



C. HAMPTON JONES



UNCERTAIN GLORY



Wellington's Heroes Series Book 4

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Editor: Alex Blackburn

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## PROLOGUE: A MEETING IN THE DARK

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A summerhouse close to York, 1808

He jumped up from the bench when he heard the rustling of her skirts.

He had kept the door of the little folly open in order to avoid any unnecessary noise and he heard it close with a click.

Ah, she wanted them to be private then.

“You came!”

His whisper was excited and grateful at the same time. She stared at him.

Her pristine form only just caught the light from the moon entering its fourth quarter.

“This is madness!” she grated at last. “If he finds out there will be hell to pay.”

He shook his head in bewilderment.

“He’s in London. He will never know. He is not even interested in the marriage of his sister-in-law; otherwise he would have accepted the invitation.”

She sat down slowly on one of the benches.

“Your family won’t be there either!” she scoffed. “They’ll all stay back in Wattles while their son marries a girl of the gentry. The son that put food on their table and money in their empty coffer.”

He sat down on the bench opposite her.

“The adopted son!” he added bitterly. “At least my father’s wife will be there, the countess. Detty would

have loved to come as well, but they forbade her to leave the house.”

She shrugged.

“You started to earn your own money and the Countess withdrew her funds. Does she still pay you an allowance?”

He looked down at his hands that seemed bluish in the moonlight.

“Let’s... not talk... about money...” he said haltingly.

Money had been his root of all evil. If money had not been an issue he would be standing next to another bride tomorrow.

She looked guiltily out of a rectangular window.

Yes, it had been money and a title that had forced her into a loveless marriage with an abusive husband.

She closed her eyes when she felt tears welling. One escaped her closed eyelids anyway. She brushed it quickly away with a trembling hand.

Oh, she should not have come! She was sitting in this folly in the middle of the night, dressed in a nightshift and a wrapper, with the only man who had been able to stir feelings she had kept enclosed in an ice-cold heart.

She could never have stayed away from him, tonight. He was marrying her sister tomorrow.

“Amelia?” he asked.

In one step he sat next to her.

She knew she should push him away and run as fast as she could to the big house. Her husband’s house. Her absent husband’s house.

“Oh, God forgive me, Amelia,” he whispered, “and everybody else as well! I need to... I want to...”

She knew that making love to him was dangerous and would probably doom her forever. Still she did not rise from the couch, to berate him for his uncouthness or his disloyalty towards her sister.

She opened her wrapper and lifted her nightshift to his hungry hands and mouth.

Peter. Her secret love and warrior.

She would surely go to hell for it.

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## Devon's Prologue: AFTERMATH OF THE BATTLE OF TOULOUSE

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*Toulouse, 10th of April 1814*

“David!”

Devon pounced on the figure staring out on the hill.

The battle in the rear had been a short one. Soult was not able to get his reserves up there; he had used them all up in the heat of the battle for the vanguard.

David turned to his friend.

He was still in a daze. His horse had thrown him when it was struck in the chest with a bullet. He was covered in mud and grime, because he had been forced to crawl into a quagmire to avoid being run over by enemy lancers. Damn, he had been lucky to be on the outside of their last attack!

He suddenly smiled brightly at Devon.

“You made it through it whole, then?”

Devon nodded.

“I was lucky. So were you, I see.”

“Kit wasn’t.” David said darkly, “He’s with the wounded.”

Devon gasped.

“So it’s true? Jenkins was looking for him. How bad is it?”

David shook a shoulder.



“His leg again, I think, but he was covered in blood and unconscious. It could be anything.”

He smiled thinly.

“I don’t think he will be going home to his new wife any time soon! Let’s clean up, Devon, I’m weary of all this. I think I’m ready to go home now. Even the prospect of seeing old Basil again seems alluring right now. What’s wrong?”

Devon sat down on a white chalky rock.

“I don’t know,” he whispered, “it’s that blinding headache. I need to...”

He turned his head to the side and vomited in the dry grass.

“You need to drink something,” David urged. “I’ll go to that brook and... Damn, isn’t that Cordelia Williams? What’s she doing out here?”

Devon turned his head into the direction of the brook behind them. A woman was kneeling there. She was washing her face.

“Her husband did not make it,” he answered softly, “the poor girl! He was not much of a soldier and I quite disliked him, but still it’s a harsh thing. Come on, let’s go. I want to check on Kit.”

Devon opened the flap of the tent and almost crouched inside.

Two people were standing next to a camp bed, talking softly. His gaze moved to the other side of the tent. Someone with a heavily bandaged head, which was dark red with crusted blood, was occupying the bed there.

“Mrs. Williams? Jenkins? How’s Lord Brondemeire doing?” Devon whispered.

Cordelia walked up to him and whisked him back outside.

“Major Broadhurst? You are leaving tomorrow, aren’t you? I prepared a letter for Lord Brondemeire’s brother, the Marques of Andover. Maybe you can bring it to London...”

She pointed with her head into Kit’s direction.

“He won’t be going anywhere for some time, I’m afraid. He lost an enormous amount of blood and will need all the strength he has left for recovery.”

“You mentioned a letter?”

“Yes, I wrote it after Doctor Hales examined him again.”

She searched the pocket of her gown. It was gray and neat and seemed to cling to her hips. She was not wearing her nurse’s apron for once.

He watched her hands, tapping the pockets. It was a strange, almost intimate gesture. He peered unobtrusively at her face, which was deep in thought.

She really was not unattractive, he thought. Although her long dark hair was braided and pinned in a bun at the back of her head, one could wonder what it would look like when it was loosened and allowed to fall all the way down, on that nicely rounded bottom. Her skin was darker than would be fashionable, but you could not expect an active lady who followed the drum to ever maintain a fashionable pale skin. Almost none of the officers’ wives that followed the drum had white skins.

The sneaky and often harsh sun in the Peninsula had taken care of that.

He was actually quite accustomed to women with sun-kissed skins. All whores and camp followers seemed to be dark skinned and truth be told he liked the darker skins more than the pale ones. He had never fancied the deathly pallor that was always so fashionable at court and with the ladies of the London Ton. To him dark skins were a sign of strength, like muscles, which was another part of his strange preferences. He had always admired women that did not melt below him for lack of some muscles.

He smiled inwardly: he was certainly fond of a strange sort of females, one could argue. He did not want them to be fashionably petite, he secretly liked sun-kissed skins and he preferred them not to be flabby for lack of exercise and muscle.

Cordelia was indeed quite tall for a woman, but he would not call her 'horsey.' It was more 'coltish' as she had to be somewhere in her early twenties, or no, it was rather in the energetic way she moved.

He peered at her bum again. It was a horse rider's rump. He knew she rode well because he had witnessed her riding, once, in a case of emergency. She had hurried to a place of calamity and she had ridden astride instead of using her sidesaddle.

He had nurtured a raging hard-on for hours after seeing her thus: her skirt was hiked-up on one side and he had seen her white thigh pressed into the horse's left side. He had thought himself a despicable pervert, but

for some reason he had never seen anything so arousing in his life!

“I think I left it in my tent. Follow me please, Major Broadhurst.”

He came out of his reverie with a start. He reddened when he realized he had been staring at her bum.

“Who’s the man in the other bed?”

She smiled sadly.

“It’s Major Armstrong. He has very bad head and leg injuries. It will be a miracle if he survives them. We put the two Lords together. Major Armstrong’s tent houses nine wounded soldiers now.”

“Oh,” he mumbled, “Lionel went down as well? That’s nasty! Is he losing a lot of blood? That head bandage looks soaked!”

“His skull was bashed. Probably a horse’s hoof. It looks a bit worse than it is, though. It seems that the wound did not... It seems that the wound is not very deep. Doctor Hales says that the brain is still intact and hopefully unharmed. He is not sure about the leg though. If the wounds start to fester he will have to amputate.”

Devon cringed at those medical observations. Losing a limb seemed as bad to him as losing one’s life.

“Colonel Lord Loghaire is wounded as well, although not as seriously as those two. He has already been transported to the hospital in Toulouse,” she added.

“Hengist?” Devon asked unpleasantly surprised, “By Jove, the man should never have insisted on joining us at the last moment!”

He was silent after this outburst. He suddenly remembered the death of her husband.

“How... how are you doing yourself, Mrs. Williams? My condolences on your own loss!”

Damn, why was he stuttering like a boor?

“Thank you, Major,” she said briskly.

She hesitated for a second. She could hardly tell that dashing Major Lord Broadhurst that she and her husband had not exchanged more than ten words in the last week, let alone that they had not slept together since ... Well, she did not even remember when it had been the last time that Rory had found his way to her tent at night.

“My tent is over there!”

She pointed at a tent under one of the few scrawny trees in the landscape. It was quite set apart from the other officers’ tents. Obviously, Mrs. Williams valued her privacy.

She walked in and rummaged through a portable writing desk, her backside wriggling enticingly when she bent to open the different desk drawers.

“Mrs. Williams?”

She turned back with flushed cheeks, the sealed letter in her hand.

“I heard you, Major Broadhurst.”

He did not know how it happened, but suddenly she was in his arms and he was kissing her savagely.

“Oh, Major,” she whispered, “you'd better close that tent flap, sir! I don't want my neighbors to see us.”

He was too astonished by her reaction not to comply.

He grabbed her by her small waist and started to kiss her again.

Was he mad?

Her hands went to his face and she stepped backwards to the bed behind her. He followed as if mesmerized.

She wore little under her dress and he soon found himself groping and grasping fleshy breasts and an enticing belly. Such a wonderful bosom: her breasts were firm and full!

He slid hungry hands along her thighs, too muscled to be fashionable, but they fired his cock at his memory of her sitting astride on that horse. He lowered her bodice and kneaded her breasts eagerly, his thumbs caressing her dark nipples that were already hard and swollen.

There was no room for thought when their passion took them.

God, she really was wonderful and soft. A dead man's wife and he could not care less. Christ, what had his world come to!

She uttered a little moan when he suddenly moved away from her, racked by guilt at making love to a recently widowed woman.

"Please don't leave," she pleaded.

She looked deliciously wanton with her lips full and bloated by his eager kisses. Her hair had come loose from the bun and the braid; they now lay in a lascivious halo around her face.

He stared down at her full white legs with the soft curly hairs down at their apex.

"God, Cordelia," he ground out, "I shouldn't..."

She bent her knees and more wantonly spread her thighs, giving him a breathless look into the place where he ached to be most.

He licked his lips, swallowed with the intimate sight of her lovely body and tore at the buttons of his fly.

He squeezed his eyes shut as he concentrated on entering her and almost went over the edge when he felt her hold him with her inner muscles.

It was a ride to heaven and back.

She might not have slept with Williams for a long time, but she knew all the motions and to his delight, she also knew how to reserve pleasure for herself.

He sat up, his hands automatically refastening his breeches.

“I am sorry, Cordelia,” he apologized guiltily, “that was uncalled for. I don’t know how that happened.”

She smiled impishly. Her teeth were slightly crooked, but very white.

“I do, Devon. I always wondered what it would be like with you. You have a reputation as a good lover, you know, even if you don’t seem to go after so many women.”

She got up without refastening her bodice and poured two cups from a flask.

“It’s wine from Aquitaine. Maybe I can persuade you to stay a little longer?”

She flashed a seductive smile at him.

He knew then that he was not going anywhere.

“Please don’t feel guilty, Devon,” she urged him, understanding his feelings of remorse. “It had not been a

real marriage for some years. There were always others. He preferred the blanket girls to me. He loathed my inexperience. How could I have been otherwise? I was given to him in marriage when I was sixteen. I had no dowry and my parents were happy that I could catch an officer of the celebrated Williams' family. He was already thirty-seven when we married. His former wife followed the drum with him and he wanted me to do the same. It's just that I was too young and innocent to give him the comfort he sought. Please don't look so sad, I was glad he had the camp followers, so that he would not have to resort to raping me."

Devon looked into the cup. The wine was good, full-bodied and of a fine colour.

"What will you do now that the war will be over?"

She took a sip from her wine and straightened her back.

"My father owns a shipyard in Hull. My parents adore me. They will be happy when I come back home and I will be able to live there with my head up high. I will get a widow's pension at least."

"What about his family? Will they not take care of you?"

She shrugged and put her cup on the floor.

She straddled his lap and started to kiss him again, first shyly, then with more insistence when he smiled and let his hands roam over her curves.

"Will you stay the night, just this one night?"

He reached for the buttons at the back of her dress.



“Yes, I’ll happily stay the night,” he whispered in a delicious, small ear. “I owe you a better turn than I just did you. I can’t wait to do it again!”

Later, on his way back to London, when Devon tried to figure out their wanton need for each other at the aftermath of a grueling battle and Rory Williams’ death, he realized that he now understood the difference between taking his pleasures in a brothel and making love to Cordelia Williams, a widow for less than an afternoon.

She had needed him as much as he had felt this incredible need for her. She had taken pleasure out of him as he had when he had ravished her amazing, lithe body. It was like a two-way street, something he had never experienced before in his life.

Whores accommodated and pretended, but they were careful never to take their own need from a customer.

He wondered if he would ever be able to experience again such a gift as Cordelia had bestowed him.

He almost turned back to France, to her; this widow of his heart, this lover for a night, who never seemed to leave his head in all those days that followed their short, but memorable, love affair.

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## Chapter 1: BACK AT THE TUILERIES

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He looked around the room that had once been his private bedroom. His eyes glistened when he noticed that nothing had been dismantled. The old Bourbon King had not even thought of removing the glory of his predecessor, the usurper who made himself into the Emperor of France.

His lips curled into a sardonic smile.

“Marchand?” he called out.

The valet was immediately behind him.

“Sire, your bath is ready and the doctor is awaiting your summons.”

He nodded and started to open his favourite blue jacket with the red and gold trimmings that he had been wearing for the occasion of his triumphant return. It had come with him all the way from the cursed isle of Elba.

His valet gestured at the waiting footmen to make themselves scarce at once. Marchand did not need them for anything now. The moment the Emperor had entered his beloved Tuileries everybody had run to prepare for his first night at home. That had been more than six hours ago.

The clock in the room started to chime just three strikes and he looked up.

“That late?” he wondered, but then he realized that he had only been in Paris since nine o’clock in the evening. Everything had been a whirl, from then on. He had been too elated to watch his constitution and now he

suddenly found himself in discomfort because of his disregard.

He cursed softly. Health was everything to a conquering emperor and it was the most difficult commodity to obtain as soon as one found himself lacking it.

“Will Corvisart be here?” he asked with hope lacing his voice.

Marchand shook his head with a sad face.

“He is ailing, Sire. He is not even able to get up, nowadays. But Monsieur de Larrey awaits you, if necessary, with the Eau Blanche.”

The valet bent deeply over Napoleon’s boots. He was not certain what exactly ailed the Emperor tonight: his bowels, his stomach or his piles, but the lines in his face betrayed that he was very uncomfortable.

Marchand stared at the Emperor’s boots he was now holding. They were wider than ever. His emperor had become fat if not obese.

He pressed his lips together. He was certain it had started after the cursed mission into Russia: lack of food had been compensated with an abundance of it. That and the Emperor’s eternal digestive problems.

He should not have come back tonight in this way, the valet thought with sudden insight.

He should have rested and then entered Paris heading all the faithful men that had flocked to his banner again. His son’s birthday today, the reason why he wanted to be inside of the Parisian gates, be damned!

Marchand felt like crossing himself, something he had not done for a long time. He did it after all, when the Emperor slowly walked to the door of his dressing room to take his late bath, because Marchand had the sinking feeling that Napoleon Bonaparte needed all the help he could get if he was to keep a firm hold of today's reclaimed throne.

The Duke of Lindley hurried into his library. He mumbled a curse when his robe opened up enough to show a muscled naked thigh.

When the messenger came he had been in his young wife's bed, ready for her embrace and a few more physical treats.

He nodded at the young man, who was dressed like a French civilian. The man was leaning heavily against the back of his chair. No doubt he had a very long and tiring day and night of travelling behind him.

The Duke fell into his opulent chair, signalling the young man to remain seated. No need to stand on protocol in the deep of the night.

"He's back in Paris?" the Duke asked, folding his robe over his legs. It had been only minutes since he had left Attelante's bed and he was still half aroused.

The young man in front of him stiffened, betraying his background as a military man.

"He wanted to be back in Paris on his son's birthday, which hampered him when he tried to make a triumph of it. He arrived in the thick of a mist at nine o'clock in the evening. Not many knew he was in town already and

fewer of the population seemed happy with him. He lost them too many sons, your grace. It were merely the military men at court that were happy with his return. Louis started to earn their scorn because he was favouring the old ones of the ancient regime that had not lost their heads under Madame Guillotine. They detested the upstarts, especially the military ones.”

The Duke nodded.

He had already read reports on the situation in Paris with Louis losing control. The fool had acted as if the years of Napoleon and the Revolution had never happened, reinstating the idiocy of the ancient regime as it was before his brother King Louis XVI lost his head.

Richard looked longingly at his cigars, but decided against smoking one. Attelante hated the smell of them, let alone the taste, and he longed to spend what was left of the night in her sumptuous bed.

“Did you get a health report on him?”

“Yes. He’s not well. His piles are killing him after having been on horseback for weeks. He’s overweight to the point of obesity and his stomach cramps are disrupting his daily routines. He’s as far from the energetic officer of yore as anything. Gone is the always alert man: he needs more sleep than ever. He’s morose, which is not characteristic of him. To be honest: we think he is a very ill man.”

“How do the French feel about him?”

The officer eyed the duke warily.

“As I said: he lost them too many sons and husbands because of his wars. One may doubt whether they’d truly

want him back if it had not been for Louis' stupidities. Orleans should have shown the people some lenience and understanding. Some light at the end of the tunnel instead of a road back to the old hated ways."

"Good!" Lindley exclaimed, "I gather he won't storm our Kingdom in a hurry. I'll have my butler assign you a room here, so that I can have a full report in the morning. Let's say eight thirty. Anything remotely important that I need to know now?"

The man smiled tiredly and shook his head. He was happy that the Duke had ordered him to stay at his residence. It would have been a long way back to the barracks otherwise.

The Duke opened the door to the hallway and signalled a footman to take care of bedding down his most important spy, grinning at a hastily dressed Poussin who had been awakened when the Duke had left his warm bed.

"The lieutenant needs a bed and gear to write his report tomorrow morning, Poussin," he said hurriedly.

He had just realized that his wife might not have waited for him to return and gone back to sleep again. She was in the early months of her pregnancy and he had noticed she could easily sleep standing up at whatever she was doing.

Poussin kept a grin from his face when he saw his master hurrying up the stairs to the ducal apartments.

God bless the beautiful new duchess, he mused. She had managed to keep the rakish Duke of Lindley by her side with his full attention, even now that she was

breeding. At last now Poussin could run a tight household, with the Duke's sister, Lady Sophia, in her house in Whitesands and no more whores and hopeful mistresses to kick off the servant's stairs.

He listened at the door of his duchess' bedroom and produced a toothy smile. Thank God her grace had waited up for his boss!

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## Chapter 2: BERTHA'S PREDICAMENTS

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“You really should stop crying now, child, you’ll be one mess of tears and Ma’am won’t like that one bit!”

Cook Mulligan replaced her generous behind on the bench, reaching out for the sad girl who had been in tears for more than twenty minutes now.

“I know you’ve got reason enough to cry, love, but please, if Ma’am hears about it there will be hell to pay!”

Cook reached for a cookie jar and offered Bertha one with a hangdog look on her face.

Bertha gazed at it with a tear-stained face, emitting a final hiccup. She pushed the long blond hair out of her face with a last sniff.

Mrs. Mulligan shook her head. No wonder those old geezers had debased the girl... She was incredibly beautiful. The light-blond hair that had never seen the artificial bleach the girls in the house tended to use, the heart-shaped face and the unique almond shaped emerald green eyes... There was nothing not to commend the girl’s figure either, although it probably had lost quite a lot of its so fashionable pudginess since Bertha had to work hard for her daily meals and her place to sleep.

She nodded encouragingly at the girl.

“Th... Thank you, Mrs. Mulligan.” Bertha tried to smile at her consoler, looking for her handkerchief.



Cook grasped it and studied the beautifully composed embroidered initials: RD, surrounded by flowers and an exotic bird.

"If only you could have found work with that embroidering of yours..." Cook sighed regretfully, "You really don't belong here, Bertha. You're more a lady than all of us in this house combined."

That remark at last made Bertha smile. A brothel was hardly a place where one could find any lady.

"He didn't hurt you badly, did he?"

Cook's face was full of concern. After twelve years of work in Mrs. Majorica's House of Pleasure, and despite it being called 'the Fancy Shoppe', she thought she had seen it all. Until Bertha appeared one bad day at the kitchen's doorstep.

Bertha shook her head, trying to contain her new upcoming tears.

"No, I was already... Ma'am's brother already had..."

"Yes, that beast Pettigrew! He's abused many a girl, even here... I'm glad he found his way to the gibbet."

Cook had spoken ferociously and then started to look around cautiously. The Madam still had a soft spot for the brother who had murdered his own lover after a fight when a gun went off. He had paid for it with a public execution.

Bertha looked down on the sturdy oak work table.

"At least Mrs. G... Mrs. Majorica did not want me for the business. She told me to go and help you out since Kelly wants to work upstairs."

Cook gazed at the beautiful woman who was sitting so forlornly at her kitchen table. Although her blond hair was starting to come loose from the moorings of a tight bun and her green eyes were red from crying, she still looked stunning.

“I cannot imagine...” she started to say.

Any Madam would like to have a glorious girl like Bertha in her selection.

“She said I was not useful since I’m too big... down there... Men seem to like to have somebody who’s tight.”

She pursed her lips. It was a terrible confession, but if she did not tell Cook now the kind woman would hear it from somebody else anyway.

“Did you have a child, that you have... that problem?” Cook asked shyly, thinking it bad enough that the girl came up with such an intimate confession.

Bertha shook her head.

“No, I don’t have a clue what caused that.”

She suddenly grinned.

“At least it has protected me from being put to work upstairs with the other girls.”

Cook rose to fetch the teapot. The cookie jar was still untouched.

“Let’s have some tea then, Bertha. We’ll have to start on the pies soon enough. Have you ever made pies before?”

When Bertha shook her head again, she continued: “As I said, Bertha, you’re a lady. You should be having tea all day with the gentry and do that lovely embroidery in the evening, waiting for an extraordinary man to claim

you as his wife. I hope you will be a quick student; otherwise Ma'am will have you out on the cobbles in no time. Not useful, indeed!"

Bertha frowned and poured the tea for both of them. It had been a reflex: she had done it hundreds of times at Hillview Manor when life was still beautiful and mostly uncomplicated.

Her mother, second wife to the Baron of Dunstead, who was also Bertha's father, (albeit years before he brought her mother and her into the house, when Bertha was sixteen years old), had never liked to do anything that looked remotely like servant's work. It had not helped to explain to her that even duchesses would take their place behind a tea-tray if need be.

Anyway, Bertha's half-sister Robin had done all the work in the house that was not strictly done by the servants as soon as the Baron had passed away. It had been her mother's petty revenge, to humiliate the girl whenever she could. Bertha had been very sad about that, but she had known there was no way to stop her mother if she had her mind on something.

She heaved a sigh and looked down at her hands.

She was to be twenty-four years old soon enough, but she found herself no longer dwelling in a perfect mansion with a little army of servants, a beautiful but bossy mother and an ever smiling brave little sister who did all the management an estate required.

Bertha's mother, Baron Dunstead's one time lover, who became almost seven years ago his second wife, had ruined everything because of her greediness. Bertha had

only been told about them after all the vile deeds had been done towards her sister, and she had not been able to do anything about them. Her mother and her lover Pettigrew, whom Bertha had known back in her childhood days, had concocted a plan to abduct her half-sister Robin and force her to marry a lowly footman in order to give Bertha a chance to inherit the Dunstead possessions the Baron had tried to bequeath in his testament. The Baron had stated that Robin or Bertha could only indirectly inherit the barony if they married a peer of the realm and birthed a male child. Although everybody had assumed that the Barony of Dunstead had been lost for the line, some very old, unwed nephew had unexpectedly been dug up and inherited, awaiting the birth of a child of one of the Dunstead girls, preferably Robin Dunstead's, as Bertha's rights were a bit shady.

As it turned out, the man Evelyn Dunstead thought a lowly footman had been 'dressed up' for a masquerade ball. In reality he was a baron in his own right and also the heir of the Earl of Wentworth.

The discovery that Robin's new husband-to-be was of the peerage had almost killed her mother: she had swooned in the smithy in Gretna Green and had been diagnosed with a heart-attack.

Pettigrew had brought her to York where his sister Madam Majorica let them a small place until Evelyn could get her hands on her own part of her husband's inheritance: as the Baron's wife she would have inherited some of his not entailed property, but that part of his testament had disappeared.

They had ordered Bertha to get out of Hillview Manor and take a coach to York.

There had been a hidden note that told her to take everything of value out of the manor, but by the time Bertha got the message all kinds of people had already come into the house and ordered the servants to seal and hide everything of worth.

Apart from a valise of clothes and her embroidery basket, Bertha had taken the jewellery her father had gifted to her, which had been hidden in the chest in front of her bed. It had been easy to hide her pretty baubles in rolls of silk thread and small pieces of cloth.

When she had arrived in York she found herself in the middle of very nasty quarrels between Pettigrew and her mother. The quarrels only got worse when she told her mother that she had not been able to take away anything of value or any money. She remained silent about her jewellery which might carry a worth of about a thousand pounds, if not more.

Pettigrew thought he might use whatever money they still had for gambling. He was certain he would win a fortune but of course he ended up with nothing and the last thing Bertha wanted was to use her little nest egg for Pettigrew's redoubtable purposes.

When worse came to worse Pettigrew had the fine idea of offering his sister, the renowned Madam Majorica, Bertha's services.

He decided he had to 'try out' Bertha first, to see if she was 'any good,' conveniently forgetting that she

would have made a far better price on that sort of market as a virgin.

When her mother found out about his ghastly rape she took Pettigrew's loaded pistol out of a closet and tried to shoot him. In the uneven fight, as Pettigrew was muscled and about six stone heavier than his opponent, the pistol went off and immediately killed her mother. Although Pettigrew fled the house he was apprehended within an hour of the shooting. It was his undoing that he had always been a very nasty person who owed half of the York businessmen money. His trial was quick and he was hanged within a month of his crime.

The only one who mourned him was his jaded sister, Madame Majorica, and maybe her equally unsavoury husband.

Bertha had been brought up and educated under the Baron's protection. She had been sent to a little ladies' boarding school since the age of six. The Baron had chosen a school for her where her initial illegitimacy would be 'overlooked.' When the Baron had started his stormy affair with the less ladylike Evelyn he had been a jolly bachelor, soon to be married to a rich girl from the Wharton family. Evelyn had made such a hubbub about her pregnancy that he had reluctantly given Bertha his name.

Bertha had always been a quiet, unassuming, albeit inordinately pretty girl and her teachers had liked her for it.

She had been brought to the Baron's house at the age of sixteen, shortly after his wife had died. It had not

taken long thereafter for her mother to take her place as his legal wife at the other side of their table.

Bertha had been pleased and surprised to find a sister, two years her junior, in the house. Her mother had been less glad of the adorable Robin. She had done everything in her power to make the girl as uncomfortable as possible after the Baron died, only three years after her own elevation to a baroness, until she went too far and got herself into a corner from where there was no escape: abducting a woman of the gentry and forcing her to marry far below her station was a felony.

Bertha had often wondered when justice would find them. Eventually it did, in a horrendous fashion.

Bertha had to hide for months, trying to live on the sale of her embroidery, not daring to sell her hidden baubles as she was certain that Pettigrew's lot were watching her closely.

It was the leering Mr Grimsdale, Madam Majorica's husband, who decided to fasten the thumbscrews on Bertha's existence and raise the rent on Bertha's tiny house.

He reminded her of the promise Pettigrew had made him, to hand her over for business at 'The Fancy Shoppe', and tried her out the moment she walked into the premises, as most pimps were obviously wont to do.

Grimsdale had forced himself upon her person, but had quickly retreated from her after one poke with his objectionable, dirty male member, declaring that she was 'as big as an empty jar down there.'

Madam Majorica had listened to him with a stoic face and had declared Bertha unfit (Bertha had smiled at that unwitting pun) for regular business.

As one of the girls in the kitchen had wanted to go into the profession of a girl of pleasure, Bertha had been sent down to the brothel's large kitchen 'to replace her, until something else came up.'

Cook patted Bertha's hand when she saw that Bertha's tears had dried up without attempting to make reappearance.

"Pies!" she exclaimed. Bertha nodded and rose from her impromptu tea: to learn how to make the brothel's most valued snack.

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### Chapter 3: TALKING ABOUT A SLIGHT PROBLEM

\*

“I’ve got to piss.”

David peered into the dark shadows of the room where the candle light did not reach. “Where’s the bloody chamber pot?”

“Outside the door,” the girl said with a yawn, “the potboy always leaves it there.”

He grunted and opened the door.

There it was. He thankfully emptied his bladder and left the pot in front of the door.

He was only dressed in his shirt, but at least that gave him some protection from the draught in the hallway.

He looked up when he heard grunts and bumping noises.

He returned to the room with a grin and closed the door quietly behind him. He might as well go back to bed; it must be the very deep of the night.

When he clambered back into the smelly bed the girl shifted herself against him.

“Would you like to try for another round?” she asked him without showing a lot of enthusiasm.

“Try?” he mimicked her with a wary voice.

His head pounded and he felt slightly sick, probably due to the bad gin he had imbibed when they had started their long night of debaucheries.

“The madam told me I was to be your last, ah... customer, so I can take my time, can’t I?”

He hoped Jeffrey would also stay for the whole night, so they would not have to go back to his rooms in this bloody cold.

“I heard my friend is still at it,” he remarked casually, pinching a big pink nipple.

She nodded, suppressing another yawn.

“Not still, prob’ly only just,” she said, looking sidelong at him.

She wondered if she could go to sleep now or that he would give it another try. The first one had not been very impressive, but it had been plain that he had been drinking a lot.

He was a handsome man, a gentleman, no doubt. She did not get this sort often in her bed in the house off Covent Garden. They mostly went to the more luxurious brothels. He had come with the Big Hunk who had been a regular for the last couple of weeks.

“Why would my friend just have started?” he asked.

She moved up against him, snuggling against his shoulder. His shirt smelled of starch. Yes, definitely a well taken care of gentleman, this one. Most of her customers normally did not change shirts more than once a month, if ever. She knew of those things; she had washed Gary’s shirts, and starched them, for two years. She closed her eyes. It would not do her any good to think of Gary right now.

“Kate was not available,” she muttered, “she was with someone else, so he had to wait.”

David frowned.

“Why did he not take one of the other girls?”

He pondered that it was a quiet night with that storm outside and it only being a Tuesday.

She suppressed a shudder and plied the thin blanket over her naked shoulder. This year March had been freezing.

“Oh,” she mumbled, “he’s one of her special customers. Only Kate can take him, you see...”

He frowned.

“Why’s that then?”

She sighed resignedly. Talking or otherwise, she was not going to get any sleep yet.

“He’s too big down there.”

She pointed in the region of David’s genitals.

“Hung like a horse, Kate says.”

David laughed mockingly.

“Is he now? I thought women liked that.”

She shook her head with a scant smile.

“Uh-huh. Why do men always think that women like the big ones? A guy like that would tear me apart and it hurts like crazy. Kate can take him because she had some... some mishap after she had her last child.”

David mused about the whore’s words. Wasn’t it every man’s dream to be, well maybe not hung like a horse but of an impressive size? Obviously women thought differently about the matter.

She seemed to guess his train of thoughts.

“It’s not so much the length as the width,” she explained, “you can’t circle his with one hand. If you

have that one inside you it's like birthing a babe all over again."

David looked at her hands. They were small but rough. Not a pampered whore's hands, he thought, but then this brothel was not one of the more expensive ones he normally tended to visit. It had been Jeffrey's idea to go here in the first place. Now he understood why.

She raised her arms to wipe her hair from her face and to pull it into a knot behind her head. Her armpits were hairy and they exhaled a sweaty but girlish smell. Jeffrey had told him the girls in this house were obliged to wash. Most whores did not bother to get themselves into a tub of hot water now and then.

David had been too long in the army not to be used to the acrid smells that went with those girls' more intimate parts of their bodies.

He felt himself stirring and grabbed her hand to lead it to his cock.

"Maybe we should go for another round after all," he mumbled.

She smiled. At least she might get warmer if they did some bed sport and she was wide awake now anyway.

When he was done he fell back in the bed alongside her.

She clung to him merely for the sake of his warmth, not to show any affection. Whores were not paid to show affection.

She was glad when he extinguished their only candle and turned his back on her, at last ready to go to sleep

again. She clung to his back for his warmth, her belly against his firm buttocks.

“Don’t do that, love,” he whispered sleepily, “you’ll make me grow again...”

She hastened to scramble away from him.

David looked his best friend over with a questioning expression.

“You look like shit, Jeff,” he said amicably, “I gather you did not get a lot of sleep last night?”

Jeffrey played with his coddled eggs. This morning his legendary appetite had escaped him. He sent David a quick look.

“I had to wait till midnight before the girl could have me. By the time I landed in her bed I think I wore her out less than I did myself. Damned, but I needed a good fuck, Dave!”

David watched his friend closely. The man was a giant at over 6 foot 6 inches tall. Anticipating that he wanted to find himself a paid lover he had not worn his elaborate blue-white and red captain’s uniform of the King’s Own Cavalry.

“Still in love with her?” he asked quietly.

They both knew they were not talking about the whore who was now at last sleeping in her cot.

Jeffrey shrugged and pulled a face after he had taken a swallow from his mug filled with coffee.

“Nope. Not really. Not since Bruno Bouchier told me there are chances that she is my sister. She’s now entirely

Brondemeire's, what with that belly full of his growing seed."

He looked pensively at his plate.

"I'm bloody tired and I have to get my arse all the way to Caversham. What a bad time for Evan to hand me over the stick."

"You could take Basil's travelling carriage and sleep all the way," David suggested, "I don't think he's going anywhere with his nuptials so close."

His voice sounded harsh when he mentioned his older brother's name. Basil was almost thirty years his senior, but had managed to steal David's hope for richness and some sort of marital happiness away from him: Lady Aline Fairfax, heiress and daughter to the now deceased Earl of Rotherham. She was to marry his ancient brother in a few weeks' time.

"I'll bring your horses to his farm in Richmond, so you don't have to exhaust them on your trip home. Bloody Napoleon will no doubt wait a while before he starts his great attack on the Allies. Lindley said that they expect him to have his Grande Armée ready in June."

"Yeah, thanks Dave, I might just do that. No use exhausting my best horses for a trip up North."

David watched his best friend closely, wondering if he was coming down with some illness or another. It was not like the always energetic and exuberant new Baron of Caversham to be so down.

"Was she any good, that girl?" he asked curiously.

"Kate?" Jeffrey mumbled, "She was okay, I guess. Nothing to your liking, though," he added carefully.

David suddenly grinned.

"I'm not that well hung, my friend. Glad to hear that you need them with special requirements. Men like you tend to give us, the normal ones, frustrations."

Jeffrey reddened uncharacteristically.

"I can fuck any woman, nosy, but it's more fun when she can move around me a bit."

The first part of his comment was not entirely true. Even in the army some women had flat out refused to give him the bodily service he required. They complained he was ripping them apart. On the other hand, when word got out about his extreme extremity other women tended to seek him out.

"Don't bite my head off, Jeff!" David complained, "I was only kidding you a bit. I'm glad you found a woman to your liking. Mine was okay, but when we woke up this morning the bed was wet with her milk. I had another go with her while she was spouting like a whale. I should have waited until she had fed her child."

It was Jeffrey's turn to grin.

"You could have had your breakfast with her there and then," he joked.

David was happy to see his friend in an apparent good mood again

"Tastes like nothing," he assured his friend.

Jeffrey rose and threw some coins on the table.

"Gottago," he drawled. "Does Basil keep the coach in Richmond? I'll bring Meringue and Feet First there myself."

“Wait up for me, Jeff,” David called after him, “they won’t let you into Basil’s apartment unless I’m there. Some people have done their best to destroy our reputation.”

“Nice!” Jeffrey cried at him, “If it serves my memory right it was you who puked over the whole place last time.”

David barked a laugh, truly glad to see his friend being his own self again.

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## Chapter 4: A GRAVESIDE CONVERSATION

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The woman gasped when Peter touched her arm. She turned around, opening her mouth for a shriek that never emerged.

“You!” she gulped, forgetting all decorum.

“Me.” Peter said quietly.

He was dressed in his major’s dress uniform, wearing the trappings that came with his rank over his Black Watch kilt.

“Why are you here?” she now huffed, pointedly taking a step away from him.

His rugged smile appeared slowly on his handsome face.

“For the same reason as you are here? To pay my respects to my poor dead wife, your adored sister?”

He knew he was not able to withhold the sarcasm from his reply.

“Stay away from me, Peter Wallace!” she warned, taking two more steps backward.

“More steps and you’ll fall into that newly dug grave! What’s ailing you, Amelia? Do I have the pox or another contagious disease?”

His voice sounded more hurt than ironic this time.

She took some seconds to peer at his face.

Damnation, he was still the handsome Peter Wallace of yore, even with the ugly scar marring his left cheek.

“You killed her!”

The vehemence in her voice was suddenly back.

The expression on his face went very sad.

“You too?” he asked, “How could I have killed her when I was still in France when she died? She died of sadness, true, but the sadness was her own, never incurred through me.”

“She died because you did not love her. It ate at her!”

He looked up at the sky. The clouds were dark grey with the water that filled them. They were in for a deluge soon enough.

His brown eyes went back to Amelia’s exquisite face. She was dressed entirely in black as she had been no doubt wont to do for the last year. She looked sophisticated and stern in that colour: she was one of the few women who actually looked great in black, with her straw blond hair and her stark features.

“Whose fault was that? Who forced us into a marriage when I had my eyes on you? Who decided that a poor lieutenant, with a blemish due to his birth, was not going to be good enough for the eldest of the St. Just sisters?”

“You liked her well enough,” Amelia snapped, reddening.

His face contorted and before he could help himself he grabbed her by her shoulders.

“You should know by now that to like someone is not reason enough to share a life as husband and wife!”

He heard himself shouting at her and he cringed, taking his hands from her shoulders.

She did not move; she just stared at him.

He turned away from her, not able to look into that beloved face any more.

Oh, Christina had borne a likeness to her, but that had only made matters worse. It had gnawed at him that he had known Christina had pined for his love, for a gentle gesture, for some sweetness coming from her husband. It had not only been Amelia's idea to trap him into a marriage with Christina, it had been Christina's urgings as well, because she knew that Amelia wanted to aim higher than a mere Scottish officer in the King's army. Christina had foolishly hoped that the fact she loved Peter Wallace, would be enough for the both of them.

Amelia's eyes suddenly filled with tears.

She had known for several years now that Peter was right: there was more to look for in a husband than his position and his money. She had been a fool to think that a noble title and well filled coffers would solve all her problems.

She shifted from one foot to another, trying to eject the burning sensation that Peter's hands on her shoulders had caused. It had been last night's beating that made her cringe. Harmon Aubrey's beating, because she had not reacted instantly to his amorous mood. At least that was what he had accused her of. After seven years of marriage to his lordship though, Amelia knew that he could always find a reason and a stick to hit her with, if he felt like it.

"What will you do from now on, Peter?" she asked, trying to stand entirely still.

Aubrey's stick had not missed her hips and her legs this last time and almost every movement brought her a stab of pain.

Peter had caught her wince and wondered what was wrong with her.

"I need to find a place for Nimmy. There is no one to take care of her in Wattles, now that almost everybody has so conveniently died. I have to be quick about it as I have to report to London in a week's time. I am to ship to Antwerp with my regiment as Wellington expects Napoleon to make a battlefield out of Flanders."

"What do you mean you have to find a place for Nimmy? She's my little niece, remember? She can come to live with me and Jilly until you've got that new war and your circumstances worked out!"

He stared at her.

"That's very generous of you, Amelia. I don't know what to say..."

"That's bloo... blooming nonsense, Peter. You know Chrissie would have wanted me to take care of her daughter."

She looked quickly behind her when she heard a carriage approaching the graveyard and her lips seemed to form an expletive.

"That's Aubrey."

She sounded a lot more composed than she felt.

"He'd better not see you here, Peter. He'll be leaving for London early tomorrow, so please bring Nimmy around after the noon hour."

"I can't," Peter said hurriedly, not entirely understanding why they could not see each other. Harmon Aubrey was his brother-in-law and he did not understand Amelia's sudden panic.

"She's still in Wattles. It will take me at least three days to pick her up and bring her to York and then I'm not counting what I have to do since I inherited... Well, no matter. I will get her into York alright."

"Come tomorrow and we will sort it out. Come at nine, then, if you are so short with time."

Without another word she turned around and hurried to the graveyard's gates.

He stared after her, his confusion warring with the fact that he still felt the old way, whenever he saw her: hopelessly, desperately in love.

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## Chapter 5: DESOLATE CAVERSHAM

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Jeffrey leaned against the door of the travelling coach, almost forgetting that he had wanted to light a cheroot the moment the footmen had opened the door for him.

Blast, but the house was a shambles! It had been a neglected place when he had left it more than four years ago, but he had never seen it in such disrepair and so unkempt!

He bent over and lit the cheroot anyway, away from the wind that seemed to howl around his borrowed carriage with the golden Ware crest on its doors.

“Shall I knock, my lord?” the footman with the most initiative asked him.

The fellow seemed entirely out of place with his rich footman’s garb in the shabby surroundings of the dilapidated manor.

Jeffrey squeezed one eye shut against the smoke of the lighted cheroot. He detected movement at the front door and held a staying hand.

“It seems my sister-in-law finally found her way to the door,” he mumbled, watching a woman extracting herself from the opening of the one-hundred-year-old oak door.

When the blond woman noticed him she threw her arms wide and smiled a broad, gap-toothed smile at him.

“Jeffrey!” she yelled, “At last, oh, at last!”

He crinkled his nose when she threw herself full force at him. Damn, but Elma badly needed a wash, and a

change of clothes, if he was not mistaken. He quickly held her away from him.

“Oh, Jeffrey!” Elma gushed, taking in his beautiful blue Captain’s uniform with the white snug breeches, his expensive boots and his gold watch dangling on a chain, “You look as spectacular as ever! How I missed you!”

“Hum, you look quite dandy as well,” Jeffrey lied, taking in the shabby black dress with the deep cleavage, her face stained with dirt and pimples. Her hands were dirty and her hair was greasy and unkempt.

He looked quickly at the two Ware footmen next to his transport and at the coach driver who was still sitting on his perch. Maybe he should not be ashamed of his sister-in-law’s appearance, not in front of Basil Ware’s snooty staff, but he felt a twinge of irritation at Elma’s indifference for appearances. She had always been like that. She had always been unsuitable to become the Baroness of Caversham and truth be told, nobody would ever have expected her to acquire that elevated position, if it had not been for the fact that Nigel and his wife had died and Evan had taken over the position to perish hardly a year later.

“Drive around to the stables,” he ordered the still gaping coach driver curtly.

“Is there somebody to help them out there?” he asked Elma.

She nodded happily.

“We still got Dennis Tanner. He’s been around here forever.”

Jeffrey looked at her with a cocked brow. He did not entirely trust the way she mentioned Dennis Tanner's name.

"Are you able to receive us?" he asked quietly.

She blushed and rubbed her arms.

"You'll have to help me out to feed them," she pointed her chin at the Ware staff that had not yet moved a muscle, "but I'm sure that won't be a problem for you. There is hay for the horses. Dennis brought it in yesterday after you wrote us you were coming."

She slid a dirty finger over the gold on his sleeve.

Jeffrey felt like snapping his arm away from her, but controlled himself. He had been an officer in the Peninsula and was used to far worse than an unkempt woman. He glared at the staring Ware men instead.

"Get my luggage inside and off with the coach. Report to me when the horses have been taken care of."

A footman raised an insolent brow but wisely refrained from uttering any remarks. After all was said and done the captain was a close friend of the Marques of Ware's brother and a new baron to boot. He pulled Jeffrey's one trunk from the roof and waited for the baron to move into his ancestral home.

Jeffrey raised a blond brow. God, but the house looked a dump!

"Jesus Christ, Elma, what has happened here?"

Jeffrey stayed rooted to the floor after entering the drawing room. Apart from a table with four chairs and a couch the room was empty.



“You happened, and the old stupid baron happened and they all died on me...”

Elma seemed close to tears and Jeffrey stepped forward to take her in his arms, as his protective nature won over his disgust of the smell she emanated.

He led her quickly to the couch and had to force her to sit down. She obviously relished a stay in his arms more than a place on the old smelly seat.

Elma rubbed her eyes, managing to stripe her face more with the dirt on her hands.

“It all went wrong after your father married that witch, Anthea Fairfax. He dropped dead and she withdrew all her money. Then Nigel and Sally got ill and died on us. Evan did not know what to do. The income of the farms dwindled to nothing in the last years and we would all have gone hungry if not...”

She stopped with a mulish expression on her face. She knew that after a letter from Bruno Bouchier, the local doctor, to Anthea Fairfax, small amounts of money had started to come to the house to keep the last inhabitants of the house more or less alive. It had not been enough to provide Elma with a new dress or to buy the food and sweets she always craved. The last shilling they had was spent to buy the hay for Jeffrey’s horses for God’s sakes! At least he was home now and all would be well!

Jeffrey stiffened after she mentioned Anthea’s name. He still could not get used to the fact that she was somebody else’s wife now, or that there might be truth in the rumour that she could be his sister! His sister! Bruno Bouchier had written him that there was evidence that

Jeffrey's mother had an affair with Anthea's father Cyril Fairfax, the now deceased Earl of Rotherham, at the time that Jeffrey had been conceived. He was born within nine months after that affair and nobody could be the wiser as to who had actually sired him; his father Baron Caversham or Cyril Fairfax.

He clamped his jaws together. At least that accounted for why the Earl had gone through the trouble to get him out of Rotherham and into a prestigious regiment, away from his precious daughter. It also accounted for the allowance Jeffrey still received; money coming out of Cyril's coffers. Anyone as rich as Cyril would do that for the son he had never truly been able to acknowledge.

Elma stared at him when he remained silent for some time. She reminded herself that Jeffrey had been in love with Anthea Fairfax for about forever. He had been when Evan Burroughs had brought her into the house more than five years ago.

Her eyes started to mist over when she thought about Evan, her deceased husband. Whatever everybody said, she had always been fond of him. Evan had been a dreamer, the ridiculed opposite of his brothers Nigel and Jeffrey. He had loved her to distraction and had married her even if she was not entirely suitable for the second son of a baron: her father had been a schoolmaster and a gentleman and although her mother came from sound village stock, there had not been one drop of blue blood floating in her veins.

Her mother had been dead a long time before Evan came to offer her his hand in marriage. Her father had

gone into a decline after her mother died, not caring what happened around him. She had grown wild and ungovernable. It was just as well that the starry-eyed Evan came to take her away from Little Hopeville after he had been stranded there when he was travelling the countryside to seek inspiration for his paintings.

She looked hesitantly down at her clothes, noticing for maybe the first time in weeks that she must look a fright. Oh, well, now that Jeffrey was back everything was certain to be alright soon.

“What happened at the house, Bruno?”

Jeffrey folded his hands behind his back in a typical officer’s stance and stared out of the window.

Bruno Bouchier watched him from an eared chair.

“We are not certain, Jeff,” he answered quietly, “I think it has something to do with the dirt, the ditches or the rats. It was terribly contagious and everybody that was not afflicted has fled that house, ah... your house.”

Jeffrey turned around to look at the man who was also supposed to be his half-brother. Cyril Fairfax had done his utmost to populate the area of Rotherham with his bastards. They were mostly boys or men, as far as he knew now. Only Cyril’s three legitimate children were daughters.

He studied the local doctor with a discerning eye. Bruno was tall, but his hair was frizzy and brownish, unlike Jeffrey’s straight blond locks. A short hope welled in him that he had not sprouted from Cyril Fairfax’ loins after all, but he soon felt the futility of that thought.

“Elma is still there...”

Bruno’s brown eyes sought Jeffrey’s face. No doubt the boy was in torment. Things had changed so rapidly at Caversham while he had been away at the wars in the Peninsula and later France.

When the army had returned its officers and men to Britain he had warned Jeffrey away from the house in a short letter. Evan had already been ailing when they had buried Nigel and he had forbidden Jeffrey to come to Caversham, even after so many years of fighting in faraway countries.

Bruno always had a weakness for Ellen Burroughs’ brave third son and he had wanted him safe when the disease still raged. He had also told Jeffrey that he might be Cyril Fairfax’s son and therefore Anthea’s half-brother, to stop Jeffrey from going after her again now that he had come back from the wars in one piece.

“Yes, it sometimes happens that people escape such dire destinies without us knowing why. What do you intend to do about Elma, Jeff? She’s still the Baroness of Caversham.”

Jeffrey breathed in deeply. Bruno’s house smelled of tobacco and wax. It was a lovely house, near the small basin of the port of Rotherham. He knew now that Cyril had bought the house for Bruno’s mother after she found herself pregnant. Cyril had married her off to one of his captains as there was no way his father would approve of his second son and spare to the earldom marrying a girl without money or antecedents. It had

been just as well that Cyril's bastard son had only been studious and interested in becoming a physician.

At least Cyril had taken care of all that was his, Jeffrey thought morosely. Bruno Bouchier had gone to study medicine in Edinburgh while Jeffrey had been able to pursue a career in the army.

"What does one do in a case like hers?" he asked Bruno with a puzzled expression on his face.

"The family takes the widow in," Bruno said suavely.

"The problem is that you are her only family now. Her father seems to have drunk himself to death a few years ago and there's no one left."

"You... I hope nobody expects me to actually marry her?" Jeffrey half-asked with a shudder.

Bruno grinned at him.

"Not unless you are Jewish. According to the English law she's your sister."

Jeffrey sat suddenly down on a chair as if a burden had fallen from his shoulders.

"You may have to keep her at Caversham and provide for her until she decides to move on. I gather you earn enough to send money down once in a while? Nothing has been coming in from the property for a long time and you can hardly expect Lady Brondemeire to continue to support a house she decided to abandon four years ago."

Jeffrey followed the stem of a crystal goblet with his finger. Bruno had poured him a glass of wine which was of surprisingly good quality. He wondered if it had been Cyril's blunt paying for it. Rotherham was hardly a place

where a country practitioner could grow rich enough to buy such luxuries.

“We have to ascertain first that the little lady is not breeding anyway. It may interfere with you being the new baron.”

“What?”

Bruno almost laughed when he saw Jeffrey’s startled expression.

“The widow’s year, Jeffrey. It has been invented entirely to not get the wrong successor on the throne.”

“My brother died four months ago. Even if he fucked himself to death with her she should know by now!”

Bruno looked down on the pipe he was about to light.

“I doubt your brother was able to bring anything forth but cough and slime for a long time. It’s just that...”

“Yes?” Jeffrey looked with narrowed eyes at him.

“There are rumours that she consoled herself in Dennis Tanner’s bed.”

Jeffrey sprang from his chair with an oath, almost toppling his wine.

“Damnation!” he cried out, “Don’t we have enough to put up with already with all the bastardy in this place? No cuckoo of the Tanners is going to take Caversham away from me!”

“Relax, Jeff!” Bruno soothed him, still not lighting his pipe, “I’ll have my say in that matter if she would be so dumb as to claim a babe as Evan’s. I did have the impression though that Caversham is just a big dump for you... Nobody could want it the way it is now!”

“True,” Jeffrey growled, sitting back on his chair, “but it’s my dump. A bloody dump that I will have to get back into order. However, that will just have to wait. I have to fight in another war first.”

“You shouldn’t,” Bruno said sharply. “You are the last man standing. There are no more heirs. When you die Caversham will revert to the Crown.”

Jeffrey put his chin up.

“There’s no way I can back out of that war and you know it, Bruno. Just assure me you will take whatever money I have and spend it wisely on that dump and the little slut in it. Let’s hope I come back in one piece and we’ll take it from there.”

“Ah, yes,” Bruno nodded, “there’s one more thing. You will have to visit the lawyer’s office of Spencer and Marrow in York. There was something with... Well, I understand it has something to do with the inheritance. They contacted me when Evan died.”

“They contacted you? What on earth is the matter with those lawyers nowadays? Why did they not write me directly?”

Bruno shrugged, lighting his pipe at last.

“No doubt they’ll tell you that themselves.”

“You’re leaving again?” She looked at him with desperate eyes, fumbling with her hands in her gown.

Jeffrey looked up from a bowl of porridge that one of the footmen had purchased at the local inn. He wrinkled his nose without realizing it. God, the girl’s smell was even worse today than it had been at his arrival.

“Elma, don’t you ever wash?” he suddenly snapped impatiently at her, shoving his porridge away. The girl’s smell definitely influenced his appetite in a bad way.

She looked wide-eyed at him as if he had suggested she jump in the sea right now to get clean.

“I... There is no warm water, Jeffrey. Cold water does not get me clean. And this frock is the only one I have.”

Jeffrey raised a hand in desperation.

“Listen, I’ll have the footmen heat some water, so you can at least take a bath. I’ll bring you a gown when I return from York. Oh, for Christ’s sakes, Elma, you’re a bloody baroness! You cannot walk around like a stupid smelly tramp!”

She stepped towards him and grabbed him by his sleeve.

“Can’t I come, Jeffrey? I have been here since, since...” she looked wildly about her. Truth to tell she could not remember when she had left the house the last time.

Jeffrey immediately shook his head. No way he was going to drag the smelly creature around in York. And he had plans for York that could not include her presence at all. He was going to get himself laid with a vengeance! Nothing could perk him up better than a hard and fast swive.

Jeffrey rose.

“I’ll send someone to Mrs. Tanner’s cottage to ask her to assist you in washing. I imagine you won’t be able to tackle your hair all by yourself. Maybe she can bring you some shift to wear so that your dress can be cleaned. I



don't suppose you'll have a reason to go out of doors today. You need a maid to take care of you, but until I can get things sorted we'll ask Mrs. Tanner to do some work in here. She's done it before and she is a good sort of woman. I had the footmen fill the larder and there is enough wood now to warm the small drawing room and your bedroom. The footmen will stay here to help out with the daily routine. Doctor Bouchier will make sure a group of people will come to clean out the house tomorrow. This place is a bloody dump, and I'm damned if I want to come back to this filth."

Elma's eyes widened. She was going to have staff in the house? Food on the table and a warm bath?

Jeffrey hastened his steps towards the door; he was in a hurry to take out Bruno's horse and to ride to York. He hoped to arrive there before the sun set. He preferred Bruno's horse over Basil Ware's luxurious travelling coach. The thing was attracting too much attention as it was and it would definitely not do to park it in front of some brothel or another.

He turned around suddenly when he reached the door.

"One more thing, Elma..." he instructed, "Dennis Tanner is not to enter the house, as you are not allowed within ten paces of him anywhere, understood?"

She only nodded wide-eyed at him. She was going to be the baroness again, what would she need Dennis Tanner for?

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## Chapter 6: YORK