was troubled about it and tried several times to catch her eye but to no avail. It was only after the meal that she actually caught up with the younger female herself, and that too when they retired to change in order to go out on horseback, for the Duke wished to see his harvesters at work.

Of course Justina answered in the affirmative to Caroline's call, but when the latter entered she was given a suspicious look and greeted with a question.

"Now what have I done wrong?"

"Justina, why were you so silent at dinner?" wondered her sister.

"I had nothing to say and the Duke spoke of matters about which I know nothing for I have scarcely crossed the county borders of our countries, let alone gone forth from this kingdom," came the simple answer.

"Why are you so unfriendly? All morning you hid yourself in the library –,"

"Your intended thinks me an unscholared female version of a lout and has given me some books of his choice to read, which are not bad at all, and I sit there with them for it is a public room and less retiring on my part in my host's house than if I were to hide in my lodgings," answered Justina. "Besides I have talked to him enough today and that may do."

"When was that?"

"I went riding before breakfast, as always, and so did he, but not with me; he and I made way together a few furlongs and separated. Have you asked him to let us go soon?"

"Er – no – er – how was your ride?"

"It was all one to me, but I think he was ill-pleased with me at the end of it."

"Ohh, Justina, never say you and he really quarrelled?" exclaimed Caroline, horrified. "I knew it! There was something sharp in his eyes whenever he looked your way, and you would not return his gaze – which is correct and maidenly of course, but little did I guess that you and he had a true dispute; I thought he was funning at your expense. Justina, you must not quarrel with your host!"

"Why else, think you, that I hid in the library?" retaliated Justina.

"This gets worse and worse," lamented Caroline.

"You got it into your head that Kit and I were on the way to sharing some foolish infatuation, which was as true candle ate cat. So I cannot keep company with Kit, but to be honest, it is a relief. Vinnie cannot look at me since she saw me in breeches, and I cannot exactly encourage Irvin, can I? Besides he asks very impertinent questions and takes verbal liberties just because he is older and about to wed you, which I will not jeopardise, so I stay out of the way and obediently read what he orders, not so much to please him, but to keep the peace, yet even that is not good enough, for *you*. You have a bee in your bonnet about me, like mother, when she has some idea of her own what the truth is so she keeps nagging at one, until one says what she wants to hear. Do you recall how when I was little she would torture me until I said, 'Aye, I did it' even if I had not, and no-one said a word in my defence? Are you taking after her in this respect now? I know that we need to be on our best behaviour to impress Irvin that he has made a good choice but if my conduct suits you not, let the lack of it

at least satisfy? Me, I grow inordinately fatigued of the whole business, if you must know. So now we are all going out and I hope Kit keeps his distance, but I pray you, ask Irvin if we may go home soon.”

“There is a heartless side to you,” condemned Caroline.

“One needs that to survive at Great Hearne Castle,” said Justina.

“But we are not there.”

“We should be and I trust you will arrange it. Welladay that I fell ill! For some reason it cut our stay in London short, and we still would be there instead of accepting unwanted invitations from Irvin, for you could have gone with your dear sister-in-law Vinnie and I could have stayed behind in London, instead of pretending to convalesce from an illness that is not even there.”

“That was not just ungrateful, it was nasty,” condemned Caroline.

“When do I ever receive permission to say things like that to my parents and siblings when they can say and do whatever they like to and about me?” challenged Justina. “Time and time again, you seek me out and there is always some admonition concerned. When will I ever hear anyone apologise for their mistakes or their unjustified condemnations, of the sort that you make, for example?”

“I? Apologise?” cried Caroline, in astonishment.

“O, I forgot; you are the prize of the family, who minds all her p’s and q’s and never has a reproach levelled at her for want of a reason: incapable of committing wrong, you know not how to apologise, but that is the price of perfection: a want of moral courage,” mocked and reproved Justina, whereupon Caroline’s countenance hardened.

“I shall forget that we ever had this conversation,” she announced grandly, “and I shall forgive you all that you have said to me.”

“I shall never forget this conversation, nor the condescension that followed it,” rejoined Justina, turning away, “and such memories hurt; which pain is all the better for being felt, for they are the best lesson of all.”

“Please yourself,” retorted Caroline and flounced out.

Oddly enough, Justina was not angry at all and changed into her riding habit, unassisted by any servant for she had omitted to call one, and in anywise, at home, there were so few of them that they were devoted to dressing her mother and two older sisters while also taking care of Selina, so she was used to making her own toilette, back-laces and everything. When they went out, Caroline rode Doubloon and Justina had her own horse, for that was how the Duke had ordered matters. As they set off, Kit approached her.

“I asked Irvin if he would request you on my behalf to let me ride her,” he owned, pointing at Jezebel. “He absolutely forbade it. He said that he had tried her out himself this morn and she nigh exploded, whatever that meant.”

“All directions,” said Justina. “An explosion goes off in all directions.”

“Did you see?”

“I wasn’t there.”

“He did not ask permission?”

“Nobody asks me permission,” she snorted, tart and terse.

At that the Viscount recognised that she was offended and would not take her for granted anymore, so he muttered an excuse and withdrew. Ahead Irvin rode with Caroline

and Kit followed with his mother, so that Justina was alone in the rear and aware that the company was so wrapped up in themselves and the affairs at hand that if she were to hang back and return to the house, they probably would not notice. So she did exactly that, at first with stealth, and when there was sufficient distance between her and them she turned about and galloped off. In fact it was a wise thing to do for the sun was rather too hot for what she had to wear, and a light lutestring silk and a bergère hat were much better for sitting under the trees in the park, where she was when they returned to the front of the house, but they did not see her. In fact, though she knew it not, Caroline went to seek her in the library, but she only reached it well after they were all in their apartments changing into something more suited to the weather. Thus when Caroline came down again, the duty footman told her that Lady Justina was in that particular enclave, so she leaned in.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Now, yes. I grew too hot,” said Justina, lowering her gaze to the pages of her book. So Caroline departed and that was that.

Before their hosts, the older sister made every effort to be as natural as possible in the presence of the younger, just as they had always been amicable, but the latter refrained from responding as much as possible, and soon, Lady Northingham began to wonder secretly to her brother if the two were on talking terms. In private Caroline had no opportunity to shew whether she was truly so amiable, for Justina sedulously shunned her, shut herself away, or simply forsook her usual haunts so as not to be predictably found. Thus, the day after, in the evening, as the younger Woodville sat on the window seat in the drawing room reading while everyone else participated in conversation and cards, Lavinia Northingham asked her what tale of adventure engrossed her so, and she replied very lamely that it was a book that the Duke, who thought her ill-educated, had ordered her to read, whereupon the Countess grew disconcerted, Caroline embarrassed, and the Duke irritated, but Kit burst out laughing, which only accentuated the respective responses of the others. The following day she seemed to vanish altogether except for meals, for Lavinia was going to shew her sister the library catalogues and she wished not to be present; she rode her own horse, she kept away from Kit, and she did not even join the ladies who came to watch him have a fencing lesson from his uncle; indeed, no-one knew where she was. It was only during the eventide after supper that convention dragged her into the drawing room, where the company added music to their entertainments, and that forced her to sing, but only in a duet, either with her sister or with Irvin, and if she sang well, she stayed out of their circle when she was not called on to perform – so she was ignored, or so she hoped, for she never looked up from her book until it was time to retire. To her surprise, Irvin turned to her as she rose from her seat.

“Lady Justina, did you ride this morning?” he inquired.

“Indeed, sir,” she acknowledged, but seemed too indifferent even to ask why.

“My stable hands had no recollection of your coming to the stable yard,” he said.

“There were a few about: the rest must have been at breakfast,” she answered, “for I tackled up and then untackled, and, as Jezebel was steaming, gave her a rub. No-one came to bother me, and I sought no help.”

“I do not pay stable hands so that house guests groom their own horses,” said he, annoyed, “but at least, you went out. That is good; I was hoping for some company when I ride tomorrow to see some of my tenants, for the early morn is a good time to catch them

before they leave for the fields or market, and no-one else here rises early.”

“Some would say that neither do I (to rise early: to know what’s what),” she muttered but he ignored that, and in anywise, Caroline interposed.

“Justina, you will ride out with his grace, will you not?” she prompted her sister, as if to urge her to make up for all her lapses.

Frankly, no, thought Justina, but answered otherwise.

“As long as I am in no-one’s way,” she stated blandly.

“You shall not be,” he assured, as if to coax her.

“I rose early when you were away to practise duello; may I join in?” pounced Kit.

“Two gentlemen will be better company for one another than some female who is an outsider,” said Justina, thinking her sister foolish for flinging her and Irvin together, even if it was supposed to be an opportunity for the rude young woman to redeem herself for having quarrelled with him.

“I rather suspect you will be instrumental in keeping the peace,” said Kit. “Lionel can be insufferable, you know.”

Justina did not reply, so the Duke nodded.

“Then it is settled,” he said, ushering the ladies ahead of him, and of them, Justina was the last one, owing to the rules of precedence, whereas of the gentlemen, he was the first, so he was immediately behind her on the stairs and for some of the way in the passage.

It was with great relief that she finally shut herself inside her rooms.

Justina did not sleep well that night: she did not look forward to going out with two gentleman, about one of whom Caroline had unfounded suspicions that were sure to be revived because he suddenly thrust himself in their way. She dreamed of the ride and that she somehow contrived to miss it and quarrelled with her sister, from which she awakened and did not go back easily to sleep, until suddenly she was seeing a pale dead woman floating in a fishpond, her skirts ballooning up with air in them all around her legs, and her stockinged ancles and daintily shod feet on display. This so harrowed her that she awakened in tears, finding that it was time for her to rise, and if she also had dreams like that, it was time to go home. For the present she had to make do: Caroline was being dutiful in her own interests and staying perhaps too long to learn about the house, while her sister mouldered in the wings and that was why the older sibling never asked the host if they should not return home to their parents. She made a toilette and went to the stables, where she found that Irvin was already there, and the horses ready.

“Will you not change your mind and ride Doubloon?” he offered.

“Poor Doubloon,” she said. “Soon Kit may come and then talk of it, and to tell him not to will give him ideas where none need be.”

The Duke said nothing, but watched her go to the golden stallion and fuss over his face, which he seemed to enjoy, but then Kit arrived at a run, whereupon his uncle ostentatiously consulted his watch. Justina profited from this distraction hurriedly to mount up otherwise she risked being lifted into the saddle by the Duke, and the three of them set off. This being a ride of business, there was little or no conversation, except during the ride back, for his grace turned to Justina.

“The fate of the female is to wed, either to provide for her taking sheet and napkin (lodging and board), or to hire her belly out to one who needs to make feet for children’s

shoes,” he said. “What would you do, Lady Justina, were you rich as Croesus and a spinster? Would you seek a spouse to breed from?”

The trouble with Irvin was that he asked leading questions and did not scruple about so doing before others.

“I would not wish to be rich owing to terra firma,” she said.

“Why? ’Tis the best investment. The rich merchant often buys land, and the very wealthy rely on it in which to put their money.”

“If I had land, I would be forced to marry. If I just had plenty of mint, I would live out my life as I pleased even if it were in the country, and leave my house as a refuge for indigent spinsters with my fortune to support them on condition that they occupied themselves in some deed to favour the poor, like making clothes for children or teaching or busying themselves with fine needlework that they could sell, like the nuns do in France, embroidering the Queen’s gowns and the King’s waistcotes.”

The Duke of Irvin bowed his head and did not reply. Her answer imposed a grim silence on him until the house and even Kit did not dare break it, even if he stole many a look at the darkly stern face of his uncle. It was only as they dismounted before the front of the building that he spoke, and that too, to Justina.

“If you were very flush, I’ll wager that you’d buy horses to please yourself,” said Kit with a grin.

“I would write to the Grand Turk to send me the best examples of the best bloodlines,” she beamed, “no matter what the cost, and they and I will live happily ever after.”

He might have laughed, but his uncle just took her by the elbow and shepherded her, willy-nilly, ahead of them into the house. In the hall, they parted, and met up again for breakfast, whereupon they were joined by their sisters, in two cases, both wanting to know if all went well.

“Famously,” assured the Duke, “but for one feature: my Lady Justina has a headful of bees about your being affronted if she rides my golden stallion. I beg that you put her aright on that score, for I would that she rode him, and he likes her.”

“My being affronted?” replicated Caroline, mortified by the extent of her sister’s often warped honesty.

“I understood that you could have been upset that I sent this horse to Irvin for her,” he persisted so sweetly that he made Kit cringe.

“Ohh, what n-nonsense,” faltered Caroline, resiling. “Justina, why on earth should you have told his grace such a –,”

“Saving your la’ship’s favour, I gained that impression by presumption and what my men described of Lady Justina’s behaviour,” interposed the Duke mellifluously. “So now, you will ride Doubloon, will you not?” he asked the younger sister.

“Poor, poor horse,” sighed she, “unwittingly much matter of a wooden platter.”

Her response was not pleasant, but it chastened Caroline and cautioned the Duke not to press the subject any further. Later, as she sat reading, Justina received a visit from Kit, who owned that he thought Lady Caroline to be a very stupid woman, and that she would ask for what she was going to receive from his uncle, but he was told to let the subject drop. Justina was beginning to feel rather sorry for her, for her odious spouse-to-be was a trifle too artful for her intellect and was misusing her due and necessary acquiescence, even if she

suspected his motives and made her suspicions overt and avowed – which he knew she would not dare. Of this Justina spoke to Kit, and asked him if he could chaperon her tomorrow morning when she went riding, for she was sure that Irvin would somehow contrive to be in the stables as she arrived, and it did occur to her not to go early at all, but then he would probably tell her to join him when it so pleased him. To her great relief, Kit agreed.

It seemed that even where there was a will the flesh was weak, for on the morrow, when she emerged from her room, she was dismayed to find the corridor empty and there was not a sound of movement from behind Kit's doors. Back into her chamber she retired but could not stay there for long, but as the passage was silent, she thought to open the doors of her apartment and lean out of them which she did.

"Good morrow, Lady Justina," greeted a soft, familiar voice. "I am ready. Are you?"

Stiffening with disappointment even as she egressed, she found Irvin shutting the doors to his chambers, whereat he paused.

"No Kit, I see," he commented, reading her mind which shewed in her unnerved mien.

"He may still be dressing," she stalled.

The Duke replied by going to Kit's doors and tapping gently upon them, but as there was no answer, he worked the latch as quietly as possible and leaned into the room beyond, which seemed to be dark. As if in invitation, he pushed a door further and turned to her, for her to come and see for herself. Furious with anger and at great pains to hide it, Justina hurried forward to the threshold: the chamber beyond had the curtains drawn but the open windows had parted them a little to let in some light, which shewed a human heap among bedclothes, for it was too warm also to draw bed-draperies.

"Do we awaken him and await him?" she suggested.

"Bah, he's worse than a female when it comes to dressing," he dissented, placing his hands on her shoulders to turn her about. "On our way out I'll send him his valet and he may try to catch us up."

"But –," she tarried, wondering why the uncle did not go in and rouse him.

"He'll catch us up," assured the Duke indulgently, shut the doors and took her by the elbow to lead her down the stairs.

Duly he told the butler, who let them out, to send up Lord Kettering's valet and dispatch the Viscount after them, whereafter they walked to the stables and Justina said not a word meanwhile, as his grace, elegant in his black riding dress, strode at her side, staring at her. It seemed that he had already sent ahead the appropriate order, for awaiting them in the stable yard was a large grey mare, Kit's bay, and Doubloon with a side-saddle upon his back – he seemed to know that it was for her for as they arrived he turned and looked her full in the face, patient as a child's pup when she mounted up, even if she was deft and swift, but perhaps rather rough in her haste to escape being manhandled by Irvin. Justina also reminded the Duke to tell the stablemaster properly to direct the Viscount in their wake, and then they set off. In silence again, they proceeded for some yards out of the stables but his grace was keen to break it, and looked at her with a strange frequency, as if to try and determine her mood, but all he could find was that she was inclined to be tense, nervous and taciturn.

"I notice that you and Lady Caroline have a disagreement going," he declared. "Is it habitual among you sisters or has cause therefor been given you here?"

"The latter, but to give the Devil his due, at home, I see little of Carrie, for I am in the

stables all day and there are many more of us, so our limited contacts are dispersed," she specified. "I may not know her as well as I should."

"What think you is the reason? The sort of atmosphere in this house?"

"That is a question your grace needs to put to Caroline."

"I will, but one cannot assess a situation without all the versions of it."

"She will probably tell you that she means well, and doubtless she does, while I am obdurate and unkind, which I have been. On the other hand, she may well say something I cannot predict, but whatever she says, she will be convinced that she is in the right."

"And you think that you are, conversely."

"Who is in the right has no relative importance. 'Tis how one behaves that concerns me. You may commit all a manner of sins and hurt many people under the conviction that you are right –,"

"She has hurt you," he understood.

"She gave me the impression that I had behaved like a doxy and that I had more hair than wit, but I was not hurt, not really. I was angered," she corrected, whereat he laughed.

"I daresay she did not mean what she said to be thus comprehended," he averred.

"You were not there, what can you know?" snorted Justina.

"I was going to say that she indubitably meant well, but you have already postulated that," he seemed to joke.

"To you this is just a great harvest of very little corn," she commented acidly.

"No, it is not. Your sister cautions you needlessly and deems nevertheless that you are awanting of care. You have withdrawn from her not just for some peace, but in rejection," he assessed, "of her, not just of her advice. Would you like me to talk to her?"

"You already did once, but I would be very grateful if your grace were just to – *let well alone*."

"If that is the case, why did you tell me all this?" he chuckled.

"Your grace asked. Besides I was in a scrape with Caroline for not being very responsive, or perhaps adversely responsive. I did not merit that my recent disclosures should warrant your grace's interference," rejected she stiffly.

"There are so many respectful vocatives that I am in awe of your capacity nevertheless to tell me to let 'em trundle," he marvelled. "Does it occur to you that we shall soon be brother and sister?"

"That will make no change to you, so why should it make any change to me?" she countered drily. "Caroline addresses you formally; do you take exception to it? Or would you rather that she called you a nauseous toad?"

His grace burst out laughing.

"I vow I cannot imagine those words in her mouth," he owned.

"Neither can I, for they are terms of endearment," she rasped, casting him a sharp, sidelong glance.

"You make her sound as if she were a sacrificial animal," he commented.

"She is, on the altar of her father's improvidence, and if he can arrange it, so will we be all," she replied.

"Well, that was the incarnation of restraint itself. I was half-expecting you to say that it was a sacrifice to wed a rake like me," he breathed.

"I can say that as well, if you like, sir," she offered with a hint of astringent humour.

"Well, like it as not, 'tis a sacrifice for me too," quoth he, and before she expelled mockeries from her mocking mouth in the mocking face she turned on him, added, "I would rather be a bawdy bachelor, than owe obligations to a lady and make her life wretched, yet I am bound to make provision for my wealth and the titles I bear, and a house for indigent but industrious spinsters will not do the thing instead."

"You have some respect for your heritage then," she remarked, "otherwise you would not protect it."

"I have little respect for the band of hang-in-chains who are my ancestors, but my heritage is another matter. What had Kit been telling you?"

"Why Kit?"

"He talks like an apothecary (talks nonsense) and that remark sounds like something he would have duly farted out," the Duke assessed. He is a worse gadabout (gossip) and mumblenews (carry-tale) than any female is traditionally said to be. It is out of respect for my heritage that I make the dual sacrifice of wedding, one of my liberty and the other of some unsuspecting female, who will not turn out to be a 'whither go ye?' or so I hope."

"I honestly cannot see Carrie turning into such a crooked rib (cross-grained wife). Aside o' that, a man's sacrifice is not as great as a woman's, for he does keep his liberty after a fashion, and all his rights, whereas a *feme sole*¹ who already has few enough rights under the law, and even fewer liberties, loses them all when her marriage oath makes her *feme covert*² and constrains her to obey you. Wealthy as she becomes, 'tis your wealth, and she has to put a curb on all activities that you do not authorise."

"Do you really know how much control a poor honey of a hug booby exercises on his homoney? There is an endless list of expressions to describe a husband as a cuckold: a horn merchant, at the sign of the Horn, member for Horncastle, capricornified, horn grower, go through the ox to bed, to death and ad nauseam."

"Caroline will not have horns to sell (loose wife), and there will have to be a tacit arrangement about your activities, so that she learns and suffers as little as possible."

"Granted that I advertise not my deeds," he answered overweeningly, "but she will need to learn not to care what I do. 'Tis the way of a prudent wife."

"Er – I beg leave to dissent; my mother does not want my father, but it pains her, or at least it used to when he philandered, thô there is little opportunity for it now. 'Tis not her vanity, but a breach o' faith, and before you say 'who keeps faith in marriage now?', 'tis degrading to be in a marriage like that."

On her face was a grimace of disgust, and with her observation, it brought a dark frown to his brow.

"There is nothing degrading about the status of a married woman," he decreed, harsh and formal. "A woman is inordinately favoured and honoured by the man who marries her, whatever he be within her station, of course. A gentlewoman will degrade herself if she weds a farm-hand, just as the old Romans reduced a patrician female to the level of freedwoman if she married a freedman."

"Perhaps your grace would explain the concept of a man honouring a woman thus, for the way it sounds as you describe it, he is just doing her a great favour, or so he thinks."

"Gladly, for in wedding a woman, a man gives her his name and protection, and makes

himself responsible for her. Thus the law allows him more freedom than it does her, and gives him certain necessary power over her,” he pronounced with deliberation, and in a soft voice, neither of which masked condescension.

“I own it a great load that you bear away from us in clearing up my father’s financial curly murlies (phantastical twists), but apart from that, at what pains would your grace be, wed to Caroline? Do you begrudge her already that you shall keep her back and belly, and that you will be forced to bed her to beget two-legged tympani upon her, when your choice lies elsewhere? Caroline is comely and clean of bodily habitudes; as for protection and responsibility, she is the least likely of all of us to land into scrapes, for she has a quieter character than Honoria, and a lady’s education, whereas mine petered out when my father gave away the last silver salver as a bribe.”

“That is not the point. You speak, Lady Justina, perhaps because you have had to do man’s work, as if a woman were a man’s equal, but she is not.”

“Forgive my disagreement on this point, but I meant not to equate man with woman, but even so, I must hold to the notion that that discrepancy gives man no right to use a woman ill. In London, I saw women of the street and not a single man I overheard speak to them was even polite, but always used some word of abuse in addressing them. If what they purvey is considered horrible? However, that which they purvey is something that the menfolk need – does that mean ’tis horrible too? In any wise, if these females are so despicable then why purchase their services? Go find one free, gratis, and for nothing, but the beau cannot, for no woman will have him unless he pays her – so he insults her because he is unwanted? So much for the blasted fellow (abandoned rogue) and the blunderbuss (stupid clumsy person), but what of the married man? Whenever we went to the Theatre Royal in London, I would see gentlemen in their boxes, and their humdrums (wives) with them, but afterwards the autem mort (married woman) was handed into their carriage alone, and Joan Thomson’s man (uxorious husband) was to be seen making the rounds of the parade of harlotry loitering and leering around Covent Garden to chuse meat. I perhaps saw many things I should not have seen, or was not expected to, but you know how it is working with animals: they cannot speak like we can, but they would tell us things if only we looked out for them and so I have learned to be observant.”

“I know you were being ironical when you referred to these men as uxorious, but most of them are parties to marriages of convenience, which extend right down to the lower merchant orders, so infidelity in them is not an abuse of their wives, while of unfaithful wives there are almost just as many; I say almost out of chivalry for the gentler sex.”

“I should thank you then, sir,” she responded with an acid tone, “but you would trap me with your sophistries and I do not recommend infidelity in any wise to anyone.”

“You are all of seventeen. At your age, girls are already married and past dying of their first child. At your age, boys are rebellious and uncontainable. As you are unmarried and keep the company of a young man and horses, it is possible that you, too, have the rebelliousness endemic to youth at a certain phase of life,” he philosophised. “However, when you are wed, and if your father has a hand in it, according to his judgment, you may find that *you* have to be unfaithful just to keep sane, and albeit that it is a betrayal of a person and of vows made before a clergyman, in defiance of a sacrament, you will not see it as such when you are in the midst of it. Now you are young and fresh, innocent and with correct

principles, notwithstanding what you witness and observe. Just wait until life itself taints your good and pure soul.”

“Very well, but answer me this, respectfully praying your grace: why is it that folk who are one’s elders, by a little or by longer, always hide behind life, experience and their age?” she shot, with a weary, little sigh, wherein disdain and disbelief had their places.

Whether or not he was trapped did not matter for his patience and indulgence had been tried too far.

“And why is it ever necessary to call to order the wild excesses of youth? It is not clever to be impertinent, it is not seemly to criticise, it is not wise to propound simple theories without living them through. Criticisms and witticisms correspond not with facts, so pray cease to argue with an elder who has been and gone and done it all, to his detriment. Just accept what I say,” he ordered.

“Are all sages so mandatory and do they forbid that adolescence engage them in debate?” she rejoined.

“Adolescent you are, that much I will concede,” he scorned.

“Very well,” she acknowledged, nodding pensively and turning away, “if I sink to alleged impertinence, you sink lower to insult. However, I will not engage in debate, and thereby give you cause to command me to silence yet again, but before I curb my tongue, allow me to remind you that it is my father and my family to whom you are rendering this great favour, wherefor we are all beholden to you and at your service to misuse, but that you are making no great concession to Caroline as an individual, even if vicariously you may demand gratitude from her because she is her father’s daughter, but not as herself. That is a truth that your grace needs to know but what difference it will make is undoubtedly tantamount to nippence no pence, half a groat³ wanting two pence.”

Justina expected a burst of anger and correction, but instead there was silence.

“You defend your sister admirably,” he said eventually, “notwithstanding your disagreement.”

“I am vexed with her; I do not hate her.”

“And your audacity in speaking thus to me is notable.”

“I must needs admit, sir, that your generosity serves the degenerate House of Hearne well, but if you wish to be lofty, do so with my father who created this situation, or with us, for we are not the child he threw away to save his groats (come off handsomely). Don’t, I pray, look down on Carrie, or deem that you do her a great honour or make her concessions.”

The Duke of Irvin heaved a sigh and shook his head.

“Why is it,” he wondered ruefully, “that when you and I are alone, we always quarrel?”

“Mere proof that I am a most unsuitable companion for your grace in every way,” she averred, the kiss in Ranelagh gardens uppermost in her thoughts.

“I am autocratic and you are recalcitrant,” he corrected. “That is how I see it.”

“Your grace thinks your grace to be autocratic but I do not,” she dissented.

“Then how do you see me?” he pursued, goaded by his natural male vanity.

“With a bit of luck, I would not see you at all,” she chuckled.

“That is Tower Hill play (a slap in the face and a kick in the breech) in return for one who has been ardently striving to gain of you an opinion not hostile to me,” he stated crisply.

“Why should my opinion of you matter, ever?” she dismissed, baffled.

The Duke turned and fixed upon her a deep regard.

“To me, personally, it matters a good deal,” he declared, grave, haughty and quiet.

Nervous, bewildered, suspicious, antipathetic, and disconcerted, she stole a glance at him and then heard what she thought and hoped were distant hoof-beats, so she looked over her shoulder.

“What is it?” he asked.

“At Land’s end! ’Tis Kit,” she announced, with unbounded, unconcealed relief.

The Duke looked too, and managed a twisted smile.

“It is a husbandman of mine, taking a horse to the cornfields under harvest. We crossed a lane that runs athwart this one: he will be turning along it,” he gloated.

Justina looked again and sure enough there was a yokel sitting on the side of a giant Midlandshire mare, all tackled up to be harnessed to a cart. On sighting the riders beyond, he raised his tricorne, whereof one side was rather limp, and the Duke replied by raising his own.

“You don’t want or need Kit,” he dismissed, with a smirk.

“Why did you summon him here, then?” she demanded.

“Under the mistaken impression that he would amuse you, but from what I have seen, he is of no blood that would ever make a friend for you,” he decried. “’Twas was because he was the same age as Lord Julius, but now I see, that even tho’ you are four years his junior in fact, you are much older than is he, and that he is no more than an irresponsible irritant. His father has seen this and will not let him come near the Quality until he is deemed ready.”

“He sees me as a rigsby,” she said.

“There is a type of man who mistakenly thinks that a rigsby is good for a flourish (hasty bout of sex) without realising that she could just as easily break his boltsprit (nose) for him,” he replied. “You know too well how many days go to the week to make a fool of yourself over a worthless nickninny like him, which is why you are irate if your sister frets, for he is handsome and would be frivolous if so allowed.”

“Kit? Worthless? God knows what you say behind my back, and you are not even my uncle,” she recoiled.

“I cannot say anything about you behind your back. You are a very proper young lady, of goodly virtue,” he replied.

“And Match! Quoth Hatch when he got his wife by the breach?” she rejoined in cynical disbelief. “I am the comic breeches part, after all.”

“I have learned my lesson about that,” he ceded. “Indeed, being a stable lad because one’s father will stand on his pantables and be the Duke when all there is of it is a castle and a family tree, especially for a girl, is no great favour, and the breeches part is not comical at all. Indeed, comfortable and practical as it may be for the sort of work involved, unless folk are accustomed to seeing you thus clad, it gives the wrong impression.”

“It certainly gave the wrong impression to your sister when I appeared for a fencing bout in shirt and hankins (breeches),” she grunted.

“Vinnie is Mistris Princum Prancum (precise and formal woman) incarnate,” he dismissed. “Think nought of it.”

“She does. She has hardly been able to bring herself to address unto me a single word since, and if ever, it is squeezed out of her with more labour the proverbial wife who cries

four eggs a penny (wife who is birthing),” she snorted, “but I confess the fault: I should never have changed into breeches or concerned myself with mannish sport.”

“Nor you should but no matter; Kit did not care, and it was but a fright for your sister and his mother. Would you like me to speak to Vinnie to tell her to curb her foolish airs towards you?” he offered.

“I would be very grateful if you did not even hint to your precious Vinnie that I ever existed,” she answered.

At that he was a little offended, for after all, the Countess was his sister, and in any case, she was passing judgment against his family, for whatever they were worth. Another silence fell, more weighty and uncomfortable than the last, and Justina even examined the notion of suggesting that they part ways so she could gallop the horse he had basically forced her to ride, but then he spoke.

“In your country climes, Lady Justina, have you a beau?” he inquired.

Justina was so shocked by this inquiry that she gave a start and her shattered equanimity communicated itself to her ride, who emitted a grunt and pranced to one side.

“Evidently that engendered such a surprise that even the stallion nigh shied,” the Duke accepted wryly.

“Depend upon it, it was a surprise, for more reasons than for being probing, for hoydens and girls who wear small-clothes do not come by male admirers,” she said.

“You don’t even look like a boy when dressed thus,” he laughed. “Besides, you only don them out of necessity, which any one of sound understanding should at least comprehend the reason for. Thus, do you not have some apple of your eye? Even in a joke?”

“I don’t go out on the social round,” she said, “with my family, among the mansions of the gentry, for I stay and work. My sister Honoria complains of it too, for she has much to do in the potager, which is back-breaking labour, but she does get a chance to shew off the rare new gown purchased fully made up from the Scotchman’s cart – you don’t even know what is a Scotchman’s cart, do you?”

“On the contrary, I do; go on, I pray,” he urged.

“Well, as Julius and I work in the stables and the paddocks, we do not go out at all, except on those rare occasions that Christmas or Michaelmas do warrant, and to church on Sunday,” she replied. “So where would I find an apple for my eye?”

“Is there no attractive young man in the whole district?”

“If there is, he is usually spoken for unofficially by the attractive young woman in the whole district, and she is not I; I am just a shadow under a hat brim, on the rearward bench under the canopy of the private pew belonging to the Dukes of Hearne at our parish church, which was installed recently when we found it too expensive to rebuild our tumbledown private chapel and pay a curate to come read a Service of Sundays.”

“Apart from hiding in the back owing to lack of seniority, and beyond the demands of the stableyard, is such the custom of the country?” he inquired. “I mean to say, by your age, most belles in the Quality apparent in the Town are – how do I put it – fully experienced.”

“You already said that, sir,” she hedged, unsure that she liked whither the conversation was proceeding.

“No, saving your favour, I did not say that at all,” he disagreed, and turned to her, speaking with an air of circumspection and a touch of hesitation in his voice. “Lady Justina,

have you ever received – how do I put it – *instruction* from anyone?”

“Instruction?” she repeated. “Teaching? Tutoring? Of what sort meant your grace?”

“No-no-no,” he denied, shaking his head, “not instruction from a tutor but instruction in the way of a certain type of what the law calls knowledge.”

“I follow you not, sir,” she owned. “Is not what I said and what you are saying the same thing?”

“No,” he smiled, bowing his head, “I ask if there has ever been anyone who has enjoyed knowledge of you.”

“Folk at home know Hearne’s daughters, but whether it is enjoyable to them I cannot say,” she declared, a trifle bemused, and wondering after the words he inserted that resembled flattery or gallantries.

“Not that,” he dismissed, regarding her quizzically, before leaning over her. “Has any man taken you into his bed or entered yours?”

“NO!” she cried with indignation. “Our way, folk who indulge in – ah, carnal *knowledge* in stealth are generally obliged to use barns and byres rather than beds but I know not what they hatch in gentlemen’s houses, for I rarely go thither, and your grace is surely too nice to know of rustic amours, in ditches or hedges or against walls, for example.”

Thereat he was silenced, and she glared angrily ahead, but if she had but glanced at him, she would have seen that he was pleased rather than annoyed or contrite.

“I believe,” he recommenced after a while, patting her arm, “that I have given offence. Thus, I most earnestly apologise. I see now why your sister is fearful of you being seduced.”

A distant shout interrupted them, and when both turned towards it, they discerned Kit, riding hard towards them, calling that they wait for him, and waving his hat.

“’Tis Kit, thank God,” said Justina.

“Thank God?” echoed the Duke, raising both eyebrows.

Later, long after the ride ended and breakfast was eaten, indeed, when the company was taking a post-prandial stroll in the park, Justina succeeded in isolating Kit and scolded him most vehemently, calling him weak, lazy, and little better than an idiot, whereat he was a little downcast for most of the day, while Caroline noticed that her sister sedulously evaded Irvin, and asked why as the evening toilette was in progress, with the certainty that no-one would interrupt them.

“You and he rode this morning,” she reminded. “I hope that you and he did not quarrel again –,” she commenced, but Justina pounced on her and pushed her by the shoulders at the doors, as if to indicate to her that her next steps were to be out of here.

“I was at my wits’ end over making that blackguard understand that beholden to him as we all were, he was not to take it out of his wife who was nought but her father’s sacrificial animal to get himself out of this pretty pass, and that if he – Irvin – should feed anyone roast meat and beat him with the spit, it was against our father and us whom he was to direct his dissatisfaction, and not Caroline the individual, whatever his opinions upon the inferiority of women and his control over his wife,” rasped Justina. “I really had to hammer it into his head, but whether I did or whether I hit the through passage (in one ear and out the other), I know not. Now I am going to bathe a little so pray let me alone.”

Caroline, somewhat chastened, hesitated, for want of something to say, but in delaying, gave Justina the chance to depart to her dressing quarters and lock the doors, so the

next they saw of each other was over the supper table. To try and make up for his failings of the morn, Kit tried to be friendly with Justina that evening but there was more serious conversation, because a packet of newspapers had arrived in the posts and these were examined and passages read out from them. Actually of them all, it was Viscount Kettering who found them the most boring, while Irvin's sister fussed about the property he owned in France and told him that he really should go back there and sell it all.

As the result of her severe reprimand, Justina found Kit awaiting her in the corridor on the morrow, and they in turn, awaited Irvin in the stable yard. Having sense enough not to ask silly questions during a reproof, he chose this moment to inquire why the need to have him about was so urgent, and whether his uncle had said or done something, which meant that he knew the aforementioned really well, but she told him that Irvin was engaged to her sister and thus was in greater need of a chaperon when he went out with even a future sister-in-law than was she, so he looked silly and fell silent. Needless to say, when they all rode out, with Kit by him, his grace spoke not of matters intimate and personal where Justina was concerned and, indeed, hardly even addressed her, his mouth full of farm talk instead – which ironically would have interested her, and bored his nephew, to whom it was addressed, but she did not say so, either to the Duke, or to Kit once they returned to the house. Instead, she counted days and repaired to her sister to remind her of the period they had passed here, which made it necessary for the latter now to address her intended about the necessity of her returning to Hearne. They had been at Irvin for three weeks now and when Justina renewed her pleas she used firm language, calling the situation untenable and the invitation overburthening, before threatening to go and say so to the Duke herself, except that the danger was, as she was Caroline's silly little sister, he was likely not to take her seriously and say something that was either disagreeable or disrespectful. Caroline would have liked a longer and serious parley on the subject, but Justina would not be stalled and retreated in haste, abandoning her sister to remorse and confusion, while seeming to be in a dour and sour mood, which in fact she was, for she saw Caroline as giving in too easily to the whims of these Claremonts, who were no better born than the Woodvilles, to the extent of making her own sister ride out with her own future spouse. A little while after speaking to Caroline, Justina was on her way from her room with a hat and veil, to protect her face from the flies in the park, with another of Irvin's chosen books under one arm, when she encountered Irvin himself. The first thought that entered her head was that Caroline was not going to suggest their departure to the Duke, but then he called to her as she descended the staircase.

"You want to go, do you?" he demanded bluntly.

As he spoke he came to the side of the bannister and altho she had a step or two yet to go, he was still taller than her, or almost.

"I seemed to think it was your idea," he continued. "Lady Caroline has suddenly become impatient to leave."

So Carrie had not failed her after all, or fallen victim to cowardice.

"Perhaps she is still afraid that I will be seduced," she rejoined sweetly, daring to meet his glittering gaze.

"*She* is afraid of nothing," he smirked, holding her by the face, with one hand. "It is you who dislike it here and would run away."

"I never want to run away, but sometimes I have had to," she asserted, pulling away.

“But you do not like it here,” he persisted.

“I am between hawk and buzzard. Do I contradict you, in which case I would be rude, or, should I say amen to everything?” she rejoined.

“Do you reject my hospitality?” he cornered.

“No, sir, but I’d fain not abuse it,” she averred.

“If it is not hospitality, is it the host?” he pursued, stalling her with a hand.

“Impossible. Your grace ordered me to like you, remember?” she mocked, but then pulled a face that shewed her good temper to be exasperated. “Does it really rankle to you whom or what I like, as long as it is not Chatteris?”

“As a matter of fact, it does. What is come in the way?” he demanded.

“This is silly, childishly silly. O, very well: it was a most disappointing chat that we recently had,” she blurted out, throwing aside his arm that barred her way.

“What was disappointing about it?” he insisted.

“*You*, that’s what!”

“I suppose I should not be surprised: you made that clear by crying out ‘Thank God’ for Kit. I found it a trifle unnecessary.”

“There has been much of the unnecessary of late, sir.”

“Not that, for had not Kit come by with his poor timing, I would have continued the conversation, to endeavour to discover what could encourage you to allow yourself into the arms of a man,” he pronounced softly. “Your sister is concerned about your relations with Kit, is she not? Thus armed with knowledge, I would be able to set her mind at rest.”

“When you use the word knowledge, I dread to ask what you mean, now,” she growled, stepping off the staircase.

“Then let me say ‘intelligences’, for there is no way to grow ambiguous with that,” he amended. “What moves you, Justina Woodville?”

“The stock answer is either wedding owing to necessity, or loving, but I know not if the latter really exists, for thô I see affection between spouses they are middle-aged and it is the product of long years of becoming used to each other, while on the other hand, I see silly people do silly things which leads to their cuckolding the parson and a tearful wedding, because one or the other thought love was confused with what they were really feeling. I love our horses and I am beginning to love those of Squire Pye: so I will miss them when they are taken away. I love my brother Julius and my sister Selina. Have I answered your grace?”

“In other words, nothing moves you,” he sighed, and removed from his deep pocket a packet wrapped in soft paper, which he handed to her. “I entreat you to take this: I thought it would be childish of me to keep back your present. The whole business about gifts in anywise was infantile enough.”

With that, he left her and retired down the passage which led to the study. Justina, for her part, pulled out from the soft papers a delicate white fichu of lace and net, not as fine as that presented to Caroline, but pretty and a gift nevertheless. Far from assuaging any sense of exclusion, it made her ireful, and she set off to the house doors, clutching it to her so that it was crumpled against her collarbone. Just as she reached the threshold, and waited for the duty footman to reappear like magic out of nowhere – for Irvin had obviously dispatched him, to eavesdrop in peace, Kit came hastening out of the enfilade.

“Justina, going walking?” he asked.

“It is too fine a morn to spend in the library, so I will read out of doors,” she said.

“I’ll take you that far – what is this, all screwed up in your hand?” he wondered.

“Irvin’s gift to me from Paris. He brought one back for all of you, but he withheld mine, and since then has felt childish and changed his mind,” she explained plainly.

“The infernal addled poltroon, what a queer fish, what a rum Ned of a man! I am of a good mind to ask him what he meant by –,”

“Nothing of the sort,” she cut in, and tugged on his cuff to follow her, back into the house. “I need your escort, pray.”

“Aye, but easy on the cuff. You’ve probably half destroyed that net thing, so pray don’t crumple my sleeve,” he agreed with a proviso.

“Are you to come or am I to compromise myself?” she hissed, hurrying back toward the stairs, and bouncing up the first step.

“Where are you going?” he asked, but duly followed her.

It was only upstairs that she answered.

“The Duke of Irvin’s apartments,” she replied. “He is far; in his study, in fact.”

Bemused, he hurried after her and when they entered the ducal lodging, she shut the doors after them, while he softly called halloo lest a valet was grubbing about in the inner chambers. She, for her part, tried not to be distracted by the lush velvet furnishings in bright emerald green, with gold bullion fringes, so that all was sober yet bright. The woodwork was all mahogany from wall panels to the lath turned posters of the bed, with its curtains and its velvet canopy, from the double chests of drawers with silver gilt vases upon them to the ladder-backed armchairs, and a sofa in the French style with legs that overlapped the upholstered apron.

“What are you going to do?” he wondered, a trifle lost.

“The bed,” she muttered, “in the bed or on the bed? Between the sheets? Nay, he may take it as a hint. At the foot of the bed? I’ll lay nothing at his feet. On the pillow? Even worse. Kit, could we go to the dressing room?”

Kit replied by opening the doors thereto and the first thing she beheld was a white and gold harpsichord. Otherwise the colours were sea green and deep green, and all the woodwork gilded except for the mahogany panels which contained parcel gilding to outline their shapes. There was a fine drop-top bureau, some more chests and the doors to closets and other conveniences with much light from broad windows and doubtless much light after sunset for a welter of silverware designed to hold candles, whether transportable or affixed to the walls in several places. The place was very neat and tidy, and the pictures on the walls were of landscapes, his sisters, and this house viewed from the park. There was nothing to indicate that the occupant was a bawdy bachelor with a raw appetite.

“Should I hang it from the closet door?” she mused.

The Viscount responded by opening it, and put on shew a stand upon which was laid a silver wig with pigeons wings and a ribbon, but without a velvet bag and the solitaire that tied the queue and in turn was tied in a bow at the throat. Justina beheld it and her heart began to beat very fast.

“In the French style,” commented he. “The queue is in ringlets but there is no louse bag (bag of a bag wig).”

Then he saw that Justina was staring at it in fascination.

“Aye, Lionel owns a wig,” he stated. “It is a neat wig but not necessarily a modish wig, and he uses white or grey hair-powder if he uses powder at all, or for that matter, if he uses a wig at all. With his mane, it is a little uncomfortable. However, he keeps such a wig in every one of his residences.”

“I have it now,” she said, and advancing, draped the fichu, which was not torn, over the wig itself.

“Have we done what we are come to do?” he asked.

“Indeed,” she confirmed. “Let us be off now.”

So saying, she emerged from the closet and led the way out into the bedchamber, where she abandoned the paper which had wrapped her present on the bed.

“Er – you returned Irvin’s gift,” noted Kit.

“Most perceptive of you,” she acknowledged.

He might have raised his eyebrows but he did not say another word. Silently he let her out and together they went below, where she suggested that perhaps he should not accompany her into the park, but she thanked him for his help all the same.

“It was invaluable,” she said.

With that had he to be content. As for Justina, she was rather pleased with herself for her daring and doubly glad of the insult just dealt the Duke in the light of what had been confirmed by what she found in the dressing room closet. Indeed, many gentlemen wore silver wigs, and black was popular for the clothes of gentlemen as much as professionals, but she had been almost certain it was Irvin under the mask in the darkness, and now she was completely sure. It was untoward of him carnally to court the sister of his betrothed even if she had enjoyed the kiss, but now he was talking about putting more than his tongue into her mouth, so he deserved a punishment, and also to know that she was aware of who had gently assaulted her in the Gardens that night. She was eager to see what the result of her deed would be and when it would shew, even if it did her no good: that was the way of all courage. However, as the day progressed she found no difference in his manner, so either he had not opened his closet, or he was most experienced in the art of dissimulation. Late in the afternoon, nevertheless, after Kit and Irvin had had their fencing bout, while Vinnie and Carrie sat on the terrace and took tea, and she was in the library, Justina had a visitor, who, to her surprise, was Irvin. In one hand was the fichu and in his eyes was a sharp but earnest expression.

“Your grace may please yourself as to where you will go in your own home, but I was under the misapprehension that there was a fencing lesson in progress,” she commented.

“It ended when it should,” he replied, “and the protagonists adjourned to change.”

Certainly there was no smell of sweat badly concealed under cologne waters or perfume; the Duke had no remarkable air about him, even when he leaned forward over the table top, and held out the fichu.

“Did you hang it on my wig?” he asked.

“I took Kit with me as a chaperon,” she assured.

“To protect you?” he shot.

“Need I protection in your grace’s rooms?” she evaded.

“*Touché*,” he conceded. “Why d’ ye chuse to try and wound me by rejecting my gift?”

“The whole affair became ridiculous, and I wanted no part of it,” she declared. “First

you had a gift for me; then you hadn't, and then you wanted to give it me again. 'Tis indeed quaint to be hobbyhorsical, but I was surpassed. You were of so many minds that you would never be mad, depend upon it."

"I suspect that there is more," he interposed, "than my prevarication, which, stands me in a none too salutary light, but my belief is that you acted thus for being annoyed with me for having asked you all those questions about yourself. I admit, I was prying, and I should not have dared so far."

"Yet I am not vexed or provoked by your prying, as you put it," she said primly. "I returned the fichu not because o' that, as much as because I did not understand what you meant by it, and so I did not like any of it. That is why I said I wanted no part in the matter, and accordingly intruded into your private chamber and looked about for an apt place to leave it. Kit opened the closet door, and I saw the wig, which was like one I had seen before, so I knew it was the thing to leave the fichu upon."

As she spoke, the Duke's visage grew annoyed, grim, tense and wry, while his firm lips pressed tightly together, far from enhancing any beauty in his face.

"So, you see, sir," she resumed calmly, "it is not merely exploratory words and lack of subtlety that can poison a spirit. I have been out of sorts for you for some while."

"My words," he hissed, leaning well over the table as he leered at her, "were not meant to be subtle."

"My answer was not subtle either," she averred.

"Nor it was," he acknowledged. "Now that we have settled that, will you take the scarf – fichu after all?"

"'Tis a fichu; Caroline's is a scarf," she reminded. "Your grace must not mix them up, just as you should not have Caroline's and my roles confused."

"There is no confusion in my mind on that score –,"

"I'd never ha' credited it."

"I wonder whether there is anything you would credit."

Whereupon, he began slowly to walk to the door, leaving the fichu on the table top.

"Ahem," rasped Justina. "You forgot something."

When he looked back, she was pointing at the fichu.

"You had better take it away," she decreed coolly. "In any wise, I know not how I will be able to explain it to Caroline."

The Duke retraced his steps and regarding her with icy acerbity and ire, took up the item with a swift, almost contemptuous gesture, but she only regarded him, with a quizzical twinkle in her eyes.

"By the bye, how did your grace answer Caroline's suggestion that we depart?" she inquired.

"I proposed that she considered tarrying, and entreated her not to make plans yet," he furnished, raising an eyebrow. "Why?"

"What if I were so to do now?" she proposed.

"On her behalf?"

"On my own; why implicate her?"

"Then make it."

"You know what 'twill be."

“Make it all the same.”

“I shall do so as a question,” she said and rose, politely curtseying to him. “Pray, sir, we have imposed upon your grace’s good nature and impinged upon your generosity long enough, and so, it is time that we were packing our boxes for to be on our way home. Caroline has learned of this fine house all that she might for the present, so there is no reason wherefor we should take such shameless advantage of your hospitality any longer. If your grace would suffer our presences until we may arrange for our journey, we will ready ourselves meanwhile. Would you allow us this, sir?”

“You may leave when you like, Lady Justina,” he answered, cool and brusque. “I shall send out relays today, and you may travel home in my berline with your baggage following. That will allow you to depart the day after tomorrow.”

“That, sir, is most kind in you,” she credited. “I am most grateful of your clear understanding.”

“I daresay that you are,” he retorted quietly and, taking up the fichu, promptly quitted the room.

Justina closed her book and waited until his footsteps had died away, before she marched off to find Caroline and tell her that they were leaving, and when. Lady Northingham sat up, bewildered, but before she could speak, Caroline inquired of Justina how she could say this.

“I asked the Duke and he agreed,” stated Justina cheerily.

“You asked?” croaked Caroline.

“Aye, I just asked,” confirmed Justina in triumph, and left them to go and turn out the content of her closets.

¹(feme sole: single woman)

²(feme covert: married woman)

³(groat: four pence)

FIFTEEN

The sisters Woodville ended their sojourn at Irvin exactly when Justina had made the Duke decree they would, and left in one of his Grace's grand carriages, with bag and baggage, six-horse teams to pull their vehicle and twelve outriders to protect them, as fresh animals owned by, or hired and reserved in the name of, Irvin awaited them at every stage. In informing her sister of this confirmed prospect, Justina offered no further intelligences or explanations, even when the other had asked her for more details, for referring her to her future spouse was not a true reply. As she knew not what Justina had done, she had to approach him with the greatest solicitude and diplomacy when she went to utter her valedictory thanks on the part of both sisters. His Grace was all acquiescence and good temper, but failed not to remark that Justina was at a restless time of life, which was a nuance that the younger sister had obtained what she wanted without the exercise of much tact, even if the Duke also said that the latter had spoken with perfect propriety, decorum and courtesy, which Caroline could not believe. There was no way to make amends by staying on another week: Justina had put pay to such signs of good faith, and Caroline was afraid that the Duke was actually offended but reluctant to say so and make too much of an impatient girl's high spirits. As Lady Caroline deemed herself to have suffered her sister's bad-mannered and bad-tempered sullenness for a goodly while now, she saw the other's abrupt termination of their stay here as the last straw, so, as the vehicle bearing them swung away from the front of the stately mansion and set off through the park, she turned on her younger sibling to investigate the matter thoroughly and doggedly, for they were alone together.

"All right, Justina Woodville," she snapped, "now you may tell me just how you contrived to arrange this indecently hurried and precipitate departure."

"You should not really be living under the same roof as your intended before the puzzle text (parson) makes you jump the besom," distracted Justina.

"This was suddenly sprung upon me like a bolt from the blue –,"

"How is that when I had been nagging you with a continuado (for days on end) to have him set us a date for to leave?" came the cold retort.

"It was for me to do, then, so why did you interfere?"

"For the mere reason that I was the outsider who had no place here so the sooner I piked off the better. Why, did you feel I usurped your pre-wifely authority – to coin a phrase – with your soon-spousy? I stuck my mell in because you delayed and vacillated and were so weak and quiescent. Do that when you are wed to him but not with the burrs (hangers on) attached to you. I made it clear that we were not to overstay our welcome and that we should depart soon, so he had it arranged that we could go as soon as possible. You will come to live here: this is your place, but not mine, a nuance I hope he captured."

"Very well, he consented and made the arrangements, but what troubles me is how was his demeanour –,"

"Grim, terse and jolly as a wet winter Friday, but then he is often like that with me."

"And doubtless with good reason. He spoke of you as at a restless age, from which I was given to accept that you had perhaps been impudent, even rude, and you had."

"You were not there: how know you?"

"It was rude of you to take it upon yourself when the matter was in my hands."

"And very still hands they were, for all you could think about was that I was about to

be seduced, in which case you should have been out of there with me before anyone could say Jack Robinson. I was really tired of all that, and now that the matter is on the carpet, when you are Duchess here, and are inviting your spunging family to stay, if you omit me, I shall not take offence, and you will be spared the fear of a hoyden with never an M by her belt annoying your spouse of great proportions, for surely he would have regained his precious respectability by then."

"I cannot miss you out: he will think that you dislike him."

"Carrie, he is not a Nokes (fool), he already thinks I do."

"You have made us despicable!" cried Caroline.

"We already are and were despicable; his is the hand that will free let alone feed us."

"And you bit it! You do not grasp the extent of his magnanimity with respect to your disgraceful conduct during this stay, about which he said not a word himself, and defended you valiantly whenever the subject was raised, even when I was troubled about Kit –,"

"And think not you that he felt truly complimented that you thought his nephew not to be a gentleman?" challenged Justina pertinently, but Caroline was generally overwrought.

"I know not how I am going to explain any of this to mamma," she lamented. "If she asks me how you fared at a grand place like Irvin, shall I tell her that you systematically quarrelled with the host and put on breeches to play at fencing with his young nephew?"

"You speak as if I were the crudest kind of John Trot (yokel)," interrupted Justina.

"Well, I am certainly not going to be able to explain how ill you have used me of late, and how peremptorily you ended our stay at Irvin," fussed Caroline.

"Perhaps it will one day dawn on you that when you first had lessons on how to run Irvin and discover its lands, you were tense as a bowed string on a viol or a fiddle, whereas I was not? I am of the opinion that in such a mood, which I have never seen in you all my life, you were ready to find fault with a fat goose (seek faults where there are none)," analysed Justina. "No wonder I could do nothing right for you. You know and I know that you do not really want to wed the Duke of Irvin and so does he. My assumption of him is that he was finally told of one family of the right degree *and blood*, with daughters for sale, so the possibility of marriage devolved on the eldest. He never chose, he just let things happen and sang 'O, be easy', while you did the same. When you came to face the life he would have you lead as far as your responsibilities were concerned, it was as like as an apple to an oyster to you helping mother run Hearne Castle from your parlour where you do the household sewing. It would affright the stoutest heart. How lucky for you that there was romping, roaring rigsby Justina to fuss about lest the Duke and his sister caught you fretting and fearing life in the house where they were born, for he does not leave all things to butler and housekeeper but keeps his hand firmly upon them all. Now tell mother that as well."

"I will tell mother all I have to," stated Caroline haughtily.

"And lay in water your own weaknesses?" challenged Justina. "Of course there is no question of your admitting to any, for you would burn another's boats instead, in a blaze of self-righteous glory and integrity. Have you learned what are the names of all the fields on the Irvin estates?"

"You go too far, Justina. I could shake you for that!"

"Don't shake too hard, for I may say that which I should not."

"Say it all the same!"

“You feel incapable and awed, and I am your all too easily accessible scapegoat. Carrie, I really ought to be grateful to Irvin for having spoilt my Season with Aunt Lizzie, because the sojourn in his house has disclosed unto me a side to you I knew not existed. To me you were the ever complaisant heroine, unshakable, even-tempered, with a calming word for everyone. Here, you have behaved like a shrew. If that is what marriage to him is going to make you, son of Venus (wencher) that he is, he will turn into a veritable rusty guts (blunt fellow) with you. Better than that, he’ll seek variety in playing at push-pike (sex) with all your sisters, one by one. Why, think you, I wanted you in Town, and why, can you guess, I wanted to *pike* off from his house after he returned from wherever the devil he went to?”

“Irvin?” gasped Caroline.

“Aye, Irvin, bless my soul,” snorted Justina with a sharp little laugh. “I know not how to say this, but our quarrels were not always such as I would repeat, especially before you. It was explained to you that you were to wed a rake; well, here is how it begins. I used to go out with Kit as a chaperon, for in Kit’s presence, Irvin would not talk bawdy.”

Caroline seemed totally consternated, and sank back into the squabs and cushions of the so very comfortable seats, her wits in a whirl, until she reached out and took Justina’s hand, with a disconcerted look on her face.

“Neither Kit nor I deemed Irvin’s motives to be honourable,” continued the other.

“Towards me?” tried Carrie.

“Towards you that would be disrespectful. I meant, towards me,” answered Justina, in a hollow voice, and left her sister speechless for a few moments, so she continued. “It sounds like I think my ha’pence good silver, I know, but I did not think so at the time, and I did not want to claim such a conquest, for the conquest would ha’ been I. Besides, one does not strap (have sex with) one’s sister’s affianced spousy.”

“What r-reason have you for such a t-terrible allegation? Was it the horse?” tried Caroline. “Doltish me! I made you ride out on it with him to please him in all he wanted so that the engagement between us would stand, and he would not cry off out of his financial arrangements with father and leave us all as men-a-hanging (in serious trouble)!”

“It was not just the poor horse. There were other little attentions and remarks. One notices them not unless they are directed at one, and he made sure that that happened mostly before no witnesses but the horses, and they cannot speak a language that we understand, but they see it all, bless them,” stated Justina.

“So he means to wed one sister and lie with another?” breathed Caroline.

“That sort of thing is better when it is far from home,” commented Justina, as her sister, wholly flaccid, let her hand just lie loose, so she withdrew it from the other’s hold. “It is not a thing one easily owns or explains to one’s own sister. I could not tell you anything there, so I would shun you and —,”

“Brought out the worst in me,” admitted Caroline, as tears coursed down her face.

“A difficult situation, Carrie,” remarked Justina, with a hint of anguish. “You cannot confront the man with the matter, for he will flatly deny it, or tell you to be damned for he means to do exactly as he pleases. I cannot really face him either, for he would do as much with me; veritably he and I have spoken of things strange and deep already. Then there is the matter of money: we cannot condemn him and end your engagement to him without landing ourselves in the seeds, for he controls our finances and basically has us by the throat. Think

to what beggary he could reduce us were we to try and thwart him now.”

Caroline was quietly weeping into her handkerchief and when Justina terminated her little speech, she nodded firmly, but kept her face hidden.

“After the sort of talk in which he indulged, when I told him I would go home, he understood. I know not if I have done our monetary position more harm than good, but what’s done is done and if he is offended, ’tis my fault, and I will pay whatever price is necessary,” added Justina. “I assure you, I did not fling his invitation in his face as contrived more for to promote his nefarious purposes than our good, and now I even doubt of me whether he really went to Paris at all, for one may buy French goods as easily at Cheapside.”

“Effectively the invitation was to get you under his roof, and that wicked procuress, his sister —,”

“I doubt if she knew what was afoot. Kit’s presence was to blear both our eyes,” assessed Justina. “However, she did a capital job of keeping you busy. I cut a very sorry figure now that all this is come out; I would rather we both sulked a bit of ways homeward and then forgot the whole. I just wanted it to blow over it and that we both would forget it.”

“It is I who should apologise for being so obtuse, so self-righteous and so shallow,” wept Caroline, and despite the rocking of the vehicle, took her sister into her arms.

The two siblings embraced, and then Justina drew away.

“Now we are aware of what we are up against, but I am not sure I know what to do about it,” she owned. “What we will find when we reach home is another matter; Irvin’s great enemy Chatteris may make a move and, to be honest, however much one despises Irvin for his fornications and adulteries, I don’t want to see him dead in two years and you a widow already, even if it turns out that he probably deserves it.”

Just as the words fell from her lips, Justina regretted them, for it seemed that she felt some partiality for the Duke, but Caroline was too upset by the whole matter and did not notice the remark. Indeed, Justina found that she was worried about Irvin, as far as the threat Chatteris presented to his life, but she would not say. Nor did she tell the story of the fichu; there were too many childish aspects to the behaviour of both, and she was loth to own any gift from Irvin lest she secretly began to cherish it – or it one day became the object of acute chagrin. She was still thinking about this when Carrie spoke.

“What if he forces you into his bed by threatening to withdraw his aid?” she proposed.

“He’d never do anything so *gauche* or overt, meseems,” averred Justina, “but giving in is hardly wise, is it?” she added despondently. “No wonder that he would have me brought out, and all prinked out fine as a lord’s bastard. I begin to feel sullied and guilty. The trouble is, that we cannot be rid of him, now. Poor Carrie, you must be so hurt.”

“Actually, I am not,” denied Lady Caroline, now calmer, as she dried her face. “Not that I condone the wishes of men who would wed one sister but sleep with the other, but I still do not feel hurt, and that is odd, very odd. Maybe it is because, as a man, I do not really want him, but how many females want their spouses? He has a mistress in Town, perhaps two: so even before I have wed him I shall have lost him. The event of his tiring of any of them will only be the consequence of his wishing to replace them, and they will not prevent him from amusing himself in the pursuit of others who make themselves available to him, for I noticed that Society in the Quality is not very moral. Frankly I do not care how many ladies he will have at a time, but as you said, it is different when the quarry is one’s own sister, and the

depredation is within the same family.”

“Caroline, we are alone in this,” warned Justina. “We shall have help from no-one. Our mother does not understand such things, and will doubtless suggest something wholly impractical, like breaking off the engagement. Father is not in the count for I certainly will not tell him and get called whore and something else. Honoria will give abrasive advice –,”

“And has an aching tooth for him, I suspect,” included Caroline.

“While our brothers can do nothing,” continued Justina. “So we have to see. If Irvin does not see my removing myself as a challenge to whet his appetites and takes the deed for what it is worth, then all well and good. If he resumes his pursuit of me, then there are three alternatives. The first, which is according to my natural instincts, is to resist him, but if he threatens, then the second, would be –,”

“To give in? No, Justina, you don’t want to lose your maidenhead to such a man! I can hardly say it – cracking a pitcher (taking a virginity) means nothing to such men!” lamented Caroline.

“I don’t want to give in; I don’t want to give anything,” assured Justina. “That would leave the third way, but he needs to agree, and it is that I should wed him instead of you.”

“Justina, you are half his age,” objected Caroline. “You are seventeen, and he is your senior by exactly that many years.”

“’Tis better than being his whore while you are his wife,” quoth her sister. “O, one hears of strange *ménages à trois* when a pair of sisters are served by the same stallion, but we don’t want ours to be one of those households and besides, that which will get our family off the penniless bench and keep us there is if all the sisters wed affluent if not rich husbands. What Irvin proposes for me will ruin me forever, for I will just be his cast-off and no man will have me even for gold.”

“Goodness knows, Justina, I would be more than relieved, now that I know him better, to give another in the family my place, for he must remain among us, after all the outlay he is making for our sakes, but I would never want to sacrifice you.”

“What if Honoria took your place?”

“If she does, it will be to enhance herself, and the moment she begins to be miserable with him, she will blame me: she will blame us all. She will not offer for to save the family.”

“I am not offering just to save the family; I am offering to save myself. As for him, he will have a humdrum. As long as it is bread (it makes no difference), as they say.”

“Yes, but what reason have you, with two sisters older than you, to wed a seasoned rake, when they would be better suited to the task of being a wife?”

“Apart from Selina, we should consider which of us is the most difficult to marry off and tell Irvin to have her, for finding husbands for the others will be easier. He really should not make a hog shearing of any change proposed: all he wants is someone in whom, literally, to plant a man (beget a child).”

“Justina, have you the patience to endure what he will mete out, and in any wise, my dear, how can you change things now that ’tis all arranged with me?” objected Caroline.

“’Tis very simple: I will go up to him and tell him to have me instead. ‘Irvin,’ I’ll say, ‘I know you want to lie with me, but you are wedding Carrie, so why not wed me instead and let us have it over and done with? She does not mind dancing barefoot and I don’t mind having your plaguey brats, which is better than adultery and incest on my conscience and my

reputation permanently sullied.”

“That could work if he still pursues you now, but what if he draws back now and renews his attentions after he has wed me?”

“Then I should wed him in any wise: that ought to prevent it.”

“What an infernal to-do! Why could this not be an ordinary marriage of convenience like everyone makes?” rued Lady Caroline.

“His lust hangs in his light (‘his lips hang in his light’: a stupid person),” quoth Justina with disaffection. “O, how it annoys one that so fine a man, with such good looks and build, bearing, dignity and taste, having the education and suavity he has acquired, should be but a wanton who is depraved, selfish, self-indulgent and heedless of how much damage he leaves in his wake –,” whereupon she broke off because Caroline was laughing.

“As times go, I love him dearly,” she said.

“I beg your pardon?” recoiled the astonished Justina.

“He had caused the quarrel between us to end,” beamed Caroline, “even if we were at variance originally because of him.”

“It is that place, his home palace: it poisoned us,” joked her sister. “Now that we are away from its atmosphere, we are sane and hale again. I hope we never have him to stay again, or that he comes and visits in the region for long.”

“Are you afraid that one day while he is in the house he will introduce himself into your private chamber and force himself upon you, crowing ‘now you have to be my harlot after all’? My dear, if that ever happens, I will stand by you, and it will be Sir James’s Cotterel’s salad (hempen rope, after a baronet hanged for rape) for him.”

“Will they try Dukes?”

“In the Lords, if another lord can bring the charge, and father, for what he is worth, is a Duke too,” reminded Caroline.

“Knowing our parents, they will say ‘keep it quiet and take the money’, and father will use it to have a hank on him in order to squeeze more out of him, but I’ll be unavenged and end up as a cast-off in any wise,” growled Justina. “None of our brothers can equal him in duello and all I can say is that I hope to God it will not arrive at that.”

“Nor I,” agreed Caroline. “Let us no longer dwell upon this dismal subject, and return to it only if it ever revives itself.”

Even if both laughed at this decision, there was a latent element of gravity in the expression of such a wish, that did not require to be verbally specified. So, after assessing his grace of Irvin, the sisters Woodville proceeded to travel home in his carriage, drawn by his horses, entirely at his expense; indeed the meals provided on the way whether in the cellaret or ordered in advance and waiting on the spit of certain inns on the way were all the product of his purse. Meanwhile the lady travellers made of it a reasonably good journey, attempting to sew, playing cards, or just dozing, as the time passed and the long summer days permitted longer journeys, where the word took on its French nuance, namely a *journée* or an entire day, but for thus being extended by more hours of daylight, invited greater fatigue. The weather being warm and dry meant that they proceeded over many miles at a good speed for there was no boggy mud to delay them, but there was much dust if windows were opened and they had to be, just a little, which made eyes burn, throats choke and clothes look grubby. They did not always talk; for sometimes progress was noisy and they grew tired, but the absence of prattle

did not make the expedition dull. As both were reconciled after their sojourn at Irvin, they were relieved enough to be cheerful, particularly Caroline, notwithstanding Justina's grim revelations in order to clear herself – and which could not be helped in the circumstances, as Caroline generously conceded.

At Hearne at last, after a progress that took them two whole days, they were received by Selina and Julius, for allegedly the old Duke was having one of his interminable discussions, also known as a monologue in his case, with his wife, who was absolutely forbidden to go anywhere while he was holding forth – althô, if it pleased him, he could walk out of a room when another was speaking to him. Devenish and Honoria were required to be present, for his Grace loved an audience, even if it would have loved to be elsewhere instead, for there were duties to attend to, including greeting their sisters, for a horseman from Irvin had reached during the day to advise the family of the imminent return of its daughters. As soon as the said daughters set foot in their home, they were required to present themselves in the drawing room to greet their father – the other members of the family not being in the count – and be showered with loving words and compliments by him, before being asked how they enjoyed themselves, but when they began to answer he grew bored and fidgeted and paced about all over the place, for it was not his mouth and voice dominating the scene, so they ceased, pleaded exhaustion and were peremptorily told to retire. Not that their mother or siblings were allowed to follow, for when her Grace rose she was brusquely ordered to remain: Caroline and Justina were not running away and she would have time to go to them later. In fact he detained them for so long – Selina said it was deliberate because he was not the cynosure – that they were able to wash the dust of England off themselves, and even take a meal, by the time her Grace, reeling from a severe headache brought on by the stentorian lecture, came to see her daughters at last. They had brought presents from London for everyone, including their father who would receive his tomorrow for now he would stall and delay them with his chatter.

Of all those who had gifts, the most disappointing responses were from Honoria and the Duchess. The former glanced over the items, nodded and just said that they would do, while the latter made a fuss about expense and even wept and refused them, which annoyed Justina and irked Caroline, for this was not her manner of thanking them, because it was just her way to reject presents. Ironically, thô they had escaped Irvin – the place, that was to say – they were disappointed once they were under their home roof, with the sound of their father's voice booming interminably below as a harsh reminder of the miserable and oppressive atmosphere that hung over this house. Then as they unpacked, even in separate apartments, both sisters noticed how Honoria hovered over their things, and if much of the family was interested to see what their aunt had bought for them, Honoria shewed none of the excitement which they manifested but grew critical and prying, comparing what they had acquired with what Aunt Lizzie had acquired for her, declaring that even if they were the aunt's gifts for Justina's coming out, they were not of prime quality and unbecoming of a Duke's daughter, for Aunt Lizzie was really rather mean and should have known enough about rank and degree to equip her nieces accordingly, for those second rate trappings with which the Viscountess had tried to introduce her to court sealed the failure there that she suffered. Not to be outdone, and with that speed which her father enjoyed to move from one subject to the next as it pleased him, she bowled out of Justina's room to ask her older sister if the latter had bought

more things for the trousseau, for items of were arriving from other aunts and uncles, but Caroline deftly sidestepped the issue. As she was going to live there, she had left all her latest purchases in this line, assisted by Lady Ashlington, at Irvin in anticipation of her wedding and subsequent removal there. However Honoria's ill-temper was lost in the announcement later made by their mother that on the morrow their father desired to see what womanly nonsense they had brought back home, a demand that was unreasonable and unnecessary, but it could not be helped, for that was how the Duke's mind worked, if ever.

Nonetheless when the morrow came he was no longer interested in women's trash and it was that witch Ashlington who had chosen the items, so there would be pick-penny things not worth powder and shot. He seemed little interested by the effect that London had had on their minds and so summoned Justina, whom he lectured for two hours, affecting the part of the grave father, who needed to have a serious talk with his recently grown offspring, gravely to emphasise her grave responsibilities. All he said was trite and hackneyed and borrowed from dramatic literature, full of timeworn *clichés* with admonitions that as she was no longer a child she had a duty to herself and her family: everyone with whom she associated had to be of value to herself and her kith and kin – words he was vastly enamoured of, repeated very often and conjuring her to take on the responsibilities of a grown woman with so-called obligations of maturity, but his discourse rambled so much that she was lost both as to its point and its aim. Like her mother she emerged with a stinging headache and the refinement of ringing ears now added, dismissing the interlude as a colossal waste of time wherein he played the part of a father with a daughter newly approaching adulthood and saying all the trite things found in plays and novels to shew that he did his duty by properly advising her. Having wasted so much of the working morn in this way, Justina hurriedly changed her garb and hied herself off to the stables, where she had a fearsome surprise, for she had expected to find Julius dressed as was she with straw in his hair, but instead there were three stalwarts in good linen shirts and striped breeches, under leathern aprons, with arm badges, as well as two more horses whom she had never before seen. The three men all looked up and espying her, exchanged amused glances and sneered, and when she ran away to the paddocks, laughed shamelessly in her back. Julius was nowhere to be seen so she careered back to the house, where she asked after him, only to be directed by the elderly duty footman to Lady Caroline's parlour. There he indeed was, clad like a gentleman, even with powder in his hair, among the rest of the family taking part in a lesson administered to Selina. At Justina's precipitate entry, all this stopped, and so she spoke.

"What has happened in the stables?" she demanded, as if appalled by what she had seen there.

"Is it not capital?" jubilated Julius.

"What is capital?" rasped she.

"We have two new carriage horses and three new trained grooms, whose fathers are lesser yeomen on this estate, in addition to the few dads who used to help you both," quoth Devenish. "Neither you nor Julius have to go humping straw and dung about anymore."

"All I know is that when I went there, your capital three new trained grooms, with fathers who are tenants here, sneered and laughed at me," growled Justina irately.

"No wonder," snorted Julius, whom she regarded as an ally. "Look at you."

"Be easy, it was supposed to be a pleasant surprise," interceded Caroline, but already

Julius was laughing and Honoria emitted a deep, short guffaw.

"I don't like surprises. Beside o' that, who's paying?" snorted Justina curtly.

"Well, now that our father's income is not tied up in paying instalments in debts and mortgages –," began Devenish.

"Have the horses really been paid for and have the grooms received any wages?" cut in Justina acrimoniously.

"The wages are due from the Michaelmas quarter," said Devenish.

"And the horse were bought on credit," piped up Selina, knowing exactly what Justina meant, and thus sounding sour and bitter, whereupon Honoria interposed impatiently.

"Fie! One would ha' thought you'd be pleased – or have London and Irvin made you covet a stableful of Barbs and a dozen men in full livery?" she mocked.

"Who said father's money is not tied up in debts, pray?" groaned Justina, rounding on Devenish. "I thought Irvin was making you his agent in the running of this estate, *Marquis*, or does that include the running up of debts?"

"I am Irvin's agent, but father is impossible to refuse," he protested, "and he still has legal rights over this property."

"Does Irvin even know?" she cried, but he bowed his head.

"By goles, you are such a kill-joy!" reproached Julius, irritated. "Why don't you go and dress like a woman for a change? Has London taught you nothing?"

"What sent him to the house top?" marvelled Justina, annoyed.

"Irvin is seeking him a post in an embassy abroad, so he has left behind all his bucolic ways and is now a skipjack (dandy)," said Selina. "He will take a black ship (teak built East Indiaman) from Tilbury and become caper merchant (dancing master) to the King of Siam's daughters."

"She talks such balderdash," snarled Julius.

"Irvin is procuring you a post that I asked for, and already you are a cockalorum (confident little man) with me?" retaliated Justina. "Be happy for yourself, but strut not like a crow in a gutter."

"Justina, go change and we will have tea," recommended Carrie.

"Devenish, as Irvin's agent in handling the affairs of this estate, you should be obeying Irvin, who knows what's what when it comes to dirty acres, not the old codger who owns it, even if you are his son. That is your own heritage you are aiding and abetting on its way to Paltock's Inn (poverty stricken place)," said Justina. "There definitely is a conflict of interests here, for you go against your principal and obey the person he curtails."

"Irvin asked for me because I am the heir and would look to the future," rejoined her eldest brother sullenly.

"And your lips hang in your light so you cannot see further than a short and dirty winter Friday," growled Justina, and strode out.

In the process, she noticed that Selina had followed her.

"What is a conflict of interests?" Selina asked.

"That is when one serves two masters who are on opposing sides and would each do the opposite of the other," replied Justina. "It happens to attorneys; one cannot act for the same parties if those parties are adversaries."

"Where did you learn that?"

“The library is half-full of books on the law, magistracy and parish regulations. Once the Dukes of Hearne ruled half the county and needed to know as much law as a judge. This one is not the acorn that fell close to its parent tree.”

“And you’ve read those books?”

“I’ve looked at some of them.”

“Will you shew me?”

“Of course I will, but not now: I must to the stables to set matters aright,” Justina said.

“Those silly stable hands?” understood Selina. “You should take a horsewhip. I cannot understand all the others, here. A few extra shillings and they are gay as geese in a gutter, when if it were I, I’d keep my hand on my halfpence. They are all ready to spend their Michaelmas rents at Midsummer, and cry, ‘hang saving’ (blow the expense!).”

“That is because once we were flush and they remember that life, craving for it. You do not: for you all is hand-me-downs and turning and winding the penny (making the most of one’s money).”

By now they were at the top of the back stairs.

“I don’t want to end up in the Debtors’ Prison because of my parents and my careless siblings,” said Selina gravely.

Justina put both hands on her shoulders.

“As soon as Caroline is wed, nay, before then, we need to push for Irvin to use all his contacts to find us spouses, no matter of what kind, as long as there is money in it,” sighed the older of the two sister. “Our brothers are plain useless as monkey’s grease.”

On that note they separated but as Selina turned back, she was slightly startled, for Julius had been leaning over Carrie’s threshold and certainly he had heard the last remark, even if he retracted his head as he almost confronted his youngest sister, albeit at a distance. As for Justina, she retraced her steps and appeared before the men, now openly humorous, asking her what she was doing here.

“I am Lady Justina, and I care not to know who you are, but know that I used to do the work of the two of you before you came to serve here, and to tell you the truth, if I had to let anyone go, it would be you, not those two new carriage horses,” she retorted. “Now let me see my horse: she is the black mare, craning her neck over her box door.”

“She’s not yet been seen to,” said one.

“Not yet seen to, my lady,” corrected Justina. “SAY IT.”

The man repeated his words and the appellation on a mutter.

“That’s a good voice to beg bacon you have there,” she carped. “Why has she not been seen to?”

There was silence, but then one of the old hands stepped forward.

“She played up these two shabs and one took a whip to her, so she is mad as a Greek,” he supplied.

“Of course she played up these two shabs; she is a blue-blood,” pronounced Justina and went to let Jezebel, who wore nothing on her face, out of her stall, finding that the mare was giving interested looks of a hostile nature at the men, of whom the third newcomer came to join them, carrying a switch. “It takes three of you to look at a horse? Put down that birch rod this instant, and if you use it on her, I will use you accordingly. Look at the state of the box! One could say it hasn’t been cleaned out in days. What did you when she was away?”

Did no-one carry out the old bedding and wash the paving?" she demanded, and marching out, took up a pitchfork from among those leaning against the walls of the saddle-room. "You are supposed to empty out the place, like this –," she said, hurrying back to the box and filling up the fork, tossed it at one fellow, who was covered in trampled and soiled straw, "and like this –," she continued, aiming a great load at another, who fell into the mare, and she in turn took exception to his proximity and struck him hard, so that he fell face down into the rest of the debris that Justina was shovelling out at them, "hey! You are covered in dirt, your new uniforms are befouled, and that is because you did not your work properly. We'll have to stop the cost of those duds out of your wages. Did you feed my horse at least?"

Three very resentful but stupid looking men stood in a line facing her, and the horse was uncomfortably close to all of them, as she sniffed them from the rear, moving along to and fro behind them and snorting. The result was that they cleaned out and washed the box, while Justina gave her mare a bath, as one old relic mixed her feed, and then she was given to eat, as her mistress dried her down and curried her hide and made her coat to shine.

"Until you three have grown up, I will come and groom my horse every day, and if you hit her, I am sure she will bite your faces off," said Justina. "You will clean out her box and mix her feed and shew her the respect that a person of degree has due to them, for that is what she is, animal or not. In fact, you will treat all these horses well, otherwise go home to your fathers, for these beasts are why you are here. Use them like beasts, they will be beastly. Use them well, and they will be mild as lambs. You'd not know the difference, of course, and before you all set to sneering down your snotty noses, did you really think I would come and groom a horse dressed in paduasoy and plumes?"

All the while she held Jezebel by the chin, and the mare did not move, but as soon as she let her go, she imagined, as hard as she could, the fine black animal rearing up to affright the trio, which was exactly what happened, and off they went, leaving Justina to call the equine gently to order, and take her to the paddock, just walking at her side.

"Do you never use a gob-string, m' lady?" asked one, emerging from behind the barn.

"On you, perhaps," she replied, walking off. "I have never in my life been rude to servants, no matter of what grade, but you rogues are hang-in-chains, all."

Releasing the mare into the paddock, she went to see the new carriage horses who were fine greys, a little coarse but honest and handsome.

"What a pity you are not paid for," she lamented. "I wonder if I have a thing I could sell to put that aright," she added, before turning on the men. "I will return this evening, before sunset, to see that all is clean and sweet and the horses are well. Have you drenched them recently?"

There was silence, and the old hands, behind the new, shook their heads.

"Then you will mix the drench and drench them tomorrow, under my eyes," decreed Justina, waiting for an answer.

It came after a desultory and disgruntled fashion, so she snorted, and walked back to the house. As she was in the upper corridor, Selina and Caroline emerged and came towards her, to join her in her own lodgings, where they helped her undress, and waited aside as she went off to wash, in cold water left in her ewer, while she recounted what she had done in the stables, which excited Selina's mirth, certainly.

"Since those men are come here, the only person to go to the stables is Devenish and

that is haphazard,” recounted she.

“Henceforth, I am going every day,” growled Justina. “Those two beautiful greys are so sweet and if father defaults, like he does with everything, we stand to lose them.”

“He’ll manoeuvre the apostles (rob Peter to pay Paul), like he always does,” dismissed Carrie. “I welcome this as much as you do, but the event of father’s debts being wiped away in our absence, things have suddenly gone to many heads and are changed. There has to be one person among us who remains embarrassed by all of it and ashamed of the conduct of the others, but our family risks becoming spungers and I am the link between them and the source of their imagined freedom to spend.”

“Spend by all means, but first commence with the stable buildings, pray, and then put paving in the yard. After that, hire the fancy servants who have more airs than a lord’s bastard and buy new horses. Meanwhile, what is to stop Julius working? How does he earn his bread decorating the house with his presence? Julius, my old play-mate in the paddock who became my work-mate in the stables these recent years, telling me to dress like a woman? Is Irvin going to be told about this?”

“No,” interposed Selina, “Mamma wanted to but papa forbade it and said it was no business of Irvin’s how the Duke of Hearne spent his income, and even Devenish tried to put a curb on it, but the old man bawled bandog and Bedlam and everyone gives their head for the washing when he does that. He justified himself by saying that Irvin, being a man of the world, would expect him to take some profit from his own funds after the bills were paid.”

“But we’re back in debt,” said Carrie, “and it is not just the horses. Devenish said that there was nothing he could do. He obeys father when the latter tells him not to inform Irvin, even if he has a contract of agency with his future brother-in-law.”

“Irvin used Devenish in order to make it easier for father to bear, and easier for himself to control what father does – if Devenish was a man of integrity, not a moral coward. Does he realise that he is jeopardising the marriage?” postulated Justina.

Caroline bowed her head.

“Even I did not realise it,” she owned. “I wonder if Irvin expected this sort of thing?”

“Spunging *ad infinitum* in the grand manner?” postulated Selina. “Well, he knows from the artisans that papa tried to have them furbish up his apartment when they were sent to prepare the public rooms for Justina’s coming-out ball, surely, for they never went back and did his chambers. When they were working, I went to watch, and the foreman, he was a jolly chap: I asked if I could varnish a panel or two and they shewed me how. From the way they spoke among themselves, it was for the wedding, but they were doing it early so that the ball could be held in rooms that did not look shabby.”

“For the wedding,” repeated Justina. “That looks like there is no way out,” she told Caroline, who baulked.

“No way out of what?” demanded Selina, urgently turning to Caroline. “Ah, Carrie, you cannot refuse Irvin now, he really has us by the craw. What is it to ‘have assigned’? I asked Devenish but had tilly-vally for an answer. The thing is, altho Irvin has paid off all the debts and mortgages, he has had the biggest mortgage assigned to himself. I shouldn’t have been listening, but I was. Besides, Devenish was upset and angry and called Irvin a rogue, so I thought it could not be something good.”

“It means that the large mortgage still exists, and that Irvin holds it,” said Justina. “It

is to keep control of father.”

“That hasn’t worked, has it?” shot Selina.

“Perhaps he thinks that Irvin his son-in-law will never dare foreclose on it, if he does not pay,” quoth Caroline.

“Little does he know,” scoffed Selina. “The Orres were here last week and Lady Orre had only ill to say of Irvin; how powerful he is, how ruthless, how he is not afraid to bring a man to court, but I thought she was jealous for he is very handsome in a deadly sort of way, and she can’t have him, so she will say he is horrid to those who can. You can’t change your mind, Caroline; we are done for if you do.”

“There is nothing like being told one’s duty by someone almost a decade younger than one, but she knows what’s what,” sighed Caroline, “youth and all.”

“Hang youth!” snapped Selina. “If you don’t marry Irvin, I will, and goodness knows that he is old enough to be my father.”

“Now she has made me feel ashamed of myself,” laughed Caroline ruefully.

“You are too young to wed him, pretty miss,” said Justina. “I know he has a face made of a fiddle, but one day he’ll but be a crusty beau (old man wearing face paint) and you’ll still be young and fresh.”

“He has a fine broad back – which is what I most often see of him, when I lean down the stairs as I watch him come inside – and when I have faced him, I noted he has excellent teeth,” approved Selina.

“They’re not his: they were procured from the all-nightmen (grave robbers: i.e. they are false, off corpses),” joked Justina.

“He’s also handsome if a little cadaverous, but that is a matter of face powder,” continued Selina, ignoring her, “if you like that sort of thing.”

“Well, then, get in line,” invited Justina.

“Justina has already offered,” explained Caroline.

“He has took your fancy too?” marvelled Selina.

“No, it is a question of necessity,” half-lied Justina, for if she found Irvin attractive she was close to being repelled by his character. “There you are, Carrie, another substitute.”

Caroline turned her about to lace her into her stays and tie on her underskirts, with their bands of horsehair ribbon.

“But as you asked first, you have priority over her,” acknowledged Caroline.

“Honor is not going to like this,” joked Selina. “O, Carrie, tell Justina about papa, what mamma told you this morn.”

“Mamma said,” commenced Caroline, as Justina pulled on her petticoat over her head, whereupon Selina charged herself with the drawstring, “that during the last fortnight, he suddenly became peculiar, that is, really an odd fish.”

“He’s been that all my life,” averred Justina sourly, reaching for her gown as Selina held her scarf down over her chest.

“Well, of late he is particularly secretive and very touchy about his desk and its contents,” related Selina, as Justina fastened the bodice of her gown over her scarf. “He seems to be engaging in a private correspondence with someone, for he goes to fetch the post himself, all alone, and when he has taken his letters if there is something for us, he will hand it us, after reading it first. He writes letters and takes them himself to the posting house, even

thô the servants or Julius take everything else.”

“He probably has some doxy,” sneered Justina, “for he can keep a secret as well as a colander can hold water.”

“When he has a doxy he is hiding, he turns irritable and daft,” dissented Selina. “Now he is gleeful and goes about praising himself.”

“Maybe that she is a pretty doxy, not like the usual sort of baggage he burthens himself with,” declared Justina, almost ready.

“Mamma believes not,” quoth Selina. “Then there is aught. Every time there is a letter from you, Justina, he has pounced on it first, to take away privily to read; the one to Julius he kept an entire day before we knew it was to him from you.”

Justina, appalled and mortified, stared at her young sister.

“I hope you wrote nought to incriminate or compromise yourself,” shuddered Caroline, white as a sheet, but Justina shook her head.

“One needs to be passing careful, when addressing even a note to this house,” assured Justina knowingly. “Did ever he say why my writings were of such importance?”

“No, but he also looked over Caroline’s letters and made Honoria read them too, just in case he missed any reference to you,” averred Selina.

“This is all very crack-brained,” commented Justina, bewildered.

“Is this related to his odd conduct about his correspondence?” wondered Caroline.

“We cannot tell,” owned Selina, “and mamma has no opinion about it. The others cannot make it out either, but when Julius found that papa withheld his letter for a day he protested, so papa used all languages at him and it made me weep, and I still recall it, the obscenities, too. He is becoming horrible by the day. If I wed, I am going to leave here and never come back even for his funeral.”

“O, I will, to make sure he is truly roast meat for worms,” said Justina. “I suppose you could not warn us about this strictly enforced censorship?”

“Tell that to the horse marines! He reads whatever anyone sends out before they send it and giving it to a servant works not for they are under orders, on pain of immediate dismissal without pay, and they are too old to find work elsewhere, to hand to him whatever we entrust to them, so we write to no-one and send nothing,” replied Selina. “I tell you, when I read in my history lesson about Papist plotters in the Tower and Mary, Queen of Scots, I felt that they were spied on less than we were – and are. Did I say that he went about praising himself?” she asked, in reply whereto they nodded. “Well, he keeps saying that he has the fates of his daughters settled, and is he not clever for it.”

“All his daughters or any in particular?” demanded Justina.

“He’ll not specify and no-one has asked, not even mamma,” declared Selina, “but she believes someone has offered for Honoria or you.”

Justina grew very pale: her father had retained her letter to Julius too long before ceding it, and the letter was about Chatteris. It befell her to wonder whether her father’s secret and clever correspondence was indeed with this personage but there was no way in which she could find out without stealthily ransacking her father’s papers, which he kept under lock and key, and breaking into his desk would invite no end of trouble especially if she were wrong, but if she were not, Irvin would have to be called in to dissuade him from pursuing this senseless course. So she was extremely worried, but she put her time to good

use, for once she was back to being in skirts and being a lady rather than a stable hand, she beset Lord Devenish with a plea to find the bills of sale for the carriage horses, for her own information, because she had given a gold watch away for Jezebel, and she affected to wish to learn how much was the price in money, even if a warm-blooded riding horse was worth more. Devenish agreed and found her the bills after dinner, when her father was napping in the drawing room, because he was somnolent after a hearty meal, for he really was supposed to be reading a newspaper from the latest packet of deliveries. Justina took the bills, requesting to borrow them for the day: her brother did not deprive her of this small privilege, or ask why she requested it. In any wise, it was she who ran the stables, and doubtless she wished to inspect the horses and decide for herself if they were worth the price paid. His mind on other things, Lord Devenish did not ask for them back even thô the day went by, and was not disposed to remember the matter when she went to the stable yard late in the afternoon, to see the animals in residence being given their last feed, to inspect the tackle and to look into every box to see that it was clean with a full hay-net and that the straw was not come from oats. Then it was her turn to dress up for supper, which she took upstairs and thus never saw Devenish again, until after breakfast the next morning, when he found her in riding dress, and discovered that she had already been at the stables and set the men in motion, groomed her own mare before grooming herself, for, she meant to go to market.

Indeed it was market day nearby, and the country roads and lanes would be busy with wheeled, hoofed and pedestrian traffic, taking animals, fowl, eggs, cheese, butter, vegetables, drink, even home-made physick, and in a few cases, needlework. There also would be itinerant pedlars, travelling clothiers, and purveyors of baked goods, but the town was an important one, with even Quarter Sessions meeting here during the year, so that there were inns, shops, a town hall and a splendid market square which was on the edge of the township, permitting the temporary erection of pens for cattle and sheep, especially when the local world assembled for Quarter Sessions and there was a great fair. This day was no such, it was just the ordinary market held once a week. The daughters of dukes did not go to market: that was for yeomen or folk who worked the land at all levels, like a squire. However, the Woodvilles of Hearne were just a great name, and the expression that invited folk to take their noble blood to market and see what they would gain for it applied to them. It was not infrequent for them to send servants for items from the vendors there, such as manufactured goods, so Devenish waxed curious; what did Justina want to buy?

"I want to look at the horses," she twinkled, which was typical – and relevant: she was doubtless comparing prices and the horse dealer who had sold the greys also came there.

However, that was not all, for she reached up over his breast and pulled out his diamond cravat pin, with its golden gryphon setting, and stuck it above the lace ruffles issuing from the soft, shirred batiste at her throat.

"To look pretty," she giggled, and with a skip, pulled her train up over her arm, to scamper across the hall and depart the house, for waiting in the stableyard, all tackled up, would be Jezebel.

Sure enough, this was so, and Justina, dressed in black silk, her hair tied in a black ribbon, and a gold banded tricorne upon her head, made a fine equestrian figure upon such a horse, so both set off, at a brisk canter, looking smart – as a carrot, folk would say, and of carrots were there plenty to buy in town. On her way she passed waggoners, women on

donkeys, children carrying wobbling wicker on their backs because the creels contained live chicken which wanted to escape, and a crone on foot tried to stop her as she swept past shouting that she had an elixir for eternal beauty. As Justina did not consider herself very beautiful even though she was so, she did not even stop, but she rode with some concern for her fellow man, woman and child, always careful not to send them a divot in the eye if she mounted the bank, or leave them coughing in clouds of dust. It was not a long ride, but slower once she was beyond the estate and its environs, for the road, if not crowded, was not deserted or very quiet. Wherever she could, she put the mare through a short gallop, but no-one, except ladies and gentlemen in coaches and open cabriolets, noticed that she rode without the protection of a male escort, which was very shocking of her. She knew that at home, nobody would take the trouble to find out: Justina had gone to market on horseback and what gewgaw she needed after the shops in London was beyond their imagination, except that she was a fool when it came to horses, and doubtless she would return with two more greys to match the two that the Duke had bought.

Actually, Justina returned with nothing. She arrived at Great Hearne Castle in the middle of the afternoon, and went directly to the stables, where she removed the tackle from Jezebel's back and head, and asked that she be rubbed down, that her legs be given a good massage, and that she be fed. She also promised to return once she had changed, so the order was taken seriously. Then she went into the house, and the first person she met was Honoria, who opened her mouth to ask –

“Where is Devenish?” demanded Justina, before her sister could say a word.

“The Stopfords are here; he is with our parents, entertaining them. Carrie is with them,” answered her sister.

Thus Justina was able to change out of riding dress, see to her horse, and put on demurely appropriate clothes again, before she saw her eldest brother, for when she did, her face lit up and she bounced off.

“I have something for you,” she announced, and fled to her rooms.

He loitered in the passage, expecting a small gift or perhaps only his pin back but she returned with two sheets of paper in her hands and a broad smile upon his face. Thus he smiled too: for all her talk, Justina had fallen into the trap set her by her love for horses and all things equine; here she was, dancing along with two more bills of sale. Gaily, she stretched out her hand to him with them in it for him to take, and when he looked at them, he was confused to find that she was only restoring those relevant to the two greys already in the stables. For a moment he stared at them in bewilderment, but then he noticed that the bottom of each sheet was marked with a note that the sum in question had been paid today.

“There,” she glowed, “now you may file away this expense as acquitted.”

“How did you pay for this?” he demanded, baffled.

Justina pointed at his throat where a lesser cravat pin glinted.

“You pawned my cravat pin?” he expostulated.

“I never visit my uncle (pawnbroker); I sold it,” she declared. “I got a good price for it too, judging by what he had in his windows and in his shop: I went to a jeweller and watchmaker and did not put this up the spout (in pawn), I came away with gold in my purse. I had the horse dealer waiting outside and I acquitted the debt, which he wrote off duly. I have the rest of the cash where you will not find it and whatever other debts you have incurred, let

me see the bills, I will go and pay them. You did a serious and stupid thing when you bought these horses: you broke your contract of agency with Irvin and for that, he will break you. Be grateful, I have saved your scrag and Carrie's marriage. This is also a lesson for you to learn that if you want a thing, you have to give something else up for it. You lose a pin: so you have your horses and your position in apposition to Irvin is saved. The next time you do anything so weak, I will sell your best suit to the duddery (old clothes shop)."

Scarcely able to swallow his fury, he put out a hand.

"I demand that you give me the rest of the cash," he ordered.

"I will write to Irvin and if he says so, I will," she replied, so he stormed off.

SIXTEEN

While this heated colloquy was in progress, an element referred to therein was in the first stages on a journey that started from his country home and was intended to end at his London residence, with, as travelling companions, two coachloads of servants and baggage, and a smart berline containing his sister and her son. In a few days they would reach and part company, for Lady Northingham had her own residence in Town, where her spouse was too shrewd to let his son stay, and was liable at once to pack him off to their estates so that he could learn more about land management. Actually, Kit asked if he could sojourn with his uncle, who led a far gayer life, enjoyed entry into fashionable circles and select clubs and Leicester House, as well as the homes of certain ladies, whither he could not venture unless his uncle vouchsafed for him. There was one place that titillated his palate but that he could on no account reach, and that was the inner sanctum of the most golden beauty in London, to whom he dared refer before his uncle as 'Delicious Deb', and whom he coveted above all things, but when he ever had such, he would want more in the way of diversity, and this would his father never allow. He even hinted that he was prepared to have her if the Duke gave her up because it was a tiresome affair to juggle the matrimonial bed with the couch of venery, but apart for being told by his somewhat ireful uncle to hold his maw, his father would never allow him to remain in Town long enough for such to happen. He was taken to his parent's home and on the following day, packed off into the country.

Had Kit been allowed to stay at Irvin House in the Metropolis, he would have been vastly disappointed, for the Duke seemed to be going through an indolent or bored phase, for he bestirred himself little beyond attending the drawing rooms of the few hostesses left in Town who were the wives of government ministers or officials engaged in the preparations for a war with France, for the courts were shut, which was the sign that cucumber-time had begun, or that period in summer when the rich trailed off to their estates and ostensibly there were so few customers for tailors that they had to live off stale bread steeped in the oil wherein cucumbers had been soaked. In fact there still were rich and fashionable folk present, so there was a reasonable amount of company free to attend at these ladies' homes and sit in parlour circles and discuss the affairs of the nation, or make out that they so were doing. The Duke remained at this superficial stratum and did not meddle in subversive politics which generally concerned internal affairs and their guides, of which the great temple was at the Prince of Wales's residence at Leicester House where Prince Titi supposedly plotted against his father and the present administration. His grace did not even go to the gambling clubs, some of them most exclusive, sprouting all along St. James's Street, among the ale, chocolate and coffee houses which were not of the sort in the City where men of business convened to discuss cargoes of cocoa bean or wool, or the freight to be paid therefor, on whose ship. Nor did the Duke venture to the exclusive and rather riotous card parties held among the ton, where there was also plenty of female society both delectable and vigorous seeking adventure of any sort, for gambling itself was such a thrill. Even at the places he attended, he was hardly his usual, haughty, distinctive, domineering, witty and flirtatious self, preferring to remain, and found brooding, in dark corners with the complaint that he was suffering from *ennui*. Every time he and Annesley encountered each other abroad, and the latter asked if he had visited this doxy or attended that masque, he shook his head, and when of an evening Sir Adrian Mortlake came to leave a message at his house that his sister was to call with her

family on the morrow to say good-bye, he was found to be at home. To everyone's surprise, he attended Parliament regularly, and only went to Leicester House because its royal tenants summoned him by means of an emissary, charging him with neglect. Nor visited he the most fashionable courtesan of the hour, knocking on her door with a purse full of gold, and that was usually just for her servant, for to engage her company during some designated night.

Nor had his grace even been to that haven where only he was welcome and received like a conquering hero – with one or two exceptions of petulance now and again. Five days had he been in Town with nothing to shew for it but a pensive frown, which was the other addition to his habitual black, more sombre than this favoured choice for elegance, apart from the grey face powder, and of that he seemed to be using even less than usual. Soon this grim change to his demeanour was noticeable, almost as if it had integrated itself into his physiognomy, and was even much talked of, in conversations ranging from the inquisitively serious to the downright silly, for such was Society: if an heiress eloped with a younger son, the Quality could fuss madly about nothing else, even if the news from the colonies was the bleakest yet, the French had won every battle on the European continent, the stock market had been swallowed by a bear, and London Bridge was falling down. The purpose of this inane talk was to discover what was the reason for the accentuated ducal sternness, and speculation thereabout, Society's favourite past-time, was much indulged in, because not knowing and guessing was more fun than suddenly finding out something trite and reasonable so that spirits sagged and excitement was gone. Among those who participated in such frivolous parleys was Lady Deborah Herriard herself, galled as she was by such talk, shamed by the laughter that attended it, and angered at his neglect of her but, unlike Prince Titi and his Augusta, she could not send an emissary at the risk of her own reputation and the hilarity that would generate in the drawing rooms and clubs, so she adopted a more direct approach and sent an invitation to him to come and sup with her that same night. His grace responded in the only polite way open to him, to wit, by attending that verisame supper table, with its very choice comestible load and its even more choice hostess, whereafter he was expected to shew energy such as the repast had provided him with. Duly he put up a fine and animated performance, whereupon his fellow protagonist ought to have been satisfied, but her sensibilities seemed hard to please, for she was not content to have him eat off her board and dally in her arms, and required to know what he had been about hitherto that needed her to call him here instead of his coming herself. Thus when they had compleated their concerted disportment, she rose to fetch two glasses and a decanter, waiting in her dressing room, professing to be thirsty and suggesting that he keep her company. She did not like the guarded way in which he agreed: she did not know that he suspected her of trying to make him drink too much and apply the adage *in vino veritas*.

"Marsala?" he cried, on tasting it, and almost refused to drink more of this sweet and strong fermentation, but hesitated, watching her.

"Aye," she gurgled. "Everyone is talking of you," she told him, seating herself close to him and stroking the ducal mane.

"They always do," he dismissed.

"'Tis not altogether edifying."

"It never is."

"Everyone is curious about your manner, of late notably changed."

“As the King said when Sir Robert Walpole knelt before him to tell him that his father had died, ‘Dat ist vun big lie’,” he dismissed. “You, surely, do not agree with this nonsense?”

“I do,” she sighed. “You are going about Town in a state of deep gloom and you admix little in company, which silly practice is giving you a bad name.”

“I already have one. This is a great harvest of little corn.”

“You know not what folk say of you!”

“I don’t have reason to be very cheery, Deb. No-one has; does everybody you know go about laughing? As for not mingling, I have been to everyone worth going to and I do not frequent or socially greet those who do not receive me because they think their morals irreproachable compared to mine, when both spouses are wriggling navels, one with her lustiest footman, and the other with his most coming housemaid. In anywise of late I find folk and matters trite. People go through periods in their lives when they would rather be left alone, and perhaps I am in one of those, but I cannot brood on my estates for there are matters of business outstanding that are quickest dealt with in Romeville.”

“Brood? You are not a confounded hen, and besides I ha’ seen for myself that twist on your brow with the Lord knows what raging in your head.”

“Nothing is raging in my head, and on the hypothesis that it were so, it is hardly going to be appeased or assuaged by this kind of ministration. Don’t say you mean well, my divine Deb; I have had a fortnight o’ folk meaning well and doing more harm than good.”

“Could I just tell you what I meant to say earlier, for what it is worth?” she included snappishly. “The *on dit* is that perhaps you have been a-hunting and that your prey led you into a briar.”

“‘Perhaps’ is hardly trustworthy and every time a fellow’s cup seems too low, or he is abrasive, folk will invent that verisame tale about him. It is as old as Westminster Abbey. The day they cease so to do, I will probably fall dead from the shock of it. As for you, I am not here because you wish to warn me or even to relate what malicious gossip I am exposed to. I am here to be questioned about and to account for my activities over the past month. You would subject me to a cross-examination like a prisoner in the dock and at the moment, I suspect that you scarce even value my company,” he reprimanded.

“Lionel, what an odiously superfluous and ungentlemanly remark!” she exclaimed.

“Well, why else was I brought here?”

“You came yourself; you were not brought –,”

“Summoned by invitation,” he corrected, “to keep up the right appearances before me, and as for being thirsty, that is about as true as candle ate cat. You would not have had me fall asleep, before you could inflict upon me this inquisition.”

Lady Deborah snatched the glass out of his hand and set it down on her side-table with a tap, before rounding on him and staring into his face, but before she could speak, he had.

“The answer is *no*,” he stated.

“No to what?” she snapped.

“To your question on whether I seduced someone new,” he smirked.

“And Paris was so dull? All the same old painted faces and flabby white thighs?”

The Duke did not deign to answer.

“Then you visited all your usual favourites,” she sighed, but with a suave and haughty air. “O, I mind not, for I have long reigned supreme over them everyone, from the comely

blowsabella in a haystack to the diamond studded Duchess who smells of stale French perfume and armpits. For someone crossing the Ditch, you returned swiftly. I suppose Paris and Versailles were dull, and there was no hunting there, either?"

"You divined correctly," he conceded.

"You retired to the country. You should have stayed there with yourself for miserable company," she scoffed.

"I was not alone at Irvin: I had Vinnie and her son Kit, with two of the Woodville sisters," he pronounced.

"One of whom you are to wed," she reminded primly.

"You should know better than to see her as a threat."

"In faith, she afflicts me not a jot," she dismissed, with a contemptuous wave of the hand, putting aside her own glass. "From what I have seen, it is that prematurely wily chit, her sister. I hear she was the guest of honour at Irvin so that she could pick up her crumbs, or some spurious excuse. I had no idea that one needed to go so far to convalesce from a sore throat – or was it a churchyard cough?"

That conclusion was accompanied by a scoffing laugh.

"Was that a story Vinnie put about? She's the only one to know. If so, good, the – what did you call her – prematurely wily chit was lured there for another reason," he shot.

Thereat, Deborah sat up, her face grave, and he emitted a crack of mirth.

"I'm not really interested," she shrugged, leaning enticingly back upon her pillows.

"In fact," he volunteered, "I had her sent there because Chatteris was after her: an insidious fellow with invidious tricks, who would strike at me through the unsuspecting kin of my wife-to-be, and the brainless girl would listen to no caution, for she went and made an acquaintance of him."

"So I noticed," she sneered. "All very proper, was their behaviour together, and O, so amiable, even friendly," she resumed, as he watched with suspicion, "except that he should have had more cause to remove her from you," Deborah thus spat out her conclusion.

Inquiringly, loftily, he raised his eyebrows.

"Tell me," she gloated, "at Irvin, when you kissed her, did you contrive to let her see your face or were you masked there too?"

The Duke's visage grew cold and black with stern wrath, and he turned on her, with stony, disdainful ire, the power of a disapproving and disgusted stare.

"I did not kiss her at Irvin," he intoned, his voice sharp and dry.

"But you did here, did you not?"

"And you are jealous," he taunted.

"Of that little belfra?" she scoffed.

"She's not a belfra, my dear darling," he denied mockingly, "she is still a maid."

"Well, she'll not be that for much longer with you in the offing," she sneered.

"What concern, pray, would that be of yours?" he chanted.

"You, my bedfellow, ask me what concern it would be of mine, that you should take another?" she cried, in horror.

"Did you not just say that you reign queen of all the others? Were those words, or do you truly not realise that I do have other women?" quoth he, goring her verbally.

"She is not among the other women, she is a wily, young slut, and she is a novelty.

Nothing titillates the male appetite more than novelty. She will sink her claws into you and hold you like the devil hugs a witch, waving over your head the threat of scandal. Lie with her, and you will become perforce her slave and her plaything, the nut-brown maid of song: she'll ruin you if you succumb to her."

"I thought she was supposed to succumb to me and that I was to ruin her," he chuckled. "Admit it, Deb, you enjoyed your little tirade, and did so relish threatening me with all ills emanating ostensibly from the Woodville girl. In spite o' that, I cannot help but detect a small pang of envy as you affect to caution me, *obviously* with my interests at heart."

"I always have your interests at heart," she asserted.

"As long as they coincide with yours, doubtless," he divined.

"You are such a base creature at times, Irvin," she contemned. "You seem in any wise not to have denied that you kissed the hussy at Ranelagh Gardens that night under a mask."

"My dear Deb, to think that you were reduced to spying on her!" he jeered under a falsely tragic air.

"I was spying on no-one. I was out of the crush, for a little quiet, and who should happen by but the stargazers (very poor, out-of-doors whores)! She will become one at this rate, but that is another matter. O, yes, Lionel, I saw how she fondled you. That girl has the making of a true gobble-prick. She knew not who it was forcing her thus, but how she embraced you – but she knew not it was you and it did her no credit. As for you, Lionel, how you were overcome to be in her arms. I dread to think what would have happened were you to have behaved thus in a room with a couch in it."

"That takes no imagination whatsoever," he waived. "So, the murder is out: Deb thinks I will replace her with Lady Justina Woodville, who will get not a que (1/8th penny) for her noble blood in the market place, but is a Woodville nevertheless, and if Elizabeth, the White Rose of York, who wed Henry VII, was not born one herself, they would all have been put to death."

"Make her your *maîtresse en titre* then and see how long you will last with a girl who is still a child in all but name, but don't come running back to me when you have wearied of her sooner than you expected, for I may not be able to help."

"A sure sign of pique," he taunted.

"No, Lionel," she denied, affecting solemnity. "She will not release you with quiet dignity but make a terrible scandal over your head, and it will not do at that stage for me to come and rescue you from the ancillary dangers of your marital problems. The girl has the soul of a true whore, and they always make trouble, sister or not."

"Truly enough," he seemed to accept, but suddenly cast back the bedclothes.

"Where are you going?" she demanded, almost indignantly.

"Home," he replied casually, rising from her side and hurried off into the dressing room to don his attire.

"Lionel, wherefor?" she cried, querulous and confused, but vexed.

"'Tis where I live, is it not?" responded he from the adjacent chamber.

The lady jumped from her bed, tying on her night gown¹.

"What is the meaning of this?" she barked, bursting in on him, "a new fad, to rush home directly after consorting with me?"

"It won't be the first time, so why the fuss?" he dismissed.

“Don’t prevaricate; ever since those sisters came to Town you pass the whole night here less and less often,” she reproached.

“Deb, you have the tone of a truly crooked rib, a whither-go-ye, who would have me live at Queen Street (house where the wife is the boss). You demean yourself with such words and behaviour,” he decried.

His grace spoke with a coldness so cynical, distant, sharp and supercilious that Lady Deborah found reason to be puzzled.

“Irvin, you are not becoming ill?” she investigated, coming to him and inspecting his face, with a searching frown on hers, “or are you in danger of abandoning some of your friends, not that your way of life must needs change because you will have a wife, however little she is of importance to you, and whatever else she brings?”

“I knew not that I had friends worth the upheaval and effort of abandoning,” he rejoined calmly.

“You are dressing so swiftly, almost as if you were in a hurry to be off,” she complained, dismayed.

“I *am* in a hurry to be off,” he confirmed.

“That would make a change,” she snapped, wandering off, so he shrugged.

“Why all this nonsense now?” wondered he. “Why all this restless jiffing and talk of abandoning friends?”

“I have a notion – an instinct.”

“Share one, but pray explain the other. Notions are abstract but concretely so; whereas instincts are cobweb (flimsy) excuses.”

“Very well,” she consented, pacing but staring bitterly at him. “The friends – or friend – o’ whom I spoke was indeed I, your humble handmaiden. The allusion was transparent as was the meaning, to that I confess.”

“You have a notion we will part?” he challenged, eyeing her with imperturbable and overweening calm. “You have been in the *ton* long enough to know that a man and his mistress are never together forever. Nor are a man and his wife: after a while a marriage is that in name only and they remain fettered for life for convention frowns on avenues of escape such as divorce. Look what happened to Diana Spencer: she wed Lord Bolingbroke and had to be parted from him by Act of Parliament, because she was more a wife out of Westminster (whore) to Topham Beauclerc. Even tho’ he wed her two days after the divorce and was – is – a descendant of Charles II, which is not difficult, she is unfrequentable. When husbands and wives part, the house is flung out of the window, which is why they stay together for three score years whereof but five are barely tolerable and the rest are what the French call *lune d’absinthe*, or wormwood moon. You and I have outdone most married couples, Deb. You have reason to felicitate yourself, not mope.”

“So we are to part, and soon,” she predicted.

“If you wish,” he said simply.

“Pon my soul, Irvin, were that not true, you would never respond thus so laconically; you would deny it vehemently and not reply that it will be my wish: my wish indeed!” she reproached vehemently.

“I would have expected that discretion behoved you not to become involved in my marital problems,” he smirked.

“Ohh, I am being made to eat my words, am I? The person most usually involved in a man’s marital problems is his mistress, and so when you wed, you may or may not chuse to continue coming here, depending on what I decide? That is very clever, indeed!”

“If you cannot eat your words, do not say them,” he advised. “Yet when the axe of scandal falls hard upon my neck, wish you to share the blow with me? I think not. You have gone to great pains not to be reputed as intimate with me; the last time Chatteris and I had an encounter, I saw nothing of you and you came not near me, for you are not accustomed to riding out storms with me. In any wise, there will be more of them; that he and I periodically duel is become a feature of Society in which he is the respectable party and I the thorough-paced villain, so that everyone wants him to win, and the only folk who dare come into the ambit of my society are Ray Annesley and Northingham, who have been my seconds since time immemorial, and how the Quality forgave or overlooked the fact that he gave my sister turnips (abandoned heartlessly) eludes me still, but then, that is the nature of folk of high degree. No-one is even worried but about him for I am a fair swordsman, thô when folk bet the odds are in his favour because he is a master of the art. Now I never begrudge your withdrawals from my acquaintanceship during these periods, and they are renewed according to your estimation of when it is safe to greet me in the street. Why am I not to inform you that no relationship lasts forever, even if some damned Pope made it so for marriage, and our church foolishly adopted it as such, but for recourse to the law open only to the very rich? Consider yourself lucky still to retain your freedom. After all, you have not wed, have you?”

Thereat she recoiled and stormed off into the bedroom, as he bound on his sword belt.

“That was quite a fine speech you made,” she scoffed from the next chamber, “but you cannot blear my eyes with it: there is a thing you have scrupulously evaded mention of, to wit, your intention to make Justina Woodville your next mistress.”

“I had no idea there was a convention that behoved a man to announce to a woman the name of her successor, whether there is one or not. There are unions that come apart because they are in danger of going stale and better that they are put asunder before the worst. This does not happen because a next in line awaits in the wings.”

“Are you ever incapable of telling any truth?” she all but shouted at him.

“If and when I decide to take another woman, would you really enjoy it if I were to bounce up to your door and announce it?” he challenged. “Would it not be better if some truths were buried, let alone hidden behind a film of vagueness?”

“Lionel, I am beginning to find my patience sorely tried –,”

“As am I,” he seconded ironically. “Could you find it in you to phrase one direct question, at least, allowing an answer that would obviate accusations of prevarication?”

Annoyed, Lady Deborah folded her arms and appeared in the doorway, leaning on a jamb as she eyed him brazenly.

“Do you intend to cease visiting here?” she demanded.

“No,” he replied.

“When the goose pisseth (never) or when the maggot bites?”

“I already come when the maggot bites.”

“If your visits become too infrequent, I may decide that you do not come here at all.”

“That is your prerogative.”

“You are prevaricating again.”

“Have you been so full of yourself that you are quite empty or have you ever looked at the two Woodville sisters who came to Town? Both are chucks (sexually desirous), each in her own way, and depend upon it, there must ha’ been a score o’ men who would ha’ liked to dance the mattress-jig with either of them. If I am prevaricating, then you are incapable of asking the right question. I gave you a direct answer: what else do you want?”

“Are you going to make of Justina Woodville your mistress?” pounced Deborah.

“For my even envisaging a copulation with her, I need her consent, and she is not likely to give it. I do not commit crimes upon females, Deb, even if, after five years of marriage to me, ten to one, Caroline Woodville would be ready to swear that crimes are nothing compared to what she will have endured,” declared he bluntly.

“All you are saying is Justina is not ready. I know you, Irvin; your power to make a woman compromise herself is immeasurable,” she averred, then added, on the verge of tears, “but i-if she becomes your m-mistress, I v-vow, I could never see you a-again. ’Twould be too much t-to b-bear!”

The Duke was compleatly baffled by this attitude, but also annoyed by it enough to make a last adjustment to his lace ruffles, stick a sapphire pin in his cravat, and kiss her lightly on the forehead, after which he just slid by her and departed for to collect his hat, cane and gloves from the console table in the hall below. There he waited as his vehicle was sent for and had to arrive, praying that it would hurry and reach before she erupted from her chambers with some dramatics as her weapons, but as his message had demanded dispatch and as his servants knew their master, they were at her door as fast as they could muster, which allowed him quickly to leave the house. On the way home he gave the post-coition discussion some thought which basically consisted of what Lady Deborah had seen in the berry-brown maid that made her so afraid of competition against this other, but he lost no sleep over it, and on the morrow, it was out of his mind altogether.

On the morrow, he had business to attend to, and it seemed to him that sooner or later he was going to have to make some sort of tour to his industrial properties, about which he exchanged a welter of correspondence with his managers on the spot and his agents whether here or elsewhere, which useful labour was repeatedly interrupted by less useful morning calls, from folk who came because the complement of the Quality was not full and they had fewer people to visit, so they had to make do even with the disreputable as a last resort, on condition that the said disreputable had money, acres and the political power that went with owning certain types of privileged land. Most of the time these were hostesses with inclinations to meddle in the affairs of Parliament because they had sons to place or husbands with interests to assist, which gave them some influence too, and as far as he was concerned, they were a nuisance, unless they could be turned to his future advantage depending on what he was capable of doing for them. Among the later comers, however, was his friend, Sir Raymond Annesley, and then, for the first time, he remembered Justina, for she did not like this individual, who had behaved rather cavalierly with her and thus richly deserved her disaffection. Unlike the others who visited, and were put in a drawing room, so that the Duke had to leave his desk and his secretary and agent, in order to go to them, Annesley was summoned to the rather private enclave of his luxurious study with its valuable woodwork and inlaid pieces, while the personnel were dispatched to work in the library. Furthermore, when he had other callers, the Duke did not always send for ratafia cordial and ratafia biscuits

or Madeira wine and a plain cake named after the drink for to accompany it, sometimes called a tipsy cake if liberally doused with and consequently immersed in the same liquid, but in the case of his friend Ray, there was no question about it: Madeira and tipsy cake were immediately required. As for Annesley, he loved stretching out in Irvin's study: the armchairs that were deep and cosy with upholstered head wings dating from the time of Queen Anne but newly refurbished, and the view, from the great windows behind rich draperies, of the trees in the square, set him at ease and gave him the comforts of affluence properly used. His calls were not for purpose but to chat idly, even if he had several more to make and could not stay long, but they were not necessarily preceded by a call card, for he had certain liberties at Irvin House. Sometimes he brought news and gossip, for he had more freedom of movement than the Duke, even if he lacked the other's wealth and power, much of it latent, and it pleased him that if he wished, Irvin could crush those who dared exclude him for propriety's sake when truly it was a case of merely keeping up appearances. The fact that he did not act against them was purely academic.

"I'll tell you what I saw today at the Devonshire *levée*, where-to you did not go," said Annesley.

"I go if there is a real drum (crowded confusion) and I am not so conspicuous, for the Duchess is too proper, her spouse having a reputation for such integrity. As the Quality is thin on the ground now, she may come sidling up to me and either ask me a favour for her husband that is political and I perform no political favours before witnesses, or, she will sweetly wonder that I bothered to come, because she needs me not, which is a hint that I am not welcome in her – O, so proper rooms. As I am a duke and of antient lineage, I may leave as early as I like and do not have to wait for the departure of the most exalted person present, unless there is a royal prince about. Accordingly I stayed away and preferred to do the unthinkable: namely, work."

"Well, perhaps it was just as well," commented Annesley. "Your Deb was present, and wearing a widow's cap, just like the old style, but without the great black veil and the black robe that distinguished them from the rest of womankind when in full mourning and made them look like popish nuns. Some widows still wear this special garb but there are fewer and fewer of them, and widowhood is noticeable but by black wildebore, without frills or braids; indeed, some widows even wear caps either indoors or under their hats, like other females, but Deb was in an old-fashioned widow's cap, with a ruffle all around her face and a pleated ruff laid from her throat over her breast, except it did not reach her corsage or even her tucker, and one could see the bulge of her bobbies between the two."

"That sounds like a true bill of sale (widow's weeds)," stated the Duke acidly, "not that I am familiar with the form of widows' caps now, if at all, but I do recall my grandmother having to wear a cap like a closed hood, with a goffered collar, except that under it was a chemise in white, and over that a great, loose gown, in which merged, as the eye could not easily distinguish it, a large, black veil pinned to her cap."

"Well, Deb has donned the cap and the goffered thing, and her gown was not fashionable yellow but pale grey, as if silver," supplied Sir Raymond. "Of course, it did not passed unnoticed and you know folk: they will pry, but when asked about it, she glossed over the matter, to the extent once, in my directs sights, of looking down mournfully and abruptly changing the subject. Tonight there is a crush at the Darlington's to take leave before they

retire into the country, for they have an invitation to go into Staffordshire and shoot blackcock. If you are not going, I will certainly, and I mean to look out for Deb to see if she is in this strange disguise.”

“Dear God, Annesley have you nothing better to do than compile intelligences upon the number of times a person has worn a jack boot or a cover-arse (sleeveless gown)? Frippery nonsense!” chided the Duke, laughing.

“Come to think of it, Deb’s was a cover-arse gown,” mused the Baronet merrily, and far from being offended, added, “I care not a jot for others but I do follow Deb’s progress with interest, on account of you.”

“Is it because of my marriage in the offing, that you await the moment when I discard – no, she is, all the same, more than an item of clothing.”

“She is an item that you wear upon your stretcher (big willy),” sniggered the visitor, “aside of which, since when has marriage made a man discard his mistress? All the same I would be interested to know if you two do mean to part.”

“Are you being shamelessly intrusive or do you want to bid for her affections?”

“Why, we’re friends and I can be honest. The answer, Irvin, is both.”

“Just a question, and I’ll not be irate at the answer,” quoth the Duke, as if he were recommending the subject. “Have you already had her?”

“O, crimes, what wouldn’t you give to know!” whooped his friend.

“Not a fig, actually,” owned his grace, and at once remembered that that was the first word Justina had addressed unto him.

“About this widow’s cap: there were a few folk who wondered whether it had to do with you, as the lady was most unforthcoming,” said Annesley. “Was it?”

“‘Gip!’ quoth Gilbert when his mare farted (addressed to pert, forward person); do you ever handle everything without mittens (handle roughly)? Fathom it out for yourself.”

“Well, her spouse was put to bed with a mattock a goodly while ago, and you have not wed her and suddenly died, so all I can guess, is that you have been up to some roguery and she would chastise you for it in her dainty way,” quoth Annesley. “I doubt she that she would make an example of you: that would be too dangerous.”

“Or perhaps, that is her message to me. Women do not wish to be put aside; they want to be the ones who dismiss,” assessed the Duke. “Go to her with my blessing. Apart from that, I am flattered; you present me like a concept to be most feared.”

“The most feared concept should be God.”

“The most feared concept should be an evil being of some sort. When we fear God it is because we fear that we will end up in Hell, and what we really then fear is Hell.”

“True. You do have guts in your brains when it comes to the theological.”

“Diabolical folk usually do.”

“To return to Deb: I am strongly persuaded that you induce her to end this foolish masquerade. ’Tis in your interests, for apart from making you both ridiculous, there is another, serious implication.”

“All men are ridiculous when linked with women, and all women have been ridiculous since time immemorial. Deb assured me that she has kept our affairs very secret, and I spoke none of them, so how could folk, even a few, ask after her disguise as related to me?”

“There is gossip, there are leaks,” sighed Annesley, “but now you are not seeing the

wood for the trees. I said serious implication. When a man parts from his convenience, the possibility reigns that she is free to receive the attentions of his rival.”

“Chatteris will go after her? My dear Ray, come aloft this instant and I will drive you myself to Deb’s bed so that you may roger her lustily and lay your claim at once!”

“Jesting apart, even if she and I wriggle navels on a habitual basis, what if, to spite you, she makes herself *maîtresse en titre* to him?” warned the Baronet.

“Let him have her,” dismissed Irvin. “There will be no scandal.”

“Your fifth duel with him is sure to follow, for she will make up a reason for him to challenge you, if you don’t fight him over her –,”

“And I have no intention to fight over her.”

“So then it is true that you have given her up?” recoiled Annesley in consternation, to his friend’s extreme surprise.

“Far from it. We had an argument during which she was disposed to make a jealous scene, so I decamped while we were still in a state of mutual coldness. It is what I do, if ever... for I do not wish to discover if she is capable of getting on the high ropes (becoming furiously angry), screaming bandog and Bedlam, and all Hebrew (unintelligible speech).”

“I still cannot believe what I have heard: you would let her go to Chatteris and you will not challenge him?”

“That is because she is not worth fighting for.”

Annesley still remained disturbed and incredulous.

“If he publicly insults me or is a gunner (harmful liar), then I would challenge him in any wise, with or without there being a Deb in the background,” said Irvin.

“Next, you will say that it would be capital were he to take her off you,” snorted Sir Raymond, exhaling in exasperation.

“Were his timing to be right, I’d probably be grateful,” remarked Irvin, with a twinkle in his eyes.

There was a scratching on the door panels outside, and when the Duke answered, a black footman entered bearing a valuable salver upon which were folded papers under seal.

“The posts, your grace,” he announced. “Master Hickeringill suggested that this one be brought at first to your grace’s notice,” he added and turned his salver as he proffered it, delicately indicating but not touching the item even tho he wore white gloves.

The Duke accepted, and uttered his thanks, taking the special letter first and laying it on one side, before he told the man to tip the rest upon the desk tray. Then the flunkey was politely dismissed, and so he departed.

“He speaks better English than I do,” marvelled Annesley.

“He should. He was born in England and spent his life among our household servants, first as my father’s page and then as a footman. He is therefore an Englishman, certainly under the law,” explained the Duke. “His father was our previous major domo, bought from a slaver, and freed, for there is no slavery in the Common Law.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Most people don’t know that, especially the holier-than-thou Dissenters who went across the Herring Pond to found a new Israel in the Americas and began by massacring all the local population – whereafter they imported black men and enslaved them.”

“I thought the local population massacred the white man,” defended Annesley, in

something of a small huff.

“What would you do if suddenly a boat load of Spaniards marched into your native county and declared that it belonged to them? Give your head for the washing?”

As he spoke, the Duke of Irvin broke the seal upon the letter of importance in his gnome-like secretary’s opinion, but then put it down.

“Don’t let my presence prevent you from reading that,” encouraged the visitor. “If your secretary pointed it out, it may be urgent.”

“I rather think he is having a joke at my expense,” said the Duke sourly. “It is from Caroline Woodville.”

“A billy doo (a billet doux)?” teased his friend.

“When two Sundays come together,” grunted his grace, unfolding the communication. “’Tis a veritable thesis: what can she have to say to me on two sheets of fools-cap?”

“Read it, Irvin; I’ll sit here and make nought but tooth music (noise of chewing),” encouraged the caller gravely. “There may be something important therein.”

The Duke relented, the sensation of heat rising within him as a peculiar nervousness shook his frame. Neither of the sheets were covered in more than a paragraph of screech, and one of them, only, had Caroline’s hand upon it. The other was from Justina. It was this other that he read first, and Annesley perceived that his countenance grew grave and tense. There was but a note of thanks for his hospitality at Irvin, written according to forms and formalities, a curt, polite note of duty alone. It took him but moments to finish and he put it down soon, calming himself and recovering his composure, to take up Caroline’s missive, which was longer and friendlier, thanking him for the good journey they made home according to his arrangements, and for enabling her father to employ three more men in the stable and buy two more horses: her way, indeed, of being honest with him about the old Duke’s shameless greed.

Altho’ palled by her father’s action in thus taking advantage of the Duke’s financial help and her brother’s moral weakness, and hoping that her affianced spouse be apprised of this clumsy impingement, Caroline herself had no desire to write and inform him thus; she had been goaded into the act by Justina, who was so disgusted by this avidity that when she began her note of thanks to Irvin she announced her will to inform him of it. Well able to imagine what she would say, Caroline undertook the difficult task of dissuading her from execution thereof on condition that the bride to be did the same instead, at once, and Justina would ensure that it was posted. In Justina’s opinion, Caroline’s performance was inadequate for she wanted Irvin somehow to ensure that her father was cured of extravagant follies merely by having them prevented. Nor could she comprehend why she could not write of this to Irvin herself, for a little direct language hurt nobody, but Carrie was as astute as she was discreet, knowing that if their father became troublesome about Irvin’s interventions, his vexation at his loss of face would not be directed at his would-be-son-in-law, whereupon she was ready to shoulder the blame alone, for she would soon be leaving this house, even if Justina thought too ill of her own father, especially after his unspeakable verbal abuse, to fear the effects of his ire, deeming that whatever happened, he would always have a petty excuse for quarrelling with his family – to cool his madness, as she now put it – so it was less galling if he had a true reason for insulting them than just a fit of bad temper that needed indulging.

In fact, the Woodville family expected a quarrel to be imminent at any moment. Apart

from grumbling incessantly every day, the Duke of Hearne had not made any verbally violent scenes with obscene vituperations at the expense of his offspring during his daughters' absence or since then, but still went about expressing self-felicitation and no more, not even the monologue harangues to which he was so partial. In the Duchess's opinion, this poor substitute for harmony had gone on for too long, and the Duke's conduct was still strange; now he was so jealously protective of his desk that he would not let the housemaid dust it, and when a footman went about the cabinets in the study with a feather duster, he stood and watched, with mounting impatience. He still collected the posts himself in addition to his usual censorship, and so Justina had him read her letter of thanks to Irvin but no-one shewed him Caroline's, which was slipped in as she folded her own, and sealed it under his gaze, so that, for all he knew, the *fiancée* was too shy to write directly to her betrothed, and he laughed at her for it. It was too silly, so she had to blush, and that was convincing enough.

Hitherto, the Woodville offspring were free to ride about the environs as they wished, and that, indeed, was how Justina went to market, but all at once, the Duke imposed a ban on their leaving the house without his consent, but for Honoria's work in the garden, Justina's monitoring the stables, and his wife's inspection of the poultry yard. Henceforth, they had to say where they were going, why and for how long they were expected to be abroad, when they had to take along one of the new, sneering grooms with them, who had to report to his grace whether they did as they said, and that included the menfolk, while Justina and Carrie were bound to the immediate grounds, even if Justina wanted to ride her horse, for she had to stay in the Park and be accompanied by a stable hand. For all his rules and restrictions, the Duke did not withhold permission for any of these limited outings requested him every day, nor forbade visits to neighbours, until, a fortnight after they had returned home, he absolutely refused that they call on the Stopfords, to whom they owed this attention. He would give no reasons herefor, and shouted at the top of his voice when Justina inevitably requested to know more, even if he later sent them a message by way of the Duchess that they were free to go, if properly escorted, to see Sir Robert Orre's dam, but they were not presently interested in it and as it was in the opposite direction to that which they would have taken. All the same they accepted the compromise lest it was going to be the last time they were ever allowed out again, but there was one exception, whose movements were limited in any wise, and that was Justina. She refused to go anywhere that she was not wishful to see, and just rode in the Park, but not to parade her rancour or defiance before her father. All the same she witnessed, shortly after the others were gone, the Duke departed on his horse Ajax, with a groom for an escort, because a duke was supposed to have an entourage, and away he went on some secret venture, for when Justina returned to the house, she found her mother alone, wondering whether her father had locked himself in the study, whither she dared no more venture. It was the rebel daughter's very great pleasure to report on what she had seen, and so it was obvious that the Duke had wanted to remove his family from his house so no-one of wit would behold him go, so little he respected his wife. He returned before they did, and was surprised to find the Duchess step out of her apartment as he sneaked up the back stairs to go to his lodging.

"Where have you been?" she asked, in a tone of mere interest.

At once he turned purple with rage, and his response exploded in a fit of rolling eyeballs, quivering lips and stentorian accents, in the words:

"DON'T QUESTION ME!"

Later, he was smug and self-satisfied, but he would not say where he had been or what about, which led to the concerted fear among his wife, his eldest son, Caroline and Justina, that either he was up to something of dubious legality that he mistakenly thought profitable, or that he had embarked upon some disastrous financial enterprise which he had convinced himself was a stroke of genius on his part. Selina propounded the theory that a doxy was involved, Julius offered to raid his desk that night, but Honoria was past caring, and grumbled that no-one was doing a thing to find her a spouse.

The following day, none of the younger folk thought to go out very far, for Justina exercised the horses in the paddock and the Duchess sent Julius to help her, but the old Duke set off again with two grooms this time, while forbidding his sons to call on Sir Robert Orre, at least until he had returned home. No-one asked him what his business was but when he was back from this excursion it was in a flurry of excitement and with a mouthful of orders, for on the morrow a very special guest was coming to sup, and naturally the whole house was turned upside down in a quest for the best wares and linens and wines and foods. Altho she was obliged to obey her husband's thoroughly foolish and impractical suggestions, the Duchess managed to arrange all provisions for the event according to her usual practices, even if he criticised everything and found fault with every stage in the proceedings, but everyone knew that had she followed his orders, the whole event was destined to be a disaster and a shame. Doubtless the Duke knew it too, in the end, but he would never admit thereto.

Much to her grace's disgust and anger, as well as the astonishment of her children, this supper, that had been arranged with such upheaval and uproar, was only for the Duke and his guest, for not even the mistress of the house or the heir apparent were allowed at the table, or even in the drawing room before or after the meal, so the Duke was going to have to pour the tea – a woman's task, and the younger Woodvilles joked that he was thus a 'cotquean' for it. For something so small and private, there need never have been as much fuss as the Duke had made. The Duchess and her progeny were commanded to stay away from the lower storey and the lower flight of stairs, while leaning over the bannisters was forbidden as was watching from the windows. He nevertheless forgot the stables, whither the guest's equipage would be taken for his horses to be removed from the shafts and both fed and watered, even if the three, new, sneering grooms were sure to report the intrusion of anyone from the house who was not a servant. As for leaning out at window panes, the Duke had only made himself ridiculous for issuing orders which he could not really enforce.

The guest's vehicle appeared in the drive, but even that did not please his grace, who had delayed and dawdled during his toilette and thus complained that the other was early, so he grumbled about rushing as he dressed up, and fretted about the inadvisability of keeping one so important waiting alone. Thus it was with the greatest pleasure that the Duchess pertinently reminded him that he had forbidden her and Devenish to go near the fellow, otherwise they would have been able to keep him company. Upstairs in the tower, Selina was keeping watch on the carriage as it arrived, and she had chosen this spot because it was too high and too sheltered for her to be sighted from anywhere, let alone below. Julius and Justina were already at the kitchen door, and strolled to the stable yard even before the guest's conveyance could reach it. Their venture was no idle spying attempt, for Justina did the rounds here of evenings and did not have a set moment upon which to inspect the place, and from the servants' point of view, it was predictable that she would come to see if the visitor's

horses were properly looked after and truly enough, she sought to be shewn the content of the feed tubs that would be placed before the carriage animals. In fact she behaved as if these young men were not quite sure of their work, however much it annoyed them. Thus, the two siblings were bravely and brazenly in the yard, stolid and nonchalant, when the carriage was driven into it. A parade of exquisitely liveried servants met their eyes, assembled upon and guiding an extravagant coach, the panels of which were painted with gilded cartouches that contained, each one, scenes of allegory set in beautiful landscapes, while the delicately shaped brackets themselves were, on closer inspection, not just the usual S or C shapes extended or distorted, but also embellished with swags of acanthus, roses, tiny tumbling cherubs and cupids, and atop the door, a nobleman's coronet, nestling in foliage which made it hard to distinguish, even if Justina thought that it was crowned by simple spikes with a ball pricked upon each one, but Julius swore that it was more elaborate and doubtless that of a Viscount or a Marquis. The new stalwarts engaged of the Hearne estate felt dowdy beside their bedizened colleagues, and so one of them asked who was their grandly equipped master, only to be told that they were under orders not to say and that they meant to keep their posts. Justina had paused to listen to the question in anticipation of hearing the mystery solved, but the disappointment she suffered made her take herself in hand swiftly lest her face, her shoulders and her entire self visibly sagged. Another thing she noticed was that the visiting servantry did not feel comfortable when she drew near the vehicle and stood in her way if she looked as if she were about to approach it.

At last, the two siblings returned to the house, retiring to Carrie's parlour, where they found everyone but their father assembled. They described all they had seen and related all that had happened, which, in the latter case, was precious little but significant enough, for the visitor himself wanted to be a secret; he had six splendid chestnut carriage horses but unless they stood atop a step-ladder they could not make out what coronet he bore, and his servants were not going to give them that liberty. The fact that he was titled did not impress these scions of a duke, but the fact that he was wealthy enough to own such an equipage and dress up his servants so handsomely interested them all, even if the occult nature of all was admittedly alarming.

"I heard his voice," said the Duchess. "He actually managed to slip in a word amid your father's endless booming. There was, however, nothing distinctive about it; it was an ordinary English baritone with no faults or affectations of speech. It was a mature voice, not that of a very young man, but voices are deceptive."

"Effectively, you've told us nothing, mother," stated Justina.

"What about you, Selina, in your watch tower?" wondered Julius.

"He wore a hat and a silver wig, but I could not see his face. I think he was a dads (old man)," she replied, "but he did not stoop or limp or walk like he had a foot in the grave."

"Was he tall or one of King John's men (undersized)? Was he as thin as a cow in the waist (fat) or was he herring-gutted (skinny)?" pursued Justina.

"He was tall and robust," supplied Selina, "with a broad expanse of shoulder."

"How was he attired?" asked Julius.

"In a suit in full, all of silk, *bleu de Berlin*, I think it was; very fine, his waistcote bedaubed all over in gold lace, really rum," continued Selina. "It matched the lace in his hat."

"Did the clothes look new? I mean to say, it was not James I wearing the same

breeches until the seat grew threadbare net-thin and shewed his arse?" pursued Justina, even tho her mother tried to stop her speech but Selina only laughed and assured them all that everything about the visitor looked new.

"Except him. I don't know, but I had a notion he was no chicken (no longer young)," she asserted.

"I wonder what he thinks of our resident Bedlamite," mused Julius.

"Well, that says little for us, for we are half our father," noted Caroline.

"*I* wonder who he is!" exclaimed Justina, annoyed.

"I have never been so humiliated in all my life," grumbled the Duchess, which was very untypical of her and surprised her offspring.

"I wonder if he is a future husband," mused Honoria.

"If so, why the hugger mugger?" challenged Devenish. "With Irvin, mother and I were in on it at the first jump. I wonder if he is a present-day creditor."

"No thanks to you," growled Justina, and with a mechanical gesture, he reached for his cravat pin. "Be easy, I cannot go anywhere to put anything up the spout (in pawn)."

"The idea that he could be a great creditor we don't know about is very frightening," said Caroline and shuddered, exchanging a glance with Justina.

"What if I just casually stroll across the hall as the old man is seeing him off?" suggested Julius.

"You will pull an old house down over your head (cause terrible trouble for oneself)," warned their mother.

Then came a servant to inform them that supper was laid out in the nursery and so thither they all went. The Duchess asked if the Duke had taken the guest to sup already but was told that he was to be called in a few moments, and that he had given orders for the family to be at meat and shut in, when he and his companion moved across to the dining room. There was some remonstrating, but nothing could be done: even an idea to go barging in on the Duke and the guest, the entire family participating, was abandoned, lest they all made fools of themselves. So out of sheer ignorance and self-respect, they obeyed.

As for the guest, he departed a goodly while after his meal, by which time the Duke of Hearne was somewhat drunk and shouting instead of speaking, so it seemed that the visitor elegantly and diplomatically put an end to the wonderful time they were having. As soon as he departed, her grace went to her husband, who was as drunk as she suspected, but instead of being loud and ill-tempered, he was loud and voluble. He was also extremely excited and exuberantly cheerful, talking and talking without a pause, and the resonance of his voice meant that all his children, much against their will, could hear his speech, but none of it led to anything informative: all he did was recount how he dazzled his guest who was in his pocket and that his attempts were bearing fruit. Then suddenly he bellowed an order, 'CALL JUSTINA', whereupon he was reminded that it was late at night and that everyone had retired to bed, for there were some who had to be up early in the morning in order to work about the house and grounds. In fact, withdraw as they had to their respective rooms, none of this doughty company could sleep what with all the noise he was making that bounced about the castle corridors and stairwells, and the news that they were unavailable made him garrulous and aggressive. Then all went quiet, and Justina, reading abed, to try and calm her nerves frayed by the agitation of the evening, was about to put out her light, when a tapping sounded

upon her door, followed by a call.

“Justina? ’Tis only your father,” said the Duke of Hearne.

Astonished but also troubled, for she did not want to face the night with a string of abuse ringing in her ears, Justina jumped out of bed and pulled her night gown over her night shift, going to the door to open it. There he stood, her father, in a maudlin and sentimental state, beaming and grinning and sighing.

“Ah, my dear Justina, my lovely daughter, my very life and soul, come to me and let me kiss my good child, the greatest and best of children,” he sighed, holding open his arms, as this paragon whom he had just described believed not a word and was sickened.

She did not step into his arms, but she just smiled a false smile and fidgeted with the folds of her upper garments.

“Is something the matter, sir?” she inquired.

“WHY should there be anything the matter?” he thundered. “Why do you suppose that whenever I call you, something is wrong?”

“I beg pardon, sir,” groaned Justina, wincing at this highly strung display of touchiness at an imagined slight. “I meant to ask, why do you want me?”

“Call Caroline. Go call Caroline,” he ordered in excitement, with some extravagant, sweeping gesticulations.

“She’s asleep,” lied Justina, for no-one could have been sleeping through all his noise.

“What? So early?”

“’Tis past midnight, sir.”

“O! I beg pardon-pardon,” he interpolated.

“Why did your grace call for me?” she persisted.

“Just to look at you. Can I not look at my own daughter?” he seemed to melt, and she was most discomfited.

“If it is all one to you, sir, may I now retire? I have to rise early to see that the horses are properly taken care of and exercised; if you have to go out, you’ll need Ajax to be –,”

“I may not go out,” he shrugged, and eyed her. “What a great child I begot.”

“Why? What have I done?” she wondered suspiciously.

“You are a credit to your father,” he declaimed, “just like me, the achiever of great things. Only one Season in London, and the whole Town already at your feet. Go to bed, child, go to bed. There will be time to talk in the morning.”

“Is your guest coming tomorrow again?” asked Justina.

“No,” denied Hearne, “he comes on the day after.”

¹(night gown: this used to mean a dressing gown or a day robe)

²(bleu de Berlin: Prussian Blue)

SEVENTEEN

Just as his best, favourite and most frequently worn garments in his vast and fine wardrobe, were of the infernal shade, so were the vehicles in which his grace of Irvin personally travelled, and so keen was he to preserve the appearance of their dark, sinister splendour that all the carriage horses who drew them were black, in the truest sense of the word – or coat – and either carefully bred or selectively bought in goodly numbers, for every member of the relays he sent out before he travelled was of this sombre appearance. Of course if a progress was particularly long and he lacked the horsepower in terms of adequate teams, he would have to hire, but he always began and ended a journey with his own beauties of Stygian hue. A column, two by two, of six, shimmering, glowing, steaming black animals, sleek and strong, their backs and necks shining blue and silver in the sun, in black leather harness lightly decked with accoutrements of solid brass, their bits made of silver because he was sure that any other metal would poison them, hurtling along as they towed a spacious black travelling berline, the patina on its plain panels bearing a close resemblance to shellac, all made an excellent and outrageous display of wealth translated into the expression of habit and affectation. For those who preferred material and inanimate objects to the overall effect of an exhibition of fine beasts, the carriage itself provided sufficient to admire, with its smooth reflecting surface, brass lanterns, gold painted mounts too sparse to be frivolous, clear, large, shining glass windows, and the ducal coronet under the window-pane of each door, without any other embellishment or abundance of mock luxuriance, howsoever pretty. Four postillions helped the drivers to control the team and a dozen outriders rode at its flanks, fully armed, while the footmen lashed to the back, as well as the second driver all carried a type of heavy, long-barrelled firearm, with five bores that had to be manipulated by hand and turned on a screw to bring them level with the firing lock so that once the weapon was muzzle loaded, it could be fired five times in quick succession, in addition to the brace of double barrelled pistols at each belt. Inside the cabin itself, there lay many fine items of the gunsmith's art included a century old wheel lock, encrusted with mother of pearl, turquoise, agate, silver leaf and citrine, extremely difficult to service and to load, but accurate and deadly in the right hands over several hundreds of yards. Among these engines of death, were books upon a folding desk attached to the fitments and upholsteries in pale blue, and a cellaret under the seats, not to mention cushions, a fan, reading lamps, blankets in Merino wool, and a long languishing human body of respectable build and perfect proportions. The Duke of Irvin was on his travels again.

In this fine style, all his physical and mental comforts amply provided for, his grace proceeded with speed towards Hearne, emerging from this haven when the horses were changed, to submit to Mother Nature and duly wash his hands at the posting house pump, for he was not among those indolent folk who carried a bottle with a long narrow neck, to save the trouble of halting, so that the interior of their vehicles ended up smelling of their own urine. In his pocket was Caroline's letter, and ostensibly that was the reason why he was coming with such speed, realising that the family were embarrassed and afraid that their father would do something foolish and excessive to the point of prodigality, hereby provoking the ducal wrath and most frightening of all, punishment. Thus on the basis that prevention was better than cure, let alone correction, he had been applied to for aid before matters became too complicated. It was to his credit that he intended to stay nothing of the fact until he was

certain of the expenditures concerned lest others suffered unnecessarily for it, and he would not talk of extra servants and new horses, it being his progress to impress upon the old man, who believed that seniority in years gave him more knowledge and sense than others, that there would be no more spending until his finances were in perfect order, and then they could recommence with reasonable acquisitions and meanwhile he had to make do. The discharge of his obligations did not relieve him of responsibility to live frugally and instead spend freely as he pleased. Yet altho Irvin was coming because of Caroline's letter, there was no need for him to have brought Justina's as well, and even if he used it as a bookmark, he did not periodically have to unfold and stare at it and imagine her hand upon the pen that has written those simple words. A polite letter of caution to Hearne was all that was theoretically necessary, but had he been asked thereabout, he would have replied that that could have served with a normal person whereas the older Duke aforementioned was too difficult and likely to wreak out his wrath upon the innocent, which the son-in-law was going to forestall. Then there was the fact that Justina Woodville lived at Great Hearne Castle too.

The Duke of Irvin arrived at Sir Robert Orre's in the afternoon while the family were finishing a late but copious dinner, which did not prevent the Baronet from going out to greet the arrival in person, and in all his gestures and mannerisms, he behaved as if his grace was expected here.

"Once again a-wooing, your grace?" he teased, for he was the archetypal bluff, country squire, who, if like every Englishman who loved a lord, nevertheless had a less subtle sense of humour and was therefore very chuff even with his superior, who would have to cut him down to size if he did not want all this nonsense to continue, for it did. "All of Prospero's imps and tempests could not keep you away, eh?"

The Duke simply bid him the time of day and stepped out of his carriage, attended by servants at door and steps, but there was no-one else with him.

"Heaven be praised!" cried Orre. "That 'thing' is not with you."

"Hickeringill?" divined his grace. "I often wonder why he is found to be so offensive, for he is under orders not to be. Perhaps his resemblance to 'Tom-Tit-Tot', according to Lady Justina, I heard, may have something to do with it."

"The servants will have some respite, probably for that reason. You know how rustics are prey to superstition."

"Granted, but respite from what?" asked the Duke, and when Sir Robert was lost for an answer, which probably meant that he did not like 'Tom-Tit-Tot' and the servants had no part in the matter, added, "well, sir, am I to be invited in, or left out here? On the subject of superstition, there is one in Central Europe about Nightwalkers who leave their coffins to prey on the blood of the living and dress, supposedly, in black, even if I do have a green velvet suit in my baggage. They may not enter a house without the permission of its habitual dweller. I ha' no idea that the belief has reached England intact, even if our Mediaeval ancestors had some sort of pestilential creature who likewise bothered them, according to northern lore."

Sir Robert laughed, for the Duke's churlishness was best suffered as a cause for amusement than that of upset.

"Given the choice," he chuckled, laying a hand on the visitor's back, "I'd gladly leave you out here, but come along in with you; we are finishing dinner, but the previous course may be fetched back if you wish."

"Thanking you, but I have already eaten," declined his grace, wriggling his way out of this familiarity of touch.

"I am relieved to see that you did not bring a muff. Firstly, all the ladies of my house began to save feathers to make one each so the place looked like a flock of birds had passed this way and shed. Secondly, I am not used to seeing muffs in the hands of us men," said the host, as they mounted the steps of his manor.

"They are all the rage at Versailles," the Duke taunted, just to see how the good Englishman would respond.

"So is the Malady of France (V.D.), but it don't mean we need to contract it," quoth Sir Robert crisply.

"Know you what they call it there? The English disease," smirked the Duke as the Baronet gave him precedence in crossing the threshold. "I am not using a muff for two reasons: it is not the weather for such and I detected a hint of envy when your bevy saw it, which was most tiresome."

"One of these days, Irvin," began Orre with a groan, "I am really going to have to challenge you to a duel."

"Not a bad idea at all," approved his grace. "I will at last discover with whom my sister Louisa's loyalties lie. The last time I ate at her table the loaf of bread opposite her turned upside down, signifying traitors at table."

"I hope you are funning, or else the pox of a Frenchman upon you," cursed the host jocosely, at which the Duke turned on him a glacial smile.

"It will have to be a Frenchwoman. I don't have a preference for duncarring (sodomy)," he replied softly.

"Now that we are indoors, perhaps we should respect the sensitivities of the ladies," recommended Sir Robert. "Althô you told me to expect you, I could not guess what reason brought your grace here."

"Apart from the opportunity to gaze with rapture upon your charming spouse, that which maketh the mare to go (money)," answered the Duke.

"Which, I hope, is of greater importance to you than my crooked rib," half-jested the host, for with Irvin, one could not be sure.

"Shall I pay my respects to the ladies?" suggested the Duke.

Sir Robert waited as a footman opened the doors to the dining room, and the company at the laden table all rose, so his grace advanced to the lady of the house and gave her a proper bow and a *baise-main*, before he greeted the offspring, with relations and friends all awaiting their respective turns. This meant that the Duke was going to install himself and begin whatever errand it was that had brought him here, or commence work on whatever preparations the errand itself necessitated, but while engaged in the ritual of politenesses, his grace became another person to the slightly irascible, overweening and sarcastic personage who had plagued his host so far, and so adopted the most charming of dispositions towards the hostess and her female company. The ceremonies over, the meal recommenced but for the baronet being obliged to see the guest to his apartments, where he was bound in any case to invite the Duke to table if the latter changed his mind.

"Is there anything you need, Irvin, apart from water?" asked Orre.

"A man to carry a letter," said the Duke, "but discreetly. It is for Lady Caroline and I

would rather her papa be not the first to read it. Indeed, I would be most grateful were that to be arranged somehow.”

“You’ve come a-wooing. I knew it,” cackled Sir Robert. “Not that I am nice as a nanny hen about such things. In this house we are not of the namby-pamby pili-piss variety.”

“I wish that you would not quote from the so-called work of Henry Carey, even if he was making fun of Ambrose Phillips for writing some poems for Lord Carteret’s small daughters, while his lordship was the ban (Lord Lieut. of Ireland). Those were silly, pretty, innocent verses for the nursery, and there was no reason to poke indecent fun at the children or the ditties, and his satire is therefore far worse than the work he lampoons so mercilessly, so that it sounds like the ridicule of a jealous man, which always splashes back on suchlike detractors. Sour Grapes, my dear Orre.”

“You completely puzzle me. I would ha’ thought you’d enjoy such a work,” commented Orre.

“There is nothing clever in words like: ‘And again, Nancy Cock,
Nasty girl! Beshat her smock.’

The verses, if not full of pissing, are full of shitting and the man definitely had the through-go-nimble (diarrhoea) when he wrote it, if not in his guts, in his brains,” scoffed the Duke.

“Let something be left sacred in our vile world, at least, such as the simple games of small children, however silly they are and however childish are the verses.”

“Not that Phillips was poorly paid for his *enfantillages*,” observed Orre.

“You wish me a French pox and you use French words? All the more reason to doubt the validity of Carey’s satire; he envied the man his pay for writing nursery rhymes,” quoth the Duke. “Besides I have a fundamental objection to the words which begin Carey’s poem which really goes on for too long. The words ‘namby pamby’ vex me inordinately. When I was a little boy, I was something of a namby pamby and oddly enough, it was not the other brats I had to play with who made a hog shearing of it, but my own family. I think that that is why I am now become so virtuous, benevolent and blithe a person.”

Sir Robert Orre looked alarmed as a gleaming grey gaze was turned upon him.

“The innocence of small children should not be toyed with, I grant,” conceded the Baronet, colouring somewhat.

“Just innocence will do, my dear Orre, if ever it can be found,” said the Duke.

“Well,” said the host, moving aside as the first box was carried in, “I will leave you to your toilette and your screed.”

“It will be no screed, just a note to tell her that I call at Hearne on the morrow.”

“And that has to be a secret from the old Duke?” asked Orre, bemused.

“It needs to be a surprise to him, but not to her, for she expects me not, unless you –,”

“You pull the wrong pig by the ear (chuse the wrong person), Irvin; I have not seen anyone from that family of late,” asserted Orre. “I’ve heard tell, servants and the village, you know, the bucolic mumblenews, that there ha’ been some singular goings-on in the castle of late. The old man will not let them out without an escort and they have to state whither they are bound, while he rides often to the Stopfords’.”

“To reach Hearne from here, as the crow flies and cross country, rather than by way of the village, does one not have to cross some of Stopford’s land?” recalled the Duke.

Sir Robert confirmed that was so and winced at the noise made by servants setting

down trunks and the last items of baggage.

“The goings-on at Hearne concern me not, unless they relate to excess expenditure, but I daresay that I will find out, incidentally and as a matter of course, what beleaguers them, for whatever that is worth. I am not here to pry into family affairs, but to ensure that the old man knows his place, that is all.”

“That sounds ominous; why, has he taken out another mortgage?”

“No, he has engaged more grooms and bought more horses. A man is free to purchase what he can afford, but not to make free with another’s monetary support. Know you anything about this?”

“My dear fellow, when the Duke of Hearne does something he’d like to crow about, he acts like his own trumpeter is dead,” confirmed Orre. “I think the entire county knows about his purchase of the horses, and from one of the best dealers in it. He made a great parade about it”

“Has he also paraded the fact that they have been paid for, and if not, how he shall pay for them?” intoned the Duke.

“We cannot ask that, but he announces that all his monies are now free for his full use, so that he is going to live like a duke again.”

“And you believe it?” sang the Duke of Irvin.

“Egad, he tells lies by the gross, I never know what to believe,” owned the baffled baronet, watching as the visiting servants at once began to open up the boxes.

“Precisely. I am here to find out about all that,” the guest replied primly. “I am not his banker, and I cannot be engaged ever to pay off any more debts that he accumulates. At present, I am buying and paying for Lady Caroline. I am not obliged to go on paying for her during the rest of her father’s wasteful life.”

Sir Robert laughed wickedly, joined by the other, but whereas the former was merely expressing amusement at Hearne’s predicament with a healthy, neighbourly malevolence, the latter was compiling excuses: if asked how he had learned of this expenditure, he could allege that what was known to an entire county was also known to the Duke of Irvin, so as to spare naming Caroline as a source of information, for Justina would never forgive him if he betrayed her sister. Not that he would even have bothered to invent pretexts if the future father-in-law sought to interrogate him, but here was a good one, which threw fault back on the perpetrator and appealed to his sense of irony. So he wrote a note to greet Lady Caroline, and told her to inform her father that he would call tomorrow during the morning, but that she should tell him no earlier than tomorrow itself. With the scrip prepared and sealed, it was carried off, and a stable boy in the service of the Orres rode with it behind a groom, who set him down at the edge of the park, through which he stealthily made his way to the garden, where Honoria and Selina were weeding and mulching. Honoria was known in the district for her prickly temper, but Selina was just a girl, and as they were far apart, he crept up to the nearest bush, and leaned about it, hissing to her and hushing her when she looked up in surprise. His letter in his hand, he ducked about the shrub, extending it to her, and after pointing towards Honoria, put his finger to his lips. Selina understood and took the note, giving him a marrow for his pains, which was all the gratuity she could spare, and he understood, for she was scarcely older than was he. Then he slunk out and she read that the envelope was addressed to her eldest sister. Slipping it into her apron pocket, she called to

Honorina that she had to visit the withdraught a moment and retired into the house. There, she hid herself to Caroline's parlour, where she found her sister preparing to come into the garden to work, and handed her the note.

"Tell us what is in it when you have read it," she requested, and departed.

Caroline paused to read it, but was so unnerved at being held to secrecy in apposition to her father, that she dared talk of it to no-one for the present, and that meant, the whole day, while Selina had the wit not to ask, lest it was some embarrassing love nonsense. However, on the morrow, as she presided over the breakfast table, she opened allusion to the subject.

"It does not rain, it pours," she said. "We are under a deluge of mystery."

Her siblings turned to her in inquiry and Julius even asked an obvious question.

"Two evenings ago we had a mystery guest to dinner whose name, credentials and purpose we know not. Late that same night, father went to Justina and told her how marvellous she was," continued Caroline, sounding latterly very doubtful about her father's motives. "Now, this," she demonstrated, holding up Irvin's note. "The Duke of Irvin is staying with Sir Robert Orre and is to call here this morning."

"How on earth did you learn that already?" demanded Honorina. "None of us have seen mother or father yet."

"It was delivered to me in the garden yesterday by stealth," related Caroline, omitting Selina's part in the matter, and Selina had the wisdom to look bland, "Irvin is here, he arrived yesterday, he is calling this morning, and I am not to tell father until today, which means now. He does not say why, but I am willing to wager that it has to do with money."

"What if it has to do with the other matter?" asked Honorina.

"What would that be?" asked Julius.

"The mysterious person who supped here," responded Honorina. "You see, I have given the matter some thought. The unknown comes here and remains concealed from us, and that same night, father goes gushing to Justina. Of us all, he is at logger-heads with her the most, and never for a moment would I have suspected that he would have spoken thus to her: he was so loud that I heard every word, and my rooms are not far from hers. It was my confirmed opinion that the mystery guest was come to ask for her hand, but not necessarily for himself, for if he is a dads, as said Selina, he could be a father negotiating the marriage of his own son, who saw her in London and chose her because of it. He could not just ask for her hand; his family would have to agree, for she has but a Cambridge fortune, like all of us, and so his father came to talk to our father – her father – about it. Coroneted or not, they could be new money, and newly raised to the peerage, so they would want to create a dynasty and strengthen its eminence with some old blood. We may nigh ha' gone to Bath (become beggars), but we are old blood, and these new, rich families are not interested in portions, they want pedigree. That is how I see it. As for Irvin, he may have had wind of it, and would know more, lest it compromises his marriage to Carrie."

"That's all we need. Our father shooting a pigeon and killing a crow (making a deliberate blunder)," growled Julius.

"Perhaps the terms that dads has held out are more lenient than Irvin's," postulated Selina. "Irvin practically owns us –,"

"Yet he has committed himself and spent money, so father cannot replace him," protested Caroline, "for he cannot pay him back."

“What if dad agrees to reimburse Irvin?” suggested Honoria. “Yet why Justina? If Irvin is being replaced, the bride to be should be Caroline again, and if not, it should be I, not Justina, for I come next.”

“You said that the son saw her in Town,” reminded Selina. “His father would ask for her, not you.”

“Yet father should have imposed me on them: I am the elder sister,” argued Honoria.

“It is all one to me,” included Justina. “I have just been racking my brains for a candidate and I can think of no-one. Besides, it is not like father to be pleased if we shine in company, for it is *his right only* so to do. When he came and praised me, I was sick and then, I was affrighted. I did not even think of Irvin.”

“Justina, Caroline, you both stayed in Irvin’s country house; have you no inkling of what it could be that brings him here?” pursued Honoria.

“I am pretty-ish well sure that Irvin’s arrival in the region has nothing to do with father and his mystery guest, and we know not if the latter has any marital concern with Justina,” declared Caroline, in a clear voice and dogmatic tones. “It is money, that is what it is.”

Justina gave her an expressionless glance: both had reason to know that much, for both had reported their father to him and believed that he was come himself to bring the old Duke to the level of seeing sense about the use of another person’s money.

“The most difficult part of this is that I now have to go and face father and shew him a letter that escaped him, with information in it that I withheld, and that too, in obedience to Irvin when I should be obeying my father, not a man who is not yet my husband, even if legally, after we are wed, he takes priority in my loyalties,” sighed Caroline.

“Just don’t tell him. Just let Irvin drive up and give the old man a surprise,” proposed Julius, but Honoria emitted a huffish gasp.

“That is deceitful! It is bad enough that Carrie kept quiet about it until now. If she does not tell him, I will tell him myself,” she disapproved and threatened.

“The danger of not warning father is what if Irvin opens his discourse with the words: did your daughter Lady Caroline tell you that I was due now?” warned Justina.

“I think I will face the music and take the letter to him and make him read it,” said Caroline. “Live, horse, and thou shalt have grass.”

“How was it delivered to you?” asked Selina, as if to make certain of her.

“As I described just now,” assured Caroline.

“He will never let you out into the garden again,” cautioned Honoria, narrowing her eyes. “See where deceit leads?”

“I care not if he shuts me away. Ere long, I will go from here and Irvin, I believe, will not impose such strictures upon his wife as will father on his errant daughter,” quoth Caroline.

“If it is about money, then Irvin knows we have two more horses and new grooms,” fussed Julius.

“What of it?” shrugged Justina.

“He may dismiss the grooms and send back the horses. I don’t want to muck out stables again, I don’t want to be a drudge until he finds me a place in a far off embassy, I don’t want to rise at five and toil all day like a stable hand!” he cried.

“You should listen to yourself,” mocked Justina. “He may send off the grooms, aye, but the horses are paid for.”

“They are on credit,” asserted Honoria. “It happened when you were away, so you know not o’ these matters.”

“Ask Devenish,” invited Justina.

“Our lives are very confused,” commented Selina. “I don’t think that the Orres or the Stopfords live like us.”

“Our lives are confused because they are in the hands of a man who is like Magnificat at Matins,” said Justina, looking around her. “Have we finished breakfast?”

There was a desultory muttering of affirmations.

“Good, so may I adjourn? I have some mending to compleat,” she added.

Caroline bid her leave, and with Honoria, loaded up two trays and then rang the bell. Julius fretted about the time Irvin was taking about finding him an idle place at an embassy and Honoria tried to silence him, but a servant came and Caroline asked her to take away the trays, so she picked up one, promising to return, except that the eldest Woodville sister carried the other out after her.

“I’ll leave it at the top of the stairs,” she said, for which the woman was most truly thankful, and which she duly did.

However, instead of returning to her parlour, she paused at Justina’s door and tapped on it, sighing with relief when she heard the other reply. Entering, she found her sister preparing needlework.

“I have to mend this petticoat,” said the latter.

“Put it aside for the moment and get your hat,” recommended Caroline. “We need to coze in the garden, lest there is temptation to listen at your door.”

Justina laid her workbasket and her garment on her bed, and went into the dressing room, muttering her sister Honoria’s name.

“Exactly,” acknowledged Caroline. “She has come up with marriage as an explanation for what has happened of late, and must be champing at the bit about the speculation that she has engendered out of it, so I don’t want her attending to what I have to say to you.”

As she finished speaking, Justina emerged, deftly tying her hat ribbons behind her head, under her bun of plaited hair, so Caroline hurried off to fetch her own *bergère*. Thus equipped against the morning sun in their eyes, the twain bustled off in a swish of taffetas and Irish poplin, to descend the back stair, from the top of which the second tray had vanished, but they did not speak until they had reached the physick border of the potager, where they slackened their marching pace to a saunter, truly like elegant ladies in a garden.

“So now what is to do?” wondered Justina. “By the way, you do realise that Irvin is here because of what I made you do?”

“I think as much but I cannot be sure, for it is such a speedy response,” said Caroline.

“I only hope that there is not too much rumpus and riot as the result of us peaching on father,” stated Justina. “It has also occurred to me, for I seem to have more hair than wit, that his arrival here gives him the chance to pursue another course under cover of the monetary one, and that course, my dear, is after me.”

“Could he even try, with you on your own ground, and all of us to protect you?” Caroline tried to appease her sister.

“Carrie, I am in awe of you. Were I to have a spouse who went after a sister of mine I

think I would not be so generous to her as you are to me –,”

“Justina, you know how I really feel about Irvin now, for I have found him out, and as I am destined to be his wife, I can hardly rebel and thus be the instrument of my own misery; I must be resigned and achieve some sort of peace of mind notwithstanding, to enable me to bear his children, and raise them responsibly, to be loyal to both parents, for I consider that, if left alone to his own devices, he will be a tolerable spouse. I know that you have not invited or encouraged his pursuit of you, so I cannot blame you, any more than I can prevent him taking fancies to you or other females. Do you see, it is not just indulgence towards a member of my own family but the need to learn how to bear all his faults and peccant habitudes, all his women and all his whoring and all their laughter at his silly yokel wife behind my back. Surely, if I am to accustom myself to all these circumstances, I will have room in my heart for you.”

“I already feel like a whore,” sighed Justina. “When is he to call?”

“This morn – I had better give the letter to father and have a peal rung in my ears,” recalled Caroline.

“Attend, does not ‘dads’ also call today?”

“So he does but we don’t know when, for father is very secretive about him.”

“If the two visits risk clashing, he will order you to write to Irvin to stay away.”

“Tina, one cannot write like that to Irvin,” protested Caroline.

“When it comes to putting a hat on a hen, going for a horse ladder and numbering the waves, our dear father is the first to command it,” sang Justina.

“I-I had better go and give him that confounded letter now, for the matter is on the carpet, and the sooner I get my head washed without soap, the better it will be to have it over and done with. Will you come with me? Safety in numbers, and after all, he has been in a good mood with you of late,” decided and requested Caroline.

“If being left alone and not called whore and something else is tantamount to being in a good mood with someone,” assessed Justina. “It is not an easy life here, and I do not mean owing to the lack of money.”

“My dear,” sighed Caroline, “life in a family is never easy.”

“And so much sanctity is attached to the value of family, that it is akin to an idol with feet of clay,” lamented Justina. “We have an unequal company, for not everyone performs an equal share of duty, and the whole is complicated by our august father. I do wish that he had not made so much of me that night when he had ‘dads’ to sup. Honoria overheard and is in a real tirret (fit of temper) about it.”

“Think no more of it. She turns poisonous from time to time; it is her way. The trouble is of her own making: she imagines that you are to wed, and we know as much about that as one can put in one’s eye (next to nothing),” consoled Caroline.

“We know as much about ‘dads’ as one can put in one’s eye,” remarked Justina.

With that the two sisters returned to the house, put by their hats and sent a servant to fetch out their mother, who was seated with the Duke, as always. It was through her that they solicited an audience with his grace, which was at once granted, all a matter of hollow ceremony to make the faded Duke feel like a duke, even if such a demand on his part of his own children was not unreasonable, except that in his case, as he was impecunious, it seemed a trifle ridiculous to these grown daughters of his. Thus, as Caroline had asked, Justina was at

her side when she went into her father's presence, and shewed him the note from Irvin that had been delivered yesterday, much to his annoyance, for it had reached her without his prior knowledge, and Justina persisted in insisting that he had overlooked it, which made him feel stupid and thus did not help his mood. However, he did not make much noise or indulge in much passionate anger thereabout, or fuss that Irvin had told his betrothed not to disclose his advent until this morn; he only seemed irked but not unduly alarmed thereby, as if it were unnecessary and inconvenient, while appearing to be wholly oblivious as to what the visitor could want. Indeed he even turned on the sisters and demanded to know if they had done anything while staying at Irvin to offend its grand owner. There seemed the matter to be concluded, and the two young ladies thought their task executed, feeling glad that their father did not open any discussion with them about it, for he dismissed them, retaining the letter and tossing it aside, as if he would forget the whole for the present.

An hour later, Justina was summoned into his presence post-haste as the consequence of one of his peremptory behests. She was in the stables, and had to run indoors, where she found him sentimental again, and even over-affectionate, languishing as he gushed with fulsome praise, and even wanted to kiss her hand, which she declined to allow ostensible out of respect for his own venerability and rank. Then he made a request.

"Now go to your rooms and wash the smell of the stables off yourself," he urged, squeezing her shoulders. "Don one of your best gowns; go put on some finery."

"I have no finery," refuted she sullenly.

"What mean you, no finery?" he thundered, rounding on his wife. "Surely that horrible slut your sister bought her something after I sent her all the way to London to stay with that old bitch –,"

"Sir," interposed Justina boldly, "one would have thought that you were doing Aunt Lizzie a favour, and not she doing us one."

"She did us NO favour. I never accept favours. Now go put on a pretty gown – and some rouge – and borrow some of your mother's jewels: I want you to look splendid, like a grand lady. Do not wear anything dull or dark. Have you a red gown?"

Rather dazed, Justina shook her head.

"And be pleasant, smile!" he ordered gruffly. "Do not make all those horrible grimaces of yours! The scarf which Irvin gave Caroline; wear that scarf!"

"Saving your grace's favour, 'tis hers, not mine," protested Justina, averse to touching something to do with Irvin, let alone wearing it.

"What is all this for?" ventured the Duchess at last.

"Why want you to know?" he bawled.

"I just asked," retreated his wife, annoyed.

"By when must I be ready?" asked Justina.

"By ten o' clock," he said.

"Is it for Irvin?" she probed cleverly. "Shall I tell Carrie to be ready too?"

"What has Irvin to do with this?" he demanded.

"He is to come here this morning," reminded she.

"Why does nobody tell me anything?" he exploded.

"We told you an hour ago," announced the Duchess.

"You didn't remind me that my friend was coming," he accused her.

"I did not know when he was due, morn or afternoon," she rejoined.

"I did not know that he was your friend," muttered Justina, but her mother glowered at her in warning, lest her father should hear her gibe.

"What is the meaning of this: you did not know?" he roared.

"You forbid us to question you about him," the Duchess riposted.

"Pah!" he spat. "Very clever, all of you. You throw my words back in my face. I know you; you're all against me: you're all awaiting dead men's shoes (awaiting inheritance). If it were not for the law, I'd disinherit the whole parcel of you! I'll shew you, I'm master in this house."

Hereupon Justina rushed to the doors.

"Don't you dare to go out when I am talking!" he shouted after her.

"Sir, it is not a half-hour to ten, and I need to clean up and dress my hair, as well as be laced in. Nor will I be on my best behaviour if all you do is scream at me and seek knots in a bulrush (find fault where there are none)," she dared.

"Just listen to her, the little slut, *retorting*," he growled. "How *dare* anyone RETORT to *me*! Ohh, my chest hurts," he groaned. "I must sit down."

"Go, Justina," said the Duchess, whereupon her daughter fled, only to be met on the stairs by Caroline, Selina and Julius.

"Heard all that," muttered the last-named.

"You must be deafened by now," commented Selina.

"Come along now, Justina," hurried Caroline, taking her sister by the hand, "let us get you dressed up. Why, O, why does he have to quarrel so violently before something important is to happen?"

"So that if it is to be a nasty event, we will be done for even before it begins, with no moral strength left in us to sustain us in order to resist him, which will give him his way and let us suffer all the more," responded Justina bitterly, "and, if it is something good, we shan't enjoy it at all for he will have spoilt it for us in advance. Now I don't feel like dressing up for or smiling at anything."

As they trooped up the stairs, the Duchess called from below.

"You girls! Get yourselves ready, all of you."

"I'm not a girl," laughed Julius.

"Not you, your father does not want the men –," she recommenced but then called, – "wait a moment."

On that note she hastened back into the drawing room where the old Duke had been shouting out a torrent of incoherent, gabbled instructions. Presently, she emerged again, and mounted the stair, atop which the quartet still awaited her.

"He has changed his mind once more," she stated tartly. "Only Justina is to be ready. So must I; he is letting me into his secret at last."

"What about Irvin? He could call at any time now," reminded Caroline.

"Irvin has to wait. I quote: *let him wait!*," the Duchess sneered.

"Then I had better be ready too," offered Caroline urgently. "Someone has to be with him when he comes. He cannot be left to wait alone."

"Yes, mamma, that's rude," added Selina.

"My dears, well do I know it, but your father is most adept at making enmity and

biting the hand that feeds him,” the Duchess said. “In fact, at first, he wanted all the girls to sit with Irvin, because, as he said, Irvin likes girls and I had to organise it, as if I were the bawd to my own daughters. He is enough to make a wise man dumb and a cat speak.”

“Queen Anne’s dead and her bottom’s cold (stale news),” said Justina, and scampered off to her rooms.

Actually, even thô she managed to make a proper toilette and dress, being laced in by Selina, Justina did not leave her apartment, for she was determined not to stir until she was sent for. Meanwhile, the mysterious visitor arrived, of which fact she was made aware by Julius, who called at her door to ask if she were ready, which she was, seated in a chair repairing the opened petticoat seams after all, but she would not come out so he went in, finding her dull and cold, but left as soon as Caroline emerged from her parlour and summoned him away; indeed, Justina could hear the tactless fellow inquire why even as he walked off down the corridor. What her father was doing, whether he was ready to receive his guest, or if he were already with that other, she knew not: all she could hear was his voice booming around the house and it irritated her but also made her nervous, and she cynically wondered whether its timbre was responsible for the tumbledown state of some of the outbuildings. She bowed her head over her needlework and tried to concentrate her wits solely upon it, feeling like a prisoner at the King’s Bench Gaol or Newgate waiting for a sentence, and resolved never to visit such places where folk liked to go when they were sightseeing. Then all at once she was aware that Selina was standing on her threshold.

“Mamma says that you must go down now,” the girl announced.

“What else is she saying?” asked Justina, putting down her work and rising to her feet.

“Nothing, but she is furmity-faced (white-faced),” warned Selina.

With a nod of acknowledgment, Justina sailed past her sister like a proud galleon, feeling as if she was part of Phillip II’s Invincible Armada destroyed, for the most part, off the Lizard by Drake and Raleigh and the English Weather. All was silent in the corridor upstairs, for neither speech nor laughter emanated from Caroline’s parlour; evidently they already knew the nature of Selina’s errand. Justina went briskly down to the drawing room and tapped on the doors; her father’s voice replied from within, bidding her ingress, so she worked the latch, and crossed the threshold. Upon her entry, her father and mother rose, as did the tall guest. It was the Earl of Chatteris.

Upon beholding this latter personage, Justina halted, taken aback, and looked upon his lordship with parted lips and round, startled eyes, as her amazement at his presence rose while the thought that he was the reason for her father’s odd conduct astounded her. Her incredulity amused the Earl, for a bright, even kind smile broke on his face, while the Duke of Hearne, brimming with anticipation, almost seemed afraid of his daughter’s response rather than looking forward to it. As for the Duchess, her consternation and alarm shewed in her blanched countenance. However, his lordship took control of the situation at once, holding out his hands and marching purposefully across the room to Justina.

“My dear Lady Justina, what a pleasure to see your jolly, pretty face again,” he greeted, “and are you not surprised to see me!”

For an instant, Justina saw the still body of a woman, her skirts filled with air, floating on her back in a fishpond, her feet encased in pretty shoes with fine buckles and high heels. Then she came back to her senses, unaware that under her tan, she had grown deadly pale.

“A-a-astonished, sir,” she owned, placing her fingers in his outstretched palms.

“As long as that is all, I have no call to protest,” he joked, leading her in and shutting the doors behind her. “Just don’t be aghast.”

“Not yet,” she half teased and her father cut her short in any case.

“Be easy, sir,” defended the Earl, “I know when a lady funks, and I like it. Where would we be without our jokes, after all?”

“I have an answer but I’ll not give it, in such refined company,” she rejoined, so totally taken aback by his presence that she was even awkward of gait, of which he took advantage, as he laughed, to hold on to her, for indeed, he truly did steady her.

“Er – perhaps your lordship would like to sit down?” invited the Duchess, her throat so dry that her voice grated.

The Earl thanked her and made for the sofa.

“Go sit by his lordship,” the Duke ordered his daughter.

Instead Justina preferred a straight backed chair opposite his lordship and in defiance of parental decree, occupied it, whereupon the Duke smouldered like an awakening volcano.

“I’m flattered,” the Earl accepted, “for I had no idea that there was anything left at which to look upon.”

“There always is,” she said with an equivocal snigger, which should have warned him off but evidently did not.

“I am glad to see that you are both already good friends,” the Duke stated, but did not sound very happy.

“Are we?” wondered she, addressing the Earl.

“No,” he denied, diverted, “for I’d hardly say that you were old enough, little madam.”

All she did was laugh in his face.

“The Earl has something to say to you, Justina, so listen carefully,” instructed the Duke unsparingly.

“O, no, you say it, sir; you are much better at talking than I am,” proposed the Earl.

The left handed compliment told Justina that Chatteris had seen enough of her father to be dissatisfied with him already, so she glanced up at her mother, who tried hard to evade her daughter’s gaze.

“Now hear me,” began his grace pompously, “the Earl has been most kind to us, and already done us great honour, Justina. Now lend us your careful attention, you cannot divine the extent of the distinction he has shewn us. While you were away, I received a letter from his lordship.”

“Sir, sir, pray,” smiled Chatteris, “all that can be explained later, and in faith, I daresay that her la’ ship will doubtless understand without explanation. Just state, I beseech you, the crux of the affair.”

Annoyed, the Duke nevertheless curbed his ire and turned to his daughter.

“To reach the point o’ this,” he proclaimed. “Lord Chatteris has asked your mother and me for to let him have your hand in marriage.”

This time she floated in the fishpond face downward and when pulled out of it, was found to have had a carp eaten off parts of it, including the nose. When she recollected herself, her mouth was hanging open and she was staring in disbelief at her father who had, after all, sold Carrie off to a rich rake, while he eyed her with an air of triumph, of conceit,

and of supreme self-satisfaction. The immeasurable still apparent in her visage began to be replaced with an element of horror, as she turned to the Earl himself.

"Is this t-true?" she gasped.

Patiently, calmly, sweetly, he smiled and nodded his confirmation. Justina rose, a hand at her temple, her very attitude and air exemplifying, even personifying, confusion misery and disbelief.

"Say something, child," snapped the loving father.

"I-I'm honoured, I'm s-sure," she croaked, peering at the once handsome, satisfied face of the Earl, that had been exposed to time for over half a century, "b-but I am exceeding taken aback, and need time in which to r-reflect."

"To reflect upon what, my dear?" wondered Chatteris urbanely.

"M-m-my answer!" she blurted out.

"That is already settled," he divulged quietly.

"That is so, 'tis settled," echoed her father, sounding bluff and firm. "Your mother has decided that 'tis time for you to wed and the Earl very handsomely offered for you, so what could be better? Go along with you, thank his lordship for –,"

"What I meant to say," interposed Justina, her nerves too tense now effectively to produce the anticipated and requisite equanimity and demureness attributed by males to females in such situations, "has nothing whatsoever to do with the Earl, and I doubt if my mother ever thought any of this up let alone decided it."

"Pray, Justina, sacrifice your proud independence –," interposed the Duchess, whose sense of timing had always been bad, and despite her desposal of her spouse, had been too long suppressed to offer resistance, which made her unreliable, so her daughter cut her short.

"No, mamma," she countered, "this has never had anything to do with you; I know the Duke too well about his resolutions, which, if liable to provoke objection if not opposition, are generally announced as your work. I am well aware that I, as an infant-at-law, need my parents' consent to wed, but I am also aware that most parents misuse this rule to constrain their children to marry. Whatever be the Earl's reasons for offering, I certainly know why the reasons for the acceptance, for I have seen many indicators, from the stables to here."

"Quiet!" thundered Hearne rapidly. "I command you to be silent."

"Command all you like," riposted Justina Woodville, "but first attend to me: why is Caroline's duty not enough to satisfy the needs of this family? Is Irvin's money insufficient to maintain us in comfort, or is this the assurance of comfort when Irvin tires of paying and the two new carriage horses become twenty new carriage horses, and the house is so full of liveried men that its own children feel out of place among them? Lord Chatteris will surely make an excellent husband, but he must be given the chance to know what he is marrying; besides, it is not my turn to wed but Honoria's, and whether he weds her or me, it is unjust to bleed his purse. Nor it is not fair to dupe him with an immature wife, as I would make, and subject him to the indignity of folk mistaking me for his daughter, because this house needs rich sons-in-law."

Even Chatteris knew not what to answer to all that, while the Duchess wrung her hands, but the Duke of Hearne was already quivering with rage, his countenance distorted to shew off the ugliest of characters, his eyes wide and rolling as if he were about to take leave of his senses, which he nigh did, for with a roar, he lunged at his daughter, an hand

outstretched with which to deal her face a blow, except that Lord Chatteris was quicker and leaped up to seize him and pull back his upper limbs, aided finally by the Duchess, in grappling with the hysterical old man, who roared the foulest abuse at Justina, which the Earl endeavoured to shout down, as he successfully pinioned back those struggling arms, thus enabling the mother to shepherd her daughter out of the room, frightened as she was for her child's safety and astounded by the courage she had demonstrated, which led to such disgraceful events.

"O, Justina, why?" she croaked, as she ran back to the drawing room doors. "Do as I do: sacrifice yourself, sacrifice yourself."

"There is more to this than sacrifice, for Chatteris cannot wed into this house! He is Irvin's –," Justina tried to tell her, but the Duchess's mind was on her husband before all other matters even of greater importance, and she was not used to being warned by her children, whose knowledge never counted for much to her.

Back to the panic and insanity that raged within the chamber she returned, to execute her part in allaying it, so Justina retired to the staircase, but as she mounted the first step, she recalled that all her siblings were doubtless at the bannisters hanging over them like vultures, and thus must have heard all that had happened after her brave protest. Already the Duke was screaming as Chatteris, now joined by the Duchess, endeavoured to calm him, but it also dawned on her that he had demonstrated his worst to his exalted guest who, surely would think twice before wedding into this family again – she hoped, and if he insisted, he was coming after Irvin, through her, which her foolish father was fostering out of sheer greed. All of a sudden she felt reluctant to go and face her brothers and sisters, who could not all be trusted to come out on her side, and who could well tell her that she had invited this torrent of abuse, which her father had favoured her with before her suitor, thus robbing her of any respect that he could possibly have for her, for had she not compared them to vultures, and thus she would be made a corpse of, unable to defend herself as they all swooped on her and verbally tore out her umbles to devour them. So she retracted her progress from the staircase, and thought to seek some place away from the lunatic element, altho she could not blot out the noise, for thick as were the walls, all they did was muffle it and not prevent it from resounding. The Duke was fuming on about how a parent did his utmost to give a child a good life but that ingrate replied in such a manner when she should have been grateful for his efforts, and that there was no predicting such disappointments as pained the progenitors every generation, which was not going to stand her in good stead with her suitor, but which she did not want to hear for it was selfish nonsense, and untrue, to boot. So she hurried away into the dining room, shutting the doors behind her by kicking them to slam shut while her palms supported her whirling head that reverberated with verbal abuse bawled at her by her own father. In this manner she walked, somewhat hunched over, to the nearest window seat, which was actually a dole chest, as her tears began to flow, and she covered her face with her hands as she sat down, trying not to shake and shudder as she controlled her sobs. A gentle grasp pressed softly upon her shoulder and pushed her carefully up from her bowed position, after which she felt the warm of an embrace fold itself about her with tenderness.

"There," came the quiet whisper in her ear. "Weep it out, weep it out."

With a little whimper, she wept silently, the side of her face resting upon a fragrant sea of ruffled lace, under which was the warmth of a human body, while in one hand, she

crumpled a sleeve of smooth silk. Soothing her to solace her, her companion rocked her as if she were a babe or a small child. A pair of agreeably dry lips alighted upon and invaded the privacy of her cheeks and brow with a moderate pressure, but – this was not Devenish, for he would never demonstrate such affection to his sisters – and in anywise, as she awakened to the fact, they moved suddenly to her mouth and closed upon it, to give her the benefit of such sensations as she, in her overwrought, impassioned condition of heightened discomposure, welcomed most ardently, and whereto she responded with a fervour equal to his as he administered the kiss, even sinking down upon her back on the cushion of the window seat as his body leaned on hers, and with her arms about his neck, holding him firmly to her. Then all at once she withdrew her hands from his back and shoulders, trying to push him off her, so that the force of his embrace diminished and he let her slip gradually away. Miserably, guiltily, and tearfully, she looked up into his face.

“That was all wrong!” she wailed wretchedly, sitting up and hanging her head.

“Wrong, wrong, wrong.”

“But so extremely fine,” he said, with emphasis, seated beside her.

“No, ’twas disgusting,” she refuted, as the tears flowed faster, “and I – I – and this time, I l-let you do it!”

“Justina, listen to me,” he urged, taking her into his arms. “Let us cease playing at charades and deluding ourselves. The murder is out: you don’t dislike me at all, but you probably hate me, for you desire me as much as I long for you, even if you deem it forbidden to you to admit it, because I am betrothed to your sister. The matter is now on the carpet, so let us not sweep it thereunder and pretend it is not there; we want each other, Justina, and you know it, otherwise you would not try and serve my interests as you do.”

“I’ve had enough o’ this,” she whined, “first them and now you. Why are you come? Foolish me, I wish I had n-never made Carrie write that l-letter!”

“Of course,” he marvelled, “it had to be you. That formal letter of thanks was a cover and your father did not realise that it was but writ to envelope the one from Lady Caroline. My dear, sweet, honest Justina, let me kiss you again –,”

However, the power of conscience in her was strong, and with a brief sharp struggle, she tore herself away from him, rushing several paces off from the seat.

“Don’t ever do that again,” she forbade, backing away as he rose. “Don’t you dare to touch me like that.”

“Justina, you are not afraid of me –,”

“You know I am weak because of what has been happening and so you prey upon me,” she accused.

“Weak? You?” he laughed. “What I felt in my arms was no weak and limp girl but a strong and vibrant, vigorous, lusty woman!”

“Maybe that my father was right, then,” she snarled. “Did you hear what he called me? Whore, a bitch in heat, a slut, a cock teaser, a cu –,”

“Justina, stop!” he urged. “Don’t use such words.”

“They have been used to describe *me*,” she retorted. “Did you not hear?”

His equanimity deeply disturbed, his countenance bearing a dark and worried frown, he swallowed and nodded, stepping forward to approach her, but she only retreated.

“Don’t run from me; I shall do nothing that smacks of taking advantage. I only want

to take your hands,” said he gravely, growing more anxious than ever.

As he spoke he drew near her and possessed himself of her fingers, which he raised to his lips. Then he let her go, but laid a hand upon her shoulder.

“What kind of father uses his progeny so ill?” he rued. “Lacks he self-respect?”

“He is in a lunatic’s rage with me – because I refused the man to whom he has, without consulting anyone, even my mother and certainly not me, plight my troth,” she cried, in high agitation.

“Why did you refuse this man?” he asked, eyeing her with a stare that grew more and more troubled and bitter.

“I – I wrote to Julius to warn him, but no-one did anything,” she growled. “My father arranged it secretly, even thô he knew it was breaking squares (departing from the set order), for he took my letter to Julius and kept it an entire day before he returned it, and meanwhile, this-this suitor wrote to him to ask for me, and there was a secret correspondence between them, upon which my warning to Julius had Lord knows what effect, for recently my father went out to see this person, who was staying with the Stopfords, and even invited him to sup. He has given his consent on my part, and told me of all today, as if it were a foregone conclusion. He expected that I would agree, and in my letter to Julius, I told him that the man was – well, I said that the family should watch out for anything like an approach from him –,”

“Justina, you are gabbling,” he interrupted patiently, taking her hand. “Who is this man whom your father is imposing upon you?”

“Sir, it is the Earl of Chatteris,” she blurted out at last, ashamed and pained.

The Duke of Irvin paused, paler than ever, and drew a deep breath.

“Chatteris,” he echoed. “Chatteris approached him with a proposal of marriage to you? Know you what this signifies?”

“Chatteris will at last be able to control you through Carrie and me,” she said, “but then, could this weapon not be a two-edged sword?”

“No, my precious Justina, I cannot control Chatteris through you and your sister,” he owned in dismay, “because he could threaten you with harm, and thus he will have me in his power. He knows me well, better than I thought, and he would not so much use you and your sister as my desire for you. He also knows that I will never let you wed him, and he hopes that you will reproach me irremediably for it.”

“Well then, he sure as a gun has crept into favour with himself if he believes that I will not forgive you for preventing his marriage to me: indeed, I would forever be your humble and grateful servant. What thinks my father he is about? He knows from my letter to Julius that you and Chatteris have more than a crow to pluck with each other, so why did he give Chatteris’s request positive consideration? I know that we all have to marry the mixen because of the muck, but to pair off two of his daughters to sworn enemies is mortal to everyone,” she half-complained, and half-raged. “It is not the Earl’s age: I don’t want to wed him, but like my sister, I am for sale, and the law is on the father’s side.”

“The law allows a plea of duress, but we will never have to go that far, my dear,” consoled Irvin. “Chatteris will never dare to wed you, and your father will never dare to force you, for I created a sword of Damocles when I cleared his financial obligations and will not hesitate to hang it over his addled head.”

Having spoken thus, he bent to kiss her throat, but she recoiled.

“No, Irvin, please,” she declined.

To please her, he relented, but held her by her upper arms.

“What if –,” she began, suddenly electrified. “What if he forces my father, by threatening to force me?”

“Of that he is capable, sure as the devil is in London,” he agreed. “No, this is impossible; I could not bear it, and I don’t want even to imagine your misery. By force! I’m already wobble-cropped (sick in the stomach) at the idea. If he did that, he would be avenged on me a thousand times. O, be mine instead, Justina, at least to preclude this iniquity –,”

“Why, what is this race for my maidenhead? Sheer depravity –,”

“No, child. Once you are mine, he will desist in his pursuit of you. He will even withdraw the offer for your hand,” asserted the Duke. “He would rob me of that which I most covet –,”

“So to save myself from him and this house from fostering two enemies, I must become a cracked pitcher? What of your offer for Caroline? Yet, how should he know that you covet me in the first place? Surely he did not see you at Ranelagh?”

The Duke was momentarily speechless.

“We were seen, and I know not if word of it was slipped to him,” he ceded, his visage hardening. “Don’t think of yourself as a cracked pitcher, don’t think of it as a race for your maidenhead. See it the other way about. Think not of yourself as a man’s coveted object, but of the man as your humble servant. Think of me as your lover; command *me* to be yours. Take me at you will and as you want.”

On that note, he swept her up in his arms, holding her across his breast, all as if she were as light as a gracious statue made of the thinnest plaster.

“Put me down, Irvin: a man does not become a female’s lover on a dining table,” she defined, rendered nervous at his physical strength.

In the hall somewhere, doors slammed, whereat both were startled, and so he set her down on her feet, but leaned about her as if to protect her.

“Sir,” she whispered, “I cannot be your mistress or you my lover if you are to wed Caroline, for her sake, especially.”

“Equally well, you are not free to be preyed upon by Chatteris,” he refuted. “Justina, I did not chuse Lady Caroline; I was told that the Woodville line had four daughters whereof three were nubile and I said anyone would do, so it was presumed that I would have the eldest and that was my greatest error in letting the presumption prevail; I should have asked to see those daughters, for I knew which one I really wanted when I set eyes on you.”

“Whatever way you look at it, see reason,” she implored. “If you are to marry my sister, I cannot lie with you, for I am not so callous, and I will not give you my maidenhead to stall Chatteris, which argument I find specious.”

“Find it as you will, it is solid and true,” he asserted. “Whatever is the state of your loyalty to your sister, for you are a truepenny (honest, true, genuine fellow), Justina, just ask yourself one question: have you ever in your life thought, or imagined, what I would be like with you? Have you ever wondered that you could want me?”

“Those are two questions, not one,” she stalled.

Thereupon the doors opened and the Duke of Hearne stood upon the threshold, feet apart, hands on hips, demeanour malefic.

“There she is, the slut,” he spat. “Ah, Duke, you have business with me, and would that this had been a propitious day, but my slut of a daughter, standing before you, has brought that haddock to paddock.”

“I beg and demand that you cease forthwith to use your daughter verbally so ill. She is a maiden more true to her blood than you would ever be capable of imagining,” the Duke intervened, stepping forwards to him, which obliged him to move from the doorway.

That allowed both Irvin and Justina a view into the hall, and ahead of the entrance to the great drawing room, stood Chatteris. Upon catching sight of each other, they bowed.

“Your servant, I’m sure, Duke,” hailed the Earl, sounding triumphant.

“And yours, Chatteris,” came the icy reply.

“No offence meant, but I was on my way out,” said Lord Chatteris.

“None taken, but it is as well,” answered Irvin ambiguously.

EIGHTEEN

"Justina? Justina, my dear, look up; look at me. There, that's better. Justina, 'tis Carrie," sounded the euphony of a familiar and gentle female voice.

Justina knew not how much time had passed or what had been happening meanwhile after the Earl of Chatteris and the Duke of Irvin met and parted, for she went at once to her room as the latter in turn set off after her father. On her way she had met no-one, as if all were in hiding to let her reach her haven in peace, but she cared not to look out for anybody who was peeping, and attained her apartment already in tears, which state overcame her she had no idea for how long, until Caroline came to interrupt her progress of wallowing in misery. She found that she was actually crouching on the floor of her bedchamber, for Carrie was crouching beside her in almost the same pose, for want otherwise, of being able to see her face, which eventually had to be forced up by a hand under her chin. When it dawned on her who this really was and what was happening behind her back, she gave a start.

"Ohh, by God, Caroline!" she exclaimed, as her conscience brought her back to reality with a hard but figurative bang.

"'Tis all right, they are all gone. Justina? Don't weep, my dear, they are gone."

Justina covered her own face, as if she could not look at her sister.

"I saw who it was and mother told us his name," said Caroline urgently. "I actually saw him; it was Lord Chatteris, against whom you wrote to Julius to warn this house."

"And that was about as useful as a side pocket to a dog," snivelled Justina. "Why did Julius do nothing?"

"My poor Justina, Julius did not know what father was plotting; he took your letter and in spite of what it contained, went ahead with his bird-witted plan. I should not say that, he has less with than a bird for what he has done," sighed Carrie. "I too asked Julius why he had let things come this far, and he said that he did not even know there were 'things to let come in the first place', as he put it. As for the rest, we heard father use you very ill, and before Chatteris, at that, which was most pernicious of him. Mother gave us her version of your refusal, but she tends to garble matters of principle after giving in to father about everything and expecting everyone else to, so she was at a loss as to why you resisted."

"I'd wed Chatteris tomorrow if it was not for Irvin, who was also in the house and who heard father roaring at me," Justina owned. "He was waiting alone in the dining room. We have a drawing room, two parlours and an ante room in this castle, and he is put in the dining-room. I blundered into him when I went there to hide."

"I hope he did not take advantage of the fact that you must ha' been hopelessly distressed, if not distraught," fretted Caroline. "He has not compromised you, I hope? You were sitting in a tight ball when I came in."

"He did nothing, but, Carrie, I was not wrong about him," lamented Justina, "and he owned it, too."

"That cannot be helped," said Caroline stoically, "but it was unforgivable of him to raise that subject at such a juncture."

"Unfortunately the two things were closely related," said Justina. "He had a solution on how to rid us of Chatteris and I will not repeat it, but suffice it to say that I had not his easy conscience when it came to you. His justification is that he was told we were nubile and

willing, but he let it happen that the eldest was betrothed to him, he did not chuse, and he should have made that effort.”

“That he should; he would have saved us all a deal of vexation. All the same, Justina, you cannot wed Chatteris, certainly not if I am granted to Irvin, for we can only have the one or the other, not both, I Irvin or you Chatteris, but unfortunately, we cannot chuse even that, for firstly, everything we have is tied up in Irvin’s money, and if we want Chatteris to replace him, we are going to have to throw ourselves at Chatteris’s mercy even more abjectly than we threw ourselves at Irvin’s purse. Secondly, Irvin may not let Chatteris buy him out, especially after what you just said about his attitude to you. They are enemies and we cannot let them use us to be at each other’s throats. Besides, Chatteris has only offered for you to be up and at Irvin, while our position is so far gone from neutrality that we must take Irvin’s part whether we so wish or not.”

“Did not our souse crown (fool) father not see that, or is he only good for storming at me and looking like God’s revenge against murder? Chatteris may have provoked this, but he did not have to fetch things to this pretty pass with his secret correspondence and secret suppers, and, in God’s name, what thought he that he was doing?” complained Justina. “He has brought this old house down upon our heads and he cries whore (this also means ‘to put the blame upon’) at me?”

“Devenish needs to wash the milk off his liver and join me in persuading father to give Chatteris up,” stated Caroline in a business-like fashion.

“He has already arranged the engagement and given consent on my part, for he does not need my participation, as I am below the age of one and twenty, unlike you.”

“My dear, with papa, my age is not in the count,” sneered Caroline. “We have to make him undo the mess he has created.”

“He will not give Chatteris up, depend upon it. We need to reconsider Irvin again,” said Justina. “Irvin is the only one who can stop this and he will, to protect himself first of all, but the person who has to request it is not I.”

“I know my duty, to myself and to us all,” assured Caroline. “We have to speak firmly to father and respectfully to Irvin, and you stay out of the matter, lest father wreaks sad havoc upon your poor head again.”

“Will you tell him that you know what he is at, and that you are aware that Chatteris would wound him by having me?” asked Justina.

“That could be imprudent,” mused Caroline, bowing her head.

“Time has passed and I should be in the stables to see if anyone has succeeded in finishing the grooming of Jezebel,” stated Justina, finally coming compleatly to her senses. “Have you all dined?”

“Dinner is in half an hour, almost,” smiled Lady Caroline, and helping her sister to rise, rose to her own feet herself.

“There rages in me a great battle,” confessed Justina. “Principles, conscience, duty, inclination, all these things, are in combat with one another from divers perspectives. The moment our father the Duke – one day I’ll just refer to him as the Duke and omit the allusion to the fact he is my progenitor – announced that Chatteris had asked for my hand, I knew he had done it to provoke.”

“When I give it some thought, I believe that father welcomed Chatteris’s suit for you

even more after he knew that it should be awkward as he and Irvin were enemies, because he might have thought that Chatteris would be a counter-balance for Irvin, in whose power a man of his ilk and fractious vanities resents being," speculated Caroline.

"Running with the hare and riding with the hounds is not always very safe," assessed Justina sourly.

"Tell that to an older man who thinks that he knows everything, because he has lived longer than you and learned nothing from experience," challenged Caroline.

"Who learns from experience, *ever*?" demanded Justina in scoffing accents, changing her shoes, to go to the stable yard.

"Take a hat: the sun is high," advised Caroline.

It was advice that Justina followed, and as she hurried thither, her mind raced as the result of the morning's horrible events. Having said that she would have wed Chatteris if duty and money demanded it, she had also made it clear that she would give priority to Irvin's interests, and as those of the family were already so bound up with them, as Caroline had pointed out, she consequently was keen to refuse the Earl. The discrepancy between their ages was a trifle disorientating but women, if wedding for convenience, put up with worse: yet it was Irvin who again took precedence. In fact, Irvin was becoming even more important than the weight of his money: even if he wed Carrie and never laid a hand on her sister, the latter did not want to be party to her father's foolish tricks and marry his enemy, thus giving the latter an advantage over him. However, she had to admit now that part of her loyalty thus was because she indeed found him attractive even if he was forbidden to her, as matters now stood, but she was admitting this feeling to herself more and more, in particular today: in her was the confusion and turmoil of a new emotion which combined excitement with guilt, and was laced or perhaps more accurately, tainted, with an disconcertingly pleasurable quality. Irvin had made her alive to it, Irvin with his tall, firm, fragrant frame, his gentle caresses, his vigour, his vitality and strength and, of course, the kisses which heightened her sensibilities and would all have been great fun to indulge in, had there not been a conscience to call one to order and consequences to suffer. This new experience, with all its attendant pains and temptations, further complicated the issue by importing the element of desire and increasing partiality, which made her susceptible to the notion that she was valued by him enough to merit such attentions, and to wrest from him a confession of such vulnerability on his part by reason of his passion for her. Justina knew better than to believe without question his protestations thus, but she could not ignore her memory of the anguish he had manifested or his animated demonstrations of affection. So suave had he always been, and the epitome of impeccability, not forgetting his glacial demeanour, that she never imagined him as capable of a display of vehement agitation, almost desperation, with herself as the cause, and this kind of power, inadvertently exerted over him, escaped not her consciousness. Then, albeit that she could not accept the possibility of criminal misuse of her by Chatteris as adequate justification for her to take to her own body the Duke who was betrothed to her sister, Justina could not help shuddering at the idea of being the Earl's victim, when yet a maid, nor could she ignore the Duke's postulation that her submission to him would drive Chatteris away, or at least stall him. This last aspect of the matter upset her greatly and made her afraid.

Hitherto, the notions of duty, consideration for Caroline, her conscience, and a sense of guilt, had aided her in supressing or preventing her from exploring the nature of her

feelings towards the Duke, which should have been neutral but were not, for certainly he had affected them, which she realised while she was ill when all she could think of was he. That which he accomplished in the gardens of Ranelagh further assisted the turmoil of her loyalties and personal predilections, for on the one hand she resented being pushed along for the purposes of lechery, yet on the other, she was incapable of shutting her eyes to his attentions as a compliment to her, what with his freedom to chuse among the most elegant of the available female population in the Quality. She had been angry with him for wanting her and thus insulting his betrothed, her own sister, but she was equally angry with herself, which in all honesty she did not want to understand, but which was now starkly divulged to her. He too had seen it and he was a predator: such men were never slow to exploit the susceptible, despite which, she now liked to feel attracted by him and affected to the man her sister was to wed. There was vigour and profundity in her sentiments, more than a passing infatuation, for she had long let it bubble in the crucible of emotions, and today she had let herself openly be comforted and confronted by it.

For whatever it was worth and wherever it pointed, Justina accepted that she had something stirring in her head or her soul in the Duke of Irvin's favour, but it made her all the more stricken and culpable, particularly on recalling the pleasure engendered by touch and tongue – and thank Heaven no other tool was involved yet! That much, coupled with the searing recollection of her father's behaviour, provoked accentuated misery, for it was not enough to dismiss the old Duke's words as hysteria verging on insanity produced by extreme rage, even if the mad were notably foul-mouthed, but when after enduring such a bout, one crept into the comforting arms of an admired but forbidden being who was tender with one, the question arose as to whether the embraces were welcome solace, or whether, because they were welcome solace, those injurious words were true and justly deserved. Justina was far from being a happy creature, and when she faced her horse, the latter sensed that all was not well with her. Otherwise, one of the old grooms had finished Justina's work on her and put her in her box to feed her, after which he would let her into the paddock. On this score, at least, her heart was assuaged.

In all honesty, Justina would have liked to confide in Caroline, but could not summon up the courage so to do. Already she had revealed that Irvin had not behaved like a brother-in-law, or neutrally, and even if this had afflicted her sister very little, she was sure that a detailed description of events would have been gall on wormwood. As to what little she had said, Caroline was not keen to interrogate for further intelligences and more interested in having her sister up and about and ready to take dinner. In some cases, silence was merciful but even then, it was deceit. It was about this that she was pondering and debating when she re-entered the house prior to the meal, when the familiar words reverberated through the house like the bell that tolled the death knell, except that the latter was far more peaceful and insulted no-one.

“CALL JUSTINA!”

This was followed by a flurry of voices, mostly that of Caroline, raised in gentle and conciliatory protest but to no avail, for the Duke of Hearne went to bursting into Justina's apartments, a finger pointed in anticipation of thrusting it almost into her face, except that he made a fool of himself, for Justina was not there, and followed him also eyeing him with the curiosity of a confident horse, who would have put his neck about his victim to look into his

silly face, and so would she, were hers long enough. To compensate for the false start, the Duke made another ignoble and frightful spectacle of himself by launching into another condemnatory tirade, including language similar whereto he had employed before, for his vocabulary may have been vast, but he had the vice of the elderly, to wit, to repeat himself. His audience soon crystallised on Justina's bed in a huddle, comprising Justina herself, Selina, Caroline, Julius, and the Duchess, and all of them were weeping silently, even the young man. So if the Duke had wanted to impress the family with his authority, he only gave them a worse account of himself than they had before, and the big surprise of the moment was that Justina was crying, to which sight and concept no-one in the house was accustomed. The filial respect for the Duke plummeted and off he strode, blissfully unaware of the fact that he was the object of mass despal. Dinner was announced but all appetites were gone, altho the Duchess had to enter an appearance downstairs, but on their way to eat in the nursery, the others met Devenish walking gormlessly in the corridor. Totally unaware of what had just happened, he stopped them, and addressed himself to Justina.

"Irvin found out that you paid for the horses with my cravat pin, and far from being sympathetic, told me that I needed to learn the value of money before I had any authority as his agent, and he was monstrous unjust about father: when I said that the old fogram was difficult to disobey even for the good of the family purse, he said that he could not care less, and that he regretted that the womenfolk could not take my place, for they seemed better able to manage money than could I. Then he reckoned father's pennies for him, and said that ducal extravagance would only work if there was a ducal fortune behind it, and until the Duke of Hearne had learned to save the money from his rents, he was best advised to live in a gravel pit (like a miser with the barest essentials). I preferred to plant the whids and stow them (keep quiet), but he turned on me too, as a weak instrument of my father's whim which he called me to my beard and before our father, and it was out of respect for his father-in-law that he had appointed me his agent, for if I did not piss in his quill (agree upon his plan), he would appoint a compleat stranger. Then he told father that the next time he chose a spouse for a child of his, it was wiser to discover if the fellow could hitch horses with the spouse to be, instead of pouncing on the first comer, and that usually these matters were discussed with the family, for more intelligences on the subject. Father was very wroth and tried to speak but every time he got a word out, Irvin put his tongue in his purse (cut him short and spoke instead). He did not even tell the old cuff that the carriage horses were paid for and how, and he certainly offered no compensation to me," droned Devenish.

Justina did not reply, but felt that whatever she did in this house among this family was going to be wrong in the eyes of at least some of its members. She was right already for when the Duke's children sat down to their meal, with the exception of the Marquis, of course, Julius expressed himself adversely about his father's linguistic excesses, with which Caroline agreed, but Honoria dissented in gloating terms, dismissing them as manifestations of shock upon the part of her father at Justina's disobedience, for he was not use to being countered or contradicted all his adult life, whether that was their mother's fault or not, and so when so insignificant a thing as a third daughter tried to assert an opinion, he was sure to respond with extreme horror. She may have been right, but the fact that she declared herself to be glad that it was not she who had received this verbal florilegia, and that it was levelled at another, rather reduced the validity of her remarks. The fact that she produced no response

but cold and even surprised looks, even from Selina, may have contributed to her remark that as far as the nature of the language her father had used was concerned, perhaps he had indeed gone too far, and that she was relieved that 'so old' a man as Chatteris had not offered for her instead, for she too would have been forced to refuse him, and thus she was relieved at not being denounced as had been Justina. She continued her monologue partly to justify that same father for being in a very angry mood, for after Chatteris had left, and until Caroline had gone to find Justina, the Duke of Irvin had remained shut up in the study with Devenish and the Duke of Hearne, and probably read them a lesson in the management of money as well as the true meaning of being a financial burthen, and, until a person charged with helping them to free themselves of such embarrassment, how to use their cash. Devenish had emerged with a most shamefast and downcast expression on his face but a silent fury burned close to the surface of his father's mask of heedless pride, and having been told how to mind his eye by his own would-be-son-in-law, he took out his anger on the one who had provoked all the trouble this morning, for had Justina agreed to wed Chatteris, this house would have been due for a rich way of life again. In the end, then, it was all Justina's fault and she had what was coming to her. No-one spoke to silence Honoria but it did not seem, however much right may have been on her side, that they approved of her propositions. It was clear, however, that she had not really understood the impossibility of Justina wedding Chatteris while Caroline was due to marry Irvin and, especially, after all the monetary transactions he had undertaken.

Honoria was right in one more matter: Justina certainly had what was coming to her and there was more of it, for after a dinner eaten perforce and thus barely digestible, the whole family was sent for to one of the lesser parlours, whither they betook themselves and were joined by Devenish. Justina felt extremely weighed by her circumstances, for she was beset in a twofold manner, namely, within herself as to her involvement with Irvin, and around herself, for having refused a man to whom her father had gaily and liberally engaged her. Then the Duke and Duchess entered the room, and he bid all be seated before him, for he liked nothing better than to address an assembly and impose upon it his word. He had exhausted much of his vocabulary this morning, but obscenities and all, he did not hesitate to repeat it, for sometimes his lectures took long owing to an indubitable repetition, often more than once, of all he had already said, but then he went on to deliver himself of a melodramatic and histrionic version containing a good measure of hackneyed phrases, intended to induce terror owing to their exaggerated nature but which managed only to excite ridicule. Family duty, mental maturity, and the imperative practical attitude to the problems of life, were all preliminary factors declaimed upon loudly and at length, couched in general terms but directed by inflexion and examples at Justina. By the time he began upon specific aspects of his version of such matters, she was sufficiently fired by resentment, animosity and anger to be composed, overtly cool and hostile, and unafraid to shew it, for she perched on the edge of her chair, as the Duke ended every sentence with an accusing look at her, and she bore it all with sneering lips pressed tightly together, eyes both glowering and narrowed, and something about the hateful in her air. Progressively her mien and manner drew a smile from Julius, who was brave if others were so but not especially keen to engage in any contest on his own, while Selina, at first alarmed and even trembling, seemed smug, as Caroline, always calm, wore an expression of patient displeasure.

Having dealt with matters of principle, althô in a fumbling, bumbling, often incoherent

manner, the Duke of Hearne took his *clichés* and misnomers and tautologies and neologisms on into the realm of the actual and the practical situation wherein the family found itself. His prime concern was the disgrace which a daughter of his had selfishly and wantonly brought upon them, by daring to retort, by disloyally discrediting her father and master, by wrongfully accusing him of avarice for he only had the family interests at heart, being head of the house, and by refusing a wonderful offer of marriage, all before Lord Chatteris – the fact he had abused her verbally before the same was not even mentioned. For a goodly while he thrummed reverberantly away hereabout, went off to empty his bladder, only to return full of words again, whereupon he recapitulated, repeated himself and proceeded to decry his third daughter for irresponsible behaviour in forgetting that a large family needed to be provided for, not to mention that this family contained four daughters, all useless, who had to be married off – and no-one said how irresponsible he was in accepting Irvin's enemy, not even Justina herself. Undutiful was she and ungrateful too; insults and refutations were all the thanks she gave for all that he had done for her. Then he began to complain of pains in the chest, proclaimed that he was ill, and blamed her for aggravating his condition. Again he turned to cursing her, and then burst into tears, heaping castigation and obloquy on himself for not having brought her up as well as would have enabled her to recognise her obligations to him, whereupon the Duchess remarked how late it had become and that they had better adjourn to prepare for supper, while Justina herself had to see to the stables. Here the Duke relented, but levelled a finger at the supposed culprit, and told her that if she was still in his house when she was old enough to eat her meals with her parents, she was forbidden ever to eat at his table.

Nevertheless, Justina's spiritual tortures were not over, for after supper she was brought into his presence and hectored until midnight, without foul words, this time, but the accusations and recriminations and condemnations were as bad, and colourful evidence of a highly vivid imagination, which was exhausting to listen to, but rejoinder or self-defence were out of the question if one hoped for an ending to all this, and one wished to prevent a screaming session. Nor could there be any light shed on the fact that the proposed marriage was fearsomely impractical, for that too would aggravate the state of his temper. Eventually, as she staggered off to bed, she encountered Devenish, dragging himself forth to his rooms from the study, where the encounter with Irvin had left him with a pile of work to finish and he had been denied the use of the afternoon. He owned to her that the younger Duke had explained to their father how and why there could be no marriage to Chatteris as long as he was bound to wed Lady Caroline, for he had invested too heavily in the family Hearne to extract himself, but even if the old Duke heard all, as it was not what he wanted to hear, he did not listen, and would not recall it, for either he hoped it would all go away, or, because he had been proven horrifically wrong and could not admit it, especially to the person he had most wronged, to wit, Justina herself, so all he did was verbally abuse her for being right. Devenish also disclosed that, after Justina had been thrown out of the great drawing room this morning as the result of refusing Chatteris, their father had become so crazed with anger that the Earl his guest had to grab him by both shoulders and give him a good shaking, so hard that had it been a child thus tossed, it was sure to have died, but it had not done much to bring the old Duke to his senses, judging from what had followed. Justina had nothing to say: nothing

could console her now in these dark moments, and so she went to bed, long to ruminate in the dark before she fell into a troubled sleep. Her last thoughts before her wits faded thus away were for the Duke of Irvin.

The Duke of Irvin had made his excuses, after Lord Chatteris's departure, for having supposedly arrived at an inopportune moment, and when the Duke his future father-in-law insisted that it should be Justina who should be hauled before him on her knees, to beg his pardon, for it was she who was to make excuses, not he, he gallantly refused this privilege. At any rate, recognition of his arrival here prematurely ended the first gruelling scene of detraction for Justina, and her father changed his mood at once for him, granting him the benefit of the sort of unctuous and obsequious ceremony prevalent among the Quality in past generations, all of it false in this case, but then the Duke of Hearne was before a peer in title of his and a superior in resources. Irvin stayed for much of what was left of the morn and declined the offer to dine, because he was not going to be moved by hospitality from the strict and censorious stance he had taken, about which Devenish had related a little to Justina, for like an auditor, he even checked the ducal books, and filled the ducal ears with good if abrasive advice. It was a most sullen, sulking elder who emerged from their session and lesson, growling and grumbling and burbling and corroded, determined not to learn from his mistakes, and lying in a chair after the visitor had departed, complaining that his whole family was against him and that he had made a severe mistake betrothing Caroline to Irvin, for Chatteris was the man of the moment, Chatteris would help on more lenient terms and a greater respect for an old man's grey hairs, Chatteris should have been matched to Caroline who was a good, obedient girl, not like that bitch Justina. All the explanations, which were true and not just excuses, that Irvin had given were forgotten: indeed, Irvin was a liability, and Chatteris would have been a superior choice of son-in-law.

On the morrow, a most morose atmosphere settled over Great Hearne Castle as far as its inhabitants were concerned, but the Duchess still managed to make Devenish, who would rather have forgotten about it, relate the contents of the entire interview with Irvin to her daughters, before she added what her husband had added about the superiority of Chatteris over Irvin after Irvin was gone. Perhaps he was right, and that all would have worked if there had been no Irvin to make the matter convoluted in the first place, but Caroline knew of Chatteris's history, of his first jilting and his four marriages and owned herself, frankly, afraid of him, even if a hypothetical future would have shewn that she had no reason so to be. Now that they *all* knew *all* that, the family better understood the old Duke's behaviour *all* day; *all* he seemed to think of was how mean and miserly was Irvin, and if that harlot bitch daughter he had begotten wed Chatteris, the latter would take care of the other expenses that he would need to incur. So everyone remained silent and low-spirited under an unhealthy air of discord, and while the Duke raged and raved away, the rest of the family went about in a state of nervous wretchedness, afraid to speak lest he overheard and found cause for to make a fuss. It seemed that not just Justina had passed a restless night, so they were all more or less tired and a pretty wan set they all looked, so his grace made out that he was feeling very ill – until he suddenly remembered, a mere hour before they were expected there, that the family was invited to dine at the manor of Sir Robert Orre. The Duchess even knew nothing of the invitation: it had arrived while his grace was deep in conspiracy with the guest at Stopford House and he had forgotten to tell her, which was of no importance, but it would have been

had anyone else in his family been so negligent. As it took a little past half an hour to gallop to Orre Hill Hall, the household was in a veritable tumult in order to make ready, which did not apply to Selina, who was too young for such gatherings, but Justina was not, except that his grace could not stand the sight of her now and so she was banned from joining them. To Caroline, Julius and even Devenish, it seemed unfair, and when the Duke called her to him to tell her to her face that he could not stand her presence in his society, it also seemed cruel. To the Duchess, it seemed unnecessary, but to Selina it was just nasty even if she would have a mess-mate for dinner, which had to be saved for supper, for there would not be a full service just for one person. To Justina, ironically, it was a relief, for she could not suffer her father's company either, and she was unsure of how she was going to face Irvin, who was lodging with Sir Robert, especially with Caroline looking on. She thus made sure she was not about as the family packed themselves into their carriage, while the Duke, suddenly well and noisy again, declared that he was indeed a clever fellow to acquire more carriage horses, for in addition to the two they already had, now they had a match team of four, which was the minimum required for to look rich, instead of just horses with any coloured coat.

Usually when they set off on such jaunts, Selina came wistfully to see them off but this time she, too, had vanished, and Honoria remarked on it, only to be silenced by Caroline, but the Duke noticed nothing, neither the absence of his youngest daughter nor the exchange between the two older ones. In spirits that were not very good and a mood scarcely conducive to convivial assembly, the family set off, and that was when Justina went to Selina and told her that she had been in the kitchens and larders to see what there was for to pack them both a picnic in the park. Selina loved such a treat and responded by throwing her arms about her sister's neck. There was a price to pay, and that was the carrying of a heavy basket over a furlong or two, but as the country folk said, one had to sing for one's supper at least, so the girl set off with a will and a stagger. At Orre's there would be baked and stuffed carps, ragouts, pies of mutton and fowl, preserved vegetables such as asparagus, which was harvested in some profusion in May, manchet¹ loaves and walnut bread after a French receipt, artichokes and mushrooms in sallets, and all a manner of sorbets as entremets, it being too warm for a great roast, and for the second course there also would be potted and jugged meats, cheese, nuts and fruits, sweet pies, tarts and cakes, while the wines would change. That was what Justina was missing, and instead she and Selina had cold cuts of chicken, pickles, cheese, brown George², eggs boiled hard, and yesterday's leftovers of apricot tart, as well as plenty of cider to drink. There were platters, knives, napkins, a pickle fork, beakers, a flagon, and linen, to add more weight, but the girls were not delicate about niceties. All else they had needed were the straw hats in which they gardened and stout country shoes, which were managed in a thrice. For this idea and the subsequent effort, Justina was called a genius, and assured that they were going to have a wonderful time, much better than that which their grown-up siblings were to suffer. With laughter they spread their cloth on the grass and joked when a gust of wind tousled it, with merriment they put stones at the corners and spread sprigs of dried lavender and wormwood about it, with relish they unpacked their baskets and set out the receptacles and the foods, and with pleasure they sat down to partake of their meal.

"I'll warrant that we'll have more fun than they do," said Selina.

"I certainly know I will," averred Justina.

“Justina,” winced her sister, eyeing her painedly, “why does father behave as if he hates you so? He has never been good to you, at least, not since you grew up.”

“Well, from what I can recall, and what Carrie avowed to me, as soon as she grew out of girlhood, when he was inclined to spoil her, he used to comport himself very harshly with her, imagining an intrigue every time any gentleman of the right age called with his family, using gruff tones and language to her, and ever finding fault with all she did: her clothes were wrong, her tone too pert, her knowledge unsuitable for a female and suchlike. He caused such a kick-up when Aunt Lizzie invited her to London that she nigh did not go, and when she went, persecuted her with letters every day that in the end she returned home after three weeks, totally disappointed and disgruntled. He claimed it had been a waste of time, she said he spoiled her stay there, and there was a terrible quarrel. Then things just calmed down of their own accord, and she grew into a calm and dignified lady, so he transferred his attentions elsewhere for it was Honoria’s turn to grow up by then, and so he grew surly as a butcher’s dog about it. At first she used to argue back, but she was wise to him; she did exactly as he desired and in any wise, they are not unlike in character, so she suffered less than Caroline. By then we had fathomed it out that as soon as we passed the ages of twelve or thirteen, he had a bee in his bonnet about his daughters, for it was not so with our brothers, for father wanted sons as much as one loves nuts, and thus, Honoria’s birth was a passing cloud, for the next one would be a boy, but it was not, it was I. Thus father lost interest in his family, for when he tried for a son once more it was only another daughter. The result was that as children, we hardly knew him, you and I, but now that I am growing into womanhood, I have been the butt of the same ill-tempered, ill-conditioned nature he shewed Carrie, and almost shewed Honoria. During the course of my adolescence the hard times that this family were falling on grew accentuated and so I went out to work in the stables with Julius, so I escaped much of the persecution he would otherwise have reserved for me, but he is making up for it now,” related Justina by way of explanation.

“So, ere long, he will commence upon me,” understood Selina, her countenance sagging with dismay.

“I fear so, my dear, unless he persists a little longer in cursing me, for I think I must be his least favoured child, and meanwhile, if we find you a spouse so that you are betrothed at fourteen and wed at fifteen, you may just slip the fate of all Woodville girls during their burgeoning youth,” proposed Justina.

“Does he not want us to grow up?” wondered Selina.

“I suspect he fears that we will be both nubile and stupid, our heads full of bees, and bring dishonour to his house for letting ourselves sprain our ancles (be seduced), being awanting in the ways of the world at this age, when, admittedly, we kick at the traces a little, and father, well, he will be obeyed like a tyrant.”

“If we don’t go among menfolk, how could we find hug boobies?”

“He contradicts himself, does he not? He will find them for us, and we will obey and wed, for she who dissents from his judgment, howsoever disastrous, is lost.”

“Whaah!” cried Selina suddenly, turning her head away from her sister, who duly started at this interjection. “There’s a man!”

Also turning her head, Justina beheld a tall, male figure dressed in pale blue silk, walking towards them from the drive where a beautiful carriage waited, its panels painted

with colourful scenes and four match chestnuts harnessed to it. He drew off his black tricorn that was laced in gold, when she saw him, and seemed to be laughing. Trembling and troubled, Justina rose, but then so did Selina, sensing that something was wrong.

“A little *déjeuner sur l’herbe*, my ladies?” he called in greeting as he continued towards them, whereupon Justina curtsied and Selina copied her.

“Good day to you, my lord,” greeted the older sister. “I fear that my father is not in, and the whole family are gone out to dine.”

“I can guess where,” he nodded, while Selina stared at his blue powdered wig, for blue powder was a novelty to her.

“With your lordship’s permission, my sister, Lady Selina, the pin-basket (youngest child in a compleated family),” introduced Justina, and announced the Earl of Chatteris, who made the girl a genial bow.

“Well, I suspect that Lady Selina’s years make it improbable that she will enjoy dinner among guests especially outside her own home,” was his polite way of saying that Selina was too young to go out to dine, and thus had to be left home, “but was it necessary for your la’ship to stay behind and keep her company?”

“I am sent to Coventry,” announced Justina. “At present my dear papa welcomes my society as much as the Devil loves holy water.”

Lord Chatteris bowed his head and grew both grave and chastened.

“Believe me, you are better off with your cold cuts and your pretty little sister for company, if I have guessed true wither they are gone,” he told her, and behind his back, Selina was pointing at him and mouthing inaudibly:

“Is that ‘dads’?”

“It would be so much less complicated if your lordship and the Duke of Irvin were not enemies,” said Justina guardedly. “I do not presume to have the capacity or the wit to make peace between you, and it is not my place to lay down conditions or assess the nature of your quarrel, for there comes a time when both are wrong and both are right, no matter who was originally to blame if anyone, but he sails on another board (behaves differently), or perhaps you do, and if you did not, as I said, I would not be called vile names by my father.”

“If I make peace with him, will you be satisfied?” he asked.

“You and I both know that throughout history, marriage after marriage has been made between the king and the king’s daughter of two respective countries at war, in the hope of a lasting peace, but come the next generation there is are hostilities again, or even earlier. How many French princesses have our Plantagenet monarchs wed to implement a treaty? Why is it that France is still the enemy country and that English folk ever want a war with her? How many Habsburg marriages have the French made yet how many wars against Habsburg territory go on during those marriages?” she replied. “The fact that he and you both wed daughters of Hearne will be about as much use as to give goose hay in putting out the fire of hatred and enmity between you. My father lectures and insults me without cesser about my duty and my responsibilities to this family to death and ad nauseam, but, saving your lordship’s favour, I know that a marriage between two Woodville sisters and two men who are at each other’s throats, will not end the fight, but make it worse, in rendering one or the other more vulnerable.”

“That is nonsense,” he refuted. “I can hardly fight one who will be my own brother-

in-law, young lady.”

“If your lordship were bent on peace there are other ways to achieve it than through me,” she rejected, “and he will only be a brother-in-law twice over, when princes kill their own full-blood brothers for a crown and sons murder fathers. If your lordship is certain that marriage will do the thing, then do as Irvin did, offer for the oldest sister. The oldest sister is gone so have the oldest available sister. That is not I, but Honoria.”

Having said that she regretted it lest he changed his suit and sought Honoria instead, who would have no wish to protect Irvin and consent at once, to her father’s joy.

“I asked not for Lady Honoria for I knew her not, but I knew you,” he responded, failing to take that bait, which was probably just as well, for it left Justina relieved. “You will make me a darling little wife, depend upon it.”

“I am a rigsby and a hoyden, and I have not grown out of it yet: I risk embarrassing and disappointing your lordship,” she answered.

“As long as you are not loose in the hilt, I care not: you will grow out of your romping and roaring once you have Hans in Kelder (babe in the womb),” he propounded, but she knew that were she wed to another, Irvin would still pursue her, and Chatteris wives suspected of adultery, especially with him, ended up dead.

“Sir, as spouses we are as like as is dock to a daisy,” she told him. “I have endured much misuse as the consequence of your arrangement with my father, and legally I am yours, for he gave consent, and I am an infant. I entreat you, withdraw. One dance at Ranelagh Gardens does not make me indispensable as the next Countess of Chatteris. If you are after our undoubtedly antient bloodline, then ask for Honoria.”

“Why do you refuse me, Lady Justina?” he sighed, and his saddened air caused Selina to pull a face of disbelief behind his back.

“Actually I do not refuse you; I refuse to be a part of what a marriage with you will bring about to Caroline and her spouse and the family they have,” she answered, “for the peace will end and the two of you will fight as bitterly as before, which I cannot have, either for my husband, or for my sister, for one or the other of us will be left a widow by it. My father called me a disgrace because of what I said in your presence. The real disgrace is when what I predict will be brought about, and my dim-sighted father will be the cause.”

“I see that I have work still left to do in order to win you,” he declared. “You will never forgive me if I were to drag you to the altar on the weight of your father’s consent alone, because you are too young in the eyes of the law.”

“You are right, sir, and that is because even for the infant, there is the possibility of appealing to the Lord Chancellor to have a father’s decision set aside, and I can shew that there will be blood a-flowing if it is not,” she answered. “You do not just have work to do with me, but also, with the Duke of Irvin.”

“By God, you know an ace or two more than the Devil,” he marvelled.

“There are books in the library and I am partly auto-didactic,” she owned. “As this was once the first family in the district, there are manuals on the magistracy and what solutions a beaksman (justice of the peace) may offer those who bring grievances to him, which they deem are beyond their capacity to redeem.”

Justina meant to warn him off and the ploy seemed to work for the moment. He knew that as soon as her father thrust his authority upon her, she would turn to Carrie and Irvin,

married or not, to seek the help of the nation's chief judge, and suborning him was not going to work, even if sometimes it did with Chancery judges, known as Masters.

"However, the idea that things should ever come to such a pass is repellent to me. As I said before, I do so earnestly wish that you and Irvin were not enemies, for in you, personally, I see a friend," she added, to soften the blow dealt him by her knowledge.

Chivalrously, he bowed, preparing to withdraw.

"I will call again tomorrow, in the hope that your father is present, and impress upon him that he should not force you to do anything that you do not want," he deferred, "and for God's sake, do not listen when your father vituperates. Ah, he has done me a great disservice thereby; what self-respecting female would wed a man, after her father has used her verbally so ill, about her doubts over marrying him?"

"While your lordship ponders how to correct or cure him in this madness, pray, sir, try and think really why you ask for me, me above all others?" she pleaded. "I can see no sense in it, unless –,"

"Unless?" he urged.

"You know," she intoned, her countenance pale and dull.

Lord Chatteris bowed again, to each sister this time, and turning, a hand on his hanger to steady it so that it would not swing between his legs and trip him, walked rapidly away.

"That was all very affrighting," said Selina.

"Why has someone always to spoil my meals?" complained Justina.

"Why does he want you and not Honoria? As you said, one dance doth not a suitor make," pursued and noted Selina.

"It has to do with Irvin, and I cannot fathom how he knows what he knows," sighed Justina. "Whatever you do, I beg that you do not ask me to explain."

"Well, one thing is clear to me: enemies do not wed sisters," said Selina, "unless those sisters are themselves enemies to each other."

Selina had found her own explanation, so Justina left the matter at that.

"Let's forget about him and enjoy our picnic," suggested the younger of the twain, and the two of them sat down again, the older sibling thinking her to be the most intelligent person in the world, and feeling troubled about her future, poor innocent that she was.

Thus, it was a little while before they spoke and were cheerful again. Chatteris's visit remained in the back of Justina's mind nevertheless, even if she tried to enjoy herself on a fine summer's day, for after they had carried in their platters, leavings and baskets the two sisters went to the paddock to ride the horses, bare back and bridleless, but all was not play, for Justina suggested that they be dutiful and work in the potager awhile, where they were still romping when they heard the Hearne coach roll up to the house door. They did not go in, but ere long, were sent for and on reaching the hall, found the Duke and Duchess awaiting them, whereupon Selina put an arm about Justina's waist.

"Justina," said the Duchess, "your father wants to know if there were any callers while we were out."

As her father stood just before her, Justina cocked an eyebrow and grew grim, insolent and resentful of demeanour.

"Why? Can he not ask me himself?" she shot.

"Justina, please," intoned her mother, but Justina only turned to Selina with a smirk.

"There was a caller," revealed the latter, "and he had blue powder in his wig."

"Chatteris?" pounced the Duke.

"So he found his tongue after all," muttered Justina.

"The verisame, sir," said another of those daughters whom he did not really know.

"What did he want?" barked the Duke, with dreadful articulation.

"Was he bit by a barn mouse (drunk)?" asked Justina about her father.

"I'm not quite sure," said Selina, "but Justina and Blue Wig could be good friends, if he wasn't so intent on wedding her, for they got along famously, and he was sorry that she was in so much trouble with you, sir, but she'll not wed him, and she wishes he and Irvin were not enemies, for marriages have never cured that sort of thing."

The Duke seemed perplexed.

"O, they were snug as a duck in a ditch," beamed Selina. "By the bye, he is to call tomorrow, and he'll probably see you, sir."

"Did you receive him properly in the drawing room?" demanded the Duke.

"No, we received him improperly in the park, where we were picnicking," said Justina.

"He left his pretty carriage and came walking to us, gay as a goose in a gutter," added Selina, "but at least he did not invite himself to our picnic or spoil it too much. Justina said that in all fairness the next to wed should ha' been Honoria, but he still wanted Justina, just because he danced once with her. I could not stop staring at his blue hair powder: but I still didn't understand why he would not have Honoria and only Justina."

By then, Caroline had descended to join them.

"You both did very well," she approved.

"Are you done with me?" Justina asked her mother.

The Duchess lowered her gaze and as no-one else replied, her Undutiful, Irresponsible Daughter bobbed a curtsy and strode off to mount the stairs. At the bannister on the upper storey waited all the others, watching her, for they had eavesdropped on the whole, but she did not pause to talk to them and went to her own apartments. In a few minutes her privacy was invaded by Caroline, who came to sit on the bed beside her, as she continued to work at her mending, and this time it was a chemise.

"Carrie," she began, "I know not what to do."

"Is all Selina said true?" asked her sister, laying a hand on her shoulder.

"The Gospel, but she forgot to add that I owned I was already his, because he had my father's consent, and as an infant, he could decide for me, and that I did not want things to go as far as having to ask for the Lord Chancellor to set aside the paternal choice, were I to shew that it could cause blood to flow."

"She probably did not mention it because she did not understand it," said Caroline.

"I hope so, for her sake. Even so, Chatteris means to work on my partiality," sighed Justina, "by which he probably means he would push father to wear me out. He was most charming but Irvin has warned me of that, and said terrible things of him, which may be the fruit of prejudice —"

"On the other hand, Irvin probably knows him better than do all of us, and if he were truly charming, and reasonable with it, he'd not offer for you in the first place," quoth Caroline. "You have to be careful; we all have to be careful. O, welladay! All these men, with their addled heads."

“And that of our father is the most addled of all,” sighed Justina. “I did not tell Chatteris that I knew he was attacking Irvin by taking me; that sounded too vain, and out of place, for Irvin is spoken for,” lamented Justina. “I cannot and will not repulse Chatteris rudely, for there are enemies enough for me without me joining in and making myself one.”

“If he is courteous, you are bound to be courteous back,” agreed Caroline.

“But the more I am so, the more will I mislead him into believing that I could be his,” protested Justina. “I told him I would be inadequate as a wife and I was a hoyden; he said I’d be cured of it once I had a white swelling (pregnant). To all I said, he had an answer, so I had to resort to assuring him that as he already had my father’s word, the only thing I could was go to the L.C. and in that I would need Irvin’s help.”

“You’ll have it, for Irvin knows that Chatteris’s reason for offering is to have him by the throat,” confirmed Caroline.

“What fogs me is how he knows I am being pursued by Irvin,” fretted Justina.

There were footsteps outside, followed by a light tapping, so Justina called a consent, and Selina entered.

“Private coze?” she asked. “Here’s more for it.”

“More sacks to the mill,” invited Justina.

“A man just rid up with a note from ol’ Blue Hair,” she revealed and in spite of all her ills and despair, Justina laughed. “Honorina read it out to papa and I was listening.”

“John Drawlatch (sneaking person!)” whooped Justina.

“I was in the room with them,” cried Selina.

“What did Chatteris want?” asked Caroline.

“To take Justina riding tomorrow during the morning, at about ten o’ clock,” announced Selina. “He said he had to work hard to court you. Well, ladies, the courtship has begun in earnest.”

“Ohh, Crimine,” groaned Justina.

“His request is that you shew him about the property and its environs, which will give you the chance to learn better to know him,” added Selina. “By Pol! He’s far too old for you, ’Tina, you can’t wed him.”

“I said that I’d wed him if it were not for Irvin, but there is another thing; when I see him, I sometimes remember that poor woman floating in a fishpond, and so – well – he frightens me, too, now. His age is the least of my worries and as I said, were he no enemy of Irvin’s or a Bluebeard, to go with his Blue Hair, I’d not care about his being older. The advantage of that when one weds a fortune, provided one survives every launch (childbirth), is that one is soon a widow.”

“Has our father sent an answer?” probed Caroline.

“He was dictating it to Honorina when I slunk out,” said Selina, “and you don’t have to guess what it is.”

“That is just capital, but all is not lost: I will endeavour to dissuade him from his present bent and that if he has a crow to pluck with Irvin, wedding me to facilitate it is not very fair to all the folk involved, for I must look out for my sister and myself. He will try to catch me out by reminding me that I offered him Honorina and I will acknowledge that it was a mistake of mine, and that Woodville sisters cannot really wed him, however sweet we all think he is. What make you of that?” postulated Justina.

“Nauseating but it may serve with the proverbial onion,” approved Selina. “I have to go. The reason I was in the room with the elders was that I was being questioned as to how many hours I had spent today minding my pen and my book and I said none, so I am being sent to the library to study. I need to be found there, not here.”

Justina thanked her for bringing the intelligences in any wise, and she capered off.

“Next they’ll say I am a bad influence upon her,” grunted Justina. “Was there something special about which you are come to seek me out?”

“More or less,” owned Carrie. “While we were at Sir Robert’s, tea was served on the terrace after dinner, and Irvin took father aside in the bower. They were together there for a bittock and everyone pretended not to notice. I know not what Irvin said, and no-one can ask father, while as for his volunteering anything about it is about as likely as finding a hen in a hare’s nest.”

“Besides, he’ll lie like a Trojan in any wise.”

“Amen to that. I hope to ask Irvin about it tomorrow,” resumed Lady Caroline. “When papa and Irvin returned, Irvin was very stern and cast an odd glance at me, while papa boiled with rage and frustration, but he cringed in a strange sort of way, and I gained the impression that he dared not give vent to any feelings, and was charming to one and all, as if he were severely chastened. On the way home, however, he was extremely curt and surly with me, for no reason I gave.”

“You were Irvin’s substitute,” divined Justina.

Carrie observed the needlework in her sister’s hands.

“What a pity that Chatteris drowns wives and duels to the death – almost – with Irvin, for then you could wed him and not just have as many new chemises as you wish but maids to mend them if they are particularly pretty,” she rued, and then took her leave.

A little later the Duchess of Hearne and her daughter Lady Honoria came to Justina’s apartment to inform her that it had been arranged for her to go for a ride with Lord Chatteris on the morrow at ten o’ clock in the morning, and when the ride was over, she was to invite him back to the castle to dine with the family, which would consist of the parents, the heir and Caroline. The Duchess was not happy about the invitation for such things took preparation as this was a Duke’s table and not a simple meal but a major one, and her spouse, like most men, had no notion of domestic organisation, especially now that the resources of this place were limited. No-one was happy: Honoria felt insulted at being left out, and Caroline was said to be alarmed for what her place was in this affair troubled her already lest it provoked Irvin’s hostility. Even Justina was displeased, althô she did not eat below, at not being allowed to witness her fate being mismanaged by others, even if she was considered old enough to go out on horseback with Chatteris, whose age and rank did not require her to ride with a groom to escort her and thus made of him her sole companion. Male and female offspring alike disapproved of their father in his playing a double game or seeming to: they all condemned him as incapable of distinguishing between falsehood and veracity, particularly in himself, and deemed his tricks with Chatteris and Irvin plainly dangerous, while Devenish lamented that he would inherit more than a bankrupt dukedom, but also the name attached to Hearne as being of one who looked one way and rowed another. It had become an uneasy ending to an unsatisfactory day.

As a consequence of one of its aspects, Justina hovered between panic and fright on

the one hand, and scepticism and reasonability on the other, but was resolved to be wary at all times, while hoping that Irvin was blinded by hatred and therefore wrong. She even hoped that he would call in the morning, at the latest by a half-past-nine, for then Caroline could walk with him in the garden and ask about yesterday as well as tell him that her father was having Justina go riding with Chatteris, and hopefully Justina herself would find the opportunity so to do if she did not. Yet Irvin did not come and Justina drove herself into a condition of nervous worry while anticipating Irvin's visit and fretting about that of the Earl. Needless to say she cursed the former heartily for not appearing, but when the hour for her outing drew near she was resolute with courage and fortitude, her air calm, so that his lordship would not be suspicious, and if his intentions were honourable, which she was sure they were, he was sure to feel insulted – or be given ideas he did not necessarily have. He came punctually astride a fine flea-bitten grey, and would have waited outside for her to join him, had not Hearne gone out and made an embarrassing spectacle of himself, so, to keep the peace and save everyone's faces, he dismounted and went inside, but declined all drink that the master of the demesne endeavoured to press upon him. Then the Duke himself, despite having charged Justina with this task, invited him to dine when his outing was over, assuring him that all was in readiness for him, which left him no choice but to accept. As Devenish was a witness to this scene, he was able to wander off up the stairs, and then scoot up to inform Justina that she did not have to invite anyone for their blabbing father had already done it. Hearne himself saw them off, while Caroline, Julius and Selina watched anxiously from an upstairs window, but in the Duke's parting from his daughter, he played the affectionate father, solicitous of the dear girl's safety, which he was entrusting to his lordship, and desirous to know whether she were warm enough!

When at last they managed to tear themselves away, Chatteris and Justina turned to each other and spontaneously burst out laughing. He had seen the Duke at his worst so he was not compleatly fooled by this exhibition just witnessed, but he alleged that there were folk liable to changes of mood so fundamental and sudden as made them unrecognisable from one event to the next, at least as far as conduct was concerned. He also confessed himself relieved that now they could be on their own, but apologised if that remark seemed that he did not like the old Duke or the pretty girl who was her younger sister: indeed, nothing could have been farther from the truth. Not really caring what was his opinion about her father and Selina, Justina refrained from commentary, but a little shrug of the shoulders sufficed to invite his mirth. For a while they just rode, the lady pointing out sites of interest to him, such as the village with its church, wherefrom many items had been saved during the Civil War only to be restored with the advent of Charles II, for when the Roundheads came to occupy the place they sacked it and stripped it of all immovable decorations such as faded frescos and carved panels, while also bearing away its bell as a Popish addition. The Earl was not keen to dismount and go in, but it interested him to pause and watch, at a distance, a drover taking a flock to market, whereupon Justina explained that they had a market Town nigh, with a Quarter Sessions, but not on a highway that he would have used to reach the region, for that was how England and her county capitals were structured. It was clear from that that however presentable the ladies of the Woodville family looked, they made their own gaudie gowns from silks bought off a Scotchman's cart or a provincial draper, and bought their other clothes, immaculate and clean as they were, from the former, or a duddery, or a merchant of

second-hand clothes, which could range from those as would befit a lady to those a milkmaid might buy. Interspersed in this explanatory chat was conversation about the Duke of Hearne, for Justina would not let his behaviour and his debts and his avidity to gain financial help from all comers degrade the family, so she told of how they had once been rich enough, and that ironically enough their peak in this respect was owed to the Duke's efforts, but then he made some ill-conceived choices and from the results of those, the family had never recovered, which was ill-helped by his grace's failure to accept that they were no longer as affluent as he had once made them. Not once was she unkind about her father for that would have been bad form, and the Earl, in whatever he said, commiserated at worst rather than criticised. Yet all could not be polite or inane chatter, for presently the Earl raised the question of how her mind and inclinations were towards him. As she could not bring herself to say that they were unchanged, she bowed her head miserably.

"O, O, well," he sighed, "you must think me rather impatient."

Justina again took refuge in silence, this time with a small shrug of one shoulder.

"Justina, forgive my ardour, and try to understand it," he pleaded.

As Justina could not tell if this was ardour or not, she regarded him wretchedly, so he reached out to pat her cheek, whereat her first instinct was to recoil, and it was with great firmness of will that she controlled the impulse and, instead, let her face receive his touch.

"Tell me, dear Justina, what disenchant you so about me," he invited. "Do you find me repellent, perhaps? Do you see me as ugly?"

"Neither, sir," she owned honestly, "I covet not looks in men, for a handsome man if oft-times a vain man, and so a well-looking man is the best I could hope for, but it is not important if he is a good man."

"Then I do not displease you? I know I am tall, and tall men have gone out of fashion since the reign of Charles II ended, but see you in me mannerisms or aspects that upset you or otherwise remind you of things unpleasant?" he persisted.

"Indeed not, sir," she denied.

"Sometimes a man's attire or way of speaking betrays him," he continued.

"I find nothing amiss with either," she answered.

"Then why the refusal? I can tell that you do not belong to that breed of vain damozel who would be proposed to five times before she gives her consent as a form of sport; I know that if beauty is in the eye of the beholder it is also skin deep, and besides, you would rather have a good man, but if I cannot flatter myself as to my goodness I can assure you that I am not a bad man for all that; I am aware that the intelligent woman peers not at a man but into him, while the crafty one assesses his books rather than his looks, so, where am I lacking?"

"Sir, I do not refuse you, I decline, and it has not to do with you but with me," she averred plainly. "A female may be faced with the finest fellow in the world and like and esteem him for himself, but never be inclined to wed him, and the same goes for a man who likewise faces a fine woman, but sees her as but a good friend and no more."

"Ah, I see it now: you do not love me," he stated. "My dear girl, love is a nonsense to be spoken of on the boards of the playhouse stage, it is not a prerequisite for a successful marriage and is so much nonsense."

"That is not what I meant. We are not suited as spouses, there are great differences between us and I talk not of age. You are an elegant man about Town and have much

experience of the world. I am, without wrapping it up in clean linen, but a country wench. You have the ways of a rich man used to great riches, while I, unaccustomed to wealth, risk turning vulgar, as do all impecunious wives of moneyed men.”

“That is semantic balderdash, Justina –,”

“There is also what your lordship said yesterday,” she interposed. “You insisted on *me* for a wife. Why me specifically?”

“The very inclination that you lack,” he responded.

“You reply very quickly,” she noted. “What mean you by such a term? Is it the love upon which you poured such scorn? I never said that I would wed for love: females in our straits do no such thing.”

“You are a little sophist,” he chuckled, chucking her under the chin.

“Not at all; I haven’t the wit. All I ask is an answer.”

“Very well, I’ll give you your answer,” he conceded, “and, it is, that I don’t know. I do not know why I want you, but that is how it goes.”

“Then the sophist is you,” she rejoined. “Not even a saphead would be content with such an answer.”

“Come now: yesterday you cited your hoyden ways as an excuse and by that I understood that you were saying immaturity. You might instead have ascribed your alleged inappropriateness to my great age, supposedly,” he reproached.

“Sir, we all know that age is never taken into question when dynastic marriages or unions of convenience, for whatever reason, are made,” she dismissed. “I may look like Nokes (fool) to you, but I am not so foolish as to postulate so cobweb an excuse,” she hedged.

“Who taught you diplomacy?” he half-joked, for under the smile there was irritation.

“In our family, one is born a diplomat with such a father ours,” she declared. “Let us just dwell upon this pretext that your lordship raised, of age or immaturity. What if it is found that I am immature? No matter how many children I bear, I may never grow up, and when you are older, I shall be a supreme irritant. I will be unsupportable. Besides I have already told you that while your lordship is the enemy of one who is set to wed into my family, I dare not compromise my family by embroiling it in your dispute with him, nor endanger my sister by making such an alliance.”

“A little more of your honesty, sweet maiden,” he pursued. “Did anyone put this philosophical convolution into your pretty head?”

“Sir, my pretty head, even if it is only that of a female, is independently capable of at least that much rational thought,” she corrected, “althô your lordship may prefer to attribute it to the instinct of self-defence.”

“That is more balderdash. Your father has no objection, so why do you?”

“My father does not think very far forward,” she rejoined, “and is dazzled by the prospect of pulling on your purse strings.”

“Does that also rankle with you?” he persisted.

“I have already made it clear that I have no objections to you except that you are Irvin’s enemy and that I cannot make an enemy into my sister’s brother-in-law,” she insisted.

“You are a perfect, even perfidious, dissembler,” he marvelled with scorn. “There is more to this than enmity and the shame of a greedy father. I will have an answer from you.”

“When you have frankly told me why I am your choice, and no other,” she affirmed.

“So you have indeed been turned over to him in spirit,” he sneered. “He has bought the whole family, allegiances, loyalties, and freedom of choice. The only one who had retained any sort of independent will is your father, whose wit you have decided not to comprehend. You are in thrall, dear lady!”

“You still did not answer me but deflected the subject,” she argued. “You asked a response of me and I gave it frankly, yesterday and today, but you will not accept it, and meanwhile, sir, you will not give one yourself.”

“That is because I would spare you the odium of it! That man, once wed to Lady Caroline, will not be content. He will prey upon all of you, one by one, and that means you too, Justina. He has not wed a wife, he has taken on a harem, like the Grand Turk. His carnal appetites are insatiable: he can go to a mistress, exhaust her, and then pick up an actress or two at the end of a play and serve them both. Why, think you, did he agree to wed into an impecunious family with four daughters in it? He will work his way through you all, and for that, he pays your family debts, such as he would pay for his pleasures at the *bagnio* kept by Madam Betty Careless.”

“Like my father, sir, you have just called me a harlot,” intoned Justina frostily.

“No, madam, I have told you that your father as good as sold all his daughters to a whoremonger and that I would at least save one of them,” he growled.

Justina remembered all of Irvin’s blandishments as well as her pleasure in them and turned away blushing, not because she agreed with Chatteris, but because she was ashamed of herself as the result of it, and because she could hardly admit the truth about any of it.

“Justina? Ohh, no!” he lamented. “He has not tried for you, my dear? He has not already sullied you, my poor, sweet girl?”

This equivalent concern by two enemies for her virtue and her virginity thoroughly sickened her, but there was a strange mixture in his expostulation of horror and sympathy that did not ring true.

“Of course not!” she snapped indignantly.

“You stayed in his house. When I found out, I was beside myself.”

Why should he have been beside himself for a girl whom he hardly knew, when he did not believe in the folly of love?

“His elder sister was present and so was mine,” she protested.

“His elder sister does not count for much. Both his sisters are his bawds,” he scoffed. His elder sister was the one whom Chatteris had jilted.

“Nothing happened,” she rasped.

“It will if you do not have a care of yourself. When he weds it will in any wise. I suppose he fascinates all of you already, eh? Don’t be blinded into misplaced loyalty by your sister’s position; you cannot be bonded to Irvin,” he cautioned. “You will end the discarded plaything of your brother-in-law, whereas I, his enemy or not, will make you a husband who is metal to the back. Can you ask for better than that?”

“You talk to me again like my father did yesterday,” she reproached, but his words rang very true and coincided with her own fears, so that again, she was anguished and guilty.

“O, Justina, forgive me,” he entreated, dismounting and going to her side, to reach up for her in order to lift her down.

Thereat was she seized with alarm and recoiled consummately, suddenly aware that

her gaze was clouded by tears that issued from her eyes and rolled abundantly down her cheeks. He gave her a smile that forgave her unambiguous gesture, and proffered her a clean white kerchief, but she already had hers out, so he withdrew his own, looking sad and hurt. Frankly annoyed with herself for inflicting injury upon him or anyone, she composed herself and begged his pardon, but he uttered a waiver and waved away the matter with a small gesture, before taking one of her hands and pressing it to his lips. Then he walked about his horse's head to mount up from the left, but halted suddenly.

"Look, already! Brambles," he indicated something in proximity to him.

Justina leaned forward and smiled, guessing that he was endeavouring to divert her, so she sought to shew some appreciation, if only to keep the peace.

"Egad, what a profusion of berries," he admired. "There is nought in the world as wondrous as an English hedgerow. When I was a boy, I would pick them and take them in, and give them, to our pastry chef to bake them into a pie, and how I enjoyed it, for having picked them myself. How great it would be to become a boy again, and feast off bramble pie whereof the fruit one has picked. What a burthen adulthood is, Justina."

"Shall you pick them now?" she wondered.

"If we get them to your home early enough, they may appear on the table with the second course," he encouraged, rummaging about the hedge nigh, to shew her how heavy was the load of fruit. "You cook will make us a tart or a pie, I hope?"

"Depend on it," she affirmed, but then she could hardly answer differently.

With that, he came about their mounts to her, and assisted her down, even if she had almost vaulted out of the saddle as he arrived. Merrily he took her hand in his, and off they went but a few paces, walking like two children on a country jaunt, for a game, about some companionable activity. Then he drew out his kerchief, in order to put in the fruit, and they began, he telling her which were the best to chuse even thô she was a country girl, for he was probably used to directing everyone he met, but she did not seem to mind, and his movements were deft and practised, as if the tale he had told of his childhood was indeed true. They both of them pricked their fingers again and again, which engendered a curse and a laugh, until he decided that they probably had enough for a pie and thus tied his large white kerchief, now stained with the juice of bruised berry, into a bag, which he took to her saddle, to hang over a horn thereof, even if it had to be removed when she mounted up.

"See what capital companions we make for each other?" he remarked.

Married life was not all berry-picking, she thought, but kept her mouth discreetly shut and bowed her head to hide any expression of cynicism that could appear upon it. To him she just seemed demure and shy.

"Justina," he whispered, his hands upon her shoulders, "dear Justina, don't injure me, I beg of you. If you cannot shew sympathy, at least feel pity."

Justina began to tremble and blush, at once afraid to remain and afraid to panic and run off only to be caught by a big man who could easily outstrip her even before she reached her horse, after which she would look like the greatest fool on earth. Yet before she knew it, in her moment of prevarication, he had bent and planted a kiss upon her cheek; prim and stoical, she bore the touch of his lips and wondered how they did not fire her as had Irvin's. All at once, he flung her into his arms and brought his mouth upon hers, but Justina was seized with such phrenzied panic that she struggled, tripped herself up on her own train, overbalanced and

almost fell, causing him to lose his footing too and topple against her, so that both went down, landing heavily beside each other. At once she tried to roll free, but he threw an arm about her and lunged a little, enough to trap her with the weight of his body. A wild series of twisting, kicking and grappling ensued, for althô it was not clear whether the Earl meant to have his way, or meant to curtail her so as to restore order, he was at least cooing at her to calm her, but it certainly appeared equivocal to an observing third party, but they ended with her panting, exhausted, and he seated by her, leaning over her person and pinioning her hands firmly behind her.

“Absurd child, poor wretched girl,” he at once lamented and chided. “Why did you take fright of me? I would never hurt or take advantage of you, force you or do anything without your consent; don’t fear me, for I mean to wed you, not betray and abandon you.”

It all sounded so reasonable, but it was spoken by one who had courted and failed to wed the daughter of another late Duke, and whose last wife was found floating dead in a fishpond. If she drowned, her lungs all filled with water, would she not have sank?

“Then l-let m-me go,” she croaked.

“Justina, you repulse me as if I were a leper, a hideous monster of a man, so how, think you, I feel?” he challenged. “Have you no compassion in your heart?”

She opened her mouth to answer, but all she could do was wince, grimace and whimper, because she lacked the courage to be ruthless and she did not want to make enmities into enormities.

“One little kiss, and let me lay my head upon your tender bosom, that is all,” he seemed to plead, even if his demeanour was by no means plaintive. “If then I repel you, you will not be able to conceal it, and I will bother you no more.”

Justina sat like one frozen, so he lightly kissed each corner of her mouth, as she tried not to pull faces, and then he laid his head with the wig bereft of powder – she guessed that he had planned this already, and withheld the use of his favoured blue so as to leave no traces – upon her breast, before raising his head.

“There, was it so bad?” he sighed.

It was beyond her heart to say hurtful words after what she had just endured, and all she wanted was to be left alone. She emitted a whine, but then looked up and heaved a sigh of relief, accompanied by a smile.

“My Justina, mine at last!” whooped Chatteris, opening his mouth to kiss hers, but found his lips alighting upon the fingers of a black, kid glove.

Up he glanced, finding himself face to face with Irvin’s more deathly sort of smile and slid away from Justina, who leaped up and bowled off while Chatteris snatched at his whip. The Duke, who had extended a hand to help Justina to her feet, emitted a howl as the whip smote his right arm with a fearsome blow, as the Earl, now upstanding, attacked him mercilessly, causing him to reel, and that allowed his lordship to pounce on him, brandishing it yet again. Up started Justina, picked up her own home-made riding crop, and flung it to Irvin as if on a reflex, to give him a fair chance to defend himself. Necessity and perspective obliged the Duke to catch it in his left hand, which was not at the end of the arm that had suffered the assault, for the coat-sleeve and the shirt were ripped to display raw, gashed skin and blood gruesomely apparent.

“Aha,” called Chatteris scornfully to Justina, “the murder is out! The partialities have

been displayed: you are not just loyal to your sister, you are his little bit of flesh. Toss a whip at him, would you? Well, we'll see about that."

"Justina, fly!" urged the Duke. "If he wounds me, he'll ravish you. Take your horse and flee from here."

"Please, please, don't hurt each other!" she called, first removing the kerchief full of blackberries from the saddle. "I don't want you to FIGHT!"

"Your father was right: you chase two hares at once," spat Chatteris. "You are a little whore after all!"

"I'll not let you say that," snarled Irvin. "She was only being fair. You cease, I'll cease," he negotiated.

The Earl made for the wound he had already inflicted but Irvin dashed out of the way and swept his wig off his closely shorn head, all of which was too much for Justina, who came forward, having set down the berries.

"Both of you, stop, desist!" she called.

The Earl changed from the beautiful and sublime of mien to the malicious and savage.

"Have at ye, Lionel!" he hailed jubilantly, as if delighted at the prospect.

His grace, however, indulged not in communication, whether verbal or facial, and tight-lipped, his countenance inflexible, measured his steps about the Earl, whip poised at the ready. His fighting arm being somewhat crippled for the moment, he adopted elusion and evasion as his best tactic, rather than retaliation. Meanwhile blood began to trickle from a graze upon Chatteris's head, which had begun to sting in any wise, incensing him further to attack the Duke, who parried him with both hands setting up a barrier that sent him hurtling back, but only for a moment, for the Earl struck out while reeling and dealt his thigh a hard but not serious blow. This engendered a reciprocation to Chatteris's shoulder, but Justina had had enough.

"In Heaven's name, end this," she insisted, bravely thrusting herself between them. "I pray you both, no more savagery. Stop ye butchering each other!"

All at once, Lord Chatteris seized her and held her before him like a human shield, yet brandishing his whip.

"In God's name, Edgar, that is the most cowardly thing I have ever seen," denounced the Duke of Irvin.

"Lord Chatteris, I own, I should not have given the Duke a weapon for instead, I should have relied on your gentlemanliness whereby you would have both not fought at all and drawn so much blood, and I apologise. Now in God's name, stop!" she cried.

"Silence, harlot," he growled and boxed one of her ears.

"I am not a harlot!" she called out angrily. "Let no-one ever use that word for me again," she added, stamping on his foot, but all he did was bellow and held her fast.

Justina began to struggle with him and caused him to totter, whereupon Irvin sprang forward to strike his arm as it held her, in order to secure her release, but just in time, Chatteris swung her in the path of the whip, so it was ironically Irvin who placed a bruise on Justina's shoulder, which did not suffice to tear her clothes, but which sufficed to make her slip from Chatteris's grasp, and fall on her knees, her visage contorted with pain.

"Justina!" gasped the Duke, horrified and unfortunately, distracted. "Justina, what have I done?"

Momentarily forgetting the Earl, he swooped to catch her, whereupon Chatteris seized his chance to whip the other across the face.

“Look out!” screamed Justina herself, and grabbing one of the Earl’s legs, gave it so heavy a push that he came crashing down over her, and Irvin’s face was saved.

Despite his fall, Lord Chatteris was quickly righted, at least, he was on his knees, and seeing Justina struggling to stand up, prepared to smite her on the back, but Irvin grabbed his wrist and wrenched his whip out of his hand, before sending him hurtling off with a blow from the knee.

“All right, my lord, get ye up,” said Irvin quietly, going to stand before the Earl but not so near as would allow the other to pull him off his feet by lunging at his legs.

With a grunt, Lord Chatteris sat up as Justina staggered to her feet, and brought along his horse, who was as docile as he was not.

“Now all that remains,” she stated, “is for Irvin to go beat up my father. I am done with men calling me whore and harlot. Here is your keffyl, my lord. Call her not by foul names, at least, she has an honest face.”

Bitterly, the Earl opened his mouth to spit out some vituperation but Irvin interposed.

“An ill-chusen word out of you, Edgar, and I’ll kick your teeth down your throat,” he rasped, “from where I’m standing.”

“Aye, she deserves no more than a lecher like you,” growled the Earl, rising rather heavily, as Justina turned to the Duke.

“Has your grace a clean handkerchief?” she asked, whereupon he produced one, so she emptied the berries into it and gave the stained cloth back to its owner, before picking up his wig and handing it to him too.

With a ‘Bah’ or too, the Earl snatched all, including the reins, from Justina, and clambering into the saddle, rode off, wishing them a lusty rogering bout together. The Duke turned to Justina Woodville with an amused and admiring smile, holding open his arms, wounded or not.

“By my troth, you are a plucky, little thing, with all your wits about you,” he credited. “Were it not for you, I’d be lying here, bleeding from every hole in my phiz.”

“You’d ha’ bled because of me so the least I could do was try to stop it,” she said.

“He caught a Tatar when he tried to misuse you,” chuckled Irvin. “Come to me, my Justina.”

“He has hurt you fearsomely,” she said, approaching him and taking his arm in her hands, “all because of me. I am a confounded female who is more trouble than I’m worth.”

“Never say such a thing,” he comforted, stroking her hair, “your face when you saw me come up behind him; I’ll never forget it. No-one has regarded me with such joy in my life,” he added, turning rueful as he cradled the wound he had accidentally given her.

“This ride was the result of his asking my father for consent to take me out,” she averred, “and like a true two fools, I succumbed to the bait of picking berries, as would all children. I did tell him that I was immature, and you did tell me that he was astute and very capable at making himself charming.”

“I saw it all, my dear, I was watching a goodly while from that copse yonder, and as it has a background of woodland, what lurks in it is very difficult to see,” he explained, “and althô I could not hear what he said, I could guess.”

"I even felt sorry for him," she owned. "I tried to be tactful and not hurtful."

"The man in his middle years often uses that as a ploy to gain the sympathy of and then seduce young women," he supplied.

"Perhaps I am not gifted for diplomacy," she sighed. "I was indulgent, I went too far and I was foolish."

"You were just unlucky," he averred.

"Stop making excuses for me," she forbade. "You did warn me about this."

"All the more reason that I should commiserate, my fighting Amazon. We need to take you home and have that shoulder seen to," he consoled and recommended.

"Your wounds are worse," she asserted, but hung her head. "Irvin?"

"What is it, Justina?" he inquired, with goodwill and tenderness.

"I am not a whore, am I?" she sniffed.

Slowly he shook his head, keeping silent to emphasise the denial.

"Your father arranged this little outing, eh?" he then added. "In faith, he courts trouble even more furiously than Chatteris. Let us get you home, and I will have a word with the stubborn old man."

With that, they turned to the horses, when she saw the bag of berries she had now made with the Duke's kerchief, and it dismayed her.

"Why do folk spoil things? It all began so well; we were like silly children picking berries for a pie. Why did he have to grow up and be horrid?" she lamented.

"That is because we are all already grown up and horrid, Justina," he told her.

"I feel so sad, sad, sad about everything, even that he should have stooped to calling me a whore," she fretted.

"That is more than he deserves," he pronounced gravely.

"We chatted as if we were friends, and I felt so bad about hurting him or anyone, and even now, after he has shamed and verbally abused me, all I can think of is, poor Chatteris, why has he this hateful streak?"

"It was a thing that bothered us when he courted Lavinia and then disappeared, and when I asked him what his intentions were, he told me he was already engaged to another and laughed in my face. As he had not plucked any rose (taken her virginity) where Lavinia was concerned, or at least, Northingham made no great matter of it, I let it lay in water, but I minded my eye with him after that. You asked about this hateful streak: I wondered about it for a long while, as the result of Lavinia's affair, for I too asked this question about a man whom I thought was wholly charming, and it was difficult at first to imagine let alone acknowledge that he could be so callous."

"Did you discover why he gave her up?" she asked. "If the subject is too painful, no matter, I will not pursue it further."

"I did ponder it and the conclusion whereto I came was that he gave her up because of me," he replied. "None of his wives have had any stalwart to defend them, and so it has been an easy thing for him to find a stick to beat a dog with. Althô I did not challenge him, it was to protect our reputations, which then were spotless, and so I let things slide, even thô he went about telling society that Irvin was a namby pamby pili-piss, but then matters deteriorated past the level of tolerance let alone forgiveness, and if Lavinia was not avenged, he was warned off enough to thirst for my blood."

“So this goes further than all attempts at making a peace between enemies.”

“I fear so. Let us change this sombre subject and I will ride by you to your home,” he suggested.

With some difficulty, both mounted up and they rode off, but there was a matter which mystified Justina, even if it had worked to her advantage.

“How did you find us?” she asked after plucking up sufficient courage.

“I am astride Puck, whom you surely have recognised as Smirking Sam, who is a stalking horse, but what brought me this way, across your path, was, I am loth to say, pure coincidence,” he owned. “That is very perilous indeed, I fear.”

“Especially now that I have made an enemy of him, which is the last thing I wanted,” she confessed.

¹(manchet: white bread)

²(brown George: coarse brown bread),

NINETEEN

“She wept, my dear fellow, and lamented the existence of your odious streak; she averred that the two of you were as friendly as a pair of children merry as grigs, and that, and that, as the result o’ what happened, she was sad.”

“O, lud, O, Lord, you are breaking my heart, sweet joy; she is all of seventeen and at her age, morts are wedded, bedded and mothers. It is time she grew up beyond the pleasure taken in childish past-times, and if you are fooled by that, you are still as much of a namby pamby as you were when I found that my red-blooded affections were ill served by your whey-blooded sister.”

“You still refer to that and in terms that cast a burthen of fault upon us: as Seneca once said, ‘it is customary to hate the man whom you have wronged’. I refrained from violent solutions for there are not any, and that such recourse would cause me to descend to the level whereat you were then to be found, in the hope that you would, if not repent or make some redress, find your rank among men. However it is I who am unfrequentable and you the darling of Society. In other words, I was certain you had some goodness left in you, and you had some of it wrung out of you by that poor girl whom you called whore and harlot, on a number of occasions: I saw how you intervened when her father used words on her and heard how you later tried to shake him –,”

“To his senses so that I could have a coherent conversation with him in my interests, not for her sake!”

“I wish you had not said that, for lying there as you are, you ought to be roundly ashamed of yourself.”

“Ashamed? I? Just because a little bangtail (whore) feels sorry I decided to call her what she is? She has the spirit of a true whore: a moment before she lets me put my head on her bosom and then she flings her whip at you to have at me, and after that, she is in our way to stop us slashing at each other. Depend on it, she isn’t worth shoe-buckles, let alone the exertion we engaged in, and far from the cuts and bruises we endured.”

“Wherefrom stems this new contempt, when before she was your indispensable tool in your continued crusade to fell me? Rage and frustration, that the apple of your eye, whose body you so coveted, chose not to supply such goods as required, did not grovel at your compliments, and was glad to be rescued from your loathsome embrace by another, who just happened to be I? She is way above your sort, I fear. You asked for her compassion and pity, I hear tell; pity is not a personal affection welcomed by a proud man, but the older he grows a man is never proud when he gasps and foams for a girl”

“You’ve said enough, Irvin, for if you persist, you will provoke a challenge and your arm cannot bear a fight.”

“Only a coward would challenge a man incapacitated, but, why all this talk of challenges? I am not come here to call on you in your private rooms for to emerge with yet another challenge. I vow, you keep challenging and challenging me and I cannot help but opine that you will only cease so to do when I am gone to the Diet of Worms (dead and buried: the said diet was held by the Emperor to call Martin Luther to order).”

“Then why came you, for in your case nothing else would be useful. Is it to make pleas on her part, to persuade me to think less ill of her, to exalt her in my mind where she has fallen so low, to shew magnanimity towards her chastity? Chaste, that one? You should have

felt her bosom heave under my head, bah!”

“You should have seen her face contort with fear and anguish, for she was loth to wound you and she knew not what to do, but she sure as check did not want your head where you dared to put it. She has said overtly that were we not enemies she would wed you for the sake of her family and that is recognition of the value of an offer. Yet your offer was not genuine; you made it to injure me.”

Lord Chatteris narrowed his eyes, as far as the pains on his head would allow, and smirked, staring quizzically at the Duke, while raising himself up from his sofa.

“By God, Irvin,” he mocked, “you are some prime oddity, a truly unaccountable muskin (odd fellow), and I am damned if ever I expected this. ’Tis not your way to come talk to me about some mort or even defend her. I wonder whether you’d ha’ bestirred yourself in this fashion were I to ha’ danced Moll Peatley’s jig (intercourse) with that necessary (woman one sleeps with) of yours in Town.”

“Your remarks but lend weight to my view of you as ever seeking cause to provoke or challenge me to a fight,” sighed the Duke, and rose to his feet. “That’s enough for now, so I take my leave, feeling that a few moments in your society are enough to last a lifetime. It may explain why you have worn out four wives and cannot trap the latest choice for a fifth.”

“A thousand French poxes upon you, Irvin, and the way you go about it, it shan’t be long before you catch ’em,” rejoined the Earl.

The Duke was tempted to say ‘figs’, but Justina’s influence was impolitic to shew at this moment so he egressed, taciturn and haughty, to go below, and inform the duty footman that he was leaving so that the fellow could duly advise the Stopfords who were housing the Earl. The squire himself came out to see him off, and as his horse was still outside in the hand of a servant, he was able to ride away at once. Ere long he was on the open road heading towards his own lodging at Sir Robert Orre’s. The silent and undemanding companionship of his steed, unlike that of a human being, enabled him to expand the nature of his thoughts, upon these events and circumstances which now seemed to control him. Chatteris was right: it was not his way to defend a female, unless she was a close relative, especially if his concerns with her were founded on carnal lusts as was always the case with him, but he had performed an act which was a total departure from form and from his wont, to wit, he had visited the Earl to sound him out for his ideas and his state of mind. A week ago he would not have cared what Lord Chatteris thought about his acquaintances, but now it hurt him muchly to think that anyone could dare think ill of one member of them, for he was profoundly struck by her sublime attitude to her situation. Irvin earnestly wanted that Chatteris know of and accept her regret and remorse at the manner in which things had turned out, and that she was courageous enough to repress anger with him notwithstanding trespasses of word and deed he had committed upon her, which condition had won the Duke’s admiration compleatly, for he, and the folk in his life, were too full of conventional human malice and vengefulness. Actually Justina had not asked him to go to Chatteris and eulogise on her behalf or even see how he fared; Irvin himself had decided to visit the Earl.

Why he had done so, and why it was important to him to crow to the latter that Justina Woodville had a nature so generous as to sympathise with him, presently eluded the Duke of Irvin and his usually powerful understanding, much as he pondered it, and indeed, he had been pondering it since the event of his intervention yesterday afternoon, when whips sang a

painful duet in the late summer air. First of all, it was significant that she had thrown him hers; that was an impulsive response and not a measured wish to redress the balance, or so he believed, and could only be so if his safety was of cardinal importance. Secondly, he recalled with wretched regret the accident that had brought his whip upon her shoulder, even if he had tried to stop it in mid-strike so that when it hit her it had not the same force as was intended for Chatteris, but that ill solaced him, and all recollection of it made him wince with shame. Thirdly, she was more worried for him than for herself, before and after she was hurt, for she had toppled the Earl when the latter was poised to inflict upon him a severe wound, whereat he was deeply touched, as much as impressed favourably by her presence of mind. Chatteris being momentarily moved out of the scene, he was alone with her again, and he recalled that it never entered his head to take advantage of her as he had done before when she came almost weeping into the dining room, despite her seeking succour in his society. Instead he had soothed her fondly and taken her straight home, his heart full of sympathy, anxiety and gratitude. So vital were these feelings in him, that he did not allow her to remain alone and be questioned by her family about the events that had befallen her, and just ordered the Duke of Hearne into his own study, where he spoke many firm words, witnessed by the wife and heir, who were seen to emerge from this interview ashen-faced. Having secured Justina's dignity and good reputation he left the castle. Whether or not his effort was successful he knew yet not, but he wondered now if he would find out, for when he looked up, he descried an equestrian figure which was still indeterminate apart from the horse being black, whereby he divined that it was probably Justina. It was only natural that he should put his boots to his mount's flanks and head hurriedly for her, whereupon she responded in kind, for having recognised him. Indeed it was his prize, and within moments, they were reining in alongside of each other altho facing in opposite directions, but a yard's width apart. There was no greeting, for he regarded her in anticipation and she eyed him, painfully wary.

"Be easy, I shall not invite you to pick brambles," he said at last, whereat she gave a sad little laugh.

"And they made an excellent pie," she said, "but I have not partaken, for it is a treat for the innocent, and I do not feel like one anymore. I am a despicable object coveted by the lust of men, and that robs me of the innocence that you would ascribe to me."

"The lust of *men*? Am I included?"

"I confess to no sense of gratification as the object of your desire, sir. I have not dared to tell Carrie about what happened in the dining room and beyond what you spoke of yesterday to my parents, no-one knows or asks anything more, but I am not proud of it, for I did not come to your aid to render service to my fellow man, but –,"

"But because you want me as much as I want you?" he shot. "What is so ill about that? What is so disgusting in our mutual desire?"

"This like a so-called discussion with papa: repetitive!" she scoffed. "You know what is wrong. I haven't the courage to tell Carrie, and even if I did, would it relieve my guilt or just injure her? She is not enamoured of you nor cares what you do, but it would upset her to know – to know – of – of –,"

"US," he emphasised.

"No, of you," she corrected.

"Of us, Justina!" he cried.

"All right then, us," she snarled. "Irvin, if you covet me, and are to wed into this family, because they have contracted to provide you with a receptacle for your heirs, while you underwrite their debts, why do you persist in remaining betrothed to Caroline?"

"What mean you by 'persist'?" he asked.

"One sister is as good as any," she replied. "You need a wife, but you want to lie with me, so why not wed me instead of Caroline?"

The Duke frowned, taken aback.

"Why do you not answer?" she snapped. "I know that you could not ask for me when your troth was plight to Caroline because I was not out, and in anywise, as you said, you blindly accepted the eldest sister, but then you turned your eyes upon me. 'Tis not too late; papa will consent for he has to."

"What of Lady Caroline?" he shot.

"I rather suspect she would prefer it to being your wife while her sister was your mistress," answered Justina curtly.

The Duke's countenance glowed and his composure faded, as he fidgeted.

"'Tis not so simple," he stated. "You cannot wed me."

"Why?" she demanded.

"Justina, I want you now," he asserted. "I crave for you most awfully and ache for you badly. Yet who knows whether I will be able to muster up a glimmer of desire for you after a year is passed, or even a month? Then, you, as my wife, will find yourself abandoned to a bed which your husband only visits when it is time to make feet for children's shoes, or if there is no-one else to couple with at the moment, and that that same spouse, who hankered so after you, is cold?" he exclaimed, speaking rapidly.

"You have a long-time mistress!" she objected.

"She is not alone, even if she would like that," he replied. "I go to her because it would be too much trouble to break with her, and because she is always there to welcome me. You may not realise it, but a man is a curious creature, for he is equipped with a carnal appetite that enables him to perform with anyone if she puts enough of her body on view, which is not the same thing as looking at a belle, fully clothed, and just feeling oneself melt with longing. My *maîtresse en titre* kindles in me a fire that I could put out in a minute, but of late, when I have taken her, it has been your head that I have put on her shoulders, and she has laboured under the misapprehension that my bursting ardour was incited by her beauty or the great expanses of naked skin she shewed me."

Justina stared, aghast and injured, her eyes and mouth open wide.

"Don't look so horrified, my girl," he rasped. "It is the truth. Forgive me, Justina, but I must be cruel, if only to shew you what lies before us. By the time my desires have faded, that which turns you now to me shall have died equally as well, and you shall find a dreadful encumbrance, a presence as sickening in your bed as might that of Chatteris ha' been. Between Caroline and me there is nothing, so when we are together she will not suffer as much from my coolness as would you, because she would never have tasted my passion, nor felt any towards me. Nor will she be angry, jealous or wounded if I go to other women, which I shall do and as I have always done, because that is how it would have been from the beginning, but you, my heart's desire, would not stand that after we are wed, and so, when the fire is put out and I am back to my old tricks, just how galled and humiliated and ireful and

anguished will you feel?"

"So we sin gaily now and be done with it?" she spat.

"Marriage is not always an excuse for two people to couple," came his sharp repartee. "For us it is safer to be unencumbered and unrestrained. Justina, you will not want me after a while: think on it!"

"Thus you prefer that we commit incest?"

"It is not really that, and you know it."

Justina bowed her head, feeling as if she could cry and hoping that she would not, while a flood of shame and wrath overcame her intellectual faculties and obliterated their powers. All she could think of was that she had offered him marriage – and been refused.

"How did it go yesterday with your father?" he asked.

"I have not seen him," sounded a monotone.

"How did that happen so?" he wondered, surprised.

"When you brought me home, Carrie took me to my rooms and by the time I came out of them, you had long gone, and he was affecting illness in his apartments, of which the doors have remained shut ever since but to servants, for even his meals are taken to him on a tray. That is how I am out here alone, for no-one knows who is allowed what and everyone is doing as they please. Honoria raided his desk and took every coin out of it. It is a strange house in which we live."

"Your venture now, is it a promenade or are you bound for a specific destination?"

"I am just taking exercise."

"Do the others in your family know what Chatteris did?"

"Mamma and Devenish have recounted only what you told my father, and no-one has had the gumption to ask me any questions. Honoria wanted to throw out the berries but I would not let her waste precious food."

All the while she was speaking like one in a daze, out of which he sought to rouse her.

"Justina, know you where I have been?" he inquired, but she did not even look at him. "Try and guess," he attempted, to no avail, so he admitted it. "I visited Chatteris."

"Poor old Chatteris," she whispered morosely, bowing her head and contemplating the grass in confusion. "Had I not demonstrated partiality for you, he might not ha' called me whore," she added.

"Why do you feel sorry for him?" he demanded. "He does not feel sorry for you."

"Men never feel sorry," she said. "I know not, but at this moment, he makes me sad, and so do all his dead wives, especially the poor lady found floating in a fishpond."

"I told him that you were sad about his affairs and he only said that it signified that you had the spirit of a whore."

"He is probably right," she spat out.

"When you are older, Justina, you will probably understand me better, for what I am," he declared sternly.

"I understand one thing of you already," she riposted. "If given the chance to do a thing honestly, you'd sooner whip the Devil (achieve illicitly what can be accomplished honestly or openly), because you know no other way. You are incapable of doing anything straight as a pound of candles, and you always will be so."

"You wax cynical because you are hurt," he snorted.

“And you, sir, are a coward, for you are afraid of a woman’s affection, even thô you flit from bed to bed seeking it,” was her sharp repartee.

“I seek only pleasure and I seek it for my body,” he rejoined.

“So you even lack the courage to admit anything to yourself?” she mused.

Thereat he smiled, averting his gaze, at once surprised and mocking.

“I had no notion that you were so vain,” he commented. “Did you think that just because a man truly and torridly desires a female, he is prepared to marry her?”

Justina appeared to be a little startled, but it was more at his manner than at his words.

“Chatteris was right again,” she said, observing him pensively. “He called me ‘Irvin’s plaything’.”

“Chatteris was out to poison your mind,” he sneered, “and seems to have succeeded, so now you are his plaything, not mine.”

She only heaved a sigh, but turned her horse to take it away from the track over the adjacent meadow in order to ride cross country.

“I thank you for having spoken to me thus today,” she pronounced coldly. “It has cleared away a fog of confusion, solved a welter of problems, assisted the process of my maturity, and shewn me resolution and rectitude.”

With that, she set off.

“Justina!” he called. “Let us not part with rancour.”

Whereupon she reined in momentarily, glanced over her shoulder as if to convey her amazement at so incongruous a notion as a reconciliation now, after what he had told her, before causing her mount to trot away. The Duke called her name once more but suddenly the trot became a fast gallop, and off she sped. Refraining from giving chase, he rode back to Sir Robert’s in the lowest of spirits, bereft of hope, and feeling damned by her forever. This benumbed his intellect somewhat, but not so far as to prevent him from reaching certain conclusions. He did not ask himself why he had blurted out words to repulse her; nor did he condemn himself for thus losing her so unequivocally. Instead, he decided that what he had done was in fact for the best, especially her best. Chatteris had been right indeed when he said that she would have been a plaything, and now the Duke conceded that the innocent and ardent girl was probably too good in her impetuous immaturity for the hell-fire rake – but too dear to him to be subjected to dissipation and ill-user that consorting with him would eventually entail. He recalled her remarks and concurred that she too had summed up the matter correctly: he was too much of a coward and assuredly too afraid of a woman’s genuine affection lest it imprisoned him forever, yet indeed, just what was he doing flitting among beds and bodies? Nevertheless, at this moment, he had just banned himself from one that he most wanted, althô she could not yet tell whether he was being truthful about the base quality of his mentality, whether he had consciously attempted to drive her away for *his own sake* for she was in danger of making their entanglement all too permanent, or whether he had really sent her off for *her own sake*, before she was seriously and brutally hurt by his failure to live up to her expectations which were delusions that his behaviour had created only because she believed in him. Women were tiresome, that was true, with their good faith and devotion and self-sacrifice and silent suffering and other suchlike rubbish, but for all that, words had come forth from his lips and produced a specific effect; she was gone from him with an ease too suspect to allow him to hope that she would be won back, yet, rather than feel disappointment

at his own folly in losing her, he was glad to give up indulging his lust for the sake of her peace of mind. All the same, he had never done such a thing with a female before, and he did not want to know the reason why.

As for Justina, she found it impossible to think at all and returned home in a daze of remorse at ever having shewn her feelings, in which unenviable state she remained for the rest of the day. That did not deprive her of the ability to eat and drink, to listen and reply, to read and sew, and even help her sister Caroline with Selina's lessons or her reduced duties in the stables, but too stunned was she to indulge in any sort of self-communing, which her diminished faculties necessarily deferred. All the same Caroline noticed that altho Justina did exactly as was humanly expected of her according to the normal way of mankind in this house, something was lacking and so, she waited until night-time, after they had all retired, and visited her sister in the latter's apartments, where she was reading, and sat on her bed.

"Did something happen on your ride today, Justina?" she asked, without any preliminary unnecessary beating about the bush, but there was no answer.

"Was Chatteris about?" tried Caroline but again, Justina responded not. "Tell me, please tell me," begged her sister. "I'm worried and afraid lest someone assaulted you and you are too drained and afflicted to speak of it."

Justina exhaled but persisted in her silence; how did one own to one's own sister that one had tried to steal her husband and duly and deservedly been sent to the Devil?

"Pray?" entreated Caroline. "If something terrible has befallen you, you must tell someone," but her sister sat still which turned her a trifle distracted. "I am already half-crazed with worry," she whimpered, whereupon Justina put down her book at last.

"I met Irvin," she pronounced. "I just met him, no more."

"I hope he was not unkind to you?" faltered Caroline.

"By what mean you when you say 'unkind'?" faltered Justina.

"He did not ask you to – er – do that which is repugnant to you, p-perhaps?"

"Yea and nay, but wait, pray. First, recount to me what happened in the study."

"Devenish said Irvin told papa that Chatteris looked as if he would surely ravish you were no-one to intervene, and reminded papa that at the Orres' he had forbidden papa to let Chatteris have any truck with us. He had a wound on his arm from a whiplash that Chatteris had inflicted. He also declaimed that you had a bad shoulder and explained how it happened but bid us speak not about it until you did, and that we all had to be careful in future. It was a dreadful thing, Justina, but father's response was typical: when faced by a problem he cannot solve he ignores it and detracts from it by some irrelevant action."

"Did Irvin say that I helped him?"

"He was full of praise about your bravery and also said that your managing to get yourself caught short thus could not be helped, for evidently *no-one* had told you that he had forbidden our father the match between you and the Earl, and instead you had been ordered to be tactful and indulgent, which is too much to load on the shoulder of a maid of seventeen in face of a well-trammelled widower of over half a century, who had seen four wives in the grave, and knew how many days went to the week."

"Anything more? Has our exalted father done anything about Chatteris?"

"This evening he made Devenish compile a letter withdrawing his consent for your hand. Of course, it contained all sorts of balderdash and his dictation was about as coherent

as a mouse in a cheese, so Devenish has to work on bettering it, but the trouble with Devenish is that he comes with salt and spoons (is dilatory) and sends all by John Long the carrier (postpone or wait a long while). He is supposed to deliver it himself. Naturally, when it comes to flapping someone with a foxtail, father makes others do his own dirty work.”

“I did some dirty work today,” mused Justina, lapsing deeper into a daze of recollection as if she were reliving the very moments referred to.

“What sort of dirty work?” coaxed and figuratively her sister.

“With Irvin; ’tis always dirty work with Irvin,” said Justina. “I suggested a thing. I should ha’ consulted you first but I did not, so I was rightly served for it.”

“I cannot divine this so would you please explicate?” pursued Carrie, a sympathetic hand on her sister’s shoulder.

“Well, as he p-pursues me and is betrothed to you, I asked that he wed me instead!” blurted out Justina, all in one breath, before courage took refuge in the dubious discretion of useless silence.

“Justina!” recoiled Caroline, and covered her face, but her sobbing betrayed her. “How could you?”

“It was meant to be for the best. It would cleanse this family of an untenable situation, and take care of Irvin’s vulnerability if I am forced to wed Chatteris in any wise in case the attempt at gaining the Lord Chancellor’s help failed – in which situation it will be all honey and all turd between me and my intended until death do us part, and me a-floating in the fishpond,” related Justina, speaking fast because she was nervous and guilty. “Irvin said *no*.”

“I gathered as much,” whispered Caroline.

“I was so humiliated,” grumbled Justina, more distressed than vexed.

“That is why I asked how could you do such a thing,” stated her sister, “for ’tis always humiliating for a female to offer: that is the man’s part. Men affect to exert over us a strange domination; we must attend their pleasure, and may not ask for certain things, for then they may delight in refusing and humbling us. ’Tis grossly unjust but it is the accepted method and we must abide by it. If we refuse them, they condemn us for spurning them, and for being proud where a woman should not just be modest but grateful. Our pride is our only defence, Justina, even if in families like ours, it has no place and we wed the mixen (dunghill), but men would wrest our pride from us. That is why we are discourseled to love men, for then our pride is gone, and that is why I may wed Irvin without undue suffering, for my pride, *ergo* my defence, is up. Irvin is a rake, he would not understand that what you want to do is gallant and practical.”

“He said it was impractical,” interpolated Justina. “After one year he may not covet me as he did now, and that I would not want him, so we would be encumbrances upon each other. His desire would fade and my warmth die – and his coolness would be worse for me than for you, for I would have tasted of his ardour, which a wife in a marriage of convenience would not.”

“Give credit where it is due, he is right,” acknowledged Caroline, and when Justina eyed her in surprise, added, “he will hurt you, ’tis true. Did he say more?”

“Aye. There will be other women –,”

“Exactly, for you as his once coveted wife, will find harder to suffer, than one just wed to him to keep her father from Needham (poverty).”

“Yet what if I put myself in your frame of mind? What if I pretend that I am you and that he does not hanker after me, so that when his desires fade, I shall not have a great miss of (feel no regret at) him or his affections?”

“You cannot, Justina. You will respond to him, if you feel anything for him, in spite of yourself,” assessed Caroline.

Justina recollected how much she had responded already, and bowed her head.

“I should not have cared for Chatteris, and wed him merry as a magpie, were there not a crow to pluck between him and Irvin,” she grumbled.

“Chatteris did not really want you, Justina,” dismissed Caroline sadly.

“Caroline, make Irvin wed me,” urged Justina, “and let his desires fade, but let him also wed me, and let me not be his whore while you are his wife.”

“Justina,” recommenced Caroline earnestly, “do you *want* Irvin?”

“I-I don’t know,” faltered Justina, covering her face with her hands.

“What an odious tangle,” rued the older sister, putting an arm about her younger one. “Had he not set this off, you’d ha’ been less likely to conceive such ideas.”

“What if it is my fault?” whined Justina.

“Nothing would ha’ come of it, had he not encouraged it, and if the wish was originally his, then he is in error for suggesting it. He is a fine, handsome fellow, ever so cultured and suave and enticing; even Selina is in love with him and Honoria hates me for having been given to him. Debts and babies, mortgages and marriages of convenience don’t signify to her; she is secretly fascinated by the idea of being forced to marry so luscious and lusty a man.”

“Except that she has been able to control and suppress it.”

“No-one pursued her to try and foster it in her. Whether or not it is wrong is not relevant; it is what happens.”

“Yet what if ‘what happens’ is more than just a silly, girlish fancy or a romantic notion, or a secret fascination over the man?”

“Justina, for your sake, never let it be more than just that,” cautioned Caroline.

“Carrie, after all that he said to me today, I should be hating him, but I cannot find it in me so to do. I must indeed be a whore, in spirit: know you how I felt after the business with Chatteris, who called me by that lareover (word to be avoided in company)? I felt sorry for him, even if I was also angry. Now, with Irvin, I am not the furious, self-righteous, self-sacrificing, brave but indignant heroine unjustly wronged, I am wounded and wrung out, I ask why he should discard me even before he has begun, and that I am foolish and silly and not worth a blue point if that is how he received my postulation. I cannot even think distinctly and coherently on the events that have befallen me, except to feel that somewhere, I am to blame, for all of it, in some way. I am totally pitiful and pathetic.”

“Justina, no; reproach yourself not: we are all made differently and some folk wound more easily and take longer to heal. That your wits are crippled is only temporary; you’ll recover and be your old self, sure as a juggler’s box.”

“But I am the fiery one who answers back to and derides our father behind his back, who buys a horse without my parents’ consent and says ‘figs’ to Irvin. I am not in the habit of feeling hurt because some hang-in-chains has spoken out of turn to me. Instead, I should be kicking him in his gear (male genitals) until he yelps like a buffer (dog) – which is the wrong

thing to do now because he won't be able to spawn anymore."

"There, see? Your old spark returns," laughed Caroline.

"No, it does not. I am only vexed with myself for being so weak, and for trying to steal your husband. I hate myself, Caroline Woodville. I should go into the woods and eat as many belladonna berries as I can find."

"Fortunately, it is too early in the year for them to be ripe and by the time you have waited for that, the man shall have his mare again," consoled Caroline.

TWENTY

The Marquis of Devenish finished his letter the following morning, and after Caroline had copied it out neatly in secretary hand and made a copy for the household records, he and his brother Lord Julius Woodville mounted up, the Marquis on his father's grey, Ajax, and betook themselves unto Stopford Manor, where the Earl of Chatteris was lodging, and there they left it in the hands of a servant, waiting only for a receipt that the Marquis had made for the Earl to sign. Armed with that alone, they returned home, but a reply arrived during the late afternoon, containing much insulting, acrimonious and derogatory language, such as was not addressed to a more venerable person of the same degree, and if levelled at a younger and braver man, would surely have provoked a duel. As Irvin was to sup with the family the old Duke shewed him this communication that did little justice to the English language and even less to his daughter, but the future son-in-law dismissed it with a joke, declaring that its sole purpose was to provoke dyspepsia and no more, judging from its time of delivery. On this occasion the host had declared it a family meal, which meant that only young Selina was excluded, and so Justina was subjected to the torture of sitting at the same table as the man who had rejected her, and of having to pretend that all was well, for she was expected to jubilate about her freedom from Chatteris which her father and Irvin had won for her, and to shew gratitude that they had won it. So suave and courtly, cool and complacent, was he that she could not tell what he felt, if anything at all, and even if he did, he was probably better at dissembling feelings than indulging them openly. All the same his presence remained for her a source of grave discomfiture, and she could hardly bring herself to look at him, which was a mercy in fact, for she would have been tempted to glower or grimace at him, thereby making herself conspicuous before her family. Yet by a strange dint of irony, she had in Caroline an ally and a champion, for, out of boredom, a small streak of gleeful cruelty and a wish to amuse herself, the eldest Woodville sister spent many minutes favouring the Duke of Irvin with peculiar and quizzical looks, which, after a bemusing interval, conveyed to his understanding that she knew more than he would have liked her to. Accordingly, he grew grim and stern, ignoring her for the rest of the time he passed with them all, so she retaliated in kind, and so he found himself in the strangest of situations, wherein the woman he was to wed and the woman he wished to bed, both sisters, shunned him together.

At the end of the meal, his grace of Irvin announced that he had a particular purpose in coming here this day apart from the obvious one of enjoying their hospitality. Indeed, he was here to take leave of them for on the morrow, around five o' clock in the morning, he was setting off for London. Althô this information was for the benefit of the whole family, he looked directly at Justina as he spoke. For the first time since her forced greeting at his arrival, when she also thanked him for his help over Chatteris, she glanced up into his face, whereupon Caroline was gratified to see that her eyes were bright and twinkling, while there played about her mouth a smile of relief. The younger Duke, at whom this was levelled, seemed momentarily stricken by disconcertment, and Lady Caroline, who had the advertence hurriedly to eye him, saw an element of chagrin almost destroy his assumed complaisance. Justina, to her own vast gratification, beheld this too, and learned thereby that he was capable of suffering for more reasons than the merely physical denial of indulgence craved to satisfy lust. Jovially, cynically, she said so to Caroline later, declaring herself elated at discovering

that Irvin was actually human, even if only in part.

Oddly enough, Justina awakened early on the morrow, and unable to return to sleep, for ere long she would dress and bustle off to the stables in any wise, she sat up to watch the sunrise, creating in it the symbol of Irvin's departure, and remembering, with a mixture of annoyance at her acknowledged humiliation and a little pleasure too, how pained he became at her display of deliverance because he was going away. That he should suffer because of her was very welcome, but even so, she hoped that it would not be for too long, and she suspected that once he returned to the pleasures of the Metropolis, his yearnings for her body would fade. He was a man, men recovered easily from women, and up she went from her bed to dress and work. In fact labouring with horses brought its own kind of pleasure and just as he would soon lose sight of her she lost sight of him; thus when she came in shortly before midday and met Caroline, who owned her own gladness at seeing her sister's good humour thus restored, she was able to confirm that that was the case, and that she was come to the conclusion that if ever men felt hurt for any reason, it was probably only out of vanity. Another cause of relief was that Squire Stopford had met Julius in the village and told him that Lord Chatteris had departed today.

"Then our home clime is clear of vermin," affirmed Justina with satisfaction.

For all that, Justina Woodville was not entirely mistress of her own affections and emotions, for the entire series of events had afflicted both and so she needed to seek her own company awhile. Her father, chastened by the affair, could not bring himself to talk to or even look on her, so he voluntarily was out of her way. Her brothers, unsure of what to do with a sister who had nearly escaped the assaults of a man, how to treat her and what to say before her, remained at a distance for fear of blundering inadvertently. Neither her mother nor Honoria had any use for her, and Selina was young and preoccupied, while Caroline diplomatically made herself available if needed but otherwise had household matters and Selina to keep her busy. When one wished to be alone and one had access thereto, the best companion for solitude, paradoxically, was a horse, so after dining Justina went back to the stables and drew out her black mare, for on her back she could fly away for a little while and breathe the fresh air beyond the closeness and imagined oppression of the castle. At a gallop, she crossed her father's lands to the road, and not far from them was the hedgerow with the famous brambles, at which she halted to stare fixedly in morbid fascination.

It was a dull afternoon, the sky overcast but not so that it enveloped the land in a clammy shroud. There was a light wind playing in the foliage of tree and shrub and waving about the taller grass, amid which birds sang or called and insects buzzed and whizzed respectively. A rabbit whisked herself off into the undergrowth, shewing her 'bun' or scut; children thus called the animal a bunny rabbit. Then all this peace or noise or activity or lack of it was interrupted by the echo of a loud report, whereupon there rose from nigh a wild flapping of wings as the feathered population, pecking for seed or seeking live food in the meads, took to the air and veered off to the protection of the woodland, crying out in warning and fright. Even the black mare emitted a series of grunts in a low register, as if to shew dissatisfaction with the state of affairs, which Justina could not quite make out, she left the banks of the road and put herself on the shoulder of a small rise, wondering who was firing off small-arms in this location, not noted for good shooting, even if that season had not long ago begun. Of course, it could have been a poacher, bagging big fat wood-pigeons for the

pot, but the matter was worth a little curiosity.

The black mare raised her head, all at once, and began to peer anxiously along the road, away from the direction of the castle that was Justina's home, and seemed to concentrate her attention firmly on something. Thus guided, Justina followed her example, and discerned the presence, far away, of horsemen, scudding like dark dots over the landscape, as fast as their mounts could carry them. There were two at first sight, and then there were three, all rushing in a headlong fashion as if chasing after or running from something. Thus she looked to see what was their quarry or their predator, unless they were travellers, or messengers with no respect for their steeds or for private property, but why on earth would a courier want to shoot off a big, booming fowling piece? Whatever they were, they certainly moved on an erratic course, diverging, converging, cutting corners, and bounding off the road altogether, but from their manner it soon became clear that they were not concerned about anything being behind them, so they were probably not being pursued after all. Then she also descried that which they were after, for she beheld the figure of a man, running as if for his life, clad in dark clothes and the heavy, long, cuffed boots of the equestrian, but without a horse or, for that matter, a hat, as she began to be able to discern the black hair of his queue raised in the wind-rush that his flight created.

Inquisitively, she rode her horse, still remaining off the road, towards the approaching manhunt, watching with the impartiality of a spectator and not thinking that perhaps she should seek cover instead, but soon enough, the impartiality turned into anxiety, for the man could not outrun the horses and seemed in any wise already to have been wounded, for he clutched repeatedly at one shoulder as he ran. His strength was beginning to flag, for even though he kept up a meandering progress to delay them, he no longer proceeded with the dedication of one in full possession of his physical faculties, and he even stumbled as if one of his legs was sore. Justina wondered what was happening, whether the hunted man or his hunters were criminal, and what was the intention of the latter when they caught up their prey as they closed in rapidly upon him. So she advanced, hoping that the proximity of the wood served as a background to her in which she would not be noticed, whereupon she saw that the quarry was tall and clad in black; indeed, she even was able to view his features notwithstanding the distance between them. To her horror, she recognised him and was momentarily gripped by alarm: the hunted man was the Duke of Irvin.

At once she jumped from her horse's back and ungirthed the saddle, casting it off into the grass before clambering upon the mare in a flurry of skirts and petticoats, whereafter she set off towards the hunt at full gallop, making for the Duke.

"Here," she shouted. "Irvin; to me!"

The Duke, looking over his shoulders at his pursuers, if not persecutors, who were nigh about to spring upon and trample him, turned to face forwards again, and saw her coming at him like a full charge of cavalry. Animated and inspired, he sped forth on a last burst of energy; why they had not yet run him down he could not understand, for perhaps they just meant to catch him, but even so he wanted that not at all, whether he was to be had dead or alive. There was another shot, singing past Jezebel's nose, obviously intended for her rather than her rider, but the mare bounced off and then reared in fright, as Justina went skidding down her back to land in a heap at her tail, but still holding on to the reins, so the mare could not flee in panic and just wheeled about, which seemed to calm her. Their gazes

met, and up sprang the girl, just as a rider took aim again; instinctively she put the mare behind her, and he brought his arm down, for he was not to kill her! So back atop her mount she vaulted, just as Irvin, arms extended, reached them and threw himself upon the mare's back like a dead load.

"I'm starting!" she warned him, and set off, the mare speedily retracing her progress homeward.

Behind Justina, the Duke bestrode the fine animal with a struggle even as she bounded off, and threw his arms about that narrow waist in front of him. Hours, even years, of riding in boy's clothes had taught her to maintain with ease a very good seat when riding bare-back, but whereas the absence of a saddle presented no problem to the lady, the gentleman seemed to have difficulty in keeping his seat, and relied somewhat on his grasp about her, so she called to him to hold the barrel with his legs and slapped him on the knee to emphasise her plea and her advice.

"M-my thigh," he gasped, out of breath. "Chatteris."

Justina accordingly recalled that when Chatteris and Irvin had clashed whips, the former had dealt the latter a blow to one leg, which he had hitherto ignored to manifest but which now was manifesting itself by reducing all his efforts, for the bruise it had made hurt him fearsomely.

"O, do the best you can," groaned she, but doubted that he was in a state to do much.

Already they were gaining on their pursuers notwithstanding that the mare was doubly loaded but because their hunters tried to shoot her down once again, she was fleeing for her life, and there was nothing better to induce speed than the instinct of survival.

"Where the Devil do I take you?" she called, traversing the road and striking out over the leas.

"Orre's, Orre's," he stressed.

"I hope I can manage it," she replied. "She is twice burthened – and you feel as if you are going to fall off at any moment."

"Try, Justina, I beg you to try," he entreated, still panting, as his body leaned limply and simply against hers.

"Stop that! I'll fall," she cried, hurriedly righting herself, while the mare leaped a small drainage trench and almost tossed off her riders.

Behind them, the three horsemen separated, in an attempt to corner the fleeing pair. The Duke warned her of this, but she, instead of being reassuring or affectionate or afraid or all three, became aware that, despite her rescue of him, she was displaying displeasure, even resentment towards him, for she had been treating him like a nuisance and a pitiful creature; now that she could sense that he was frightened, she could only come up with contempt.

"Wash the milk off your liver (stop acting the coward), Irvin!" she declaimed with unmasked exasperation. "Stop leaning on me; wish you to reach Orre's alive?"

"I've hurt my shoulder," he whined. "They shot my horse from under me, and when I fell, they shot at me."

"They shot your horse?" she shrieked. "Which one was it?"

"It was P – Smirking Sam," he managed to croak out.

"Ohh, no, poor Smirking Sam! He's not dead is he?" she wailed sorrowfully.

"I don't know, he was bleeding, and fallen, and I got away," he replied, his grip about

her tightening as he felt worse owing to her lack of concern for him. "What of me? Do I cease now to matter?" he complained softly to himself, but leaned his head upon hers, so she overheard him in any case.

"You?" she barked. "Bah!"

With that, she turned to look over her shoulder in order to see where their pursuers were. Altho falling back, their net seemed to have widened, for they were aside of her, so that if she changed direction she could be intercepted, but change she needed to, veering to her own right, which enabled one horseman to make up a goodly part of the distance between them, especially when she went plunging down a slope, for she had to slacken otherwise her mount would fall. Her immediate pursuer took advantage of her plight and ran his mount recklessly down at full speed, only to cause it to miss its footing in a grand style, but it did better, for it rolled over on him and picking itself up, set off like an arrow in the opposite direction. The fellow was not to be outdone and even as he sat up, he reached for his fowling piece and levelling it, pulled the trigger, releasing a hail of shot. Behind Justina the Duke emitted a small moan, and Jezebel shuddered, with a small squeak.

"Jezebel's been hit! My Jezebel has been hit –," wailed Justina, except that, from the manner in which the gallant mare kept on galloping, her tail still held up and out, there was no way of telling that she had been wounded or where.

"So have I," grunted the Duke of Irvin.

"I think she took it in the croup," speculated Justina, trying to turn and lean under him to see, but he grasped at her.

"Justina, don't," he whimpered. "I have shot in my back and it hurts so."

"Ye gods," she carped.

It was all very well making fun of and pouring scorn on him, for now a new factor needed considering. His right arm suffered from a severe gash applied by a whip, his left shoulder had been banged about and then shot, a thigh was afflicted with a bad bruise, and now his back was peppered with pellets. She did not dare ask how long he could stay on horseback and he probably did not know, but the situation was bad, for he lurched and reeled and slid from one side to the other, taking her with him. Were they to fall, the mare, already frightened and in pain, might not remain to be remounted and just flee in order to save herself, so it was imperative that they keep their seats. Justina was certain she could not reach Orre Hill Hall, indeed, she did not think that they would have been able to reach Great Hearne Castle, which was closer than the destination he had wanted. Instead they had to hide, for it required too much effort and a goodly distance of hard riding to shake off the remaining assailants. Fortunately, Justina's turn made them lag behind even farther, whereof she sought to take advantage. Remembering that Orre was building a dam on his land from which to irrigate his crops, she thought thither to go, and enlist the aid of the workers on the site. The dam was not far away; indeed she would soon see it with the naked eye when the lie of the land changed. Faster and faster went the mare; perhaps she sensed some proximity to refuge in Justina's head and was keen to reach it. Then all at once, the works came into view, but the site was deserted: not a single figure moved among the sustaining timbers or the new and raw-dug channels. For a second she was aghast with dismay, but then it dawned on her that tomorrow was Sunday and the workers probably had Saturday afternoon off, to clean up before church the next morning. Justina felt that she was already being punished for

forgetting the Sabbath, which he, if travelling, would be breaking squarely.

Their hunters were not gaining on them and Jezebel had put more distance between them and herself. Even so, Justina remained anxious and pessimistic, for the Duke's condition promised nothing but deterioration as he all but lay against her, his breath quickening and his body shifting with pain; she could feel the sweat from his brow upon her neck, and suspected that he was hardly conscious anymore. Still, they reached the deepened yet dry basin, but Justina could not breathe the proverbial sigh of relief, for before them lay a perilous descent down the steep sides and she knew not which way to take. It occurred to her to hide in one of the deeper channels, which were narrow and supported with deals and battens, and which hopefully contained spare planking that she meant to lay across the said supports to make a shelter, for the sake of concealment, and so to do before the pursuers approached and saw her at work, so that when they did arrive, she and her horse would have seemed to vanish in thin air. She even knew which channel she wanted to enter and was glad of that day that her family were all ordered to the dam for an excursion, to keep them away from the Stopfords. The only trouble was that she did not know the way down into any of these, but in any wise she dismounted, and took her horse by the bridle, while the Duke just bent over, albeit seated, bleeding here and there so that red drops splashed down on Jezebel's black coat. Then as she was sure the men who worked here did, she tackled the ramp which was the side of the basin, and learned from the horse that the best way to make a steep descent was sidewise. Whether a tired mare with a shot wound in the croup and an exhausted, fainting, injured rider would survive it, remained to be seen.

Bravely, then they began their short odyssey, his grace endeavouring to sit up, his chin resting on the ruffles of his shirt, his eyes barely open, and his fists gripping the mare's black mane, Jezebel herself concentrating hard on where she put her feet and the rolling gravel that beset the whole side of the basin, while Justina held her head and neck steady to chuse a diagonal course that would lead to the furrow she had chusen, while repeatedly turning to hold the Duke in place whenever he looked as if he were ready to heave off the mare's glossy back. By carefully measured paces and sedulously chusen tracks they make good speed, the anxious girl and the nervous mare both heroines of this piece. Occasionally the ground itself betrayed them, with Justina losing her balance on loose pebbles or the mare lurching and plunging, which loss of equilibrium hurt and wrested a moan from the rider, who was not entirely out of this world yet, close as he was to the condition of a dead faint.

"I can't go on, for I feel sick, so may we please stop?" he begged.

"Then fell the oaks (vomit) as far as you can launch it, for we are slithering down fast and I dare not break our stride or the rhythm into which we are gotten because you feel like a cascade (vomit)," was the unsympathetic response. "Stick a pin in it (hold hard)! If you don't make a slight effort, I will be constrained just to leave you here and take Jezebel off to have her rump seen to at home," she threatened.

As she spoke she looked up at him, whereupon he opened his eyes, his brow knit in an expression of extreme wretchedness, but he did not reply, and naturally, Justina continued briskly down the side of the basin into the bowl. Once there, she urged him to hold the saddle before leading the horse at a run into the selected channel. When they were well in it, she turned to him.

"Dismount," she whispered urgently. "Wake up! Dismount."

The Duke slid his sound leg over the mare's withers and just slithered down from her back, assisted by Justina, who supported him as he staggered after her to one of the channel's two walls.

"Sit against there, and stay in the shadow. Thank God that you wear black," she ordered and then commented. "How does one make a mare crouch?" she mused, addressing the frothing steed, with a glance at him, lest he knew a helpful thing that she did not.

His grace could not even assimilate the question, let alone answer it, so Justina relied on common sense and more than that, the animal's intelligence. While imagining very hard the mare in a reclining position, she reached up the great, rounded croup and while pressing down on it, urged her mount to lower it. Jezebel could have done one of three things: she might kick her mistress, or, she would have just stood motionless, or, she possibly obliged. The reins were over Justina's arm and thus turned the long head towards her, the sweet face directed towards her as she repeated her pleas, as all of them could hear the approach, albeit well above, of horses' hooves. It was intelligence, born of self-preservation and the will to hide, that prevailed and the mare descended as required, a spectacle of controlled power as she knelt and then tucked in her hind legs, taking care to try and not stretch her wound. The sides of the channel were sustained by sloping and upright battens, affording a network of wooden scaffolding behind which the agile could crawl were they unafraid to become a trifle dirty. Irvin was no longer agile but Justina compelled him, despite all his wounds, to sit cramped like a curled foetus in a disgusting drawing of an opened womb in an old anatomy book, tucking him behind a deal, while she dragged, as quietly as she could, some of the loose planking left lying in the channel for to reinforce its future continuation. These she wedged about through others to cover the sight of the horse, some of them actually touching the black robe, and hoped that Jezebel would not suddenly decide to object, rise and shake off the impediment. That much accomplished, Justina went to crouch near the Duke, peering up through the web of woodwork to descry the two horsemen at the far end of the basin, scanning the quarried site beneath them. The Duke chose this moment to awaken and sight them too, and emitted a soft moan, only to be hushed by his companion, lest he should make the mare stir.

To her credit, the said mare shuddered not a muscle nor twitched a hair; indeed they could not even hear her breathe. Meanwhile the Nimrods twain began to ride around the dam site to investigate it for visible nooks and crevices. There were the channels, of course, but short of risking their necks on the sides of the basin there was no way of entering these, and the ones they were nigh looked too narrow to conceal a large animal, besides, where could one hide a horse? As they began to draw nearer her hiding place, Justina began to be able to hear their voices and make out their speech, whereby she was relieved to discover that their understanding of their surroundings was incomplete, which put them in the horns of a dilemma, for one insisted that the fugitives could not possibly have entered the dam, the sides being too steep, the bowl too clear and there being no traces of hooves on the ground before them, but then, in descending sidewise, the mare had dislodged earth with each step and inadvertently created the same patterns made by shovels scraping at the slope to smoothen it. He also deemed it too dangerous to reach the channels, themselves packed with makeshift beams, liable to cave in if the ground upon which they were laid was disturbed, so in his opinion, the prey had ridden off past this great hole, and if they two were to recommence

pursuit as fast as they could muster, they were sure to sight their quarry still in flight. His colleague persisted in the idea that the victims were on this site, for if they had fled onward, the topography was such that there would be a distant view of them, even taking into account trees and copses, so he wanted to enter the dam site and turn over every piece of wood and stone in sight. His friend insisted that he would not be party to such dangerous deeds and waste time over them, but the braver and more dogged of the twain suggested that they should wait, all night if necessary, for the female was a local girl and probably knew this place better than those who worked in it. The proposition met with no favour from the fellow who would rather be off and he almost departed alone, but his accomplice pointed out to him that the Duke was wounded and thus, very soon the female would be forced to seek help, which meant that they would not have long to wait. Justina stiffened with fright, for the two men were just above her, and worse, they ceased wrangling, for while the opposing party sped off to give chase nevertheless, the enthusiastic one remained and patrolled the edge of the basin, effectively imprisoning them therein. The movements of this fiendish guard were followed by the reverberations of his horse's hooves as he came and went, and whenever he was near, Jezebel pricked up her ears, but did not try to shift about, for she caught the sound and the vibration before the humans did. For upwards of two hours he rode and halted, sometimes close to them and sometimes not, but luckily unable to discern that beneath a tangled mass of woodwork below there were two people and a horse, mercifully as black as shadow, lying perfectly still. A wind started up in earnest, masking ancillary sounds, but that also served to make his moves harder to detect, except that Justina actually saw him go to the far side of the basin, and, therefrom he finally attempted to make a descent into the bowl.

"Now we come out of God's blessing into the warm sun (from better to worse)," she whispered. "There is but one man, and now he is coming down. At least he is alone, for if there were two, it would be more difficult for us to defend ourselves."

"Ourselves?" repeated the Duke. "With what am I supposed to defend myself? I shed my hanger because I could not run with it coming between my legs, and in falling down, my poor horse lay on my pistol case, making it inaccessible."

The effort of explaining that much exhausted him and he ended up panting.

"Bah, you're moribund," scoffed Justina, but he only shifted slightly and looked up.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"Behind you, near my mare," she replied.

"Why sit you so far?" he whined. "Come nearer me, please."

The mare wheezed, so Justina made her choice.

"She is as afraid as you are, and your fear disturbs her, for she has been very good. Now that rogue is on his way and our real trial is coming now, so don't spoil the miracle that this allegedly dumb animal has shewn herself to be. Bah, I can see him from here; what a pity that you left your pistols behind."

"If you are thinking of shooting that fellow, ask yourself if we are not in enough trouble already without a murder charge hanging over our heads for putting out the light of some hedge bird (despicable scoundrel)," he cautioned, his speech and his breathing laboured.

"I am thinking of saving our lives and all you can do is fear the Gregorian tree (gallows)?" she spat. "Why, as far as those who measure a twig (act absurdly) come, *biscottum capis* (you take the biscuit)."

“They don’t mean to kill us. They shoot at our horses, but if they shoot us it is only to wound, so that we cannot flee,” he averred. “That much I have seen.”

“Did they really kill p-poor Smirking Sam?” she whimpered.

“I don’t know. Where is the man now?”

“Hang the man; p-poor, poor Sam,” she wept.

“Justina, I beg you, the man,” he implored, shuddering.

Drying her eyes, she leaned forward a little.

“His horse is refusing to go any further,” she announced softly.

“That’s a relief.”

“No, it is not, for he is now at the dismount and that enables him to go anywhere, whether he can lead it down or whether he leaves it on the slope.”

“What does he now?”

“He is leading it down, and it resists. I hope it strikes him so that he goes down head over heels and breaks his neck. Now we need to hold our maws (shut up).”

A few minutes later, the Duke gave a sigh.

“I am cold, Justina,” he said, with a waver to his voice, “I am so, so cold.”

“Curl up even more tightly in a ball and cover your legs with your coat-skirts,” she counselled without even looking at him.

“It hurts so to do –,”

“Listen,” she snarled. “I am not interested in your being hurt or your being cold. If you do as I say, you’ll not be seen, that is all, and that is of prime importance now.”

The Duke relented and huddled up tighter, as she leaned closer to her mare, and arm about the creature’s neck, over her mane, which encouraged her to draw in to her mistress’s side, and lean her great head against it.

“Where is the man, Justina?” mouthed the Duke hoarsely.

“Still far and rather slow. He runs for his supper after all, and his horse does not piss in his quill (agree on his plan). The sooner he falls and breaks his neck the better; I want to take Jezebel home and clean up her wound, for I haven’t even been able to look at it yet,” replied and fretted she. “Bye the bye, Irvin, what have you done, that all these people pursue you thus?”

“I don’t know,” he denied.

“What kind of knock in the cradle (fool), rocked in a stone kitchen (fool), balderdash answer is that, pray?” she hissed. “What men are they?”

“Nor know I that.”

“You know not who they are or why they chase you, but you flee all the same? Why not stop and ask, or is this sort of thing bread and cheese in your life?”

“I was abroad on horseback and s-suddenly, three men burst forth upon me,” he related. “One shot my p-poor horse, and the other two levelled fowling pieces at me, so I ran, for I sought not to be taken. Then you c-came.”

“Have you no inkling, even, why this should be?” she probed, leaning forward again to watch the distant intruder.

“The only thing I can say is that they may be Chatteris’s hirelings.”

“All the same, you are not sure,” she noted.

“That is because I know of no-one else who would undertake such an enterprise,” he

stated painfully.

“Why should Chatteris send bravos after you?” she recoiled.

“Ask Chatteris,” he growled.

“He is supposed to have left today, and for that matter, so are you,” she objected.

“Well, I’m still here, and there is about as much hope of his leaving as of finding hares in a hen’s nest,” he said wryly.

“Here and in riding dress, not garbed for travel at all. Did you change your mind, or was it a matter that if a lie could choke, that one would ha’ done it?”

“Neither, I expected that Chatteris would communicate with you again if he thought I was gone and I wanted to be about when he did.”

“Why, and what sort of communication did you expect?”

“Menaces, or actions, and then I would take the matter in hand.”

“Well, your cake is dough on that score. As for actions, he is performing one against you, and you were nigh in the seeds. You are still not out of the woods yet, and besides Chatteris’s involvement is speculation, even if you have no notion of who else. Now hush your voice, the fellow is nearing the foot of the basin.”

The fellow turned first in the opposite direction, so she dared inspect the Duke, who was a little dusty, but ashen and trembling.

“Are you in great pain, Irvin?” she asked.

“N-no,” he swallowed, “and I did not lie: it was a ploy to flush him out. Were he to ha’ known that I was nigh, he may not ha’ communicated with you, and for him to think that and comport himself accordingly, I could not be seen to associate with your home, which meant that you should think I was gone. I could not just suddenly cease to call, could I? Nor did I want to let any of you into the secret, especially your father. J-Justina, I am suddenly very cold –,”

“Hush, that man has turned back, and he is mounting up to continue his inspection of this place,” she silenced.

“Come closer to me,” he urged in a voice of entreaty.

“My horse is leaning on me. As soon as I can, I am going to try and see if there is lead in her croup, and if there is, I will remove it and lick her wound, like she would,” said Justina. “I can’t leave her: you have to slide towards me, but be careful not to move even a grain of sand when you do.”

The Duke had no choice: she spoke of her horse with tenderness, and to him with exasperation. So he kept the peace and edged towards her, turning a little so as to lie against the channel wall with his person half against hers, and his head at her shoulder.

“You are being cruel,” he complained.

“And you are just sorry for yourself,” she defended curtly. “I put you on my horse, I carried you away from immediate danger, I brought you to a makeshift hiding place and even carried heavy planks that labourers bear. Don’t call me cruel.”

“Never let it be said that I am ungrateful for your saving me, but there is no warmth in you anymore, and you are abrasive, even impatient. I am namby-pamby-pili-piss all of a sudden,” he objected. “Are you so hurt by what I said that –,”

“We do not talk on that ever,” she interrupted.

“What I said was for your good,” he tried.

"I'll thank you not to trouble yourself with my good in future," she commanded.

The Duke turned his head and planted a small kiss upon her cheek.

"Do that again, you scurvy knave, and I'll hit you," she spat.

The Duke, thô pressing himself to her for bodily warmth, refrained from further blandishment.

"I would rather give you up entirely," he said, wincing, "than wed you and make you unhappy, so I'll not pursue you henceforth."

"Shhh," she interposed. "Bah, you are all sweaty," she resiled. "Pray move your forehead from my neck."

The Duke, veritably a tragic figure, turned away his visage, whereupon she could see that it was indeed moist, but stained with trickles, not just of perspiration, but of tears caused by pain. Taking out his kerchief from his pocket, she wiped his face. Just then the mare emitted a whine and raised her head, which was followed by a peculiar thudding, scraping and rolling sound, with the crash of wooden planking, which noises echoed across the basin. Justina peered forward and perceived that the man and horse had fallen when trying to enter a small channel for the loose piers against the earth wall came away into their path. The beast was the first to rise, and having more sense, disengaged itself from the place and all the debris, heading for the slope of the basin, out of which it wanted to depart. The fellow scrambled to his feet and had to go at a limping run after his mount, which he managed to catch, but in vain tried he to lead it down, so he led it up again, but just tethered it, before scrambling down into the dam on foot. All this took time, and Irvin said nothing, but Justina watched, increasingly annoyed that the fellow was so diligent. Besides it was growing late for the afternoon was giving way to the eventide.

"Your parents will be worried," the Duke said.

"My mother may be worried," she corrected.

Those were the last words they spoke for several hours, for their hunter prowled carefully about the basin, whereof he first made a full tour with the fading light of the sky to aid him, peering into each channel but wary of entering them lest accident befell him with no hope of rescue until Monday morn. This caution served the fugitives well, for when he came to the trench in which they had secreted themselves, he paused at the mouth thereof, and stood there for several minutes, staring at the planks and deals which barricaded his better access to the deep furrow. Through them, upward, he could see the sky, but below all was black shadow, and it was as well that he was come this late, for had there been black in the afternoon light, instead of pale earth, he would have been suspicious. In any wise the wood all looked to him dangerously loose, and he wondered after the wisdom of moving the deals to investigate further, for it did occur to him that this could be a hiding place for the desperate, but the idea of concealing a horse in such a spot appeared to be a feat rather difficult to accomplish, for the animal was too tall to stand under all that debris without being detected. However, if anyone was cowering in the black darkness there, they would respond to an invasion, so, feeling reckless, the man picked up one of the planks and flung it down noisily, listening hard for a neigh or an equine grunt. Justina grew very afraid, both her arms about her mare's neck and her head leaning upon the crest of the mane, but the wily animal did not so much as budge. The whites of her eyes began to shew, but that happened when a horse wished to see more of a situation about which it was uncertain, and that made Justina anxious

lest Jezebel's patience and fortitude should run out. The intruder was almost persuaded that there was no-one in the shadows there, but he thought to try out one last test, and picked up a pebble, which he flung through the planks. It landed in Justina's skirts, so she brushed it deftly upon the earth, to let him hear the noise of an empty place, where stone hit bare ground. The mare did not respond at all, and the two females, of different species, exchanged glances. As for the spy, he took one long, last look at the still site of shade, and then left the entrance to the channel. To Justina it had felt like hours. Even thô he had gone, the mare did not move, and remained still as a statue, whereupon it occurred to her young mistress that she could have had a severe cramp in her legs, aggravated by remaining long on the damp soil.

Darkness fell so the man decided to cease roaming the pit and departed for higher ground, watched by Justina as he clambered up the slope, sometimes on all fours, to his waiting horse, but he still had not gone when, after a little while, she crept forward in her hiding place to try and peep through the planks for a view of the edge of the basin, for then she sighted his black equestrian shape against the sky above him.

"What now?" the Duke asked.

"He is still out there," she answered, "at the top, and on his horse."

"I wonder where his copesmate (accomplice) went," he sighed. "Hopefully not to round up reinforcements."

"I think he gave up the chase, but this man dissented and sadly for us, he is right," commented she.

"I wonder for how long he will stay," mused Irvin.

"Soon it will be dark owing to nightfall. I doubt if he will go then, for it will be the best time for him. The clouds are parting, and Oliver may whiddle (the moon may shine). The bowl will turn pale and bluish and the land it is dug into will look black, so he will be able to see our dark figures if we cross the basin, but we shall not be able so easily to descry him if we look up," she explained. "Unfortunately I have not thought of a solution for that. My main anxiety was that we be not found. If it were not for Jezebel holding her breath and pretending to be a shadow, Heaven knows what would have befallen us."

"I hope to God that someone has found Puck and taken care of him, that is to say, if his wound is not fatal," he fretted.

"And if Jezebel's is not soon taken care of, it soon will be, too," said Justina trenchantly, even thô the Duke himself faced the same fate.

All the same, he knew better than to remind her of that, for she would give him short shrift for putting her mare at risk for his sake, so he turned his wits to more practical things.

"We cannot s-stay here indefinitely," he remarked.

"We cannot move from here until he leaves and we are sure he has, for he could well tarry and lurk out of sight," she responded. "The night will soon be upon us, but I cannot make a break for it: you are not mobile enough for sitting there in a huddle has made you moribund, and, worse —,"

"Justina, leave me behind here. When you think it safe, take your horse and fly," he urged. "If you send help it will do —,"

"If I leave you the man will see and know where to come for you himself. The game will be up. Besides, I cannot leave in the first place, for, as I was trying to tell, you, worse than everything else, Jezebel cannot move. She has the cramp; I am certain, for the ground is

cold, Irvin.”

“Ohh, dear Heaven,” he groaned.

“Precisely,” she responded. “The most I could do is creep out when it is very dark and attempt to walk to Orre’s. The night promises to be clear and if there is a strong moon and any other person on the prowl, I am done for. Nevertheless, I have been out of my own home for too long and my family is doubtless beginning to wonder what has become of me. Julius and Devenish, at least, may be dragooned by Caroline into going out on horseback to seek me, and I suspect, Sir Robert Orre may have the same misgivings about his houseguest.”

“Will they find us, half-buried as we are?”

“Pray God that they do, and in any wise, we shall hear them,” she assessed.

“Be not deluded b-by lights and the noises of a party,” shuddered his grace. “It may be Chatteris, and I d-dread to imagine what will happen to you were you to fall into his h-hands now.”

“Irvin, are you still cold?” she asked. “I am sure I can hear your teeth chattering.”

“Well, they a-are,” he owned. “The ape’s paternoster.”

“Would you like to wrap yourself up in something, like my redingote?” she offered.

“And will you not be cold in your shirt and petticoat?”

“I’ll hug Jezebel,” she dismissed, but already did so.

“I cannot let you catch a chill for me, for it is something you could die of. It will forever be on my conscience,” he protested.

“I knew not that you had one,” she intoned, but pulled out the billows of her redingote skirts from under her, compleat with train, and spread them over him like a light blanket.

However, that was not enough for him, for he was exhausted, not just by pain, but by loss of blood, and after a little while, he just heeled over and laid his head in her lap, so that the mare’s nose was an inch away from his face.

“You’ll fall asleep,” she warned, “and then you’ll die of the cold. Stay awake, Irvin!”

“Good riddance, for then your troubles will be over,” mumbled he.

“Whenever you are concerned, my troubles are at their height, and even in death I daresay you will reach out from under the daisies to interfere in something,” she snorted. “Pull yourself out of your mulligrubs and be a man.”

“At a time like this, you would take advantage and be harsh?” he reproved.

“At a time like this?” she snorted. “What, pray, is a time like this? The fact we are alone together, that you are wounded and I am female, and that tradition ascribes the maternal or protective instinct to women, gives you no expectations of any kind. What am I to do at a time like this? Cosset and dandle you, embrace and fuss over you, gurgle kindnesses and forgive you all? At a time like this, after all I have endured, hitherto, at your hands – and mouth – I would rather not touch you at all.”

The Duke of Irvin raised his head, and moved to lean against the packed soil of the channel wall.

“Damnation upon you, Justina Woodville,” he muttered.

“Much improved,” she approved. “I like you better in your odious true colours, for then at least I know what I must confront.”

“I gain the impression that you deliberately antagonise, affront and anger me,” he claimed, annoyed.

"It makes you keep your distance, which you should have done all along," she retorted. "Now *that* would ha' been for my good."

"What happened to the girl who would marry me?" he demanded.

"Nothing at all, for yet she would, but, instead of loathing you a year later when wormwood moon follows the honey moon, she has taken the precaution prudently to –,"

"Loathe me in advance?"

"Not loathe, for than I would not wed you, but I believe that I could learn despal; at present, I am rather enjoying our predicament, especially your part in it, for you are the weak party and I am the strong one, to whom you owe your present safety, for what it is worth."

"Owe?" snapped he. "Then take yourself away at once. I want none o' such help: 'tis being fed roast meat and beaten with the spit."

"The true response of the trapped man," she jeered. "Refutation, rejection, repudiation and bombast circumstance."

"Then why did you help me?" he spat.

"I know not why I helped you in the first place but now I know that I must help you to help myself," she answered candidly, "althô I will confess to my folly in having helped you at all, for I am cold and damp, I am dirty and tired, my precious horse is wounded, hungry and has the cramp, and we, she and I, only have you for company."

"I had and still have much to say to you, Justina Woodville, but your conduct and attitude make it vastly and uncommon difficult for me to speak to you at all," he stated breathlessly.

"What you have to say is in vain," she dismissed, "for you would vindicate yourself, alleviate the burthen on your vanity, persuade yourself that you act for the best, and I have heard such talk from my parents until I was bored brainless of it."

"Parents?" he mused. "It dawns on me that you have the heartlessness of my own mother."

"More sacks to the mill! I am not insulted at all. When men are exposed as base or weak or liable, they at once accuse the woman. The founding fathers of our religion put the blame on woman in all their theologies: why was the red clad person a whore, and not a man, in St. John's dream, when Babylon never had a Queen regnant in its history and all its monarchs are listed as men? Indeed, did the church not once debate on whether woman has a soul in the first place and is in fact like a mere animal? Thank your mother: she has made you the dark and devilish man of whom all are afraid today, the man whom I should not wed for after a year he will be tired of me and back to enjoying the delights of venery, from the first hunt to the last horn."

There was a grunt and a snort out of his grace, to signify his contempt for her and her propositions, as he leaned his head forward on the deal before him, wrapping himself tightly in the train of her redingote. Justina saw how his hands clutched at the folds in the cloth, heard irregular wincing interrupt his laboured breathing, and watched as he shifted or writhed a little, ever awake, emitting a soft moan from time to time. Not once did he touch her or bring his body near hers, while she witnessed his suffering with the awareness that she had not the cold and indifferent character of his beautiful mother, who should have been here now to take care of her son and not reject her offspring *en masse*, for adult or not, that was what he needed and it was not the place of a Justina Woodville at the grand old age of seventeen to

provide it. This factor chastened her a little, but she remained away from him, for the last thing he wanted was pity, and so she shivered somewhat herself, which doubtless did not reassure the poor mare. Night had fallen already and Justina was worried: there was little she could do of use in the trench and she feared to come forth, not just for fear of being spotted, but lest she fell over some serious obstacle in the dark and broke a bone. Now indeed had the ordeal really begun for her, despite what she suffered for her mare, which was serious disquietude; now she was really feeling afraid, her cold, uncomfortable, squeezed position making her wretched and despairing. With the passage of every minute an eternity went by and hope ebbed; having no watch she could not reckon time, and unable to sight their tracker she could not assess if it were safe for her to rush forth across the land to fetch help back hither. She was also frightened lest she fell asleep and missed a search party that came nigh, while the Duke had fainted away and poor Jezebel was without a voice for God had omitted to grant His greatest creation that faculty. Finally, knowing her parents as she did and sure that Orre was secretly glad to be rid of his guest, she feared that no-one would trouble to come this far to rescue them, if at all.

All the same it was in Justina's nature to be plucky and doughty, and she realised that it was for her to make an effort to remedy their plight. Irvin was too weak even to speak, and she did not even want to think of the blood he had lost; it was too dark to remove shot from Jezebel's croup without butchering her, and if both beings were too long neglected, they would die, which was the last thing she wanted to happen. She had horrible visions of crawling up the slope at dawn only to come face to face with the hunter, of Jezebel's cramp having turned to paralysis so that the beautiful and valuable animal would have to be shot, of the man having long gone but owing to her pusillanimity in going out to seek succour, she was too late and Irvin died in anywise, when she could have saved the situation long ago instead of cowering in the darkness. Bracing herself, she disentangled her half numb limbs, lifted and moved aside some of the battens, and crawled out from beneath the deal shelter as far as the mouth of the channel, keeping to the shadow side of the trench, hampered by darkness and the utmost necessity not to make noise. All at once she heard sounds in the distance, horses and men in a group, coming this way. No mounted party moved overland at this hour unless searching out someone or thing, and she reckoned that she and Irvin were the prizes, but whether these folk were come at Chatteris's behest or comprised her people, she could not tell. Stalled by the factor of ignorance, she dared not emerge, but hoped that if her brothers were among them, they would approach close enough for her to hear their voices.

"Irvin?" she whispered. "Irvin, wake up! People are coming, so wake up."

All he emitted was a painful sigh.

"Irvin, take a hold upon yourself!" she urged, but the group were advancing fast, and all at once there was a call, followed by the receding drumming of hooves.

That would have been their tireless sentinel, who was frightened off by the approach, so it was just as well that she did not come out; indeed there was a moon and much could be seen under the black firmament because of it. All the same she dared not assume that much yet: for all she knew the fellow had been summoned to his own, and was hurrying off towards them; effectively her predicament was still indeterminate. Then all at once she heard someone shout out her own name.

"Justina! Justina, answer me: are you there?"

Long and extended were the vowels and well-enunciated were the consonants, as if meaning to halloo to the four corners of the earth. It was Julius Woodville. With a joyful heart, Justina prepared to reply but suddenly there was a terrible thudding of hooves as someone rode by at full tilt.

“Julius,” she croaked, endeavouring to muster up a voice after long hours of silence. “Julius, I am in the dam: help me, I beg; help us all!”

As she hailed him she grew louder and louder, her voice resounding in the basin – which would probably have made a better amphitheatre than a dam. A series of riotous cheering sounded, but above all sounded a yell.

“Lady Justina, this is Robert Orre! Where are you?”

The world had emerged in strength! Justina now dared move, but first she kissed her mare and told her that help was here, before drawing her train off Irvin, and that was when fear seized her, for he did not move. So out she crawled from under the cage of concealing debris she had made, and stumbled forth on shaky legs in which blood sluggishly flowed, in order to shew her dark figure despite the fact that the channels were bathed in shadow.

“I’m in the great trench,” she bawled out, and a motley chorus of male voices echoed her latter words, as if to confirm that fact.

Then came the sound of slithering and scraping, as a contingent of men, leading their mounts, slithered sidewise down the steep slope, bearing brands, not caring where they descended, for to reach the bottom of the bowl was their first concern.

“I know the great trench,” cheered Sir Robert. “Hold hard, la’ship, we’re coming for you. Is the Duke of Irvin there?”

“And I hope he is not dead already,” replied Justina, at her possible loudest. “I also need winching gear; Jezebel has the cramp and cannot move, aside of which I need to take her home in a cart, for she was shotten. We also need a flesh-tailor (surgeon) for the Duke, who has been injured all over the place and lost pints and pints of blood.”

She called out her needs slowly, so that they would hear and someone would turn back, one to fetch a surgeon, another to fetch the horse-doctor and bonesetter, without whom no rural community was compleat, and another to obtain materials and transport.

“Justina, are you hurt?” called Devenish.

“No, ’tis not for me,” she assured.

The lights were hastening down the slopes accompanied by the whinnying of protesting horses, but ere long they were in the basin, and Justina awaited them in the entrance to the great channel, waving her arms, even if she was visible in the moonlight, so towards her they all gravitated, and she pointed within the trench.

“I made a sort of shelter, but as it is very makeshift and loose, and there is not light enough to see what deals to remove first, mind your eye; you may hurt yourselves as the two who shelter thereunder, and she is a loved one,” she told the first men who arrived, and who were footmen, grooms, and land-workers from two estates, all mixed up in this mission with no regard to the differences in rank, for at home, footmen did not share a table with stable hands, and landfolk – or farm labourers – were beneath them all, albeit most valuable.

Among them came Orre and Julius, but it was the former who spoke.

“A bevy of milkmaids found the Duke’s horse, and were dilatory about reporting it, so we went to find it, and therefrom moved off in Lord knows what direction, for he could not

speak, poor fellow,” said the Baronet.

“Why? Was he dead?” pounced Justina, her eyes pricking.

“By goles, no, he was standing up and bleeding from the shoulder, in fact he had a trail of blood behind him. It seemed that he was slowly trying to make his way to my stables, but being injured, had to halt now and again, to rest. We sent for a cart to put him into and carry him back, for it was a monstrous doughty and brave beast,” related Orre. “The trouble was that Irvin’s firearms were in his tackle, so we grew worried. We followed the trail of blood, and found the grass stained with quite a pool of it, where the horse had first fallen.”

“Is his wound serious?” she wondered.

“’Tis a flesh wound in the chest, but a few inches aside, they’d ha’ got his heart,” said Sir Robert. “God protects his own, the innocent animal being one of them. Still, we tried to see, from the way the grass was trampled whither the Duke was gone, and found his hanger nigh the road, which we followed, and lost our trail, so we sent to Hearne Castle, where things were in a pucker because you had vanished. It was growing dark and we did not want you out all night, so we all collected what resources we had, and went to scour the ground. Your mother was beside herself with worry and little Selina was weeping. Thank God we found you, and it seems, Irvin too.”

“Thank God you came,” sighed Justina. “I have been here since the afternoon, all evening and after nightfall.”

“Carrie had been nagging since supper, but no-one did anything, but then there came the message from Sir Robert,” said Julius, “and father said, laconically: ‘what if they are both run away together?’ but it was clear from Sir Robert’s words that foul play was involved and we feared that you could have been swept up in it, which was, in truth, the case.”

“Did you contact Stopford?” asked Justina.

“Indeed, but they wanted nothing to do with it,” said Orre.

“Well, then they will not attend Carrie’s wedding,” snorted Justina in a huff.

“Bare a fist here!” called a man. “Those planks are weighty stuff!”

As more fellows left their horses to go and assist, while the slighter among them stood at the upper edge of the trench with brands poised to light the scene, Orre seemed surprised.

“Who carried that woodwork into place?” he asked.

“I did,” said Justina, “and before you ask, Irvin was too far faded to assist.”

“You are sturdier than my landfolk?” marvelled Orre. “Why, you are as fat as a hen in the forehead (very thin)!”

“Years of carrying bales of hay and shovelling bedding in the stables,” chuckled Julius, with a hint of pride in his voice.

“Maybe I should go help them,” chuckled Justina, whereupon there was mirth.

“Are you hungry?” asked Devenish.

“Hunger drops out of my nose,” groaned she, “even if until now, I have been too afraid to think about it or notice, but now that you mention it, aye, my gut thinks my throat’s been cut. My poor horse must be hungry, that is for sure.”

“Puck so was, for when we set out now, he was cosy in his stall, all stitched up and bandaged, and had been fed a tub of warm bran and oats and physick herbs, which he gobbled up like a glutton,” chuckled Orre. “Then he swallowed a tub of cider, the borachio (drunk).”

It seemed that everyone was cheerful, for they were afraid of the condition in which

Irvin was going to be found, and that was one way of ignoring something worrying, while Justina was also worried about her own beautiful horse. In the meantime they all waited and at last, the bodies, one assuredly alive, of the Duke and the mare were uncovered. Then everyone became serious and Orre asked Justina after the places where the Duke was wounded, so she recited them all, including the bruises and the gash from the whip, which would have suffered badly from all his exertions. She feared that he had perished from the cold even if she had kept him as warm as she could, but she had no water to give him, and the ugly truth about his condition was about to be revealed. In fact all they could hear was the mare, blowing air and snorting, when a man called that indeed she could not rise to her feet.

“Queen Anne’s dead and her bottom’s cold,” groaned Justina.

“Block and tackle! We have engines like that on the site!” whooped the Baronet.

Not only that, there was plenty of rope and leather to make slings, so the necessary was fetched but as this was being done, two men carried the Duke out of his hiding place. When he was brought out into the moonlight and the firelight, they laid him on the ground, and Sir Robert, whose guest he was, took charge to feel for a pulse and then sighed, with obvious relief.

“He’d survive Hell, Hull and Halifax,” he stated. “Well wrought, Lady Justina.”

“I did nothing; I just wrapped him up in my train,” dismissed she. “What I want is that someone get Jezebel up, pray.”

The nearest machine, one of a few on the sight, was wheeled to the edge of the trench above where Jezebel sat, and Justina went to her to help draw wide leather straps under her barrel urging her to roll, in order to let them pass under her, and then making her lean back for that it be drawn under her. Eventually she endeavoured to coax the mare to arch herself, so that the belts be turned into a sling and attached to the winch, whereafter the men began to work the wheel, whereof the creaking alarmed the animal. Justina stayed with her all the while and becalmed her, talking to and stroking her, and thô the mare emitted a squeal it was more one of surprise than of pain. The latter soon followed, as she found herself suspended about the belly with her legs hanging until the points of her hooves touched the ground, whereupon Justina began to rub her muscles and limbs, joined by Julius who did likewise. The mare began to struggle as if to try and reach the soil, and so they called to the men working the machine to lower her a little, but she still could not stand and wobbled somewhat, as her two attendants worked away. Along came Devenish, but not to assist.

“Sir Robert has just succeeded in awakening Irvin, who is asking for you,” he said.

“Tell him I am well and that I am trying to make my poor horse mobile,” she rejoined.

Accordingly, a little surprised by the sharpness of her tone, the Marquis retraced his steps in his usual lugubrious way and that was the end of Irvin as far as she was concerned, for the thing to do was bandage the mare’s legs to stiffen them and support her, even by tying her between two strong horses, so that she could try to walk and that was how they were going to remove her from the basin, for there was no machine on the edge of the dam site that could be used to lift her out of it. A makeshift stretcher was fashioned for the Duke out of deals, ropes and canvas, and he was borne away, loaded into a cart and taken to Orre Hill Hall, of which Justina was told but she said nothing, for she was still engaged in bringing her mare out of the trench and then, the most difficult passage followed, for the assisting horses half-dragged and half-supported her up the slope. By then, Orre and his men were gone, and

those who remained belonged only to the Hearne family or grounds, who managed to take Jezebel out of the dam at last. There was a wagon awaiting her, with a back that could be let down, and this became the framework for a temporary ramp that they all built with wood from the site, to haul her, without the other animals, and just human company, into it. By cart, then, lying on her side in a comfortable bed of straw, and Justina by her side, the black mare was taken home, and her mistress spent half the night splashing her legs with hot water and rubbing them with heated towels to try and make her well again. She did not even come into the house to report about Irvin; it was her brothers who did that and on their doing so, her sister Caroline came to the stables to hear her story. Justina was actually very hurt that the Duke, even in his wounded state, after she had saved and sheltered him from capture, should have spoken of his inability to wed her, even if it was a statement of his inadequacy. As far as she was concerned, she would rather that he did not speak at all, but she told Caroline that he had raised the subject again, and in all honesty, Caroline declared herself embarrassed.

TWENTY-ONE

The fact that Justina had had so gruelling a day, with so much to agitate her, may have exhausted her in body and mind, but there was no question of sleeping that night, which she passed with her horse in the stables, only going back to the house at first light. For all her misgivings about the disaffection of her family, they were all unquestionably and unanimously relieved, even her father, and no-one questioned the veracity of what had happened between her and Irvin in the trench, which was nothing. Dirty and hungry, she was given a bath and a good breakfast, but left to her own devices and no efforts about the house or grounds were expected of her, even if she chose to furnish her usual duties in the stables. Jezebel had recovered the power to stand, and she planned that, after grooming the mare on her return, she would leave her in the paddock to see if she grazed or just sat around. Then Justina returned to the castle to routine and a total lack of excitement beyond that which concerned the Duke of Irvin, for Devenish had visited Sir Robert Orre's to ask after him and brought back the news that his grace had been seen by a surgeon from the town, and that all his bullet wounds were taken care of, so that he was comfortable for one in his situation, but neither delirious nor drowsy. Sir Robert was pleased to recount that the patient had given a very good account of Justina, but that was not sufficient for Justina: she would have liked to know how fared Puck as well and after that had her brother omitted to inquire. She did not even ask what Irvin had said about her, even if it was strangely gratifying to know that he had spoken well of her and that she was on his mind. There was still no elucidation about the attack on him, but there was plenty of speculation. As for Jezebel, she was grazing, so her legs were well.

That afternoon, when a person who had kept vigil all night would be expected to take a nap, Justina at once put on riding clothes and set off on her father's horse to recover her saddle, which she had jettisoned before taking up Irvin, and she had an armed groom with her on horseback. She remembered the site of the event and all the time it took her to find it was all the time it took her to reach the place. The groom was one of the new stalwarts and by now his smirk had been replaced by impassivity, so that he obeyed without behaving like a stupid man did before an intelligent woman. Besides, of them all, he was the strongest and she had heard his talk among his peers as the most successful among all the young tough creatures on the estate at wrestling. Thus, when they reached the spot and Justina sighted the saddle on the grass, she bid him dismount and carry it, but that he could give her the fowling piece: besides, his saddle was equipped with two pistol holsters in any wise. All the same it occurred to her then to follow the course on which Irvin had been running, in reverse, to seek she knew not what clue. This she did, which was not difficult, for there were undisturbed remains of dried blood still left intermittently along the track, for the carts that passed could not touch every inch of dirt, and she even found where Irvin had joined it from the grassy meadow, which trail took her to the spot where the horse, Puck, had fallen: carrion crows were hopping about it as the dried blood attracted them. Yet that was all there was for then, Puck himself left a trace of his own progress towards Robert Orre's stable, and so she dismounted and stood about for a while, wondering what to do and rueing the fact that as a tracker she had no talent at all; nor had she any idea of what she was seeking. Ere long, thô, Ajax pricked up his ears and the groom cleared his throat. Justina looked up and beheld a rider coming towards her, also on a grey horse, at a fast trot, so she at once mounted up her

father's big stallion. It was Chatteris, from whom she had no intention of turning tail to run, but as he advanced towards her, he began to smirk or sneer, she was not sure which.

"Keeping a tryst?" he sniggered. "You always seem to find some sort of adventure here, do not you?"

"More like *misadventure*," she corrected, "if anything at all, and, I reckon, to do with your lordship more than not, especially regarding what happened yesterday."

"I make no secret of the fact," he scoffed. "By the bye, how did you elude my men? You either fled or hid, and in the latter case he waited half the eventide for you to be flushed out but nothing happened, so where did you fly? How did you fly, and on a wounded horse with a wounded man encumbering you? Did you hunker down with some yokels?"

Justina raised both eyebrows but answered not at all.

"That must ha' been cosy," he jeered, but as she persisted in her silence, he taunted his way on, "and private. Irvin is a bull, but I suspect that he quite knocked himself out. I nearly said nicking away between your white thighs but you're dark as a gipsy, are you not? That would have been a new experience for him, and warm work."

"That is not how to speak to anyone before servants," she reminded. "You only display to them your lack of good breeding, sir, whatever you chuse to call me. Besides, it does hurt, does it not, to believe that Irvin and I were winding up the clock hummily? Incidentally, why did your men thus dragoon and try to bake his bread for him?"

"You, young lady, make very fanciful accusations. Nobody wants to kill Irvin. Talk to him, perhaps, but the fellow is such a poltroon that he took fright and flight. They did all to stop him but then along you came and wrong-headedly spirited him away. My men described an equestrienne who could only have been you. What a great harvest of little corn: one fellow had a terrible tumble, the other went all over the countryside in vain and the third, waiting to bring you out, had an army of yokels put him to flight, yokels you had sent. He barely escaped with his life."

"This makes for good theatre, not events in the deep country," she teased. "What wanted they to talk to him of?"

"I wanted to talk to him, actually," he corrected.

"Could you not ha' writ him a letter?"

"The things I had to say were not for committing to paper."

"Then you should have sent a messenger."

"I did, three of them."

"They had the wrong aspect about them. Perhaps I may not. Recount your message to me, and I will convey it accordingly."

"O, by way of you, there is only one message I would convey," he gloated.

Justina understood him very well, and so did the groom, for he took out a pistol and cocked it, whereupon she levelled the fowling piece at him.

"He is not interested in me anymore," she told him.

"But I still am," he gurgled. "I can be whatever you want, furious and leonine, gentle and languorous, vigorous like a new-fledged lad, you make your choice."

"You sound like a harlot," she laughed. "They perform in ways that a man would not ask of his wife, or so I learned from listening to chat when I was at Ranelagh. There are some folk who like it best on grass; are you one of them?"

"If you learned such things, then it was because you were keeping company with the harlotry," he snarled.

"Standing with one's aunt as she scans the company for as many people as she can recognise is dull; one tends to lend an ear to the arrangements being made by the couples who surround one, and not all the females on the arms of the fine gentlemen are ladies, even if they have the air of the same," she explained.

"It is extremely difficult to have a conversation with anyone who points a fowling piece at one," he discredited.

"Better than pointing one at a horse. That is truly pusillanimous," she cackled. "You shot Irvin's horse. You shot mine. Does that sort o' thing make you feel like a man?"

"No, sweet trugmoldy (harlot), you do. Why do we not blow the groundsels (sex on the ground or the floor) and let the fellow watch?" he mocked.

"This is my fault, I should not talk to you," she mused. "Your presence itself is insulting, Lord Chatteris."

"That was included in my calculations," he cackled.

"Did you kill your latest wife before or after you left her floating in the fishpond?" she shot, cool and calm, whereat he turned red as a beetroot and was about to snarl out an imprecation, but she cut him short. "Better to be a trugmoldy than Bluebeard," she scoffed, and wheeling about her mount, rode away from him.

With great suspicion, the groom followed, keeping watch upon him.

"What is on a man's mind?" mused she aloud. "Strap (sex), strap and strap again!"

Those words ringing in his ears, she put her heel to the stallion's flank and caused him to break into a gallop, which she sustained until they were well out of sight. On her doing so, the groom came up alongside of her.

"Saving your favour, my lady, what he said is a duelling matter, and if your brothers chuse to call him out, I'm witness to the offence."

"Thank you," she said but would not take the matter further.

All the same, she did talk of the encounter and repeated, as best as she could, the words they had exchanged, before a witness, and it did her no honour that it was a servant, but then Chatteris knew more ways than the obvious of dishonouring a female, and both her brothers agreed that it was indeed a duelling matter, as the groom had said, except that the Earl would make sausage-meat out of them. All the same, they and Caroline were agreed on the fact that Justina had defended her honour with gallantry and that her complaisance and calm had won her the day, as if the encounter was a combat, even thô Justina herself complained that first, she should not have accused him, a widower, of murdering his fourth wife, and that second, he had been once so charming that it actually hurt to be addressed repeatedly as whore by him, which left her wondering with regret at the change in him, and she knew the reason why even if she did not say: it was because he thought she had chusen Irvin in preference to him. She elected to treat the matter as grave, but worthy of curing, even if she could make no amends, and this enmity between him and Irvin was becoming a nuisance in any wise. To her surprise, Carrie agreed.

"I wonder if it will interfere in my married life, that is, if I do wed him," she mused.

"He may die before you do," laughed Honoria.

"It will interfere," assured Devenish. "Justina, loth as I am to fuss, and far from being

the ideal escort and protector, I heartily recommend that you do as you did today and never again ride out without an escort. You have lived here all your life, and never had to do that: no-one has! Thanks to recent events, it is now imperative. I beg pardon for saying it, and cut a very sorry figure before you as I do, but that is how it shall have henceforth to be, even on our own father's land."

"To think that father invited this upon us," lamented Caroline.

"In fact, Chatteris wrote to him asking for Justina and then father invited this upon us," amended Honoria.

"In other words, Justina is to blame," recited Justina herself.

"Like it or not, that is true," declaimed Honoria. "As for this new danger you have invited upon yourself, instead of going out as often as before, go out as little as possible. That will obviate the need to put servants in danger."

"And myself being in danger is of little concern to you?" smiled her younger sister.

"The trouble is, you asked for it," stated Honoria. "You must have done something in London to attract Chatteris's attention for him to offer for you in the first place."

Justina did not know what to reply and her siblings had no word in her defence, while she could not repeat Irvin's expression of perplexity at Chatteris knowing, since London, that his enemy had coveted her. Feeling miserable, she left her siblings to discuss the matter as they pleased and take her name in vain and shred her deeds and character as much as they pleased. To fight back now in self-justification seemed ridiculous, even to a slightly wild seventeen-year-old. So she took refuge in solitude, even if it was self-recriminatory, and remained away from her family as much as she could, even if she were working in the garden or the orchard: they were there and she was apart. The best part of her day was when she went to see if the horses were duly bedded down and that her beloved mare was all right.

Unknown to her, Caroline was secretly resolved to supervise with discretion that her sister be properly guarded, for if Chatteris's gift to Irvin was to take Justina's maidenhead, he could well come to the gardens of Great Hearne Castle and drag her off behind a bush when she was picking fruit or whatever was required of her. This vigilance needed to be unobtrusive, as much as the Duke of Hearne's effort in this respect was not: his wife told him of the encounter and so that evening, after supper, he summoned his dear child and spent two hours repeating himself as he incoherently and clumsily expounded away on the instructions he had devised for her safety, which bored her when she should have been paying attention to some of it, but he loved the sound of his own voice too well, and his idiom did not make the lecture much short of painful. In fact Caroline had offered to go and tell him not to see Justina about this matter but Justina, on being summoned, declared that it was better to suffer even his insults than provoke a general family quarrel, while the Duchess belatedly wondered what kind of fatherly love it was that behoved him to torture his daughter for two hours, for her grace, unlike Honoria, deemed that her husband's greed had perpetrated this continuing crime against their child, except that she lacked the courage so to say to his face.

Actually, Justina was feeling very ashamed in general. She had made an offer of marriage and been rejected, she had tried to take her sister's husband and been rightly punished for it, she had been insulted beyond the decent before a servant and she knew that if ever Chatteris found her alone, he would ravish her. Thus, if her mother or her eldest sister had any anxieties about how to contain her, they soon found that she was disinclined to take

liberties of any sort. Apart from going to the stables, upon which venture Julius now accompanied her and even assisted her a little, she remained in the grounds if there were others about to work in them, or she confined herself to the library or her own apartments. When Carrie needed help in the schoolroom with Selina she was available, and otherwise she read, for her own education was never ending, or she participated in the household sewing of which there was always a mound, whether to mend or to make. At meals she chatted or joked very little and rather than ask her what was the matter, they left her alone – which she found odd, especially in Honoria's case, for the latter was always ready to pounce when there was a departure from usual practice. That restraint was Caroline's work but she did not know of it, even if she did notice that Honoria ignored her totally, because Honoria was offended, while she thought that Honoria was disgusted with her. In effect, she was very easy to watch over or to protect, and altho she was not always accustomed to participating in calls which the family exchanged with the squirearchy, she did not use their absence to flee the house. In any wise, she wanted Jezebel to regain her strength and the morning exercise around the paddock sufficed for the moment – for both of them. Ironically, even tho Justina was so compliant without being told what to do, and behaved exactly as was needed to watch comfortably over her, Caroline grew worried about her, instead of being relieved. It seemed that there was a light in her which had gone out, and that she sometimes had the air of one preoccupied, so that her mind was far, far away. Why this should be her sister did not ask, but a clue was allowed her when they went to call on Sir Robert to inquire about Irvin: she declined to join them and promised to remain indoors singing and sewing with Selina, who had to be schooled in music and needlework, like all ladies.

It was not as if Justina was a hermit in her own home: she was present wherever necessary and participating in whatever task was imposed on her. She was attentive when spoken to and if a reply was needed, she gave one duly, but Caroline still felt that an element was lacking. When she consulted her mother and her brothers about it, they seemed to notice no difference: Justina was only being obedient for a change. Only Selina owned that she thought Justina to be less fun than before, which assessment bore considerable weight, especially as Selina had had an entire morn of her company when the family went out, and the other feature about Justina in this case was, on their return, she did not address to anyone a single inquiry about Irvin, even tho she was the instrument of his rescue and it was because of her that he was being comfortably looked after at Sir Robert Orre's. Much as tho Caroline wished to talk about this quietness, this dullness, this silence where Irvin was concerned, hoping that some sort of catharsis would be engendered by a discussion or that self-knowledge would result out of some fog in Justina's brain and emotions, she desisted from imposing cures or palliations that resembled prying, for she suspected that there was something painful under the surface of what Justina shewed, and did not wish to bring it forth if her sister was able to control it or even be rid of it for ignoring the same. She only volunteered news that the Duke of Irvin was much improved, and even if he could not leave his bed, had asked about Ladies Caroline and Justina, the former as his betrothed and the latter as his rescuer; indeed, he even asked about Justina's horse, and sent word that his own Puck was doing very well. Indeed, he had also added advice, to wit, that Justina be kept as safe as possible and that all her siblings should contribute to the effort of it. To all this Justina listened most impassively, as if hearing news of a perfect stranger, but within her, she was

embarrassed and disconcerted. If she could have turned back time, and unsaid thereby the offer she made, so that the Duke and she never had that discussion, she would have given anything so to do. In fact Orre himself, bluff, clumsy, bludgeoning, had even invited Caroline to go to Irvin's room with his wife, of course, but Caroline knew more about etiquette than did they, and cared for it, so she refused. Her account of this made the others laugh, but Justina had to force up a smile: she had listened to all with interest but she did not find anything funny even if she recognised that the squire's suggestion was inappropriate. Not a single question did she ask, but all the details about Irvin were freely imparted to her, especially by Caroline herself. Indeed, that made Justina even more shamefast and self-critical than ever, but Caroline had begun to conceive a strange notion about her future spouse: for all that he alleged to Justina, he seemed to be better suited to her younger sister than to herself. If she had told that verisame sibling as much, the latter would vehemently dissented: after all, had not Irvin himself explained it all?

Yet another week passed with no change in Justina's behaviour, but the weather was not clement – except that hitherto she would have answered she was not a pillar of salt and thus liable to dissolve in it. In all fairness, she was no active cause for anxiety, nor difficult, emotional or selfish, but never before had she been so unobtrusive and self-effacing when about the house, even if she used to spend all day in the stables until her father acquired the three grooms. All the while, *thô*, as Caroline could see, she was pondering, musing, thinking, and her eldest sister correctly opined that her thoughts were not pleasant. She also gave the impression that she was interested in very little, not even the report that Chatteris was gone, or the subsequent visit from the Stopfords to apologise to the Duke of Hearne about him, but then no-one here believed the tale or the family who followed it, and continued to consider that she still was not safe. Towards the end of these seven days, a carter brought a trunk from London addressed to Lady Caroline Woodville, and this was a most unexpected delivery, so Carrie affected to be excited and tried to involve Justina in the general animation that surrounded the object when it was unpacked. Accompanying it was a letter from Aunt Lizzie, informing them that within were all the clothes for the family to wear to the wedding, ready and paid for by Irvin, of course. Justina sat on Caroline's bed and smiled and seemed cheerful, but whether this was genuine or a shew to oblige her kind sister, none could tell. First to be taken from the trunk was a white brocaded gown of paduasoy, worked with gold, and an embroidered petticoat in blue silk, labelled as for Lady Selina, with which Lady Selina was overjoyed. In fact all the bridesmaids' gowns were in such a scheme of hues, but the patterns chusen and the embroidery on each separate assemblage were all different as could be, so the bridal attendants would be similarly but not identically clad, allowing them, afterwards, to have fine attire that later did not look as part of a uniform they had once been obliged to don. That was revealed by some careful rummaging, but then Caroline took out the next gown, which was for Justina, but before she checked the label or held it against her sister, Honoria impatiently dived among the papers protecting the finery, and exposed, not her attire, but something in black cherry-derry, a rather light mixture of silk and cotton, suitable for summer wear, and this of the best quality, with a cuffed sleeve in view.

“Eh?” whooped Julius. “Irvin's wedding togs ha' been packed here in error.”

“Take it out, take it out!” squealed Honoria, recoiling from the act of touching male garb. “What is it? Where's mine?”

“Look inside the cape, there will be a name on a scrip pinned there, like there was at the back of my bodice,” suggested Selina.

“Look at Aunt Lizzie’s letter,” proposed Justina.

“There’s nought in the letter about black,” said Caroline, consulting it, as Julius pulled out yards and yards of what turned out to be an extremely smart riding habit for a female, sleeves and front in a mannish style as usual.

With it was a black petticoat over which the redingote skirts opened, a tiny waistcote of black satin embroidered with humming birds, and two white cambric chemises, boasting the finest Dresden lace they had ever seen.

“’Tis for me, because the old one will hang like a rag if we wash it, and it is too dirty to be brushed,” said Justina. “He has our sizes from Lizzie.”

“It has nothing in it like a scrip or a note, nothing at all,” commented Caroline.

“Then it is for me,” said Justina and slid off the bed, holding out her hands for the whole suit. “I’m going to try it on.”

“It would be black,” laughed Julius.

Justina uttered an acknowledgment and went into the dressing room. By the time that all the gowns and royal blue suits for the brothers were removed from the trunk, Justina emerged, looking very grand and older than her years, in the majestic, sombre, neat, elegant habit. As she examined herself in the cheval glass, she wondered if this was how Irvin imagined she should be, but it was not a long look, even if the sight of her stopped all chat and caused all eyes to stare at her.

“It IS for you!” cried Honoria, disappointed. “’Tis a perfect fit.”

“Not quite perfect: I am awanting o’ room in the armseye and the sides are too long,” said Justina quietly.

“Justina, you look wonderful,” marvelled Caroline.

“Like a dowager duchess,” giggled Selina.

“Is it the black or is the waist very small?” wondered Julius.

“Justina has a tiny waist, Julius, not that it is your business,” dismissed Caroline.

“Orre called her fat as a hen in the forehead,” recalled Devenish.

“Rather impractical a garment, with a tight armseye and all that train,” condemned Honoria sternly.

“Sour grapes,” sang Selina.

“I’m fetching mother,” beamed Devenish. “She just has to see this,” he added, and bolted out of the room.

“I have never seen Devenish move so fast. Usually he goes at an alderman’s gait (very slowly),” noted Julius.

“Why did he not put in the name of the owner?” fussed Honoria.

“First, it is to compensate Justina for her old habit, which will barely serve with an onion even after starching, and second, it is definitely not for you, Honoria; you could not get your belly under that after all the tight-lacing in the world,” said Caroline. “Justina, ’tis not too long at the sides, ’tis full skirted in the redingote, for the front runs directly into the train.”

“I’ll trip on it like someone badger legged (one with one leg shorter than the other),” said Justina.

A few minutes later she had to parade about for her proud mother, who wanted her to

go below and shew her father, but she refused, so there the matter ended. Once the excitement had died down and the gowns carried away to be hung up, Caroline sat down to write the Duke of Irvin an appropriately long letter of thanks, which was really her father's task. Justina, too, was obliged to put some words of gratitude on paper even if he was only making up for her loss, and she went to perform this task at once, with so dejected a mien that Caroline thought it was going to be quite a trial for her, let alone a feat. All the same she accomplished it without any querulousness and even shewed it to her older sister for faults to be corrected or blunders in style. In fact it was very formal, and inclined towards curtness, with an emphasis that he really should not have troubled about such a matter, but otherwise neutral. Caroline happened then to be trying on her golden wedding gown, made from lama and stiffened with silk, with gold embroidery all over it. She glanced at the note, approved of it even if she thought it too short, but it did not hold her attention as much as an idea.

"Justina, try this on, just for a lark," she invited. "Honorina already has, and even Selina; now 'tis your turn."

"No, I'd rather not: writing that damned scrip made me flustered, and so I am hot," declined Justina. "May I put it with your letter, pray? Your gown is not as we planned."

With that, she just laid the paper on her dismayed sister's dressing table and praying to take leave, moved to the doors, but halted a moment on the threshold.

"Would you pray tell our mother not to bleat to the world and his wife that Irvin replaced Justina's riding habit?" she requested and egressed.

Caroline was disappointed for her hopes had risen just now, with all that had happened, but now Justina would probably sink below her own spiritual nadir, which she did for a short while, for having once tried to take Carrie's husband, she did not feel like wearing Carrie's wedding clothes, but she was alone with her mournful thoughts, and when her sister came to seek her, she had righted herself again and shewed no change in her manner. As for the favour she had sought of Caroline, it was not unreasonable in country climes, where molehills readily became mountains, and so her sibling obliged her, even if it took some persuading to make the Duchess see sense. Justina was aware, by now, that she was the source of some concern to Caroline, but she tried not to make anything of it, except that she continued as she had begun after the incident with Chatteris and the groom as a witness, and now that she could at least go out with a strong young escort, she still stayed nigh home, even thò her horse was quite well again. To make matters worse, she persisted in wearing her old habit, which had suffered to be washed and had a humble appearance; when asked why, she alleged that she had no need to dress up for a groom to ride in her father's park. Actually, it turned out to be a piece of discretion on her part, for the Stopfords called, and she was still dressed in her old habit, and they met her in the house as they were arriving, for she managed to evade being present in the drawing room, where her mother was bursting with news that she dared not relate and hoped that her daughter's fancy new clothes would bear witness themselves, which they did, but not as her grace would have liked. The whole business frayed Justina's, and she grew worse when she went to the library to change her books, for it was supposed to be a silent place, but her father's voice boomed about the castle and penetrated this enclave, which made her testy and unable to concentrate even on reading the spines of the tomes she was supposed to be chusing from. Someone entered the room while she still had her back to the door, and before she blurted out that she wished her father would finally do his

larynx permanent damage, she turned to see who it was, lest it was one of the Stopford sisters tarrying and nosing about to try and meet the elusive daughters of the local ducal family. In fact it was nothing of the kind, for, shutting the doors behind him, was the Duke of Irvin.

The sight of him gave her a start and caused her to turn and face him across the room, her brow knit with confusion and anticipation, her lips parted, her regard anxious and searching, and her attitude that of one sorely taken aback, but displeased with it. His grace himself was grave and gaunt, tired and dull, like some wretch prematurely forced out of a sickbed, the pallor of his countenance heightened by the deep, opaque, black velvet in which he had chosen to clothe himself. Watching her with a fixed gaze, he raised his eyebrows in inquiry, as if seeking consent to advance further. She nodded and also, she found her voice.

“Good morning, sir. Would you like to be seated?” she invited, rapidly installing herself on the spiral library steps, for he would not sit before she did.

In a voice grating on a dry throat, he thanked her, and advanced to the library table, where a chair was displaced, allowing him to seat himself without the prior exertion of pulling heavy furniture in his state, except that he only paused before it, and then went to her where she was perched. Without another word, he held open his arms.

“No, Irvin, you forever breathe hot and cold,” she repulsed.

Despite his weakened state, he sprang and enclosed her in his embrace, so with a look of dismay, she placed her hand upon his arms, careful to avoid the bullet wound in the shoulder and the gash on the upper arm, for both his limbs were afflicted. As he brought his forehead to lean against hers, she sensed that the gesture brought him a measure of peace and comfort within, whereas about her, all was turmoil.

“When I see you again, now, and remember that time we endured in that makeshift tunnel that you made,” he sighed wearily, “I feel nothing less than devotion to the girl who came forward, asked no reason why and bore me off to safety, sacrificing herself and her horse for the sake of this dissolute carcass. Forgive me, Justina, I have no right to tease and taunt you like this, but when I think on the effort you furnished —,”

“I need to save my sister’s intended, for he has invested heavily in our affairs, and she will not be able to afford even a wedding dress without his underwriting our debts and managing our income, for fear of sounding like a raise-mountain (braggart) when I use that latter word,” she answered solemnly. “May I ask what you are doing here?”

“Visiting, but as the Stopfords are here too, and were hosts to Chatteris, I am obliged to eschew them,” he replied, “so I asked to wait in the library.”

“That objection is reasonable,” she ceded. “Yet why the library when we have other parlours and the last time your grace waited, it was in the dining room?”

“That is because I let the footman put me there,” he answered. “This time I asked him if any of the family were below and he averred that you were in this room, so I said I would go there too. Weakly do I run to your society, and fail to resist the compulsion to seek it out, and weakness is a poor excuse, if an excuse at all. Even if you would just give me your hand, I would be slaked.”

Justina held out her fingers somewhat tentatively, and he took and crushed them gently in his, before raising them and planting a kiss in the palm of her hand, only to have it snatched away, as she shifted about on the spiral steps.

“I haven’t asked how you fare, Duke,” she said stiffly.

"No, and if you say that you mean not to, or that you could not care a fouter, I would see things with your eye," acknowledged he. "In any wise, I am here and before you, so I must be mending well, and not as sour ale in summer. Puck is well, too: still smirking, of course, being strong as a horse, because he is one, his stitches are already out and he walks about the paddock once a day right as bird that flew in air."

"Why are you come to visit, sir?" she probed.

"I took leave of this family and then ended up endangering one of its daughters, so I owe you all an explanation," replied he. "It is that I am come to furnish. The Duke and Duchess, as well as Lord Devenish and Lady Caroline, know that I am here, for I was told that they are in the drawing room with the callers."

"As are Honoria and Julius, but I did not want to go and I have formed no part of the receiving household hitherto, so everyone forgets that as I am out, I should be present too," she added and remarked. "I still have to study, and I help Caroline teach Selina, which is why I am come in here, to chuse more material, for my own edification and hers too."

"Another reason for coming is to talk of the trunk: I am glad its contents were so well received, but I would have any alterations performed by the botch (tailor) and to my charge. I had your note: at once easy and formal: Justina trying hard to be brief and correct, but out from behind the stiff-rumped lady, out peeps the girl."

"Caroline did not see it like that," she objected.

"She is used to you," he replied. "I found a spark of merriment that set me alight, for in the trench, you were unhappy with me, and I asked for it, reminding you of a painful subject at the wrong moment."

"I don't write many formal letters except when I receive gifts of money sent by aunts or other relations about the time of my birthday," she owned, "for then I churn out the same litany, year after year, as Carrie first taught me how. Carrie is the one for writing letters; she has a fine fist and a delicate but felicitous turn of phrase. I just sound contrived."

"You sound natural," accredited he. "That was enough for me to invite myself to your stronghold just now, so that I could see you again. You are a strong person, in body and in spirit, not like his grace namby-pamby standing in front of you."

"Did your mother use that expression about you much?" she divined.

"Indeed, and her other favourite was, 'when you grow up, are you really going to be a man?'" he mused. "As you know, after Lou was born, she left her married life and her family behind, for she would not tolerate my father's wenching or his partiality for houses of civil reception. I remember her departure, as hand-in-hand with Vinnie, I watched, and I was glad to see her go, for no more would she say to her cousins that I was a hang-dog, and mock me if I wept for falling down and hurting myself, but on the other hand, I felt that I wanted to weep, oddly, for that was my mother deserting her own, and with no place in her life or her heart for us, so I must have been the queerest of sights, not knowing whether to laugh or to cry."

"I reminded you of her in the trench," she cringed. "You said that I had her heartlessness," she recalled.

"I was feeling too sorry for myself at the time. My mother would never have comported herself as you did," declared he. "I was ill and in pain and wanted to be dandled like a baby, whereas you were the grown man who was minding the fort and saving the weak women and children, with no time for fripperies. My mother would not have done as you did."

Have you any idea, Justina Woodville, how I felt when I beheld you riding towards me, even before you unsaddled your mare so that I could bestride her? When I think back on it all, how I did it all wrong, and what a miserable coward was I! Had I been in your shoes and another behaving as I did, I doubt if I would ha' been as patient."

"Not that I was," she owned. "You're not a coward. Sometimes one has to run away from those who would harm one. There is no dishonour in refusing to stay and be slaughtered. Chatteris said that the men chasing you were sent out because he wanted to talk to you, and, aye, they had orders to kill our mounts to prevent us from outrunning them, but I wasn't born at Little Witham, and if you would talk to a man, perhaps if you meant him no harm, you would be able to convey your meaning without first trying to kill his horse?"

"I know that he interrupted your ride, Justina," said the Duke. "Among the things your family has done is send Lord Devenish to Stopford Manor to tell them that their guest has been harassing a daughter of their house since her hand was refused to him, and to control him better. I suspect that that was why he left; they could well have given him to understand that it was time he was on his way."

"He thinks that his best answer to you is by having me," she stated.

"That would be part of it," he accepted, "but his most important aim is that I should move off. Why else have there been so many duels between us and he always calling them? Some were in such disgraceful circumstances as to be droll, on recollection."

Justina bowed her head to hide a smile.

"Is it true that you were both in the buff when you met in the – er – doxy's chamber, the female who supposedly could not keep a proper engagements' calendar?" she asked, trying not to shew mirth, but mostly failing.

"Naked as my nail, my dear," he owned, "and later I had a thought on it: the woman had been paid to give an assignation to me at the same moment that she allegedly was to receive him, for following that, she was able to bail her mother, a notable bawd, out of the King' Bench Rat Castle (goal), which is a hell-hole. That could have coincided with her having saved money enough for the bail monies, but the timing was too close."

"Two nude men duelling, and without seconds," she assessed. "A receipt for a miller (murderer), perhaps."

"You see with more than half an eye," he affirmed.

"Why am I so important to him, that he curses and profanes me because I will wed him not, and why will he wed me? If it is that he would control you through me, then you would be able to do alike, is that not so? All cannot, surely hang on who has my maidenhead first, for when I am his wife that will not count," she pursued.

"He will have more power over me than I will over him," he declared. "Even if you have been my mistress and I have been my usual self as a son of Venus, and discarded you, I would not that harm befell you, especially the sort of harm that he metes out. So, were you his wife, he could be certain that there would be certain things I would never say about him, because the repercussions upon you would be very serious –,"

"Floating in the fishpond?"

"Of that nature, aye. Beyond that, holding a sword of Damocles over your head, he could obtain favours and privileges out of me, for my own wife will be in terror of her sister's safety and he knows how to work that kind of puppet shew."

“Why should he be so hostile when he could just be a part of the family? You just alleged that there would be certain things he would know you could not say about him. Is there something you know of him that others do not and that could do him damage?”

“Well, there is a secret or a suspicion of a secret, or knowledge of a secret suspicion,” he conceded.

“Then it must be very dire, for you are not clear as to whether you know or are sure, and already that is perilous,” she ascribed.

“Sometimes the adage ‘what you don’t know cannot hurt you’ is good grammar and the saying that ‘knowledge is power’ is nonsense. It is possible to know and be endangered by knowing,” he confirmed.

“So, if I were to ask what it is about him, considering that I am in the middle of his affairs and yours at this moment, would you tell me?” she tried.

“No, Justina. You said it must be dire. Well, that would be putting it mildly. It is not just dire, it is ruinous. If it is revealed to be true, it will finish him. If it is not, the rumours already would terminate his social career and cause him grievous financial losses. He could always turn on me and sue me for flinging dirt at him (slander), but that is repeating what he would best have buried and forgotten, and it costs money. Only five people, once, knew of it: now there are two. They were he and I, the deceased Earl and Countess of Chatteris, and my father. Whether my mother also knew I have no notion, but if so, she has taken such intelligences to the grave with her. Now only he and I are left.”

“Is this the cause of your enmity?” she asked.

“Indeed and indeed,” he affirmed.

“I thought it was his jilting Lady Northingham,” she owned.

“He courted Vinnie to wed her for the same reason as he would wed you, but he then did not realise that I knew what I did about him. When he found out, he panicked and retired, for it did not strike him that he could use my knowledge against me and through it hold my sister to ransom. The trouble is, that I did not wish for him to have Vinnie knowing what I did about him, and I hinted about it, whereupon he gave her turnips. Then later he recovered his gumption and realised that the best way to safeguard his position was to obliterate mine, thenceforward began a series of duels, but now he cannot wait and hires bravos to chase me in the countryside, ostensibly for him to talk to me. If you believe that, then there is such a person as an honest man and a good bowler (supposedly impossible combination). Me, I suspect that he was preparing a false ‘accident’ which he could set in motion once I was delivered into his clutches.”

“And you’d end up gone to Peg Trantum’s (dead) so that there would be no-one else to suspect his secret,” she nodded.

The Duke of Irvin placed his hands on her shoulders and nodded.

“The more he attacks you, the more he proves that there is less suspicion and more truth to the secret that burthens you,” she analysed.

“My Justina knows an ace or two more than the devil,” he credited.

“Except that she should have more wit than to ask a Town bull to wed her?” she postulated miserably.

“That damned secret is another reason why I should not wed you. He will be sure that I have shared it with someone,” he sighed. “Not that I could make a husband worth your salt.

I have no hope or confidence enough in myself to make a moral improvement, or better my habitudes. It would not be fair to let you have what you may think will sort things out your way, and condemn you both to Chatteris's enmity and to misery for the rest of your life, with such a spouse as the Town bull, as you rightly called me. There is a thing you need to know about men. He who tells you that he will change because he will wed you, that he will reform his ways, that he will improve, because you are there to give him all the satisfaction he needs, not to mention love, which is apart from the fun of nugging (having sex), may mean it when he says it, but 'tis impossible. It can't happen: you may as well try to number the waves."

Justina listened in silence, but was angry with herself, for her emotions and disappointments made her eyes fill, and he saw, bowing his head until it touched hers.

"Dear, brave Justina," he breathed. "You do not just light a fire in my loins; you bring balm to my craven heart. For your sake, I must leave you in peace."

As he spoke, he took out his kerchief and tenderly wiped her eyes, which had begun to spill out their load. There were noises in the hall: the Stopfords were leaving, so she gestured him to move off and he obeyed her, in readiness to go to the drawing room.

What if I wed him just for the 'nugging'? she thought to herself. The Duke could not hear such a thought and departed, only to be given a hero's welcome in the drawing room, but by then, Justina was in the hall and could overhear the reception he was accorded, even if she did not stay to listen, and retired with her books to the schoolroom, where Selina was dreaming over her list of Roman Emperors, and under it, some exercises in French grammar which Caroline had set her. Justina sat with her and helped her memorise the former, before she commenced upon the latter, when her sister settled down in a window seat to read quietly to herself, with a fine view of the garden well below. From the corner of her eye she noticed movement, and looked out, to see Irvin with Caroline, both strolling. Despite his wounds he scarcely limped, and wore no sling, but valiantly held out his left elbow for her to take, and she, demure in her straw *bergère* and a light silken wrap, looked perfect at his side, both a picture of complementary refinement and formality. Selina noticed that her sister was staring out at something, and as Justina was not as strict as Honoria or as demanding as Caroline, she took advantage of the other and came to her sill, to see what she was watching.

"Handsome, is he not?" Selina approved candidly.

"And I don't mind that he's tall, either," added Justina.

"All the same I suppose it was horrid in the trench with him," understood Selina.

"At first I was a little nasty to him, but then I feared he would die, altho I did not say," owned Justina.

"Look at the pair of them," marvelled Selina. "The night of their wedding, I will be able to think of nothing else, vile child that I am."

"What? Nugging?" asked Justina dismissively.

"And you the same?" laughed Selina.

"No, worse," confessed Justina but did not explain even if her sister waited for her so to do, for she was already wondering what coupling with Irvin would feel like.

"I wonder what they are speaking of," said Selina.

"We cannot hear so when Carrie comes out of it still alive, we will ask her," suggested Justina. "Now before they feel they are being watched and turn and catch us about it, perhaps you should return to your French."

Selina mumbled an agreement and wandered back to her desk, to sit at it, sigh and take up her pen. As for Justina, she tried to read but from time to time she did indeed glance up for a look at what was going on below, for the betrothed pair wove their way about the parterres and seemed to be chatting, sometimes calmly and sometimes earnestly. That last aspect confirmed Justina in the wish to pry when Caroline returned, for she too, now, wanted to know of what her sister and the Duke were speaking. If she looked complaisant to Selina, she was inwardly unhappy; her conversations with the Duke made her so, and not because Chatteris wanted him dead either. He was having a detrimental effect upon her emotions, and causing her to feel miserable, even as she sat and eyed the future bridal pair. There was no envy of Caroline in her, but she regretted many things: she rued that she had wanted to take him from her sister, that she had boldly offered marriage to him, and even that she had used him so coldly while he was trembling with agony in the channel, altho she was also trying to save his life, for she deemed that she should have been kinder. She also began to believe that he was right when he said that he was not going to make her a suitable spouse for long: after the first flush of passion he would revert to his old ways and his golden mistress. That notion hurt the worst of all, but she wondered if she would really mind as much as he said she could. Not that that would achieve anything now, but then, when one felt a fondness for a person, was that not also in spite of their faults? He would not change, men did not change, he had the courage to tell her that those who promised to change would eventually be proven wrong, change was impossible. Justina asked herself if it mattered so much as long as one was with the person who made one feel for them, but all that was theoretical, academic – and spoony. The recollection that she lit a fire in his loins and also brought balm to his ‘craven’ heart brought to her face a sad smile, and she gave a last glance at the strollers before changing her seat in order to read and put distraction out of her mind, but she was still beset by the notion of what they might have to talk about.

In fact, they were speaking about her.

“I know that Chatteris is supposed to have departed these countries, but I trust him not, and there is nought to stop him from secretly returning to surprise us,” he said. “Thus I dare to ask how this household is taking the strain that my betrothal to you has indirectly imposed upon it.”

“Praying your favour, in what regard?” wondered Caroline, turning to him.

“Lady Justina is being kept guarded, I presume, still?”

“Truly, but with less strictness than when we were certain of his presence,” admitted Caroline, “but my sister has never complained or attempted to do the foolish.”

“Even so, I anticipate that ere long, all these restrictions are going to try her patience, if they have not already,” he remarked.

“Ah, now there we are all nonplussed, for Justina is a paragon, sir. Your grace anticipates her impatience because you know her to be a lively creature, with a bird’s notion of freedom still, who would resent escorts as if she were having foisted upon her a nursemaid, and rebel against the notion that she is better off near to the house than riding away for the fun of it. Well, for the present, that is not so. She comports herself in such a manner as surpasses even our hopes, and there is no hint even of recalcitrance, no shew of resentment; there is just a calm, rather untypical acceptance of the situation whereat I ought to be relieved and pleased, but which, instead, worries me,” averred her ladyship.

“Some details, I pray, madam,” he requested, listening attentively.

Caroline described an ordinary day in Justina’s life as she was living it now, in and out of the house, the stables, the orchard, the library, her rooms, and all the while, her manner and mood subdued, even if her humour was fair but dull compared to what she used to be.

“Is her appetite suffering?”

“No, but she is not the same as before. When there was all that excitement over the trunkful of clothes your grace ordered, she did not shew as much as any of the others, and she did not think it an amusement to try on my wedding gown, like Honoria and Selina did,” she dared reveal. “I cannot help but be anxious, but I do not want to pry.”

“Has she the habitude of confiding in your la’ship?” he asked, disturbed.

“Sometimes, and sometimes not,” she evaded. “Yet for how long must this continue? Do not say ‘until Chatteris dies’ for that is not foreseeable. What will make her safe? I like to persuade myself that she will return to her old self when she is free to do what her old self did. Sir, you care for her welfare, so answer us fairly or let us find a way for her.”

The Duke regarded her suspiciously now, for her words sounded to him as a nuanced confession of some knowledge, while his wariness appeared to her as an acknowledgment of the same.

“I will give the matter a particular place of priority among my thoughts,” he promised, “and we lack time: something needs to be settled before the wedding at least.”

“And after that, too,” she asserted.

“After that, we retire to Irvin to spend some of the autumn, before the hunting, and the winter round of house-parties. Then she could come and stay with us,” he mused.

Why not take her along during the honeymoon as well? thought Caroline to suggest, but fell not prey to this temptation. However, temptation also gripped him, for even *thô* he meant Justina no trespass, there was some reason beyond the rational that had produced from him such a suggestion.

“She may not agree,” she replied. “There is a certain responsibility upon me and she would not compromise me thus.”

In fact she was speaking of two different things at the same time, whereupon he balked and changed the subject.

“It is not long before our own nuptials, Lady Caroline, but we have never yet spoken of ourselves,” he said.

“There is no need for that,” she answered, suspecting that his motive was to discover what were her ideas, and how strong was her desire to wed him, as if, perhaps, he sought the possibility of persuading her not to do so.

“Saving your favour,” he dissented, “I must at least make the effort to acquaint myself with your la’ship’s state of mind.”

“My dear sir, my state of mind makes not a shred’s worth of difference to the situation,” she responded crisply, and would have liked to add that it made no difference to his pursuit of her sister either, with the announcement that she knew of his predilection for Justina, but instead, she left him and paced away a few steps.

“I take it that yours is a poor opinion of me as a husband?” he understood.

“Sir, neither of us pretended that your grace was of the uxorious variety even before we were betrothed,” she rejoined, for *thô* she had no wish to be impolite, her inability to reply

starkly was itself sufficient.

“Then you entertain no hopes of my betterment,” he concluded.

“I fear not, sir,” she admitted, turning away.

“You are very wise,” he declared, “for such hopes are often false, notably in the mind of a wife.”

“A wife-to-be,” she corrected. “Let me just add that I am not being cynical or censorious, or intimating that you are beyond all hopes: it is just that you have done nothing to engender them.”

“I am to engender hopes?” he recoiled, surprised.

“They are in your favour,” she stated. “If you do nothing to enable us to hope for or place faith in you, there ends the matter. There must be reason: faith based on blind partiality or prejudice is of no consequence –,”

“Yet you are not partial to me or prejudiced in my favour, so you have no foundation for such faith,” he interposed, whereupon she smiled and shook her head. “We must be under no illusions as to the consequences of the steps we are to take; neither you nor I. Am I to assume that you do not look forward with impatience to our union?”

“Neither do you, I apprehend,” she answered.

“The term ‘neither’ presupposes your own negative attitude, however,” quoth he coldly. “Do you ever wonder to seek release from this marriage?”

“No, sir, my family are too far financially committed to your assistance, but were they not, if your grace would have the truth and I might have had a choice; would you be offended were I to speak freely?” dared Caroline.

“I would welcome it,” said Irvin.

“I would never have countenanced the idea. I did the London Season once, with my aunt, Lady Ashlington. I recall seeing you in many places, and fine as you were, I did not gain the impression that you went for my money¹ – figuratively speaking, for I have none.”

The admission wrested from him a small smile of satisfaction that surprised her.

“I am very relieved to hear it,” said he, baffling her completely.

“Sir, when I said that,” she tried to explain, wringing her hands, “I did not mean that I sought release from what is already arranged between us; I know my duty and would not seek to be absolved from it, it is what I would execute most gladly. However, were you to repudiate me to release yourself, I cannot object, but I will pray you not to renege on your monetary support, because we will never be able to reimburse you. There has to be some concession on your part to arrange satisfactorily for our finances.”

The Duke seemed more pleased than ever.

“If I give you the opportunity to be released, without your father’s pecuniary status being affected after the relief I have brought it, would you take it?” he asked.

“Does that mean, sir, that you would continue to help us, as you are doing, and in not wedding me, have no consideration² at all for your generosity?” she cried. “That would be charity! Fie on pride when the geese go bare-legged, but our family could never allow it.”

“Not at all, for if I seek release now, it would be compensation in respect of what would amount to an insult to you, and so it must be proper that I forfeit every penny, for money cannot really buy redress,” he assessed.

“Sir, it was not you seeking release, but I,” she reminded.

"If I release you, I release myself," he specified.

"That is a casuistry," she criticised. "Our family name will be tarnished – even more than it already is – and that will make it impossible for my sisters to find spouses for all hopefuls will think we shall try some ignominious trick upon them."

"If there is a mutual release then there cannot be room for ambiguity," he declared.

"Are you ending our engagement, sir?" wondered Caroline, rather worried. "There is a great mortgage which you have taken on, rather than redeemed. What will happen to –,"

"I speak figuratively," he consoled. "I will never make any trouble about that mortgage, and soon it will pay itself off, I have seen to that matter."

"Be easy, sir, I am not the kind to be in your way: I will bear you all the children you want and provided that you are not cruel, or seek to humiliate me, I am ready to sing 'o, be joyful' on the other side of my mouth."

"It will never come to that, and I will not force you into a union repugnant to you," he said cleverly.

"You do not," she assured. "I must wed, and soon. I would rather wed a man with a civilised and mature character, who will lead his life and leave me to please myself, rather than one who is affected to me but suffers because of this from changes of mood and grows difficult as the result of it. The pangs of lovers are as good as a play, but for a play only."

"Yet you would rather not wed *me*," he stressed.

"Your reputation has preceded you beating mummy-daddy (the elements of drum-beating)," she owned, with good humour.

"I presume it pleases little where your prospective peace of mind is concerned?"

"There are also the troubles to do with enmities, which begin to worry me."

"Would the load on your mind then be alleviated were I to wed one of your sisters?"

"That would be the easiest way, but –," she broke off.

"But you would feel insulted, dancing barefoot (when a younger sister weds before the older one)," he said.

"Not in the least," she emphasised, with a short laugh.

"Besides," he continued, "'twas just a postulation."

"In which case, upon whom would your choice alight?"

"Upon the one who would chuse me."

"That would be three of us, for I would do my duty by my family and am already two and twenty, Honoria is dying to shew her capacity for self-sacrifice on the altar of family loyalty, and Justina would have you in any wise, and has said so to me," she pronounced.

"You and she discuss this sort of thing?" he wondered, his face stern and drawn.

"Justina would replace me if I wished it, because I was not to be the martyr to my father's expenditures," she declared.

"So she is saving you?" he snorted. "Is that all?"

"She is half your age. She also thought to end the difficulties over Lord Chatteris in this way. She is young, loyal and earnest. What else did you want? Don't laugh at her, judge her or humiliate her because of it," scolded Caroline.

The Duke now knew that Justina had told her sister about having made an offer for him and that it had been rejected.

"I would not dream of it," he replied.

“Would not you?” she challenged; evidently there was less rivalry between those two sisters than he had thought. “She may even make you a good wife, even if you do not make her as good a husband, or deserve her devotion. Justina will espouse a cause in all seriousness and see it through to the end. We all receive pin money, but not her, at least, not since she acquired a black mare. All her pin money, theoretically goes into that beast’s belly, so she is not free even to treat herself to a bracelet of glass beads off the tray of a travelling pedlar.”

“And I put great solitaire diamonds in all the buttons of my coats and my coat cuffs,” he compared. “I do not really deserve any of you, but she, well, I deserve her the least. Whom would you recommend?”

“Myself, because the plans are laid and the banns are read,” she stated, “but otherwise I cannot presume so far. Chuse for yourself, leaving aside your suitability and the time it takes for wormwood moon to shine after a few weeks of wedded bliss.”

“What if I chose brave and fearless Justina?”

“I would not be surprised.”

“Were you considering Honoria for me?”

“I’d not dare. Honoria has a jealous and prying side to her nature and would swiftly make you very wretched and angry. Hers would be a she-house (where wife rules) and I cannot imagine you living at the sign of the Queen’s Head. She would stoop as far as making a public scene and carry no coals (not put up with insult or injury) if you had mistresses.”

“What of Justina?” he tried.

“Well, return to your old ways and find out,” invited Caroline. “She is young and the only example of philandering she has seen has been in our father, whom she despises heartily for it. She is no fool, *thô*, and is aware that one cannot teach an old dog new tricks. She will first be hurt, but you must try, whatever you do, not to let the pain turn to hatred.”

“Of you all, she is the toughest and most challenging!” he marvelled.

“She has spent much time with horses. Perhaps she thinks like them,” she remarked.

“Has she misplaced romantic notions?”

“She sees how horses are mated and there is no time for romantic notions with that. Paradoxically, the person with romantic notions is Honoria. As for me, I ceased nurturing those long ago, but if a spouse deserved it, I daresay I could learn to love him, but not so as to make things complicated, and just as an ancillary to the main union,” affirmed Caroline. “Justina would probably mate off best with a man whom she could esteem, but there is a soft side to her. Present her with an injured crocodile and she would probably find a way to nurse it lovingly, even if it could bite her head off in the end.”

“I am relieved to affirm most solemnly that I am not a crocodile,” he half-joked, even if I look like one to some.”

“I doubt if Justina is one of those who considers you to be so, but I do not, even if both she and I know you to be predatory,” she averred, “I you will pardon my frankness.”

“I willingly do, for it is a rare gem in this our hypocritical society where the Quality gyrate,” he conceded.

“That is one of Justina’s failings, if I may put it as such: she is no hypocrite, and can’t be taught to act like one if the occasion demands,” she replied. “When she made her offer, she was fully aware of your shortcomings, and I am sure that she knew better than to expect that you would change for her sake.”

“Ohh, dear God, the things I have told her about the inability of men like me to change,” he lamented, covering part of his face with one hand, in shame rather than to hide it.

“She will have accepted them, for she knows that you are a man of the world and have more experience than has she; besides you explained the habitudes of your sex, which most menfolk like to conceal beneath a veneer of superiority. She may have been hurt at the time, but I assure you, she will respect your frankness, and it will stand your character in good stead with her,” commented Caroline.

There ended their conversation, for a few drops of rain began to fall, and before they wet the strollers, who were at some distance from the house by now, it was decided that they hurry within, Caroline holding up her skirts just a little with one hand and using the other to take her escort’s support, for he was able thus to hurry her within, and thus, all was well. On hearing them in the hall, finally, Selina went to open the schoolroom doors but Justina stopped her firmly.

“In this house, we do not eavesdrop,” she intoned censoriously, “and we disapprove heartily of those who do. Wish you to become into another Honoria?”

“Hush!” warned Selina, relenting, “she’ll be along soon for to give me a lesson.”

“Not before the Duke is gone,” answered Justina. “She will want necessarily to gush a little to him in parting.”

“Are you not going to see him off?”

“If I am sent for, for I have already paid my respects to him today.”

“When? Where? You did not tell me! What a shabby thing it is to be thirteen and see all these men, who are too old for one but who are nevertheless so fine,” lamented Selina.

“He came to tarry in the library while I was seeking books for to teach you, but as you have enough to do, that can lay in water.”

“Ohh, crimes! I haven’t finished my French exercise – Carrie will ask what I ha’ been at, and bone-in-the-arm excuses don’t work with her, for she knows what’s what.”

“Then you had better make an effort, and don’t ask me to come and finish them off for you: the least I can do if sent for is go down and stall a bit if I have to say good-bye.”

In fact, that was what happened: Justina was duly told to go below for the Duke wished to include her in his valedictions. It was Honoria who brought the message, and seemed all the worse for it.

“Upon my reputation, I cannot understand what importance gipsy Justina has to so elegant and refined personage,” she huffed.

“I’ll be back in the god-speed,” said Justina to Selina.

“I hope not!” cried the latter.

“And don’t call me gipsy, pray: ’tis an unpleasant pejorative for a female.”

“I’ll call you what I like,” growled Honoria.

“If I am a gipsy, you are my sister,” said Justina, bouncing ahead of her and tripping down the staircase, only to stop short, for the whole family otherwise was in the hall, surrounding Irvin, who stepped forward to take her hand, and make a stiff bow over it.

“Er – your grace should consider yourself dispensed from making such movements as would stretch the wounds you have suffered: where there have been blue plums (bullets), there are sure to be stitches,” she declared.

“They come out tomorrow,” he replied, with as indulgent a smile as any had seen on

his cold face, “so I consider myself almost healed.”

“All the same, mind yourself,” she recommended, with a grimace.

The Duke looked at Caroline, and she shifted about, with a smile.

“You were right about the crocodiles,” he told her, even if no-one but she understood.

No-one dared ask, either, not even old Hearne. By then, Justina herself was loth to pry into the chat enjoyed by the betrothed on their walk, for it seemed excessive and unnecessary, as she joined her siblings in waving him off, for his vehicle was at the door; his hosts the Duke and Duchess remained inside the castle.

As he drove away, the Duke of Irvin found himself savouring the memory his last interview with Justina, as if it had been a moment of pleasure just to have her company. He also recalled his conversation with Caroline and had the distinct impression from it that, were he agreeable, she would have jettisoned him into the arms of her younger sister, who actually liked him or maybe more, and that she would esteem him too. ‘Stand your character in good stead’ had been Lady Caroline’s exact words, and he could not imagine that his character stood in good stead with anyone, including his sisters; indeed, he did not even consider that he had any principles left, let alone such as were worthy of respect. He did not think Justina’s affection to be a girlish infatuation: she had not seen him at his best, she had been the victim of his lechery if only a light display thereof, she had repulsed by him, she had shewn that she was withdrawn from and angry with him, but still, when he was endangered, she did not demonstrate the supposed ‘fury of the woman scorned’ and leave him to his fate, but came rushing to his aid and did her utmost to save his life, in which she succeeded. Perhaps it was just the act of a righteous Christian, but Justina had not spoken like one, and he thought hard on it: he ever seeking superficial and momentary bodily pleasures, had nevertheless made such an impression upon this lovely maiden so that she risked all to keep that body alive, and thenceforth, rued her rough manners with him, accepting his reasons for repelling her as probably valid. That was a creature of integrity to the backbone, of the like he had never met, and of the kind whereof he probably had great need. That was why she esteemed him for even hurtful frankness, for he had given her no other reason to consider him with anything close to deference. At this moment, he revered her for it, and he had revered no woman in his life, least of all his mother. He saw all his own attentions as minor: sending her a new riding habit to replace an old one was hardly a kindness, for it was only her due, but not every mortal was like that and content to see things spoilt for his own sake without even dreaming of spending a farthing to redeem himself. That was a part of him that she saw but he did not, for it was only natural as far as he was concerned, whereas being poor, she had seen her fair share of those shameless enough to take advantage – a fact he did not know.

During his drive to his lodging at the Orres’, the Duke of Irvin gave further and closer thought to his conversation with his betrothed. His true purpose in instituting it was to investigate some specific aspects of his situation, but the results of this measure did not all please him. Firstly however, it was a relief to know that if he declined to wed Caroline she would be neither hurt nor offended; indeed she might even welcome the breach. That Justina would marry him, he knew, even thô she was loth to steal her sister’s husband and that when she had made the offer, it was to save herself from wedding Chatteris, who was presently out of the picture, but who still posed her a greater threat as his wife than if the said wife were Caroline; her other pretext, very valid, was to prevent Caroline suffering the misery that

would befall them all if he took one sister as wife and the other as mistress, but now he could not help wondering if there was more that had guided Justina in her daring resolution, when he looked back on this their most immediate meeting of which Caroline was ignorant and likely so to remain. That Caroline would not be angered if he wed one of her sisters had also emerged, and in particular, she would have not minded that he forsook her for Justina. He expected her to be protective of her sister, he knew that she did not consider him good enough for her fresh younger sibling, for not only was the latter unsullied by a man, but her mind was untrodden virgin ground, likely brutally to suffer from the infidelity of a spouse, in particular if it were conducted in so heartless and brazen a manner as would be a return to his customs now. Irvin was not upset that Justina also meant to wed him to save her sister, but when he discovered what kind of man a commonsensible female liked to wed, a way of indirectly discovered his own eligibility, he felt sorely mortified, from Caroline's description of a suitable and welcome spouse, he had nothing whatsoever to offer beyond the extent of his own weaknesses.

At this late stage during the betrothal precedent to what was only a convenient marriage, the Duke found himself chagrined and downcast, when he should not have cared less, for it was not enough to know that the mechanics of changing his marriage plans were not impossible. Hitherto he had opposed wedding Justina both for her sake and for his own, but even though he had explained why to her, the fact of doing so sparked off thoughts about such a possibility, yet on the other hand, after the discussion with Caroline which explored divers contingencies, he felt that he had been right to oppose Justina, for he was finding that he valued her too highly to make her his life's mate, for he would effectively degrade her. He became morose, discovering that he wanted Justina more than ever and not just with desire but with affection, and this humour, accompanied by taciturnity accompanied him for much of the day, which his hosts ascribed to his injuries and not to him as an ill-conditioned entity. There was a matter, however, that bothered him, and the cause of that was the time he had passed this morn at Hearne Castle, for on discovering that he was to return to London after his sutures were extracted from the sites of his wounds, the Duchess suggested that they should hold a rehearsal of the wedding ceremony, for he was not due to return to this shire until the wedding and all she had to do was talk to the vicar to wait on them at Great Hearne Castle the following afternoon, assuming that the surgeon would attend to him in the morning.

It was Caroline's task to apprise her siblings thereof, and as most of them had witnessed the plea their mother made, that just meant telling Justina and Selina. In all honesty she did not quite know how to approach the issue where the former was concerned; in fact she was paradoxically beginning to feel that the Duke should have been Justina's spouse rather than her own, and Justina had been rather uncommunicative about him of late, so her present predisposition towards him was unknown to her sister. In the end she just told them plainly that the vicar was to attend the house tomorrow afternoon to stage a mock ceremony in the drawing room, and Justina received this news with a calm silence and a nod. In fact, just for a lark, the siblings had a rehearsal for the rehearsal that afternoon in Carrie's parlour, which degenerated into a farce, and Caroline was relieved to see Justina laughing. Julius played the part of the clergyman, and even imitated his speech, for he was what they called 'an old dog at common prayer' which meant that he was a bad preacher. Honoria had made a plan of where everyone had to stand or sit, and as the Duke of Hearne had no more part in the affair

beyond leading his daughter up the aisle and giving her away, he was soon dispensed with and could go below and please himself.

Even so, when the moment for the actual rehearsal came, it was on the real site, with a real clergyman and the true groom – who was kept waiting for half an hour, as were the guests he brought, for the Orre family came to attend too. This was the fault of the Duke of Hearne who fussed and delayed over his post-prandial toilette so much that the future bride grew harassed and embarrassed and confessed herself to be in danger of sweating like a hard-ridden horse, which was bound to endear her future spouse to her. When, at last, the Hearne party arrived at the village church, which was fortunately set somewhat apart from the aforesaid village, and that meant no crowd of nosey yokels had collected when they should have been harvesting somewhere, no-one, mercifully, mentioned their tardiness: Hearne was too uncouthly grand to bother with an apology and Irvin was too suave to demand one, altho he accepted Caroline's whispered words with quiet good humour, and forbade her gently to mention the matter any further. Then he went in to take his place; young Michael Orre was to be his best man, which role would be taken on the day by Sir Raymond Annesley. Once they had reached the altar, the small band of musicians by the choir, in what used to be the Lady Chapel until the Interregnum, scraped and blew out an anthem, which heralded the advent of the bride's procession, which reached its place without mishap. As he went to his seat, the Duke of Hearne grumbled about the pew in which he was presently to sit and the vicar assured him that it would be properly furnished on the day, in keeping with his rank. In fact it was the family's private pew, so why he should have complained was unknown, unless he would draw some of the attention on Lady Caroline to himself. Then, duly attended by all their available people, Caroline and Irvin went through the motions of a marriage. The church was silent and still but for the voice that intoned and those that replied, but it was not an entire sacrament which was recited, just the opening words, notwithstanding which there was no rustling, fidgeting, whispering, giggling or tears. None of the participants looked either overjoyed or overwrought, and all the faces behind the bridal pair were bland, revealing not a glimmer of a single emotion, but for the old Duke, who grinned as if his face would fall apart. The vicar abridged the recitation for this was not the ceremony, and needed to be certain that both knew what to answer when, but he did not pronounce them man and wife, for then the Common Law of England would have made them thus. Then wheezed pipes and cat-gut alike and both Caroline and Irvin turned, as Justina, watching like the others, noted that the first thing the mock bride and groom did was look at her to search her demeanour. Staunchly she withstood their gazes as if there was nothing amiss and so they deflected their respective lines of vision, so as not to excite either notice or suspicion. Caroline was afraid to be relieved, and saw not whether Justina's lack of response was owed to indifference or to fortitude, the former being welcome and the latter worrying, for it did not guarantee that she would be fortitudinous on the day. Outside in the churchyard, the wedding party broke up, and with the vicar, aired opinions and made comments, but Selina and Justina just stood aside like a pair of unconcerned children who had no business having ideas in the first place. While the others talked, Irvin positioned himself so that he could view Justina, but what he learned from it was very little for all the good that did. The whole affair ended, they all went to Sir Robert Orre's, cleric included, with Justina and Selina too, for a hearty collation, which would make supper served later nothing more than broth and bread for they were all sure to be too full to eat

more. That event too was unremarkable, except that the cold grey eyes of the Duke of Irvin repeatedly kept Justina Woodville in their sights. He, however, unlike Lady Caroline with her doubts, was thoroughly dissatisfied with the whole situation, for so far, he had had no opportunity to talk to Justina on her own and needed badly so to do before he went away.

No chance was afforded him to seek her out; she never went about on horseback now and refrained from strolling alone in the park so that he could engage her privately in speech; if he visited the castle again it would only be by chance that he met her, and he could confide in no-one to carry messages or write her a note and commit such words to paper: besides a talk was not a unilateral monologue and he wanted an exchange of language. Not that he had anything of importance to say; he wanted to speak of the rehearsal and how it had affected her, he just wanted to be with her again, and he wanted her to know that. All the same he had to go to Great Hearne Castle to take leave of his bride when he prepared to depart, and hopefully, Justina would come to see him off: he had to be content with that much.

Bracing himself then, he went to visit on the next day, arriving shortly after the family had breakfasted, and that was a somewhat protracted affair, for the early risers ate well before their parents, and Devenish ate with the Duke and Duchess, who were much later. Luckily for him, Justina was back from the stables by the time he appeared, but the old Duke was not quite ready, and there was a little fuss as to who should sit with him while the others convened. The obvious choice was Caroline, with or without her mother, but the latter refused, lest her hysterical spouse would later scold her. Honoria raised an objection: it was too close to the date of her wedding for her to entertain the prospective spouse without a duenna, such as Honoria herself. Knowing that the latter was eager to make some sort of favourable impression on him, Caroline declined, stating that one or the other of them should be teaching Selina, so Justina came to the rescue, with Julius, who would be a chaperon in the true sense of the word, until Devenish finished his toilette. Thus when the siblings twain came before the Duke their visitor, they presented him with a somewhat tantalising situation, whereto he responded with a manifest disinclination to make conversation. Justina was too disconcerted and dull to notice this, but the silence grated on Julius's nerves and stricken with embarrassment, he offered to go and hurry the others, whereto the Duke agreed with thanks. He had what he wanted: he was alone with Justina, and as the doors shut behind her brother, he rose and crossed the room to go to her, whereupon she, too, stood up.

"Dear, dear Justina," he began, "I do so want to see you, and I have good reason, for I cannot tell you often enough to beware of Chatteris, who may well return to this district and burrow in some dog-hole of an inn, but the real cause is that I just need your company."

"Well, you have it," she answered.

"You have told Lady Caroline about your brave offer and my craven withdrawal," he remarked.

"You said it was a warning against yourself," she reminded. "What if it is just for the fun of nugging in the end?" she shrugged. "If you are wedding Caroline, I cannot lie with you or whatever it is that you fancy."

"That I fancy?"

"Althô I am but scarcely out of the schoolroom, and no Town belle experienced in the ways of the Quality, I see the animal crudeness of man at his most natural here in the country. At harvest time, don't Jill and John go off into the woods as Jill stands against a tree and John

gives her ‘what Harry gave Doll’? Or Peter sits against a haystack and Bet bestrides him as seated, they niffle away. One rides by pretending not to notice and doubtless they are so far about each other’s business that they do not even hear. I said all that lest you word-peck (pun) and insist that sitting across you on a chair is not the same thing as lying with you.”

The Duke seemed most dismayed.

“At this moment, I would be content just to hold your hand,” he owned.

“Aye,” she consented, giving it to him, “but do not embrace me, and do not kiss me, for I cannot stop myself when you do, especially when you play tongues.”

“In that crude choice of language is there so much innocence,” he sighed. “What if you cannot stop yourself? I will never let us be caught.”

“That is not the point. It is deceitful, and for that reason, disgusting, and after that I will feel sinful, lustful and guilty, not to mention hypocritical.”

So wisely he released her hand and put two good yards of carpeted floor between them.

“Yesterday in the church, you were not happy. It is as well that Caroline did not see. You have some weeks in which to learn how to set your face in a brake (be poker-faced) and confront the music,” she noted.

“Granted, but you made no great display of joy or even drollery: Selina, on the other hand, was ready to burst out laughing, while Lady Honoria was –,”

“Ready to burst, and no more?”

“A little that way, aye,” he acknowledged. “You were wretched. Justina, sweet child, tell yourself that you have no use for a rake who is twice your age.”

“Except that the said rake would have a use for me, if I let him,” she reproved.

“*Touché*,” he accepted. “Just so that you know, I don’t like a quick flourish against a tree or anything as casual as a chair. There are some things, where some people are concerned, that merit more than a little effort.”

“I know not whether to laugh with joy or cry from the confusing frustration of it all,” she replied. “Hark ye –,”

There was the sound of footsteps, rapidly approaching, and belonging to at least two or more people.

¹(he goes for my money: he’s the man for me)

² (consideration: something in return for money, a service or an object: legal term)

TWENTY-TWO

The Duke of Irvin left the district according to his statement of intention, and this time he was really gone, with no pretence like on the last occasion. Sir Robert Orre confirmed that he had made extensive inquiries about Lord Chatteris's presence hereabouts before departing and it was as if proper confirmation hereof duly propelled him hence, but with no optimism, and certainly no illusions as to the danger in which Justina now stood. Apart from those last few words exchanged with her during the interlude when she kept him company while waiting, his grace had no further truck with her, and if there were things said it was ever in the presence of many witness from her family, about inanities, during which he preserved his customary icy dignity and she her simple calm. The day he left, she persisted in her usual routine, mentioned him never, neither wistful nor low-spirited nor even relieved, but just affable, amenable and rather quiet. However on the following day, she spent much of the day out of doors, albeit with servants and now Julius, who was feeling silly at being a lordling while his sisters did menial work in the stables and the garden, and returned from furnishing much effort in a state of exhilarated fatigue, whereat Caroline was most relieved.

In fact, Caroline wished to come to some conclusion or judgment about her sister's behaviour, and deemed that the girl had chosen to withdraw owing to the effect upon her spirit of the presences, whether jointly or severally of Chatteris and Irvin, in the vicinity, both threatful each in its way, but now that they were gone, she was mechanically returning towards her old ways, if not to them. Whether she would go so far as to impose a strain on the safeguards in her favour, it was too early to tell. As the rest of the week shewed, Justina imposed not strains on anything or anyone, on the face of it at any rate, and complied with all the restrictions that were meant to protect her, even if it was annoying to hear the Duke complain that Irvin was to blame for all this trouble, when he had responded positively to Chatteris's unilateral overtures and even kept it a great secret, about which he used repeatedly to felicitate himself. When his wife told him as much, there was a terrible scene and he denied nigh all of what he was accused, namely what he had done. Whatever had happened was someone else's fault and that was the way things were in this family. Apart from that, Caroline was inwardly a trifle relieved that she could look forward to the last weeks in her old home with her jolly young sister sound in wind and limb and mind too, or almost, for Justina was still not as lively or vivacious as before, if otherwise vastly improving. She would have liked to confess to her youthful sibling her joy thereat, but refrained awhile, just to be sure that this was not merely an act staged to make the final stages of her life at wretched old Hearne Castle, with such an obnoxious father and so useless a mother, at least bearable before she settled down to exist in the life of a man as secondary, even less, but respected as long as she bore him boys and kept out of his way. Before she jubilated about Justina's restoration to her old self, she needed to be sure that old wounds and raw patches were all healed up. She held her peace, and gradually, Justina seemed to be more at ease and less dull, so, of an afternoon as they were out on horseback with a mounted groom, the subject of her departure from this place arose and she exploited it. Summer was gone and autumn was here, windy, russet, sometimes inclement, blowing trees in divers directions and leaves all over the land.

"It is affrighting, veritably, how fast time passes," she noted.

"When you are engaged in drudgery it seems to stand still, then all at once the days are short and colder and the hay is heavier because it is not so dry," agreed Justina. "I wish not to

be a grumbletonian, but time passing fast also brings very close the event of your leaving us. I do not regret it: you cannot rot away into your dotage a spinster in this shambles, which I hope someone will repair and make into a decent home, but I think I will miss you, Carrie, and I don't think I would miss you as much if you were Honoria."

"Who knows, perhaps henceforth, you and Honoria will grow closer, for want of my being present," postulated Caroline optimistically.

"Tell that to the Horse Marines," snorted Justina.

"Well, at least give her a chance," suggested Caroline.

"Will she have wit enough to recognise it or mistake it for an opportunity to ride rough-shod over us all?" grunted Justina, whereupon Carrie laughed and patted her arm.

"How glad I am at last that you are your old self: I should not like to have left before I saw the old Justina again," she said.

"Would you like to explain that?" probed Justina.

"You went through a phase of withdrawing into your own spirit," averred Caroline. "You were in your own sad little world, and not very easy to reach, even if outwardly you tried to keep up appearances."

"Ah," mused the other, "at least I read many books and improved my embroidery skills vastly, not to mention the pile of household mending I accomplished."

Caroline was still amused and shook her head.

"You were not troubled too much by it? It was just a chip in a potage (a thing of no importance)," said Justina.

"As a matter of fact I did grow concerned, my dear," owned her sister.

"Then I apologise, for I would not for the world that you suffered on my account. I was trying to compose my wits, that is all, and I wanted to become accustomed to being all locked up, which I shall be forever more, Amen, until Chatteris has other fish to fry. I knew it was for my good, but I misliked it, a little, at first. I wasn't a hang-dog, was I, with a face as long as a fiddle?"

"No, just reserved," said placid Caroline.

"You should have hailed it as a pleasant change; I'll warrant that I was less noisy."

"Well, I love you for what you are," beamed Caroline.

"I think that is what loving means," mused Justina, and her mind wandered forward to the coming weeks when she would see Irvin again, as a bridegroom for her sister. "So, you shall be alone with him soon."

"I daresay he will have his family flutter in and out to distract me as I share him with others," assessed Caroline, and looked very miserable.

"Not very enviable, your grace," understood Justina. "However, if you feel unable to go through with it, I'm still game to take him off your hands. Don't be shy, Caroline: you've never wanted him and I rather think that you dread what is to come."

"I do, but I am not the first or the only or the last female in the world to go through this sort of ritual," accepted Caroline. "On the other hand, to look at, I could do worse, but I still know not how cruel he can be, for he has a hard look to him, and by cruelty I do not mean Tower hill play (slap in the face and a kick in the breach) or falling down and treading on one's eye (a black eye). I mean lying in repeatedly as he lies around with half the wives and half the whores in Town, and sends me to the devil's arse-a-peak (said to bothersome wife) if I as much

as open my mouth.”

“Well, the last time he and I spoke, he seemed to understand that I could not be his doxy while he was wed to my sister, however much he wanted it,” stated Justina.

“So he will not pursue you?”

“So he says, but I know that I must needs mind my eye (be careful).”

“You spoke of what he wants, Justina. Do you want him?”

“I will say and do nothing to hurt your feelings, Carrie, or make your marriage less easy to bear. I do not want him if he will not have me, and if he wants me under what are dishonourable terms, I will *never* want him. I have a spark of pride too.”

As she spoke, Justina’s voice wavered and so Caroline abandoned that subject of conversation: her marriage was likely to be safe but her sister’s tough little heart was broken and mending as well as it could. What really were in Justina’s thoughts she would never know until that other disclosed them, and all she had revealed was that she was stalwart and loyal, but Caroline suspected that her sister would have liked to marry Irvin more than she did, and not out of vanity, like Honoria. There was no sense in probing any further and she was right, for Justina’s return to what Caroline had called her ‘old self’ was at a rather high cost, and something that her sister had never done before but which no-one knew about – except the horses. Every night she cried herself to sleep, and when she exercised the horses in the paddocks at a whirling gallop, with men in her proximity but too far to see her face, often it was tearful. She did not resent her sister, nor was she jealous; she just wished that she were older and that Irvin was less of a rake to want to spare her a wretched life with him, so that it would be all right for her to wed him instead. As hard as she could, she tried not to think of him during the time spent among others, but when she was alone, not counting her equine companions who did not judge, ask questions or carry tales, she was unhappy. Her feelings were not bitter either, but there was an element of guilt in them, for it seemed to her that she coveted her sister’s husband; at least her partialities did. There was that about him which fascinated females, Caroline included, but Justina endured more than that, and for different reasons, she was ready to put up with his nonsense, as long as he came back to her in the end, but he was not even hers to come back to, and not ever hers either.

His rejection may have hurt but it was well-founded; he could have so easily have won her had he not shewn some regard for her future, but the way she saw it, that future was in the house of some fellow whom she hardly knew, another marriage of convenience with money in it and the never-ending regret of having lost what she really wanted because it was inappropriate for her. She was just a silly girl and he was a seasoned, grown man. In rejecting her, he had demonstrated a strange kind of humility as not good enough for her, and that warmed her heart towards him, which was probably foolish of her. Thereby he had also caused her to grow up to the ways of men, and to have no illusions about them or him. The man she would one day wed was going to be no different, except that he would be less of a wencher, less well-looking and less honest about what he was and did. She did not believe that as a compassionate and available wife, she would cure Irvin of his licentious practices. All this pained her too, and if time passed and she seemed to forget him and Chatteris, in fact she was analysing his subject every night. There was also another consideration: perhaps Irvin was not fond enough of her, even if he had sympathy enough to spare her his bad side – which was effectively most of him. It was too much to expect that if he had similar depth and

extent of feeling towards her as she had for him, he would want to alter his ways: he had told her that even the most ardent of promises by a man on this count meant nothing as time passed and the sound of his words faded away. A mere country lass of seventeen was hardly going to enchant him for as long as it took to mend himself as a libertine – if libertines ever could be mended, and become respectable enough to be received in all the drawing rooms of the *ton*. She could not tell if he was able to guess how she considered him, but she knew that it was inadequate, that she was inadequate, and that injured not just her pride but her innermost emotions. All the same she was incapable of hating him, whatever he was and had said: her affections for him were profound and pure, just as much as her desires for him could so easily be aroused as she had found out to her great and unpardonable shame.

Despite his absence all this time, contact with him did not cease and the closer they progressed towards the wedding date, the more often he wrote. His letters were addressed to Caroline, and concerned administrative matters, arrangements, the nuptial ceremony, and all that was practical, even if her father snatched at every missive and tore it open to read it first; had Irvin not addressed his communications to his betrothed her doating parent would never have told her what he said in it even if it applied to her more closely than to a father-in-law. Ending every text he asked her to convey her respects to her family, and once he inquired whether the measures taken for Justina's protection were being implemented in full, but otherwise he never mentioned her by name, and Carrie only let her read the correspondence because she let everyone else do so. Thus Justina was left wondering whether the Duke thought of her at all, in return for which she wept about him every day, stupid child that she was, by her own reckoning. Certainly, she knew that he rued nothing and was not at all desolate, as was she in her private moments: she did not see or hear of it but she knew all the same: men were always busy and women had nothing to do but think of them.

In one matter, she was right: the Duke was not in so acute a state of secret despair, but while she had a few hours at a time, sometimes not even that, in which to be miserable, he could, in his solitude, spread out his infelicity over an entire day. Not that he was languid with grief or dazed with distress or pining in any way, but he was very much out of humour all the time, and wore the air of one angry but perplexed, which made him awkward to approach, for he was irritable and sharp-tongued with it. Within his conscious mind, intellect, inclination, wisdom, weakness, cowardice, courage, all did battle and affection, desire and sympathy assisted all sides. The debate was furious: would he hurt Justina more by wedding her or her sister, or, would he hurt himself more in either case. Injuring Justina was inflated to the level of an enormity and was of cardinal importance. Protestations of love soon wore thin: it was consistency and resolution that saved the situation. If he claimed the right to betray a wife, it was because, once she had borne him true and legitimate heirs, he did not care what she did as long as she did not earn the name of Duchess of Sluts, but he would not have liked Justina to betray him even if he deserved it. Why, then, did Justina matter, and it had nothing to do with Chatteris?

The Duke went about his affairs with his usual arrogant and lofty equanimity, but he nevertheless found that Justina invaded his thoughts when he was supposed to be entertaining himself. He saw attorneys and agents, he dealt with bankers and men of business, he conducted correspondence overseen by the horrific Hickeringill, he competently handled money, instructed mine superintendents and manufactory managers and spoke in the House

of Lords. When that was all, he was well, but when he attended entertainments, sometimes he heard Justina laughing; if he went to see a fashionable courtesan or had an assignation with some bored wife, or even called on Lady Deborah, it was Justina whom he took in his arms and upon whom he performed with such loving solicitude – and not against a wall or in a chair either. In the world of fashion however, there was plenty to do and most of it consisted of minding everyone else's business, and watching others like a hawk. Thus his morose, reserved and quiet manner was duly observed and remarked on by the all too nosey Quality, which tittered and attributed it to the impending marriage, fast approaching to draw him into its jaws. It was also noted particularly among the menfolk that the Duke was neglecting certain of his customs, particularly those which involved personal indulgence and riotous enjoyment: furthermore when he thus did divert himself, he was not seen to be amusing himself at all, whether it was at drinking and gluttony, cards and whores, and leaving after an hour because one was bored was hardly evidence of licence at all. Eventually it was Lady Deborah who spoke the mind of Society when he called on her of an evening in response to an invitation to sup: she had truffles from Périgord, that foremost of aphrodisiacs, reputedly, steeped in the brandy of the Armagnac region, and baked into to a pastry puff which was her idea and she wanted him to give her his opinion thereabout.

His grace was on time. His grace was courteous and most complimentary about the puffs, but then he would have been anyway. His grace was about as communicative at table as a monk from the Cistercian house of La Trappe. When she made suggestive suggestions, his grace sat about and brooded: what if Justina were to see him now, and for that matter, even though he had twice already availed himself of Lady Deborah's bed with her squirming in it, he was still unable to bring himself to accuse her of what he deemed to be a terrible offence: she had seen him kiss Justina in Ranelagh Gardens with all his might, but Chatteris had not, except that Chatteris knew about it. As to those women scorned like whom hell had no fury – supposedly, golden Lady Deb was just one such and perhaps she believed that Irvin, her lover, had never kissed her with such furious and torrid passion, or so it might have seemed to her. Thus when he sat and ruminated instead of tearing off his clothes and joining her in bed, he actually wondering about gruesome acts of treachery, wherefor there was no forgiveness. As for his dear and resigned Justina, she would doubtless have replied that in his position he could hardly help himself, for the woman was all but naked under her wrapping gown of peek-a-boo lace which shewed about as much as it hid, and then she had not even taken the trouble to pull the front about her. Would indeed the innocence of Justina be sufficient support to help him out of a situation when a desirable woman bent over him with one beautiful white breast half-protruding from her garb and leaning towards his mouth? It was at this unsavoury moment that he recognised that he had probably won Justina's love, even if she had never said a word about such matters, but the most wholesome part about that was the way in which she entertained it while preserving her dignity, staunch and brave. Divine Deb's suspected treachery gave him good reason to upbraid her and sent her to other lovers, who would be more inconstant than was he, but first he decided to mollify and enfeeble her by giving in to her ploys of seduction and let his tongue run upon the exposed white bulge. That was exactly what she wanted so she believed that she had made her conquest. However he did not tear off his attire like a man turgid with lust, and went behind the screen to undress while she experimented with classical poses whereby bed-linen hid what

captured lady Cathars referred to as ‘the entrance to my belly’ when brought before the Inquisitors of Carcassonne to be interrogated about lovers and bedfellows. When he eventually emerged she laughed, for really she had no alternative.

“Why, Irvin, you look like God’s revenge against murder,” she chuckled.

“We’ll talk on that later,” he said, and entered her bed, at first doing his utmost to slake womanly lusts, with the powerful tool that God had given him but which the Devil directed most of the time, before ploughing her lustily and avidly, as if he had not enjoyed a woman in an age.

Even when his initial lusts were satisfied, she owned that he had quite exhausted her, but then he drew himself off her and lay gently by her side, seeming to contemplate the exquisite creature that she was. In fact he really saw a girl who had begun by charming him and enticing his spirit, but it was now a truism that she had been able to unearth more in him and he judged that as remarkable. Albeit that he had agreed to and insisted on restraint with respect to her, he was free to couple with her in anyone’s bed, even if he knew not what she would be like, altho he was discovering what he would be with her. Justina had never said outright that she loved him, but she did not have to say anything at all; on the other hand, the delicious Deb affected the same affection, and he neither believed her nor treated her – albeit courteously – as more than a convenience whereto he repaired because he was accustomed to her, which was not very chivalrous of him, nor very kind, but she seemed flattered by the role of *maîtresse en titre* so she could enjoy it with all its asides of ingloriousness. In truth, he thought her to be as selfish as he was, and now his preference favoured another. There was also the question of her treachery, which she would flatly deny. As he mused about all these aspects of his relations with Madam Herriard, she leaned over him and laughed softly.

“Irvin, if your eyes were not open, I’d ha’ vowed that you were asleep,” she chuckled, her hands running over his body until he suddenly grasped her wrist, so she drew away. “Very well, we are petulant,” she shrugged, which had an inviting effect upon those white orbs which she had just planned to dangle over his mouth, but which action had, obviously to wait. “Now, my Lionel, will you be so familiar as to apprise me of the reason for these doldrums into which you have lately descended? I do not mean now; one touch and you will bull me with all the vigour I could imagine. I speak of society, for if you are not careful, you will make yourself tiresome.”

“I thought I was that already,” he commented, “which would mean that you degrade yourself by taking me into your bed, but then you achieved that condition whiles ago without the help of my old stretcher (big penis) down there.”

“Irvin! What kind of nonsensical talk is that?” she exclaimed in indignation.

“Do you recall all that business wi’ you going about wearing a widow’s headdress?” he reminded. “All because you had seen me kiss a maid (pun: also means be guillotined Scotch fashion) in the Bread and Butter Warehouse (Ranelagh Gardens), or thought you had, of course being able to recognise a masked man in the darkmans. I’ve heard of the expression ‘kiss and tell’ but ‘see a kiss, and tell’ is, would you not say, a dangerous variant?”

“I know not of what you speak, Irvin,” she said, feeling his forehead.

“Stay your hand, if ’tis a fever you seek, this is enough to cause one,” he intoned frostily. “Let us return to your allegedly seeing me kiss a girl –,”

“Kiss? Had you been with her a moment longer, you’d both ha’ been blowing the

groundsels lustily enough to make the earth quake, it was that sort of kiss!" she interrupted.

"No matter what sort of kiss, but what do I find? Chatteris knows of it," he declared abruptly. "Chatteris was nowhere near me at any time I was at Ranelagh and I know he was not playing John Drawlatch amid the trees at any time during his visit to the place, so how should he know that there is a kissing going on in the dark of the park, unless he crossed the path of a mumblenews, or more likely the buzzer put herself across his? You appear to be the only one who has accused me of making free with both ends of the busk with a girl, but he has learned of it. Did Deborah think she was a biblical judge and go tell him, in order to arm him accordingly?"

"All that is totally unfair!" she protested with the air of one deeply wronged.

"It is, is it not? A fellow cannot put his tongue in a girl's mouth without the event being larded up with dirt and reported, accusing me of it with no proof, to my worst enemy. Now that is true injustice, or are you taking your place too seriously?" shot he. "You know that I err, and that yours is not the only bed in which I practise the art of venery. Why indulge what appears to be an act of unfounded spite against two people whom you do not know which results in imperilling me and my bride, not to mention her sister?"

"You are always in peril where Chatteris is concerned," she dismissed as if waiving the importance thereof.

"So it matters to you but a que (half an old farthing)? Well, here's how I stand with you, then, and thus you cannot expect much favour from me. Yet Justina Woodville goes in peril of ravishment and leads an unnatural life cloistered in her own home unable to ride over her father's land, owing to the fact that you are as long-tongued as granny and spiteful as a viper. She is not even the one I am due to wed."

"She was the one I saw being kissed!" she snarled.

"And you at once assumed it was by me?" he jeered.

"I recognised your silver wig," she asserted.

"There have to be a hundred men in the Quality alone who are tall and who wear silver wigs," he scoffed. "There are consequences to every action. You saw Justina or thought you did, and now she is in danger, because of you. I was brought to the Woodville family to relieve them of debt in return for wedding the eldest daughter, not to fetch peril in my wake. I am entirely and consummately disgusted with the way you have behaved. Even I could not bring myself to do something so selfish."

"I love you, and I take you under any terms, and this is how you use me?" she exclaimed. "I have never endured such derision from anyone –,"

"I would never dare to deride you, Deborah –,"

"Ah, now you are seeing sense, so shall we recommence or will you rest awhile until the ink fills up?"

"I would never dare to deride you, but I will confront you with the truth, and had you any self-respect, you'd accept it," he continued where he had been forced to leave off. "I am surprised at you, Deborah, and a touch disappointed; for one who loves me, you toss my family by marriage into the traps and tangles that Chatteris could hold out for them? Do you ever think before you speak, or have you thought long and loud, and come to the conclusion that you will have me only under your terms now that I am to wed?"

"Irvin, take your rags and get out of my bed. Get out of my house, while you are at

it," she ordered.

With an eruption of bedclothes the Duke rose, and set off briskly for the dressing room where his attire was awaiting him.

"Never to return again?" he hummed on his way out.

"Lionel, you are sorely trying my patience," she snapped. "What exactly is your purpose in this whimsical conduct?"

"Well, I have determined one thing: you care not a fouter about the perils you visit upon others just because of a momentary flight of fear or jealousy, which is very generous of you," he called, on tones of recitation, from the other room.

Pulling on her robe, she went to stand in the doorway.

"I know what this is! This is a prelude. You are going to abandon me, and you seek to saddle me with the blame for it!" she accused.

"Deb, you are shouting. Too many exclamation marks," he intoned.

"Bah, you have another. Did she squeal when you took her maidenhead?" she jeered. "I'll warrant that conquest pleased you."

"I have never taken a maidenhead so in that realm of activity, I am a virgin," he smirked, "is that not a famous joke?"

"Irvin, I'm warning you: dress and depart, and I will never see you again," she spat.

"That presupposes that I will come back," he answered, "despite your treachery?"

"You'll be back, begging," she sneered.

"Live horse and thou shalt have grass," chanted he.

Rather loudly she shut the doors upon him, and when he emerged into her bedchamber, she was not in it. So he departed, seen off by her servants, and there ended his interlude with her.

In fact, she was dropped from his life, that was to say, those few days of it spent in London, for he neither went to her door or had even politenesses for her in the drawing rooms and assembly rooms where the Quality gathered, but as they kept socially apart but for the most formal encounters, no-one noticed. She did however approach Sir Raymond Annesley to ask when the Duke was leaving, and he told her that his friend and he were to travel together to Irvin, whereafter they would journey into the Midlands for to attend his wedding. Of course Annesley reported this to his grace, who, on the day before his departure from the capital, was therefore not surprised to receive a hand-delivered note from the lady, forgiving him for his outburst and conversely, seeking forgiveness for hers. This was accompanied by an invitation to call on her so that they could make up the quarrel. The Duke was going to prepare his home to receive his wife after he had taken the Sacrament of marriage, so he was loth to indulge in a bout of carnal knowledge, even with Justina, for whom Deborah conveniently provided the body, so he wrote a polite letter in his own hand, to remind her that he was due to take church vows and was reluctant to make a great and riotous orgy before it, which was why he was going away, but he thanked her for her generosity and regretted very much that he would have to defer any visit to her house for the moment, concluding that when she saw him next, he would be married: with a Duchess at his side, and after their quiet honeymoon. Doubtless she would see in that a hint that he was going already to be bored and thus prepare herself for the grand return, whether for Parliament or the Season: but for now, he was gone.

In fact he was gone on the morrow, with Annesley travelling with him, to stay with him for his last weeks of bawdy bachelorhood. Then he would become a bawdy adulterer. At his home too, were all the Northinghams, including Vinnie's children, and all the Mortlakes, offspring alike. It would not be a peaceful interlude even if the younger ones knew to stay out of the adults' way and had governors and nurses with them to ensure that they did, but the Duke had required it, to habituate him to the nature of a family, a house with children that his wife was to provide and if she began with a bevy of girls, he would keep impregnating her until she produced a boy. As his sisters were cheerful women and his brothers-in-law complaisant men, he was not required to furnish much entertainment or conversation and finally, there was a great flurry of packing and sending out for horses and dispatching relays and ordering rooms at inns, until, early one autumn morning, when the clouds were assembling with a rather minatory aspect, a great column of carriages set off, attended by clouds of servantry in three different types of livery, to travel to Hearne. When they reached the Mortlakes would stay with Orre as would Irvin himself, until he wed, and the Northinghams and Annesley would stay with another family nigh, of mercantile origins but turned gentry in the reign of Queen Anne, compleat with coat of arms and family tree, as well as a name to warm Royalist hearts, and by no invention were they called Clifford, the same as that of an old family once Earls of Cumberland and which had died out last century. When asked if they were at all related, these good people never said otherwise, and why not indeed! Not that any House as old as that of the Claremonts cared: it was those recently ennobled or not long ago new gentry who either objected or mocked them. As for the Duke of Irvin, he comported himself towards them as he did to any member of the squirearchy, that was to say, according to the Great Law of Subordination.

With a heavy heart did his grace begin his journey and continue it letting his wits debate endlessly and fearfully, for he was in a terrible state of indecision. With his sisters and their respective families making a convoy with him, his was probably the only carriage in which there was absolutely no excitement, of noise, for he soon shewed that he made a poor companion for Annesley, who could do nothing to animate him after an entire morning of trying, and as it was his vehicle and not that of Sir Raymond, the latter could not throw him out of it, nor request permission to travel with one or the other of his sisters and their spouses, which would have been insulting to his friend, so he just sat and sulked in silence. Thus they made a fine pair, one thoughtful, taciturn and tortured, and the other sullen and dissatisfied, refusing thus to set in motion any conversation, for it would only peter out owing to lack of response. They suffered or tolerated each other all the way to the Midlands, and finally arrived at their respective destinations, all within a few miles of one another, to find the houses already filling up with guests and relatives from both sides, and every village inn was full. It was not going to be a grand affair with crowds of expensive folk invited hither, but there had to be a substantial shew at least, when a duke's daughter wed a duke. In reaching some two days before the event, they were not among the last or even late arrivals, which was just right, and Irvin sent Annesley to Great Hearne Castle to inform the family that he was here. The place was stuffed with relations of the Duke and Duchess, which kept the sons and daughters of the house busy, even Selina. The old Duke was grumbling that this event was not going to be ostentatious enough and that wedding in a parish church was a disgrace for they should have had their own private chapel, but when Justina told him that he could have

had it rebuilt when they had money instead of wasting it, he roared at her and only the very deaf old inmates of the place did not hear. It did not interest him that the indigenous population of the district would come to the churchyard to watch – for the poor loved to see a duchess in bridal finery and everyone was curious to view the face that went with the terrible reputation – or that he was going to have to feed all his tenants in honour of his eldest daughter, he would have liked something truly ostentatious, and instead of helping or advising his family as they prepared the house and all the banquets, all he did was sit and complain of what should have been the case about every little detail.

The day after he arrived the Duke of Irvin met the Duke of Hearne and dined in Sir Robert Orre's stately home, the Baronet presiding over the meal, for his younger grace's purpose was to ensure that everything was prepared for the nuptials upon the morrow, and to confirm that the old Castle was properly decked out for the festivities that were to follow. The old Duke feigned affront at these inquiries, but it was a fact that cooks from the Orres, the Cliffords and even the Stopfords were in the Hearne kitchens, helping to make the best dishes that they could master. The Duke of Irvin knew all this, and asked about it as well, but there was one inquiry he could not make. He could politely utter a question about the health and welfare of the Woodville family, and he was permitted even to do the same about his future bride, but he could not very well seek a report about the Lady Justina as if her happiness was his prime concern. In any wise he could hardly interrogate Sir Robert Orre's pastry chef about the Duke of Hearne's offspring, especially the female ones, and as Great Hearne Castle was teeming with people, it was likely that those gone to work there temporarily could not recognise the ducal children, who were unobtrusive and not liable to behave, among so many critical old relatives, in any way that would be remarkable. If, however she were hysterical or ill, Hearne would relate the latter and Orre would confide the former, so, by a process of analysing what was not said, Irvin guessed that she was either being strong and level-headed, or that time, distance and resignation to the inevitable were working together to help her recover from him. In one case he esteemed her for her fortitude and her doughty character; in the other he was relieved that she was weaning away her heart from him, althô the loss was his. Too intelligent to be compleatly optimistic, he hoped that she was ably withstanding her miseries which themselves were fading. In this, he was almost exactly echoed by the lady whom he was come here to marry.

The truth about Justina herself was very simple: nothing had changed, except that she committed herself to her wretchedness as if it were some plague that had to be suffered as it continued to disturb her, and she expected that to be a goodly while yet. In time, whether or not it vanished or the cause for it healed, she would be able to calm her spirits enough never to be tempted into a state of weakness over any man. The wedding by no means enhanced her infelicity to any peculiar extent; paradoxically she looked forward to it, for once the event was in her past and over and done with, she could then examine how to be a sister-in-law and soon, an aunt. As she had said to Caroline, she would want him if he wanted her, but when he was married, she could not dare want him at all. The passage of the days immediately before the wedding, however, galled and irked her, because althô she knew that henceforth there would be no turning back now for Irvin, he had not yet taken his vows, so theoretically there was room for manoeuvre, and this so-called theoretical aspect banging about in her head was possibly the most useless thought she could ever have had in her life. Most upsetting was the

equally absurd notion that he was sure not to make use of it.

The night before Caroline's marriage, Justina did not founder into her usual, useless, concealed, tearful ritual, for she had not the time or the opportunity therefor. Feeling lonely, cheerless and displeased, Caroline came to her younger sister's room for to relieve herself of her emotions and anxieties and pains by chatting a little. They began in a jocular vein, with nurseries full of little Irvins, and what the husband would do when his first born was brought for him to view, for they did not sound like a very parentally loving breed, but it was not long before the mask of levity was dropped, and Caroline confessed her dread of a life bound until death to a selfish rake, the humiliations attendant thereupon that the Quality and its nub, the *ton*, would inflict on her with mirth and mockery as the consequence of his wonts, the fate of being taunted by his latest favourite mistress, and all the child-bearing that he was likely to inflict upon her, not to mention all the diseases he could bring back. She was even moved to shed a few tears, and squeaked a little into her kerchief, which effectively prevented Justina from weeping, for one of them had to resist distress for the sake of the other and not self-indulgently make matters worse. By the time Caroline left her she was emotionally and physically exhausted, but if she could not sleep she still could not cry, and just lay on her pillows to ponder in some confusion about the prize she so wanted but which was less attractive now that Carrie had explained her dread of it. Effectively, confusion reigned.

Caroline on the other hand, fell asleep at once on her return to her bed and was reposed so well that she had to be shaken rather hard on the morrow by her mother in order to wake her up so that she could eat a good breakfast, take a brisk walk and then bathe and make her pre-nuptial toilette. Her first thought was for Justina, and as soon as she could sit up without falling back upon her pillows and begging another minute abed, she asked after her young sibling.

"'Tis because I kept her up late last night," she admitted.

"She has not emerged from her room," said the Duchess, "Julius left for the stables without her, which was most inconvenient, for there are many vehicles to be readied and if he can see to that, 'tis Justina who sees to the horses. Yet be easy on that score, we have more attendants who will probably mind their own teams and your need to be up soonest of all to primp up for the great event, while she has not, so no matter for the present."

"Is she all right nevertheless, even if she is driving hogs to market (snoring)?"

"I tried her door, and oddly enough, it is locked. Justina never looks her door at night lest there ever is a fire, Heaven forfend. I thought it extraordinary," quoth the Duchess.

"Has she asked for water? I know Justina. She will never don her bridesmaids gown unless she is washed all over."

"Carrie, dear, the whole house has asked for water. No-one will recall if Justina made any such request."

"Did you call to her?"

"If she is in the withdraught she will not hear. Besides, I do not wish to shout for my own daughter in a house full of fusty old relatives, the worst being your father's, who do not mind what sort of questions they ask."

"And if you fob them off they will make a meal out of you with their complaints. Families-in-law thrive on such venom. Aunt Lizzie is in the minority and even her acid tongue cannot hold back the tempest to the kind of storms they raise," said Caroline.

As they were speaking, along came Lady Ashlington herself, and leaned in.

“Whose dog is dead? By the bye, good morning, damsels. Ready to face it out with a card of ten, Carrie?” she wondered, turning to the Duchess. “I could hear your worse half grumbling until two o’ clock this morn, so if we all nod off during the service, put the saddle on his back, not us snoring crew. I also heard what he was griping about: ‘why can’t Lizzie stay in the inn? I thought she had Southern airs too grand to let her stay with dirty Midlanders like us’. I know he wants the place for that Friday-faced sister of his who is wed to a sting-bum rich as Croesus whom he hopes to touch for money, but the best he’ll get from folk o’ that kind is a loan at three-hundred per-cent, if you’d pardon the mathematical impossibility.”

Caroline invited her aunt in, and slid out from under her covers.

“Lizzie, I slipped out of bed to go sleep in the drawing room,” defended the Duchess. “’Twas the only way to stop him. ‘Now you’ll not even share my bed anymore when we have guests in the house’ he grumbled to me.”

“So much for the joys of wedded bliss,” sighed Caroline sharply.

“Don’t worry, Carrie, your husband will not force his presence in your bed all night and he will not tell you he loves you and then go desert you for another whenever it suits him, howbeit hugger-mugger (secretly),” growled the Duchess. “With that I have had to put up.”

“Now we have sorted out that matter of burning importance,” continued Lady Ashlington, “I’m off for a walk. Are any of the girls up, for I should very much like a young companion.”

“Justina should be at this hour, but it is not like her to be a slugabed and lock her door,” said the Duchess.

“Unless she locked it to prevent intruders from your husband’s relations while she was in the stables,” suggested Lady Ashlington.

“I’ll send to the stables to resolve this, and Caroline, I’ve ordered you a bath,” stated the Duchess, sweeping out of her daughter’s room and taking Aunt Lizzie with her.

Even as they left they talked about the relief and the tragedy of losing a child to marriage whether the husband was worth it or not. As for mother and daughter respectively, both did as was planned: the Duchess sent to the stables and Lady Caroline hid herself below to the laundry offices where it was easier to fill her a tub and more housemaids on hand to help her with her ablutions. When she had bathed, in somewhat of a daze, because she was bathing for Irvin, she came upstairs in her night gown, to compleat her toilette, and take some breakfast while she did so, in the process whereof Selina and her mother visited her in her apartments to dress her hair.

“Any word of Justina?” she asked.

The Duchess confirmed that Justina had not been seen in or near either paddocks or stables this morning and that one of the old grooms was presently exercising Jezebel, who was rather selective about the folk she allowed near her.

“This is not right,” complained Caroline. “Someone has to find Justina.”

Her concern was not irrational: it was based on the worry that the strain of the day had made her sister ill or desperate and that she had not put Irvin behind her at all.

“Let’s go get her!” whooped Selina, and with the insouciance of youth, bounced out of the room, went to her absent sister’s door and not only tried the lock but banged on it and called out, “Justina! Shew yer ugly phizog.”

That was sure to have produced a swift response, even if it was only a call from within the privy offices, telling Selina to depart immediately, albeit in a less circumspect idiom. Now the Duchess arrived, followed by the bride, her hair partly braided, and the rest awaiting curling tongs. Selina was peeping through the keyhole and declared that she could see nothing but daylight.

“She has taken the key out of the lock plate,” she remarked. “Interesting.”

“Why so?” her mother asked, confused.

“Well, if you slide a piece of paper under the door, and poke through the lock so that the key falls on it, you may pull the paper out with the key on it, by shifting it to the middle of the threshold, for there is the floor most worn away, with the most room between the bottom of the door and the floorboards,” supplied Selina with a smug smile. “It works both ways, like when I used to be locked in with Justina when she was still in the nursery and we both were naughty. That is how she’d get us out. So she knows to ensure that we cannot get in.”

“Ohh, God!” cried Caroline, her face turning compleatly white. “Ohh, no – that door must be opened, now, now, do you hear me? Get one of the men up here – I mean real men and not some dads whose shoulder will crumble if he puts it to the woodwork –,”

“Carrie, are you not over dramatizing this a little? I’m sure there is no need to be so overwrought –,” deferred her mother.

“Mamma,” snapped Caroline, “my sister is locked in her room and will not answer, time is passing, and it is my wedding day. What is there absent from the receipt (recipe) for becoming overwrought?”

Her voice carried and Julius arrived, everything about him in the interrogative. Between them, Caroline and Selina both explained, the latter more coherently, what was amiss, while the former was rather reproachful of her mother for being so supine, and the Duchess finally also admitted that she had sent to the stables and that Justina had not been seen there either.

“Nor does she lock up her when she goes out,” added Selina. “No-one does.”

Julius was a strong young man, whose labours in the stables some few years had served him as well as they had his mysteriously unresponsive sister. So he obliged his older sister, but told them all that if they were wrong, Justina would kill him. He did not use his shoulder, instead he sent for a footman to fetch a hammer and chisel, tools readily available in the coach-house. In fact there were also some such below in the serving offices, and so the man returned quickly with them. All he had to do was drive the chisel into the lock plate and plant a few, well-placed blows upon the head of the implement, which he held firmly. That soon ensured that the room was accessible to them. In they rushed to find the room was in compleat disorder. There had been a veritable eruption of bedclothes, two chairs were overturned, the brass candlestick that was by Justina’s sheveret was at the foot of the bed, the table had been pushed out of its place, and the door to the dressing room was wide open. When they went to it, and leaned in, calling Justina’s name, no-one answered because no-one was there. Then Caroline pointed to a chair and uttered a cry.

“Why, it is gone!” she exclaimed. “Last night Justina laid out her bridesmaid’s clothes with the petticoats spread on the chair, the gown on her tailor’s dummy and the chemise laid lightly over it. The stomacher was – here,” she added, pointing to the clear surface of the table top, “and all her hair ornaments too. All are gone; even the shoes, which she took out of

their box and placed carefully before the chair, so that she could sit down and buckle them on. Her hoop she stood up in that corner; it is missing. Unless she has put all back into the closet all has been removed.”

The Duchess duly peered into the wardrobe; the attire for the wedding was no-where to be seen. Just to be sure, Selina opened the door to the privy: all they saw were the close stool, the jakes-sack that was filled with carefully chosen perfumed herbs, papers and a jug. Embarrassed and blushing, Julius shut the door and hauled Selina away therefrom, but noise nigh, distracted them, for Honoria and Devenish had arrived, the former aghast.

“What has been happening here?” called out the former and immediately began to pick up a fallen chair.

Caroline retraced her steps and physically moved her sister away.

“No!” she cried. “Let everything remain as it was. Devenish, get over here. Honoria, don’t touch anything.”

Languidly Devenish wandered towards them and Julius raised his eyes to the ceiling.

“Don’t hurry, Hopkins,” he mocked, whereupon Caroline went up to her eldest brother, took him roughly aside, whispered swiftly in his ear, and all but pushed him away. The Marquis duly went to Honoria’s side and took her by the elbow.

“Come along, Honoria, there has been an incident, so let us be off,” he proposed. “Let them see to it: too many cooks spoil the broth.”

“I want to know what is happening,” demanded Honoria.

“When we find out, we will tell you,” called Caroline but Honoria talked over her.

“Has Justina had a brain storm?” she wondered to Devenish.

Her words made everyone exchange glances, and Selina, who had followed them into the bedroom and no further, went to open a window, while outside, in the passage, Honoria was threatening to tell her father about all this. All at once a terrible thought occurred to Caroline who went to join her youngest sibling and leaned out, but there was no body lying crushed and crumpled on the garden path below.

“Thank God,” she breathed.

“No-one commits suicide and shuts the windows behind them,” laughed Selina.

“And Justina put up a devil of a fight. Why did we not hear anything?” marvelled Julius. “Why did she not scream for help?”

At that, Selina went closely to inspect the candlestick.

“If she hit someone with it, his skin and blood will be on the edge of the base,” she gloated. “I hope she hit them hard.”

“She did,” intoned Julius, for there were dried flakes and hair and blood stuck to the metal, “for all the good it served her.”

“Why did they take her bridesmaids’ dress?” cried the Duchess, totally confused and about to weep.

“You are assuming that she was attacked and did not run off,” announced Honoria, who had reappeared on the scene.

“Her costume would not have been conducive to flight,” snapped Julius. “Justina is a practical girl, and how do you explain the state of disorder in this room?”

“To make it look like an abduction,” asserted Honoria. “After all, who’d want to abduct Justina?”

There was another exchange of glances, and the Duchess and Caroline simultaneously cried out one name in unison.

“Chatteris!” they exclaimed.

“His men,” Julius corrected. “There were many of them.”

“Well, if she hit one on the head, there would have to be many of them for to take her out, for he’d ha’ been good for nought,” quoth Selina. “Why did they take the wedding clothing? Perhaps they took something else. Should we go through her things?”

“Whether this is an abduction or Justina has run away and cleverly staged a scent to look like an abduction, one thing is clear: you cannot wed today, Carrie,” smirked Honoria.

“Would Justina do this to delay the wedding or somehow prevent it?” fretted the Duchess. “Why?”

Caroline, who knew the answer, was half-ready to put the blame upon the missing girl.

“Mother, first of all, pray send a man for to fetch the Duke of Irvin,” she suggested. “My head to a turnip he shall not come but send for him all the same.”

“No!” refused her useful parent. “We don’t want him meddling in this; ’tis too – too personal. He’ll tell his sisters and they will tell all the other guests.”

“Then don’t tell him why you want him,” suggested Honoria.

“If he does come, he’ll find out why in any wise,” snorted Julius.

“Talk, talk, talk! *Do* something,” insisted Selina. “I’m going into the dressing room.”

“Send for him, mamma,” coaxed Caroline. “Ten to one he shan’t come.”

Selina had already gone off to rummage so the Duchess set off to summon a footman.

“When our messenger returns from Sir Robert’s, let him come to us directly to report, and if Irvin is with him, I must speak to him first and privily; no-one else should see him before I do, and I shall await him here in the same chair where Justina laid out her wedding petticoat.”

So saying she followed Selina, now in the closet, to seat herself accordingly. Everyone else egressed and shut the doors, but Julius stopped the Duchess from entrusting the matter to a servant and rode for Irvin himself. That left her grace free to wonder aloud why Justina had chosen today to run away, for it was not as if she was being forced to wed Irvin, so it had to be Chatteris, but Selina was finding it too sad to fiddle about among her sister’s effects and so she petulantly asked Caroline to help her. The Duchess returned to running the house and seeing to the guests, as if nothing had happened, and Caroline and Selina went through all Justina’s effects, clothes, books, juvenilia and what passed for valuables. They were still engaged in this painstaking task, which shewed that some underclothing and her best stays were missing too, when they heard Julius’s voice, and the sound of a door opening.

“Carrie,” called her brother from the bedroom. “Irvin.”

Thereupon, Caroline quitted the dressing room and went to confront the Duke, who was in riding dress.

“My apologies for not coming any the quicker: I was in the process of attiring myself differently, and had to undo all that, madam,” quoth he.

“That is of no consequence, sir, for the essential feature is that you are here,” she said, and Selina came to listen, exchanging obeisances with her future brother-in-law, whom she still thought handsome if cadaverous.

“Be not offended at my confession that I understand not at all what is amiss and why I

am here,” he said.

“Julius, pray, shut the door behind you,” directed the lady. “Do you see the state in which is this room?”

“A shambles, if I may say so, and it hardly escapes one’s notice,” he acknowledged.

“Has your grace any ideas on how it might have become so?” she asked.

The Duke raised a suspicious eyebrow and picked his way about the disorder to lean into the dressing room.

“Nothing much has capsized in there,” said Caroline, joining him, “except that the shoes and clothes she was to wear for the wedding are also missing.”

“What else?” probed the Duke.

“The bed-shift in which she retired and her best stays and bits, *you* know,” included Selina, with a little shrug.

The Duke asked about Justina’s riding habits and horse, but all were accounted for, and Julius owned that he had even verified that before he set out. With a nod, his grace returned to the bedroom, which the Duchess entered now, with her eldest son. She asked her future son-in-law what he could make of this spectacle and of her daughter’s disappearance, and confirmed that meanwhile, she had had the attics and cellars searched in case Justina was hiding, out of some unreasonable fear of attending the wedding.

“I have no doubt that she is not in the castle, madam,” affirmed he.

“Has your grace any inkling of where she may be?” tried Lady Caroline.

“Not exactly,” he answered, “but I could answer you better if any of you could recall sounds such as put this room in such a pretty state, and when these sounds occurred.”

Somewhat shamefast, they all admitted to having heard nothing.

“And the guests?” he probed.

“We’d rather not ask them,” said Julius.

“When was Lady Justina’s absence discovered?” the Duke inquired.

“A little upwards of an hour ago,” admitted Caroline. “Her door was locked, sir, and had to be broken open. The key has been removed, so I presume that –,”

“It was locked from the outside to delay discovery,” he completed. “Were any windows open?”

“No, just one, a chink, for air overnight, according to her custom, and if you look, it is as it would have been when she arranged it,” said Caroline. “I had a terrible thought and leaned out to see if the terraces were clear, but that was not the window I used.”

“No-one jumps from closed windows or through chinks as small as that one,” appeased his grace. “She was taken out through the door, but it was locked and we know why. She –,”

“You say she was taken, sir: abducted in other words?”

“This room shews it, Lady Caroline.”

“She did this not herself, think you?”

“Why should she?” he challenged, almost coldly.

Selina picked up the candlestick.

“And while she was destroying her room, she beat in her own head with this?” she postulated.

The Duke smiled at her and she beamed in delight.

“Lady Caroline,” he said, “you know your sister: her character is too strong for her to resort to such subterfuge.”

“Among the alternatives we raised was Chatteris, or his men,” said the Duchess.

“I wondered the same, your grace,” he replied.

“In a house teeming with people?” objected Devenish. “How could they just come and take Justina from her bed? They’d ha’ been discovered!”

“A house teeming with people and all their servants whom no-one recognises is easily infiltrated by intruders with unfamiliar faces,” declared Irvin. “They doubtless came in bold as brass with someone’s baggage and were parading about in plain sight, unsuspected by all.”

Caroline seemed remorseful and ashamed of herself.

“What about the gown?” wondered Selina.

“The gown was destined to be worn to a wedding, was it not? Well, by a cruel irony, it probably will be,” he remarked, pensive but bitter.

“Ohh, great Heaven, her own!” gasped Caroline.

“Precisely, and she must be fetched away at once,” emphasised the Duke, “for even if she has gone through a ceremony, she must be took from him. No marriage should stand against a successfully proven plea of duress and if it is not consummated, it will be voidable which will make the Ecclesiastical Courts less unwilling to annul it. Now, you asked whether I knew where she was. Well, in my opinion, she is, in all likelihood, in a vehicle heading north for the Border.”

“Gretna Green! She may be wed there without her parents’ consent,” comprehended the Duchess, aghast. “Ohh, we must send after her at once: I had better tell your father, Caroline. Julius, Devenish, make ready to travel.”

“To travel where?” interposed Irvin.

“They must find her,” asserted the Duchess.

“Where?” shot the Duke surprisingly.

“To Gretna and onward!” hailed Julius.

“If she is not at Gretna, what then?” challenged Irvin.

There was a perplexed silence.

“She may not even be at Gretna. She may never even go there,” pursued he.

“Sir, you said –,” commenced Caroline but he cut her short.

“Saving your favour, madam, I said that she was making for the Border perforce,” he specified. “Chatteris, my lady, has lands in Lanarkshire, and I would suspect that she shall be dragged there, for the livings thereabout are all in his pocket, if not necessarily in his gift, notwithstanding that the Scotch Kirk affects less patronage as to the appointment of its moderators. That means, any local pastor will wed them without question if Chatteris orders it; and, as Scotch law presumes the existence of a bond of marriage between any man and women, neither being already wed, who lie and live with each other, the sooner he installs her on his ground under the protection of his henchmen, the better it will be for him to have his way. At Gretna, however, he will leave witnesses behind who would report news of his passage to any pursuing party. Now tell me, pray, Duchess, if Lady Justina has been taken to Chatteris’s northern territories, how will your good sons free her?”

“We’ll challenge him,” hailed Julius.

“He’ll split your gizzard at the first jump, if he even lets you near him,” snorted Irvin,

“nor know you a jot about his wiles and guile.”

“Well, you cannot go, sir,” piped up Lord Devenish, “for you are to be married today.”

“Would you really delay the pursuit of Chatteris until after I am wedded, pray?”

countered his grace suavely.

“No, no!” interpolated Caroline, placing her hands upon his arms. “Irvin, go you and bring Justina home safely. I have already said; there can be no wedding if Justina is away, being abducted.”

As she spoke, she nodded and patted him gently.

“Carrie,” interposed Julius, “we –,”

“No, Julius, I will say it a third time: there will be no wedding today. Duke, do whatever you must,” said she, firm but benign.

“My dear Lady Caroline,” quoth the Duke of Irvin warmly, and possessing himself of her hand, raised it to his lips.

As he did so, he looked over it into her eyes, his own twinkling brightly, whereat she deflected her gaze, endeavouring but failing to suppress a knowing, meaningful smile.

“I believe that I had better also wait briefly on the Duke before I go,” he added, addressing the Duchess of Hearne, who nodded, and leaning on Devenish’s arm, led him out.

“So what are we to do with all the guests?” wondered her son.

“They may wait until this *imbroglio* is sorted out,” rasped her grace, and calmly escorted the visitor into her husband’s private rooms, at which intrusion he was caught without his breeches on, but pulling on his stockings nevertheless.

“Eh? Eh? What’s all this?” he growled at his wife. “What think you that you’re – Ah, Irvin, my dear fellow, pray excuse me! They never told me that you were come: bring us some port, and hurry,” he snapped at the Duchess. “Aye, Irvin, pray be seated. Forgive my appearance: I ha’ been in the saddle since six o’ clock this morn and am only just returned. ’Tis a hard life, the country life; nothing to do but work, work and work. Where’s that wine? Go, go bring it.”

“No time for indulgence, sir,” cut in Irvin sharply. “Pray cease your fidgeting and attend to me. There is to be no wedding today; something dreadful has happened for despite all precautions, Lady Justina has been carried away by Chatteris’s men.”

“O, that’s very, very serious,” declared the old Duke, not really very interested, “the stupid little slut, she must ha’ wandered out on one of my horses. Serves her right for –,”

“She was snatched from her very chamber last night,” snarled Irvin. “Duke, I really would appreciate it if you were to cease calling her a slut. I am most marked by it. My judgment guides me to assume that she is being taken to Scotland, where Chatteris has land and where the marriage laws favour him. As you *no doubt* realise, it is imperative that I go and fetch her therefrom. Your sons have offered, but it will be a most uneven match, for they know nought of his ways and in any wise, he is my enemy, not theirs, so it is entirely my responsibility.”

“No, no, they are useless, they have no experience, they have no more chance than a cat in hell without claws. Now were I younger –,”

“I am sure you would have acquitted yourself faultlessly, but I cannot spend time discussing what might have been –,”

“Would that I had a son like you, Irvin, not those bonny clabber (sour buttermilk) boys

– but no matter, after a small formality, today my son you will be after all, or as good as.”

“Not today: if you were listening, I said earlier, there would be no wedding today,” reminded Irvin trenchantly.

“What that?” thundered Hearne suddenly. “NO WEDDING? HOW NOW?”

“Justina has been –,” recommenced the Duchess, but as she counted for nothing, he talked over her.

“Yes, yes, we can all go look for that nuisance of a child when the wedding is over. She has been a thorn in my side since the day she was born and I had such hopes for her,” growled his older grace.

“I am wasting too much time,” announced Irvin at last. “Good day, sir,” he concluded, and turning on his heel, made for the door.

“I need to talk,” called the older Duke. “Can’t you leave in the afternoon? What do a few hours matter?”

“Everything between saving her and damning us all,” spat the younger one. “Your attitude to the whole business is nauseating. I fear I would value a daughter of mine more than a wedding ceremony. Her honour and mine are fearsomely at stake. I did not come to seek consent or blessing but to inform of my departure, which is now, and as my progress will be long, I cannot wed Lady Caroline in the immediate future.”

“Do you mean to say that I have to feed all these scavenging vultures until you return?” exploded the old Duke.

“They are your relatives,” reminded his wife sourly.

“What of my status, my prestige? Both will be ruined if the wedding is delayed. What am I to tell everyone, including the neighbours? That the bridegroom is run off to Itchland (Scotland) to seek a daughter of mine who is not even in the running? Put your priorities in order, Irvin; you are not thinking like a father with a reputation at stake.”

“No, I am thinking of a girl in the hands of a mortal enemy who will turn her against her will into a tool against us all,” hissed the Duke of Irvin. “Now, finally, God speed.”

“Go after the wedding, there will be more time, and you can settle things according to the pace you set,” figuratively clung the other.

“The pace is not mine to set at the moment, and you cannot interfere with it,” said Irvin, on the threshold.

“Don’t dare you to tell me what to do, you young –,” bellowed Hearne, about to lose his temper were it not for his wife who interpolated with one word.

“Mortgage!” she sang.

“Bah,” spat the Duke of Irvin, and turned to go.

“Take Caroline with you,” called the other. “She will take care of Justina, so marry, consummate the marriage and then go as a wedded pair. It will be your first duty together as man and wife –,”

Irvin responded by storming off, the slings of his sword sheath making enough of a ringing noise, as his boots trod a firm measure to the tune of a precipitate departure. As he emerged he saw Caroline on the way to her own chambers and requested her to try and reason with her father after he had gone for that parent was in a state of imperviousness as far as common sense was concerned.

“Never mind him,” she soothed. “Go along with you, Irvin, and make good speed, for

we need to have our Justina back safe and sound and only you can accomplish that feat. Be careful of yourself, sir.”

“I shall, and may God bless your la’ship,” he replied, running down the stairs already.

Caroline watched from the landing as he traversed the hall and hastened out.

Meanwhile her father was come forth from his room and was roaring obscenities after such a manner as damned him in her eyes and caused her to understand why Justina hated to be near him, but more than that, he lowered himself before his immediate family, and debased his precious status and prestige in the eyes of his guests who kept out of sight, but ensured that they heard all he said. In vain did his wife and heir try to calm him, and his younger children bowed their heads in shame until he had finished with making his unwholesome display. Then out came Caroline.

“Let us hold the wedding breakfast in any wise,” she suggested. “We have all the guests, the tables are laid, the ragouts are stewing and the geese a-roasting, while doubtless everyone is too far dressed for the event to want to change back into drab duds now, so as to not disappoint them all, let us have a fête and forget that it is to do with a wedding.”

“What happens when the wedding actually takes place?” asked Julius, bewildered.

“Then the wedding will doubtless be the quietest one ever staged,” she chuckled, tripping gaily off to her chamber.

“What shall you do?” demanded Honoria, almost in tears.

“I am going to don my golden gown,” sang Caroline, “so go you and make yourself pretty. Who knows, Ray Annesley may make you an offer and there will be a wedding after all,” she added, whereupon Honoria turned all coy.

“What unnatural daughters you have produced,” grumbled the Duke of Hearne to his Duchess. “Why could you not have only had sons?”

“And you’d have found careers for all of the penniless ones who were due to inherit nothing,” taunted Selina.

“Nonsense! This child grows more insolent by the hour. ’Tis the bad influence of that pestilential Justina,” the father complained.

“A fine way to thank a daughter treated like a stableyard drudge,” dared Julius.

TWENTY-THREE

As soon as he egressed from Great Hearne Castle, the Duke of Irvin mounted his horse and rode post haste overland to his temporary abode at Sir Robert Orre's, where indeed, he began to make such arrangements as compleatly baffled his hosts and the other guests, including persons from the Duke's own family, instead of retiring to his apartment to resume his interrupted preparations as a bridegroom. That he should order out his berline with all its horses and attendants, was nothing remarkable for a man about to wed, but there were no garlands or feathers or any decoration whatsoever upon the entire equipage and that was what confused the company, as subsequently did the Duke's race to make his valet pack some necessaries and send forth for the hire of relay teams, before rushing below in person to his hostess's kitchens to chuse his needs for his cellaret as both squire and squiress followed him everywhere as far as they could, anxiously squawking questions, so that he managed to disclose that Hearne's penultimate offspring was missing. It dismayed him to hear them call her a rigsby and say that she was doubtless hiding to vex them all and would appear at the church gate all dressed demanding where they all been, so he raspingly owned that he believed Lord Chatteris had her and that she was to be rescued from him as soon as possible, whereat they shrank back somewhat chastened. Accompanied by his sisters and their families at least, the hosts watched as the vehicle was loaded and the amount of armament placed in the carriage cabin provoked no mean degree of alarm, for all of them begged him not to become involved in a blood bath. As he meant to recover Lady Justina alive and well, he assured them on that score.

For all his punctiliousness, the Duke wasted very little time over all his multifarious preparations, which were executed with admirable efficiency and speed; thus, very soon, his black berline, with him in it, pulled out from before the manor and bowled away as fast as the drive would allow, piloted, flanked and followed by its protective escort, leaving his *bemused* and spiritually exhausted host to explain delicate matters to other, *bemused* guests. At first the Duke's progress was painfully slow for his urgent purposes, for the network of country roads hereabouts were mere dirt tracks, whereof the shape of the surface altered every time it rained, and it was not until he reached the highway, mercifully in the care not of whatever local parish it passed through, but a Turnpike Trust, that he could order his coachman to hasten. Before them lay a long journey, which could be covered with comparative ease and in good time on a firm thoroughfare and in favourable weather, but some hours had been lost meandering about the rural lanes, and not the full extent of the route northward had been turnpiked, for it was a private affair conducted by a trust set up by factors and merchants, who charged a nominal and necessary fee for road users. The Duke preferred, this time, to decide not to be bound by daylight hours, even if the evening twilight was long, it being his intention to risk his life and travel through the night. This he made his servants understand, and offered an extra silver half-crown to his outriders, for these were exceptional circumstances.

Thus, just as darkness began to make visibility difficult the Duke stopped to change horses, and the second coachman took the reins, his superior settling down under a horse blanket to sleep in his seat. Of the twelve outriders, four of them strapped themselves down to the roof of the vehicle to receive three hours sleep, their armament at their sides, at the end of which period they would be replaced by four others and so on as stipulated, until morning. Those who kept riding on carried lighted brands, even if every coach lanthorn was lit, and the

postillions each had a lamp at the end of a pole, so that the whole equipage proceeded in a blaze of light, an easy target for any criminal, but even such folk had enough intelligence, whether or not working singly or in partnership with others, to try and assault so well accoutred and heavily guarded a conveyance. From time to time the whole halted before an inn or a posting-house, with such a clamour of wheels, horse hooves and whinnying, so that apart from gaining fresh horses, they harvested a mouthful of abuse launched from upper windows, but those with whom he treated were respectful, especially after they espied the ducal coronet on the panels, for the nobility usually signified money and the Englishman, for all his suppose insolence, whether towards foreigners – who could include folk from the next county – was only too pleased to grovel to a titled personage. Not that they ever saw him unless he needed to use their privy, because he did not emerge even to stretch his legs, and althô he lay sprawled rather than sat upon the seat, he did not sleep, for he was too worried; indeed the men strapped to his roof were better rested than was he. After all, at the journey's end, they had warm beds in a hostelry to look forward to, whereas he had the prospect of finding his poor Justina, he knew not in what state: abused, shamed, sullied and misused, all to satisfy the wanton malice of an enemy.

Notwithstanding the danger of travel in the darkness or the grunts and groans of its personnel, the entire equipage survived the night with comparative ease and drove on into the day. A little while after breakfast, they crossed the grim landscapes of the far north, known for its execrable roads, until they reached the Scotch border, their progress already slackened and remaining so owing to a recent spell of bad weather which further despoiled the apology for a highway. All the same, after midday, his grace could afford to breathe a sigh of relief, for by nightfall, they would be in the vicinity of Lord Chatteris's fine estate and he hoped to arrive at the laird's door that same night, no matter how late it was. It was Irvin's intention to take up residence in an inn outside Chatteris territory so as to be beholden to him for nothing, and that included staying in the premises of a business run by a tenant of his. Fortunately nothing happened to spoil this plan, and here and there, the journey gained speed, for the parish through which they ran was well-appurtenanced and well-run, so that patches of road which passed through it were properly maintained, but being Scotland, that was not necessarily a rule, for in some cases, the verger and wardens hauled out everyone who was on parish relief and made them work on all the paths and tracks, especially the principal ones, irrespective of age and infirmity, for they had to earn their gratuity, as in this land, nothing was free: at one stage, in the late twilight, the ducal equipage passed such a team of grannums and grandpas and women with children, all trudging home carrying tools for such work, even the youngest ones who could walk. This was Scotland, after all, where those who paid out parish rates to the indigent demanded their money's worth.

So in the darkness, the Duke finally arrived in the hamlet of Sandnock, which was very much off the beaten track except that the track had just been beaten into fine shape by doubtless such a work gang. There was an inn, and one of his own servants had reached it in advance, so that he was expected. A dish of roast grouse was being readied, and the best room in the house was retained, even if the Duke had the mattress on the bed sprinkled with herbs to deter bed-bugs and bags of dried petals hung up above him, while only his sheets and blankets, taken from his trunk, were put on his bed. He had a valet to see that all these domestic matters were in order, and off he went to the moderator's house near the church, to

seek whom he was told was the Reverend Hamish MacGregor. The said party was found to be absent, dispatching the soul of a dying body heavenward, he hoped, and so his grace was welcomed by Mistress Reverend, who proved to be one of two types in this land as far as its women were concerned. The first were mean with words, suspicious of everyone and all things, wary of all they knew not, which was wise but at the extent whereto they carried it, rather formidable, extremely good Christians in a way that brought obloquy upon the religion and its followers, and instantly recognisable by a nastiness in their faces. The second were voluble and talkative, extremely nosey but if confronted by the skilful, liable to answer the very questions they had asked, not really mischievous but interested by outsiders for what they could learn or gain, and actually quite good fun, apart from being genuinely friendly and helpful. The being whom the Duke faced turned out to belong to the latter variety and on finding herself visited by an English peer of the highest degree, was only too pleased to let him in, in order to wait for the spouse to return. She would have liked to send out after the latter, but Heaven knew how long Gamekeeper Sandie was going to take to die, not that her husband was going to see him off, she hoped. Sandie had not been a good man during his life and knew not the meaning of Christian charity, so her husband was going to have to pronounce a condemnation at his burial, like when he had buried Harlot Mhairi, for the custom was for the moderator to chant the words ‘yer gang tae heel’, or ‘you’re going to hell’, which her Hamish disrelished somewhat as most unchristian, but as that was what his holy congregation expected, he had to do it and please them. The Duke of Irvin was not concerned with the burials of nasty old Sandie or poor Harlot Mhairi; all he needed to know was if the Earl of Chatteris was in residence.

Lord Chatteris’s estate was not in MacGregor’s parish, and this living was not in Chatteris’s control, the Duke knew that much about his enemy, as was the least he could do. What he expected was that the lady would ask him why: he needed an answer ready, which was that he had business with his lordship and had been told to execute it here, but was keen to know that he was not wasting his time; the Scotch were a canny crew. Instead she aerily announced that Lord Chatteris had arrived during this morning itself, and that the gossips said there was a girl secreted in his home awaiting him. Some even swore that she had arrived in the dead of the previous night and was awaiting his pleasure. That he was not popular here was clear, for Chatteris was not a Scotchman, even from the Lowlands, as were these, and this estate had been passed to him in the maternal line through a grandmother who was a Wallace. This shire was dominated by the Douglas and the Wallace, but stood at a crossroads of many clans so there were names in plenty and a variety of them, albeit that the Gregorach, like the MacNab, hailed from north of Loch Tay, close to Campbell country, and the latter even once obtained a Privy Council decree giving them permission to wipe out both clans so as to be able to expand into their lands. Fortunately the Civil War came along and that put pay to hellish Campbell ambition. The Duke of Irvin revealed that he knew about this, and Madam Reverend was in transports of joy: she was a Graham, which meant that she was hailed from the border the Scotch had imposed between the Highlands and the Lowlands, so his grace let her talk about that to please her awhile, but as soon as she paused to look out of her windows because she thought she heard her husband’s horse, he asked from whom there was word that Chatteris had brought a girl to his home, for as a duke of the oldest lineage, he was loth to be in a house serving as a love-nest for misguided deeds, lest his own good name were

compromised. The excellent lady replied that the purveyor of these intelligences was the very mother of the servant-woman deputed to look after the girl in question. In fact she was about to launch into a gossip's discharge of exaggerated intelligences when the Duke wondered if, apart from funerals, there had been any weddings celebrated lately in the district involving notables. Indeed there had not been a wedding in these countries since last winter involving anybody, and that too only because there was a bairn concerned, but in the next parish and not here. That pleased his grace: evidently parish boundaries in this district did not prevent news from becoming common ken.

That was also when the Duke was delighted to find that he had accidentally stumbled upon the right person and the right place, for she told him that in the neighbouring parish, the incumbent was ill and his curate gone to administer to another neighbouring church, so her spouse had to look after both services, making each one short, and reading them both out one after the other on Sunday morning, which meant that his own parishioners had to come early and the neighbours were late. Luckily the Kirk had no time for papist decorations like hymns and other wastage of time so after a psalm, a sermon and the Lord's Prayer, 'a short horse was soon carried' or a little business was soon dispatched. By now too much time had passed and in any wise, the Duke had another task to accomplish, for Gamekeeper Sandie was a while a-dying. He took leave and promised to return the next morning, early, for he had a matter of great importance to discuss with the absent moderator. He noted too, that while she had been generous with words, Mistress MacGregor had not offered him anything to drink, but there was roast grouse waiting at the inn. After feasting, which took no longer than five and twenty minutes, he called for a horse, a mounted and armed outrider, and disappeared into the darkness, scouting over Chatteris's estate. On the way, he toyed with the idea of going to visit the lumpish curate despite the hour but decided that the first thing the fellow would do was inform Chatteris about a tall man in black who asked ugly questions. Creeping as far as the park and hiding therein, they could see that the laird's castle was inhabited and that there were lights within, even at the upper levels. As he imagined the trials that Justina must have been undergoing, a knotted feeling tied itself in his breast, as if a ligature was being made of his very heart. For the first time since his early childhood, on falling down and hurting himself and being called a namby-pamby by his own unsympathetic mother, he felt tears of misery and fright prick at his eyes. Of course, as he had swallowed them down then for fear of having his wet cheeks smacked, he swallowed them down now, but he also recalled the trench and how his wounds had hurt and his face was wet with sweat and tears of pain which he did not even feel emerge, but the outwardly churlish Justina had wiped his face, even if it was with his own kerchief.

The laird's castle was a house, in fact, but none too large, albeit greater than a hunting lodge and conceived and built to impress, for it had the black shape, in the night light, of a grand edifice, and was surrounded by labyrinthine gardens laid out with a multitude of hedges and walks. The extensive park was ranged about this inner kernel, and its southern edges reached a sprawling wood. Beyond this had the Duke and his escort ventured, as could see, with the naked eye, that a man prowled about the parkland, armed as if preparing to repel any invader. It occurred to his grace that he was one of several, each allotted a perimeter in which to patrol, but in the ducal opinion, he presented the least hazard, for the darkness would help them slip past him, and the house with its lights ahead provide them with a destination

whereto they could direct themselves. Providently the Duke had a telescopic spyglass, and he decided to use it, for if there were men in the park there would be men in the garden and even at the doors of the house. The glass also assisted in revealing entrances not obscured by high hedges put in the way by perspective, and such a one was duly located and noted, an entry for servants or tradesfolk, where the save-alls, or poor children, came to take the leftovers away after meals, and his grace shewed it to his man, who added the observation that someone passed and re-passed outside of it. That was a problem, for if they could evade the guards in park and garden alike, the human watchdog at the door had to be tackled and silenced very swiftly before he could give the alarm. For that was useful the stock of a heavy pistol.

Now the Duke had to decide how to proceed. After midnight and when the lights were out, they could break the lock, saw through the bar inside the door unless it was of metal, and reconnoitre the house, with which his grace was not familiar. This intrusion did Irvin reserve for himself alone, leaving his man outside the house, with instructions to return through the park and wait on the edge of the wood with the horses for an hour, but if his master had not arrived by then, whether alone or accompanied, that meant he was caught, and so help was to be fetched, not just in the form of all available hands, armed and mounted, but with the law and a writ of Habeas Corpus, or whatever passed for it in these strange climes, about which the Reverend MacGregor would know and, hopefully direct them how to obtain. The man, who rather savoured the notion of entering upon the Earl or any Earl with an official writ, suggested that perhaps they went first and obtained it, but the Duke said that with a writ, the Earl would at once be alerted to his presence, which meant that as soon as he left the house with his prize and the accompanying constables departed because their work was done, Chatteris's men would waylay him in violent and bloody fashion, and if they both survived their capture, he and Justina would be incarcerated or even removed, so that the effect of the writ done away with. Yet if she were to be stolen away from the house, her absence would possibly not be discovered for some hours, hopefully too late for the Earl to do much about it and at least permitting the Duke a head start. A foolhardy enterprise in the opinion of some perhaps, and fraught with risk, it was nevertheless the only one available to Irvin at once, as he saw the situation, for he was impatient to have his Justina out of that house and back where he could ensure his own peace of mind by ensuring that she was all right. In a state of accentuated anxiety and extreme bitterness, the Duke rode back to the inn, where he instructed his men, and then, returned to the moderator's house, where he was given a gruff reception, but at least a listening ear. He did not spend long here, and soon he was on his adventure back over Chatteris's grounds, to the park. As he rode along, he wondered in angry distress where Justina was behind those windows and what the Earl was doing or had already done to her.

In fact, Justina was lying *on* a bed dressed in her bed-shift, and a most exquisite pink night gown, with quilted cuffs and hems, made of Lyons silk and stitched up by French dressmakers and seamstresses, part of a small collection of garments left here to await her and stored in the wardrobe of her adjacent dressing room, which apartments were those traditionally set aside for the Countess of Chatteris, who had once owned this charming pink creation, not that she had much chance for the use of it. Despite her condition in dishabilly, Justina seemed well and alert, reading from a book, which she hurriedly put down and assumed a dull, pained mien, when she heard footsteps approach her room. The doors opened

and the Earl of Chatteris marched in briskly, his smile portraying an excess of satisfaction.

“Do you never knock?” groaned Justina in greeting.

“Knocking is for the Countess, when you become one,” he smirked, “this evening.”

Justina rose up on one elbow, and frowned with worry.

“This evening?” she echoed.

“The verisame,” he chuckled and it seemed a little like clucking.

“You sound like a bloody hen,” she scoffed.

The Earl shook his head and sat on the edge of her bed.

“Learn your lesson: antagonism only seals your fate and puts pay to any hopes you have of future happiness,” he sniggered. “I know that you can be reasonable, so why do you comport yourself like an immature little slut of a hussy?”

“I was reasonable until the day you began to call me by names that I am not, the use of which reflects the true nature of your character,” she sighed, lying back. “I admit that I was responsible for a time thereafter but patience wears thin finally.”

The Earl reached out and touched her belly whereat she recoiled.

“Does it still hurt?” he asked.

“In spasms, but more so if you press on it, as you do now,” she retorted.

“Are you sure these are natural pains and not those resultant upon impregnation, preceding a casting of one’s calf (miscarriage)?” he demanded.

“My condition is proof that I am not with child!” she rasped.

“Pray God you soon will be!” he blurted out. “How long does this accursed condition last?”

“I go for seven clear days even if the flow diminishes by the end,” she answered. “Do I have to talk of this before you?”

“Your maid alleges that you have not thrown out a single soiled lump of floss all day,” spat he. “Little dissembling liar, there is nothing wrong with you!”

“Much know you about the captain when he is at home (menstruation proceeds) for being wed as often as Henry VIII,” she mocked. “With some girls, the bleeding does not accompany the first pains but it is those pains that set in motion the said bleeding, and then the pains and the bleeding continue together and lessen together. With the sort of torture my insides are suffering, I could begin bleeding any minute now, and I have a great bundle of floss on.”

“Exactly where I would like to be,” he gloated.

“You lecher,” she recoiled.

“Crippled as you are allegedly with agonies, you can still read a book?”

“Desultorily, and one reads with one’s eyes and one’s brain-pan, not with one’s belly and its outlet,” she mocked.

“’Tis a ploy to keep me from you,” he accused.

“Do you want to risk it and enter me, thus provoking a haemorrhage and end up covered in clots and floods of blood, all over your belly and legs and right up your bum?” she challenged. “Go on, try it. Your very pintle (penis) could provoke a blood rush if you punch (deflower) me and I am not responsible for what will happen if you pound away in a close hug (intercourse).”

“Do not defy me, Justina: a wife respects her husband.”

“Why do older men tyrannise over their young wives?”

“I am merely more mature than you would have imagined, and would do you greater justice than a looby, with a hand like a foot, who is your age.”

“Very well, you are the demi-god of virility and an amorous athlete, and were there nugging at the Pythian Games you’d ha’ won laurels, and Pindar would ha’ writ odes about it, but for the present, would you pray leave me to rest?”

“Mature men spoil their young wives, Justina. Cease playing the jack and I will spoil you just as much as you could desire.”

“I cannot wait,” she snorted. “Are we really getting married tonight, or do you speak so, just to coerce me?”

“I speak soothe, but I am having a small *contretemps* where the rector is concerned,” he admitted. “Mine is ill, and I have to call in the man from the neighbouring parish to officiate, but he is out and his gadabout (gossip) wife is not one I would leave such a message with. He’s a dour blackguard himself: my fellow is just the right sort.”

“Is he allowed to do this? You don’t belong to his parish,” she objected.

“He will see us living in the same house, and that is enough for Scotch law to make his conduct of the ceremony valid,” said the Earl. “Were it not for your confounded fluxes, I’d also have fulfilled the other condition, that is, to have lain with you.”

“Fluxes,” she repeated. “What on earth did Newton have on his mind when he named what Leibnitz called ‘Calculus’ by the term ‘Fluxions’?”

“Where did you learn about Calculus and Fluxions?” he cried, amazed.

“I saw a diagram of a hyperbola in the library and it explained that the calculation from one point on it to the adjacent point is governed by Fluxions. I had to look at the spine of the book to ensure that I was not consulting Vesalius (Italian anatomist) by mistake. Why is the neighbouring rector a blackguard?”

The Earl rose from the bed.

“He is likely to berate you, and tell you to reconsider your position for when you are two-and-seventy and I am still younger by three-and-thirty years?” she guessed.

“You have to rise and dress,” he growled. “You cannot be married off in a bed gown.”

“So I divined right about the dour blackguard,” she teased. “You fear he will refuse.”

“He cannot. I have the papers in order.”

“You know that this marriage can be invalidated by a plea of duress, do not you?”

“Not after I have lain with you, my girl. What, would you like that your shame be paraded before the whole world?”

“You cannot lie with me when I am in this state,” she snapped.

“I am going to find out about the veracity of this alleged state,” he carped. “A woman in labour cannot lie there and brazenly argufy. You can despise spasms which are not too different from those of childbed. I have read my Fallopio (Italian anatomist).”

“Bah, Fallopio did not write about the insides of women even if some tubes are named after him,” she rejected.

“I do believe that I am about to have the last laugh,” he cackled.

Then he turned his back to depart.

“All depends on you,” he said. “’Tis the difference between torture and ecstasy, so be a good girl.”

“You treat me like a child,” she protested.

“You are a child,” he rejoined.

“That reflects very ill upon you,” she said.

“Do not go to the windows,” he forbade, opening her door in readiness to depart.

“You expect an intruder,” she chuckled.

“Indeed, but it is only to spare you the sight of him being shot down as he crosses the park,” he declared gravely and left her.

Justina heard the key turn in the lock and listened with dismay as it was removed therefrom. Outside the Earl laid it on a nearby console table and went below, knowing full well how vulnerable were keys left in their holes, but solicitous of his own convenience in not wanting to be disturbed if he were to carry it in his pocket, which he would be every time a servant went to attend her. The prisoner meanwhile pondered upon the gravity of her situation now that it was in a crucial and critical state and about to turn to her compleat disadvantage. To ward him off she had resorted to the most obvious subterfuge but he was too old to be taken in by a such ploy for long, and too vengeful to laugh at and comprehend or forgive it, facts about which she did not delude herself. Althô desperate, she despaired of intervention, for her father and brothers were no match for Chatteris, and if Irvin could be expected to come only to save himself, he was doubtless going first to wed. This probability moved her to tears, at last on this fateful day, for hitherto she had been stolid and bold althô incarcerated, but her gaoler was about to vanquish her, and so she looked deep into herself at that which she had hidden even from her own conscience, and which was the greatest cause of her distress. It was no balm to her either to be sacrificed to his will. Thus, there she lay, her eyes red with weeping, when the women of his household came to wash her a little and lay out her wedding dress and its accoutrements. They even brought her a small snack and told her that all the candles were lit in the drawing room for the ceremony, so would she be pleased to cease crying for she would make a poor bride. All that was left was for them to await the arrival of the Reverend Moderator MacGregor, and the Earl was already grumbling that he was wrong to trust a Highlander. Then not unkindly, they bid her to call them when she had eaten and was ready to dress, but departed and did not forget to lock her in, duly leaving the key on the table. Justina was now left alone to await her imminent fate.

Below, the Earl rampaged about in his library, nervous, impatient, troubled, disconcerted and annoyed, pacing with a heavy, rapid tread, looking at all the timepieces at all too frequent intervals. The rector was late in making his visit, and as every minute passed, he became later. The half-hour which the Earl may have forgiven him became an hour, and was extended by an hour and a half. A second hour fell due to end when his lordship decided to take matters into his own hands and came bursting out of the library into the hall. In a loud voice, he ordered that his carriage be fetched to the door, with two outriders bearing firebrands. In her room, Justina heard this and slid off the bed, going to her door to listen. A moment later, heavy footsteps rushed up the stairs and a nearby door slammed shut. Ere long it opened, slammed shut again and the same footfalls descended the staircase. The Earl had made ready to go out.

Avidly Justina listened as the house doors were noisily closed and the sounds of carriage wheels and horses' hooves died away. Inquisitive and disquieted, she rang her bell and when a servant came she asked the woman what was happening. Whether she knew or

not, the female affected ignorance, and there the matter ended. Despite the gravity of her circumstances Justina could not suppress a snigger of glee; that dour blackguard had just not arrived. Perhaps this was because he was not beholden to Chatteris and could reach his own independent conclusions, but then for all she knew, the Scotch were habitually late, even if two hours was rather exaggerated. Chatteris was otherwise aware, and the moderator of Sandnock was a punctilious fellow, even in minor respects. Thus when he set out to find the man he meant for his outriders' flames to be very bright and not just to light his way but also to shew his presence on the road in case the cleric was on his way. Held aloft, the lights were effective, but all the same, they did not disclose the presence of horsemen in the trees, for watching as the equipage hurtled past and towards the gates, was the Duke of Irvin.

The Duke of Irvin had just acquired some new knowledge and therefore made new plans. Contrary to his previous decision of arriving with one man who was charged to go for help if he failed, he had invaded the Earl's woods with a band of at least fifteen mounted and armed men, comprising outriders and postillions. This contingent proceeded in a body as far as the park, at the edge whereof the Duke and his companion from his earlier visit both dismounted, to set off and run the gauntlet of the prowling patrols who roamed the area between them and the house. To make their task easier and light up possible hiding places, these fellows were equipped with dark lanthorns, but if such were shuttered all the time, that would defeat the object of their efforts, but they had one disadvantage, for their light gave any intruder a clear idea of the precise position of the fellow carrying his lamp, which assisted the Duke and his accomplice much in their invasive and evasive enterprises. Thus, by staying in the darkness, hopping behind trees and even crawling about on their bellies, the Duke and his men entered the labyrinthine gardens. The problem of crossing this place was a trifle more complicated, but the hedges and the lanthorn bearers ironically assisted their efforts as long as they exercised their intelligence. It was a precarious game, and twice were they nearly sighted, so that they blessed their dark clothing, but at length, they found their way to the door they had chosen, whereupon the Duke's servant leaped on the guard and reduced him to horizontality, quite senseless, but held him in his fall so that he would not crash down and alert the others. With a nod to his master to go on, he dragged the fellow out of sight behind a shrub to tie his hands behind his back, and secure his feet together, so his grace slid up to the door itself and tried it. Despite the late hour, as there were so many servants in the grounds, those within had not yet locked it!

Stealthily, the Duke entered a darkened, chilly vestibule, paved with stone, which obliged him to lighten his tread. The smell of stale cookery pervaded the air, and muffled voices, most of them English, belonging to employees from the Earl's home in England, emanated from the servants' hall. Ahead was a dimly lit passage and someone was coming towards him in it, so he shrank back into the dark entrance of the now abandoned kitchen. It was a girl who went into the servants' hall so with her out of the way, his grace tiptoed past and fled down the passage to the back stairs, for the use of the servantry, for to advance to the main staircase in the hall would bring him face to face with the duty footman. Up he went, and knowing how the wealthy laid out their rooms for reception and repose in their country retreats, slunk speedily up to the storey where he suspected the private apartments were sited. There was a corridor at one end of the landing and where Justina would be he knew not, but he believed that she was going to be locked up in a bedchamber. Before he advanced down

the passage he peered along it, seeking a guard, but thô there were dim wall lights, there were no humans, not even a shadow of one on the main staircase, but he could hear footmen below, speaking of how strange it should be that the Earl should drive off into the night. His grace thus realised that there was a risk that he would not find Justina, who could well have been in the carriage which passed him in the park, so he hoped that the talk of the Earl was in the singular and the specific, rather than as metonymy. Otherwise, before him was a parade of doors and two entrances were double-doors, a formidable array which he was sure he would not have time to try out, every one, or make a noise and attract attention. He had to guess wisely and not waste time: perhaps, if she were here and not in the coach, Justina was in rooms near to those of the Earl. He assumed that one pair of double doors belonged to the master's state apartment, and so the other would lead to those of his consort. Then all at once he perceived that by the latter was a console table with a key upon it. Looking around him swiftly, he then sped thither to pick up that verisame key and fitted it into the lock of the adjacent doors, whereupon it not only entered but turned with facility. Silently, he pushed open those doors, and the first sight that met his gaze was Justina.

Lying on her bed, staring hopelessly and disconsolately at the canopy above, Justina did not trouble to look when she heard that someone was entering. The game was probably up by now, and if this was not Chatteris himself, it had to be some hireling to fetch her below. Thus she was entirely unprepared for the appearance of Irvin's face leaning over and smiling into hers. Up she sat, with an amazed expression on her face, her eyes open wide with incredulity, and her lips parted. His grace seemed both amused and delighted to see her, his countenance softening, his expression both gentle and benign. With a forefinger pressed to his lips, he sat down by her and took her into his arms, as she threw hers about his neck almost with jubilation, and laid her cheek against his as if in relief.

"Come along now, my brave beauty," he said quietly, laying a great fowling piece beside her, "I am come here only to take you away."

Without a word she removed her arms from about him and as he rose, slid off the bed.

"Have you something dark to cover your clothing? That pale pink will be very visible outside," he said, "and we could be sighted."

Althô speechless with incredulity, Justina nodded and went into the dressing room, where she doffed her pink night gown and drew out of the closet a black cloak with a black satin lining, which she drew on.

"Poor dead Countess. I am borrowing all her clothes," she said. "Look at all my wedding finery," she sighed.

"We must leave it all behind," he rued, and went to the doors to peer out of them into the corridor, whereupon she approached him, only to see that he held out his hand behind him for hers, which she gave him, so he turned and pressed it to his lips.

Then he led her out of the chamber and without a sound, they shuffled along the corridor, descended the staircase, and managed quickly to scurry through the dim passage, all the way to the vestibule, still undetected. Cautiously he leaned out and discerning no-one about, beckoned to her to follow, for, wishing to protect her, he had to be a trifle ungentlemanly and precede her. Justina was patient and prudent, walking when he said she could and waiting when he said she should, without uttering a word or making any noise. Out they went into the garden across which they made their painful way. From time to time his

grace would ready his fowling piece but not cock it, and Justina, on seeing this, felt a cold chill run down her spine but all the while he kept his other hand encircled about hers, which served to calm her disorientated spirit.

After an exercise both in forbearance and how best to seize an opportunity, the Duke and his companion found themselves in the park, where a swinging lanthorn started to proceed their way at speed. His grace darted behind the nearest big bole, pulling Justina in front of him, but he feared that their sudden movement attracted the unshuttered lanthorn's attention, for it changed direction and began calmly to pursue them. Down on the ground the Duke threw himself, to be lost among the antient, exposed, upper roots of the old tree, but the lanthorn kept coming. Justina heard the bid firearm being cocked, when a hoarse whisper familiar to the Duke, and by no means Scotch sounding, became audible.

"Don't loosen your leaden towels at me, sir," it chuckled.

"Collins, you rogue," croaked Irvin, "what the devil are you doing with a light?"

"Thought you'd be minded to have the end o' your grace's way lit," the other gurgled.

"How on earth obtained you that lanthorn?" demanded the Duke.

"Well, sir, I sort of – er – borrowed it, your Grace might say," chuckled Collins, "and him wot lent it me is in Cloth Fair (asleep, gone to bed), sir."

"At your express advice, indubitably?" said Irvin leading Justina by the hand.

"Well, I dropped a hint, on his *head*," owned Collins gleefully.

"Very good, but light you not our way, for then you'll light us up for all to see. Continue on your way and douse the glym (put out the light) before you put it down somewhere safe for we don't want to start fires on property," ordered the Duke, very meticulous about where the material values of life were concerned. "That was very well done, Collins. You shall have a crown (five shillings or 25p.) added to your wages."

The fellow figuratively beamed as brightly as did his beacon, leaving Justina and Irvin to run pell-mell into the wood, where the men waited with the horses, one for the Duke, one for Collins and one which had so far remained riderless.

"Can you bestride a horse in those billows?" he asked Justina.

At present Justina could do anything and when she expressed her affirmation she had spoken to him for the first time. At last they were reunited with the band, and the Duke assisted Justina into her saddle with both speed and decency. Just as he was about to mount his horse, his grace discerned that Collins was running towards them.

"All is bob (all is safe), sir," he confirmed, leaping upon his horse.

With that, they set off, stealthily and quietly, hoof-beats muffled by earth and grass, and tackle wielded with care so as not to make a multifarious rattling, but once they were clear of the belt of woodland, they broke into a gallop, relying on the eyesight of their steeds in the dark, and they sped as fast as their animals could carry them, by which time two men had lit brands and piloted their way. As they neared the village, they left the lane, and extinguished the torches, being loth to encounter Chatteris on his way back. No longer in a body, but in pairs and trios, some advanced into the village street, and others went roundabout. Irvin, Justina and a man made for the church, on the edge of the community for it was surrounded by a graveyard, with a field beyond. At the burial ground they dismounted and protected by the screening afforded by taller tablets and monuments, made their way to the church itself.

“Are we seeking sanctuary?” whispered Justina.

“No, my dear,” he denied.

“Where’s Carrie?” she asked softly.

“At home, now hush, little Justina,” he cautioned, and with her and the other, ducked behind a tall tablet, for a tall man was wandering about the cemetery.

Justina emitted a choked gasp so Irvin squeezed her hand tightly to reassure her. It was Chatteris, in a pale, perhaps cream, perhaps white, silk suit, the waistcote, which, as usual, reached much of the way down the thigh, glittering with gold embroidery, as were the cuffs, pocket flaps and edges of his upper garment, the buttons all set with diamonds glinting even in the night light. He went to look in at the church windows and tried all the doors; indeed he even tried to smash a window pane but the whole assemblage was webbed so closely with leading that not only did the pane resist, he would not have gone far had he been able to destroy it. Nor could the inner mortise locks be reached by such devices from the outside, to throw the window open. The Earl obviously seemed to know about these impediments, ingenious as they were and intended to keep out robbers. Thus foiled, he walked away in disappointment, out of sight but not out of these precincts yet, and Irvin verified this by sending his henchman to an adjacent headstone for a better view of him as he disappeared about the corner of the church building. The fellow came crawling back to report that he could not see the Earl but that he had a view of the lordly carriage at the churchyard gate, so he was returning to his hiding place to watch for more. Presently he slithered back to relate that the Earl was boarding the vehicle, so the Duke sent him back to ensure that his lordship did not in fact disembark from the other side, but in a minute or so, they heard the sound of horses’ hooves and a carriage start off. When the sound receded totally, the Duke stood up and taking Justina’s hand, solemnly led her to the vestry door and tapped gently on it. At once it opened and a thin old man emerged, clad in black, putting out a snaky, skinny arm, and seizing Justina’s shoulders in bony fingers so icy that she could feel their chill through her clothing. Briskly, he pulled her inside, but as the Duke sprang after her she did not protest, taken aback as she was, while the servant, Collins, followed and shut them all in, whereupon the old fellow leaned out and bolted the door.

“This way,” he whispered, picking up a single, tiny lighted taper. “We must gae easy doon, fr’ we canna ha’ lights. We’ll be seen fr’ th’ ootside.”

The Duke agreed, following the taper and enfolding Justina in one embracing arm.

“What are we doing?” she inquired quietly.

The Duke nodded his reassurance and patted her face, but she could not really see all that well where they went, through doors and past shapes and almost collided with what seemed like wooden benches. Behind their antient guide, and barely visible in the glimmer of the taper, was a simple altar.

“Justina, this is the Reverend James MacGregor and he has agreed to wed us tonight,” announced the Duke gravely.

“Wed u-us?” she croaked.

“There is nae time tae explain, lassie,” growled the emaciated spectre who was in fact the Hamish MacGregor of Reverend fame but the Duke believed that his name in English would make more sense to his bride. “Wull ye marry this man or wull ye nae?”

“I will, AYE!” assented Justina, “but —,” there she broke off, bewildered, “- but are

you not married to Carrie?"

"No," denied the Duke, taking Justina into his arms, "I could not wed her, my dear, sweet Justina, not after what happened."

"It was your wedding day! You did not marry her?"

"Nor did I jilt her at the altar; she did not think it right to wed on a day saddened by the abduction of her dear sister and repeatedly said it; moreover it was she who sent me off, with a specific requirement that I save you," he emphasised. "When I took leave of her, she had about her a look and a manner of dispensation, and her language was nuanced as if to give me my freedom, were I disposed to take it. Actually, while I was dressing up in my bridegroom's attire, I felt the guilt of betrayal, and realised that most of all, I was betraying myself, in insisting on wedding her, when it seemed after all that she would have had us wed each other. She has been the salvation of the House of Hearne, and of us both. As I drove here to seek you, my mind was made up; I could not wed her with you about; I could not confront a life wherein I was deprived of you. It was only when I came within a spit and a stride of wedding another that I realised the error in my obstinacy. It was partly for your good, but then it was not what I really wished for. Perhaps it would be better, morally, for me not to condemn you to wed me, but – you know what a namby-pamby I am."

"Irvin, this marriage, yours to me, is the sole thing that can end Chatteris's project to seize control over you through me," she stated. "Let us proceed, with God's blessing!"

"My poor, brave Justina," he agreed, and kissed her forehead.

"Thar'll be teem fr' slip-slop (kisses) laterre," growled the Reverend Hamish. "Now wull ye let me wed ye tew?"

His patience having run out and his interest in their affairs negative at the least, he leaned over them as he mounted his steps, and so, Justina Woodville, for all her pains and tears and lost hopes, at last married her precious Irvin, for whatever he was worth, by a Scotch moderator, by the light of a single taper, in the dead of night, under pressing circumstances, and with the groom Collins and Madam Reverend lurking in the shadows, for witnesses. When the ceremony was over she invited them to the cleric's house 'fr'a wee dram' and even invited them to spend the night under her roof, for the young Duchess would be even safer if her marriage was consummated in a clergyman's house, which kind of talk even Justina, who worked with animals, thought a trifle vulgar. Her dour spouse commanded her to silence but she gabbled on, and revealed that that evening, while her 'spouse' was seeing off Gamekeeper Sandie, a note was delivered for him under seal and as she did not know of seals and coats of arms she laid it on the table for her husband to attend to when he returned. Indeed it was from Chatteris, to order a wedding this evening, at his house, but the Duke of Irvin arrived and finally tracking the moderator down on his second visit, changed all that, for the cleric only read the note after his grace was gone and thus gave his grace priority. In any case now that he discovered that the Earl meant to wed someone he had abducted, he did not want to be party to that, and gave his allegiance elsewhere, whereby he was proven right. That was why the clergyman's wife had not told the Duke during her conversation with him of the Earl's letter, for she did not know it was from the Earl in the first place. Was that not droll? From her husband's grim look, the Duke's steeled face, and Justina's gravity, it was clear that she was the only person who thought so. The Reverend MacGregor gave his opinion finally: he shuddered at the idea that he was being misled to lend assistance to an abduction, itself a

crime, and also of celebrating a marriage that was an invalid mockery of itself by reason of duress. Furthermore, he warmed very little to the prospect that an older lecher sought out a man's beloved to spite him and ruin her virtue, because the Duke had told him that he was to be the poor victim's spouse by her choice, and that she was his. As for the integrity of the ducal allegations and the abductee's true proclivities, these were demonstrated by the comportment of the twain, namely, the Duke and the lady, in each other's company, which he, the moderator, had heard her proclaim.

Their respective versions behind them, the cleric and his wife ushered the wedded pair into the vestry where a candle was written and the register of marriages signed. After that, their arms about each other's waists, the Duke and Duchess of Irvin egressed from the church into the churchyard, to follow the clergyman's lady to his rectory, with her chattering all the way about how they had shut up and put out all the lights in their home and the church alike lest Chatteris came seeking them, which he did, and they could see him outside as they hid in the church, but at least he did not commit any sacrilege of breaking down any doors. If she was jubilant, MacGregor was chary, for he feared that Chatteris could be dogged enough to return to await him at his residence, but when they reached it all was dark and quiet, so she congratulated herself and her clever 'spouse'. In fact she never really finished her sentence but with a small cry, for as they were in the garden of the modest house, lights came forth from behind it, as a voice called Irvin's name from behind them. The Duke and his wife both turned and at the rectory gate stood Lord Chatteris, in all his wedding finery, with a footman behind him, bearing a firebrand. To the Duke's delight, Justina did not balk at all. Pulling her arm away from her husband's body, she marched fearlessly past the rector to the Earl.

"You are a little late, sir," she said. "The wedding is over."

"Irvin!" snarled the Earl, pushing Justina roughly out of the way and swooping forward, "out of my way, harlot, harlot-in-weeds. Irvin, you will pay for this!" he spat, and drew his sword. "I will turn that bride of yours into a maiden-wife-widow (woman whose husband has not been able to enjoy her virginity)."

The moderator's wife screamed, her husband ran for the watch, for Irvin's men, for anyone who would come, and Irvin himself darted forward.

"Insult me, Chatteris, a thousand times if you will, but dare you never to insult my wife!" he rasped.

As he spoke, he snatched on a glove, seized the Earl's weapon by the blade, whipped it swiftly from its owner's hand and swung the heavy hilt so that it crashed into the Earl's cheek and jaw. With a choked bellow, the casualty fell to one side, along the line of the Duke's blow, and landed, ironically, in the arms of the very Duchess whom he had verbally abused.

"Chatteris, Chatteris, hush!" she soothed. "Madam parsoness, fetch a cloth and some water, pray. My lord, be calm, pray."

As Mistress MacGregor rushed off into her own home, Justina was catching gobs of Chatteris's blood in her bed-shift so as not to stain his fine clothes.

"And not at a snail's gallop!" she called after the female, from whom all a manner of squeaks, rolled R's and divers Scotch noises emanated. "Go bring his vehicle close," the Duchess ordered Chatteris's men, "he will need to be borne home comfortably – and don't bleed all over your beautiful white suit, sir."

Oddly enough, the men obeyed her and Irvin came to help her right Chatteris, whom she was causing to bend in order that thick strings of blood fell from his mouth to the earth and not upon his clothes.

“Have you broken any teeth?” she asked.

The Earl of Chatteris drew out of his pocket a pair of handkerchieves, one for shew and all of the best Malines lace, the other for nasal mucus and other nastiness.

“Get me some ice,” he grumbled, putting the latter cloth to his mouth.

“Now here we are, we three, alone, but not for long,” said Justina. “Pray would you tell me why you two hate each other so? Is it because of Lavinia Northingham, and if so, why do you want to kill Irvin so that you make up opportunities for it, and pursue each other so relentlessly that I am become a pawn in the game?”

“I hate him because he hates me,” stated Irvin frostily, “and he hates me because he trusts me not, on account of my having learned of a particular fear that he has, which has given rise to another, the second being that I may divulge what I have learned.”

“THOSE ARE LIES!” bawled Lord Chatteris and Justina stuffed his kerchief in his mouth, in case flecks of blood spoilt his fine attire.

“Aye, he avers that what I have learned are lies,” confirmed Irvin. “He always avers that those matters are lies, and he is even persuading himself that I fabricated them, altho I swear, by all I hold dear, that I have never.”

“What is it, Duke? What is this that plagues him so, and which has brought us all this far? You should tell me, for after all I have endured, I believe that I have a right to know.”

“Very well,” ceded the Duke reluctantly. “He is afraid that he and I are half-brothers.”

“Half – Ohh,” she groaned. “Which parent are you suspected of sharing?”

“Our father, the late Duke of Irvin,” said the present Duke.

“Ohh, Crimine,” she wailed, “that means he –,”

The Duke of Irvin put a finger to his lips, indicating the approach of the moderator and some of the Irvin company.

“Irvin, why did you never reveal this, in spite of all that Lord Chatteris has done to you?” wondered Justina cleverly.

“If it is not true, I shall have unjustly destroyed a man’s life, howsoever hatefully he has lived it,” said the Duke, “and I know not if it be true or nay. If it is true, I would be a very paltry and snotty creature were I good only for betraying a half-brother to the benefit of men whom I know not, and who would not thank me. Besides, the Earl has no children, so if he does manage to die childless, he would not be barring anyone from a true succession, that is, if he is falsely in possession of properties and titles that should to others under the law.”

“Then, Lord Chatteris, you are a great fool altogether,” snorted the young Duchess. “Yet if he is a half-brother, why did he court Vinnie?”

“To shew that a half-brother he is not,” the Duke replied. “When I discovered that was his sole game, he jilted her with great ostentation, and that caused bad blood, but I did not want to advertise the fact that my sister had lost her fiancé, so I sat like Mumchance who was hanged for saying nothing.”

“But that would ha’ been incest,” protested Justina.

“Lord Chatteris bothers very little about that sort of thing,” said the Duke aerily, looking up. “The rector comes, so our confabulation is at an end.”

Lord Chatteris's carriage was coming too, and just then the parsoness staggered out of the house with a pail and a rag, which looked as if she had been washing the floors therewith.

"The rag has seen better days too long ago to be put to my mouth," said Chatteris. "Perhaps I will be better off at home."

"Swill your mouth out into the back of a flower bed," suggested Justina, as the Earl's men came to take charge of him. "I hope that we never see you again, sir," she said in final valediction, letting him take the support of his henchmen who were not in the garden. "I hope that we do not even hear of you again, and that we forget you and your affairs absolutely."

"As well as all that ever goes or ever went with your lordship," added his grace, going past him to let him out of the gate.

To his vehicle did his servants assist the wounded man, and the Duke picked up the fallen sword and gave it to one of them. Justina followed them and when he was installed among the squabs, proffered her hand before the doors were shut on him.

"You were such fun before you began calling me names, and that put me in mind of my odious father. Was the Devil dancing a measure in your head?" she demanded.

After a moment's hesitation, Lord Chatteris put out a hand and touched her fingers.

"You'd ha' made me a good wife," he bumbled.

She only smiled and withdrew, but as the equipage pulled away, Chatteris watched from his window as the young woman to whom he would have been wed walked across the road to join her husband. Altho such a spectacle pained him greatly, he could not bring himself to hate her for the wound he had invited upon himself tonight, and he even rued, to a limited extent, his use of ignoble language applied to her. The Duchess had turned her back so she saw not his face; instead, she was looking at her husband's nervous pallor shining blue in the night light.

"I knew not that you were so honourable and it is a pleasant surprise," she owned.

"I knew not that you were so compassionate and it is most comforting," he credited and held out his elbow.

"You have not asked me in what state I am," she asked tantalisingly, as she linked arms with him, "whether he has already had his way with me."

"It is not important," he dismissed, "and besides, were he to have despoiled you, you would not ha' shewn him such kindness in departing."

"You wed me and it is not important?" she cried in surprise.

"Then dare I ask if you are still a maid?" he relented, albeit stern.

"I still am whatever your dare or dare not to ask," she affirmed.

"How did you contrive that?" he marvelled, between surprise and admiration.

"A female complaint that follows a cycle," she chuckled. "I promised Noah's flood in gore if he put his impudent parts where he should not."

"I hope that in truth you are not," he asserted.

"I'm relieved to say that I am not," she declared merrily, "but I would wish, for our wedding night, to be washed clean and put in a new shift, with curls in my locks and a fine bed in which for to receive you grace's first ministrations."

"That would also be my wish," he agreed.

"Ye cuid always wash wuth this," offered Dame Reverend, with her rag and pail with even less savoury contents, for she was come right up close to listen.

TWENTY-FOUR

Notwithstanding the implementation of Lady Caroline's suggestion, that, while they had a banquet ready and guests to attend it, they should hold the same, for a number of assemblies expected to be fed and were sure to be disappointed if they were not, the banquet was a dull failure, livened, if at all, by two subjects of malicious gossip, to wit, firstly what Lord Chatteris would do with Justina, and whether in fact she might have gone willingly notwithstanding what was said to explain the situation, and secondly, whether Irvin had truly departed to effect rescue or whether it was just an excuse to abscond. Some kind souls even asked the question as to whether Caroline would ever marry, which vexed the Woodvilles so much that that they pronounced an intention to clear the house of relations and guests, for *thô* it was a standing joke in Society that folk attended one's parties, ate one's food and spoke ill behind one's back, this was taking things too far, and then there was the matter of economics. The Duchess of Hearne made her son Devenish compute whether the family could afford to maintain so many folk indefinitely under their roof, not accounting the indecency of requiring the neighbours to house friends and relations for the same unspecified period. It was decided that after the banquet, as no-one knew anything for sure, the wedding festivities would end and the bride would be wed in private when her betrothed returned, which announcement was ill-greeted by these good peoples rich enough to feed themselves at home, and many said outright that there was a chance Lord Chatteris would kill him at last. Caroline was extremely dismayed, for she had meant well and wanted to reward the company for coming all this way on her account, but it had to be explained to her by her Aunt Lizzie that of all Creation, the human race – and perhaps the snake – was the most malicious, and ungrateful with it.

It was no pleasure to see the guests prepare their journeys and pack their baggage, for meanwhile they were resident yet in their hosts' houses and, as if to punish the Hearne family for cutting short the pleasure of a house party, they pleased themselves by continuing to talk in a manner most uncharitable of the bride and her relations. Eventually, at Great Hearne Castle, some of his grace's relatives grew so free with their condemnations that the old Duke quarrelled with them and just threw them out, declaring that with kinfolk like that, one did not need enemies, and for once he was right. Staunch to the end was Lady Ashlington, who took her nieces' part in everything and who, the Duchess had to remind her pugnacious spouse, had spent a great deal of money housing and equipping three of his daughters in London, so he could not begrudge her meals and a bed. Some of the guests even took away the wedding gifts they had brought because there was no wedding, but a few had some vestige of a conscience and when presenting them joked that when they were called again for the real event, they would not need to fetch anything. The Duke was put into a thoroughly bad mood the very day of the banquet, which was the day of the wedding and also the day of Justina's disappearance, which state of mind worsened daily, and the departures did not help, for such an event was a clumsy business but necessary in a household where a tight control was being exerted on the purse strings – by a son-in-law who had vanished. Thus his anger extended to everyone, so that he dismissed one of his new liveried grooms, which obliged Julius to return to duty at the stables, and even cursed Justina for her bad timing, saying that she was selfish and a silly, little bitch who was useless except for spoiling his affairs, so that all this was her fault. When it made the Duchess and Caroline weep, he shouted at them, and Devenish had to becalm him, but he still could not divest himself of the notion that his next-to-youngest

daughter, whom he did not really know, was directly responsible. The Duchess lost her appetite, Honoria was perpetually irascible, Devenish waxed querulous and maudlin. Selina wept often: apart from the stoical Caroline, who shewed nothing, and Julius as a long-time workmate, she loved Justina very much and was close to her. Poor Caroline seemed due for beatification or sainthood, for she bore and withstood all without a twitch of complaint, even the malice, accompanied by smiles, directed to her face by relatives whom her father had vexed, and the so-called friends who were necessary to invite rather than really wanted, but in fact her nerves were taut with agitation and her reticence hid anticipation of the best and terror of the worst.

Fortunately the two families attached to Irvin were the most dignified outwardly at least, altho behind Caroline's back Louisa made no secret of the fact that she did not trust her brother an iota, and she even joked about it to the Orres, who were terribly embarrassed. Of the neighbours, they were the only sympathetic members of the squirearchy apart from Pye, and the latter did not count as a bankrupt who had only just managed to save his house and some of his land. He even paid a visit on the Hearne family to express his hopes that all would soon be well, and Caroline took him walking in the garden, accompanied by Selina, to own that she was extremely anxious as to what could befall Irvin if he did find Justina, and how Justina would respond to it, but she could not write to him because he would travel faster than any letter, and besides, she did not know where to send it. It was strange how much easier it was to confide in one who was almost a social outcast than a member of her own family. He, for his part, bid her take courage, confessing his annoyance at his inability to be of practical use, and thus they parted: the Duke, who was looking after his horses for an illicitly paid fee, did not even want to see him even tho he had been among the guests. For some three days after the banquet and the empty wedding day did Caroline suffer on, quietly and valiantly, attempting to appease both parents each in different ways, to cheer both brothers each after his own needs, and console Lizzie and Selina, while urging Honoria to be calm, but Honoria had decided never to forgive Justina this disgrace which she had brought upon the family. Yet if there was one thing she was glad about, it was that folk were finally leaving, except that they took their time and could not very well be dismissed summarily, which rather prolonged the agony. By then, allowing for their specific responses and their respective characters, the Woodville family was sunk into a Slough of Despond.

On the morning of the fifth day after the Duke of Irvin had been urgently summoned to Greater Hearne Castle and dispatched on his salvage mission, for it was more than rescue, the old Duke lost his temper with his wife and children, the aunt being an onlooker, and raved and ranted that Irvin was a rascal and blackguard, how Caroline was a fool to have agreed to marry him, for no-one had forced her, how Justina must have been so far shamed that the family could not possibly receive and shelter her in their house, and how there was doubtless never going to be any wedding. By then Lizzie Ashlington became a participant in this loud verbal fight, for unlike the others, who for the most part sat in silent martyrdom and bore the unjust monologue of nonsense, she began first to mutter, thereafter to interpose, and at last, to answer back vehemently where no man or woman dared, striving valiantly to defend and exculpate her nephews and nieces whenever he castigated them, which only exacerbated the ill-will and strength of the quarrel. They were still shouting at each other, impervious to the warnings that the last guests left in the house could hear and were probably listening,

when Julius rose, exasperated and enraged, and yelled above all voices that there was a berline in the drive. At that, the entire content of the chamber poured towards the windows and desultorily, the Duke of Irvin's return was proclaimed. Thus even before the conveyance pulled up before the castle doors the denizens, that was to say eavesdroppers included, poured down stairs, and spilled over the steps, led by the intrepid Selina who was closely followed by Caroline of the burning curiosity. Just as the vehicle lurched to a halt, Justina's face appeared at a glass-paned window, and so the family rushed forward to seize at the doors before a footman could come and pull down the carriage steps.

"She's riding inside with him!" objected Honoria, shocked. "That is highly improper; he should be riding outside on horseback, even if it is his drag (carriage)."

"Doubtless, there is a very proper explanation," said Caroline, with a mysterious smile, as she and Selina pulled open the door.

Out jumped Justina, in her night-shift and the late Countess of Chatteris's cloak, into their arms, so that her first embraces were for her two most sympathetic sisters. She seemed radiant, and not at all the damsel in distress narrowly saved or just recovered in whatever state, so it was fair to say that something had happened to make her happy, for this was not a family whereto one was glad to return. After them she had a hug for Julius, who came to reach for her, and then her mother and faithful Aunt Lizzie together, whereafter Devenish put his lanky arms about her and then Honoria stood before her, brazenly disapproving, suffering that Justina squeeze her shoulders one in each hand but no cuddle or even a kiss on the cheek, for she knew that Honoria thought her to be in a state of dishonour and wished her a hundred miles away. Her father stood among the remnants of the residents on the verge of departure, not knowing what to do, for he was not sure whether she merited a welcome or that if he gave one, he would be compromised for abetting his daughter when he should have spurned and refused to forgive her – this was not France one hundred years ago. Then Lizzie was seen to indicate someone, and there was Irvin, on his feet before the door of his berline, watching with a smile upon his face that was far from the usual lofty smirk, or the supercilious sneer, or the bored, languorous twitch: a smile that was both genuine and pleased, of pride, affection and appreciation. Hearne perceived him and pounced on him to be the first to greet him even if he had as good as ignored his daughter returned. He shewed no relief with respect to her but alleged praise and thanks to the younger Duke, to whom he was now doubly indebted. When the commotion and excitement began to face, the older one raised his voice.

"Now that we are all here at a family, and the Duke of Irvin is back among us," he boomed, "we may proceed with the principal matter, namely the marriage."

"Pray, I beg a moment," interposed the Duke of Irvin. "I was to have wed Lady Caroline Woodville some days ago and even a Sabbath is come in between. However, for her sake, I cannot wed her now, for it will be in breach of matrimonial law."

"Why?" snapped Hearne. "What are you talking about?"

"Bigamy," announced Irvin. "I am already married."

Caroline put a hand to her chin to try and minimise a smile, Selina seemed bewildered, Honoria emitted a gasp and cupped both palms over her mouth, but before the brothers or the mother could respond, the father bawled out:

"WHAT?"

"O, hush, you," snorted Aunt Lizzie, "pray tell, Irvin, for how long have you been in

this desolate condition?”

“Nigh on two days, madam,” he seemed to beam, so bright were those eyes.

“You jilted my daughter! The contract – what about the contract?” screamed Hearne.

“The contract is unaffected for I have abode by its terms,” assured Irvin. “However I have indeed jilted Lady Caroline.”

“What nonsense is this? How can you have done both?” barked Hearne derisively.

“My part was effectively to wed one of your daughters, sir,” stated the other Duke.

“And you did,” laughed Caroline, reaching out for Justina’s hands.

“Carrie,” sniffed Justina, “I’m such a sorry figure –,”

“You’re a sorry figure? *I* wanted to marry him!” protested Selina, provoking laughter.

“He has married Justina?” croaked the Duke of Hearne, turning to his wife in horror and confusion.

“I gathered that,” she intoned, impatient with her spouse, but turning anxious as she faced her younger daughter. “Justina, will you be happy with this man?”

“Why did no-one ask poor Caroline that?” shot Justina, for it was her mother’s way, at a joyous moment, to seek a matter for to fret about.

“Justina, our madcap, hoyden, rigsby Justina, a Duchess!” hailed Julius. “Justina, married first of all of us.”

Honorina turned on her heel, and stormed off into the house. Apart from a glance or two of embarrassment levelled her way, folk chose to give her no more notice, but for Justina herself, who looked wry.

“Why am I not surprised?” she commented. “I think I ha’ just lost a sister.”

“Sir, a question, pray,” Devenish pounced on the Duke of Irvin. “Do you mean to say that you really preferred to wed Justina?”

“What made you do it?” wondered their mother. “Was it because of Chatteris?”

“It was a small but very rich thing,” Irvin replied, “more valuable than all the tea in China, madam.”

“Justina, have you anything to say for yourself?” demanded her mother.

“No,” refuted the rebel, refusing to be misused as a child anymore.

“Very well,” her mother saved face, “let us into the house.”

“I would pray that you sent all the Duchess of Irvin’s effects after her, clothes, books, even what she had as a child and still kept,” declined and required the Duke. “I am taking her to Orre’s now and tomorrow, we leave for Irvin. I would rather that if you wished to take leave of her that you came there this afternoon, instead of her remaining here. For your understanding of that I most humbly thank you.”

“Let us go in all the same and Justina herself may collect her belongings: I don’t want her saying that we deliberately forgot this or that,” urged the matron.

“Go on, indulge her, she only wants to make peace,” persuaded Lady Ashlington.

The Duke of Irvin nodded and with that the two Duchesses entered the castle.

“I only hope that my marriage does not become like yours,” whispered Justina to her mother, but the latter gave her a cold look.

“It was what you wanted; you must make do,” she rejoined.

Caroline joined them having overheard part of their exchange.

“Justina, you have found a man who loves you,” she consoled. “I hope you love him,

and that your affections strengthen and continue.”

So, aided by her mother, aunt and her eldest and youngest sisters, Justina packed all her belongings, and changed her clothes, while the two Dukes sat in the study and talked, attended by Devenish, and Julius went to fetch Jezebel and see that she was attached to the ducal carriage. When the ladies were done they sent word to the gentlemen, but as they watched Justina’s entire worldly goods, which seemed paltry compared to what she had seen Lady Northingham just travelled with, the new, young Duchess turned to Caroline and admitted a regret.

“I am most remorseful in one respect,” she owned. “Had you wed before I did, you would have had the chance to leave this house.”

“It is a sad thing not to love one’s home,” said the Viscountess.

“Some places carry ugly memories. One’s home should not but mine does,” said Justina. “Besides, I daresay that Carrie does not want to remain here all her life, howsoever much she loves it here.”

“My turn will come,” dismissed Caroline.

She was arm-in-arm with the young Duchess when, below, she handed her over to her spouse, who offered his elbow and upon it, lead his wife out into the drive, where her effects were being loaded upon the carriage.

“Caroline,” she said, turning, with a hint of sadness in her eyes.

“Justina, enjoy your life for as long as you can,” urged Viscountess Ashlington. “Carrie didn’t want Irvin in any wise.”

At that, there was laughter, as the rest of her siblings, excluding Honoria, trooped out and overheard their aunt’s assessment of affairs. Their father, however, now joined them, his countenance grim and his expression black.

“You are a depraved girl,” he told Justina. “You threw yourself at this man.”

“Papa!” cried Caroline, aghast and appalled.

“I disown her. I disinherit her,” snarled Hearne.

“You haven’t much of value left to bequeath,” riposted Justina, feeling actually free so to do, at long last, as her husband reached for her hand to help her board the vehicle.

Just as their greetings had been clamorous, so their valedictions were dull and quiet. The Duke of Hearne turned his back on the whole proceedings and commanded his wife to follow him, but she defied him for long enough to wave good-bye to her daughter, of whom she and her husband were accustomed to thinking little of in any wise, so she was secretly relieved to be rid of her quickly, even if Caroline’s persisting spinsterhood was a problem. The others were less complicated: they had hugged and kissed their sister good bye and were at liberty to stand and wave her off; so it was with the aunt. Honoria remained doggedly away which annoyed Caroline and unnerved Selina, while Julius was almost angry. To the Duchess of Irvin, this did not seem to matter anymore and at last the doors were shut. The conveyance started off and Justina’s heart began to beat very fast as she leaned out and waved at those who waited to see her go.

“That did not go very well,” she said to her husband. “In this family, there is an untold capacity to spoil another’s fun. Every good memory I have of my parents and some of my siblings is tainted by some corresponding unpleasantness that accompanies the whole.”

“I had noticed,” he acknowledged. “I spent all the time you were packing in the study

listening to him raising mountains, which I hoped, put him in a good mood, and all he did was to come out and insult you.”

“He has to insult someone. It is like Honoria. If she did not find fault with one person at least every day, she would wither and die. That is why I lived out my day among horses.”

“I feel a trifle guilty about you, Justina,” he owned. “Ever since you and I met, folk ha’ took to insulting you. It will never happen anymore; I will protect you with my life.”

“Dear Irvin,” she sniffed, tears in her eyes, “don’t speak thus, I pray: grand promises remind me of my father.”

“I humbly beg your pardon,” he relented, not trying to justify himself.

Suddenly the vehicle slackened and with a shudder, halted, so the Duke pulled down the window in the door panel and looked out. A heavily armed horseman in familiar livery, leading a fine pack-horse with a rolled burthen on his back, was talking to the coachmen.

“What is it?” demanded his grace.

The horseman advanced to his window, and bowed, tugging off his own hat.

“For the Duchess of Irvin, your grace, from Lord Chatteris,” he announced, and dismounting, untied the pack from the other horse’s back, before carrying it to the cabin.

The Duke threw open the door from within, and bid him lay it on the seat opposite, which he did with great care. Then he bowed and withdrew, go mount up again. The spouses stared at this with mystified eyes, before the Duke untied the strings that bound the roll and then carefully unrolled it. Inside a layer of protective oilcloth were Justina’s bridesmaid’s attire with all accoutrements and even the sleeve knots and shoes. There was no written message, but there need not have been.

“I hope this means that he will never come after your blood again,” she said, in a hollow voice.

“It often happens that a woman ruins a situation and only a woman can restore it. They said that about Ysabeau de Bavière who, as Queen of France, signed a treaty leaving her insane husband’s crown to King Henry V of England and disinherited her own son,” he related, “when along came one Jeanne d’Arc and contributed to overturning the situation.”

“Well, for all that, even if I have contributed to the end of your feud, I have overturned affairs in this house that I leave behind me,” she said, as the Duke bid the coachman to continue. “I am glad you have taken me away, but things are not better for them, except in a pecuniary sense, for my parents do little to secure the future of their own children.”

“That will be for us to arrange,” he replied. “The posts take time between England and the Royal Court of Siam, where Julius is going to have to put up with the Dutch, but there will be very little for him to do except take instructions from a superior on how to uphold the dignity of the Monarch of the Three Kingdoms as we are officially known.”

“And the others?” she fidgeted.

“In time, in time, as we make the right opportunities,” he soothed. “Think of yourself, and then you may make your way forth in their interests. Rome was not built in a day.”

“You are right,” she accepted, laying her hand in his outstretched palm. “I hope poor Caroline forgives me. I feel as if I betrayed her.”

“Justina, you are all conscience, and you did not betray your sister,” he insisted. “She knew this was going to happen, and we are all aware that one cannot stop the inevitable, for what it is worth.”

“Aye,” she acknowledged, nodding slowly and staring fixedly ahead, added, “the inevitable, for what it is worth.”

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