



THE BAREFOOT BARONESS

Joan Smith

Chapter One

"You'll never guess what, Laura!" Mrs. Harwood exclaimed, glancing up from her letter. The ladies sat in the morning parlor at Oakdene Hall, just finishing their breakfast. A letter was an exciting thing in their placid lives, and Laura was on thorns to hear what news it contained. "Hettie Traemore is taking Cousin Olivia to London to make her bows."

This news had been anticipated forever and did not cause the stir Mrs. Harwood hoped for. Naturally Olivia, formally known as Baroness Pilmore, who had inherited the barony in the female line from her mother, and who was the owner of a tin mine among other vast holdings in Cornwall, would go to London to make a match. Olivia was the sole noble relation of the Harwoods, and was, of course, an object of great pride and curiosity in the family.

"It seems impossible little Olivia is grown up already," Laura replied. "We have not seen her for five years. It was the year I made my bows in London that they visited us."

The object of greater interest on that visit had been Olivia's mother, since dead, but Laura had vague memories of a hoydenish girl with red hair. Olivia would have grown into a proper lady by now.

Mrs. Harwood spoke on excitedly, sure that the next paragraph would wipe that calm smile off her daughter's lips. "There is more in the letter, Laura," she said, glancing at the page. "Her aunt is to be her chaperone. Hettie Traemore is the most indolent

creature in Christendom. She wants you to go to London with Olivia, to show her the ropes. What do you think of that, eh?" Her smile suggested this was a treat of no ordinary degree.

Laura heard the news with an inward groan. Her Season in London had been the one dark patch in an otherwise sunny existence. Raised in the provincial quiet of Wiltshire, she had neither wanted the Season nor enjoyed it. And in some devious manner, it was all connected with the baroness. Some envy or competitiveness existed in the family. Laura's mama wanted Laura to snag a title, to catch up with her cousin. It was clearly a case of the sin of the parent being visited on the child, for Laura had no such ambition.

"I show her the ropes?" Laura exclaimed, starting at the absurdity of it. "That would be the blind leading the blind, Mama. Mrs. Traemore knows I did not receive a single offer during my Season. How am I to show Olivia anything? She will need no help in any case. An heiress, and pretty to boot, unless she has changed greatly in five years."

"You must go, Laura," her mother said urgently. "It will be different this time. Last time, we were regular greenhorns. We didn't know a soul. With Olivia to draw the gentlemen, you are bound to meet someone."

"And am I bound to get an offer from some buck who is dangling after a beautiful, rich, young baroness?" Laura asked, dampingly. "Such close proximity to what I am sure will be the star of the Season can only make me appear even less appealing than before, Mama. I will not place my poor candle against the sun of Baroness Pilmore."

"Hettie has invited me as well," Mrs. Harwood added, peering from the corner of her eye. Life was dull in Whitchurch since Mr. Harwood's passing. Mrs. Harwood had no notion of angling for a husband herself, but she looked forward to the excitement of London. "Hettie's back is acting up on her. She will go with Olivia to London but fears she will not be able to keep the pace. She hoped that I would help her chaperone you and Olivia. It could be interesting."

It was plain as a pikestaff that Mrs. Harwood was longing to go to London. Laura admitted to some stirring of interest herself, but it was all colored by the degradation of putting herself back on the marital

market. She had failed at seventeen; the only thing that had changed in five years was that she had lost that first sheen of youth. Her chances now were even fewer than before. It would be ideal if she could go to London and just enjoy the pleasures of the city—the plays, the concerts, the drives, and dinners—without worrying about nabbing a husband.

Mrs. Harwood continued perusing the letter, adding tidbits to entice her daughter. "Hettie has hired Lord Montford's mansion. It is that huge house on the corner of Charles Street. She plans to get a season ticket to both theaters—you recall how we could never get a ticket on opening nights—and will be having a large ball for Olivia. All that without our having to spend a penny. You see, she says, 'Naturally I—[meaning Olivia]—shall bear all expenses, if only you will assist me with the chaperoning chores, and dear Laura will show Olivia the ropes.' I daresay you remember a few things that would help Olivia. You cannot know less than Hettie Traemore in any case. I don't believe she was ever east of Wiltshire, and she was only here once. Poor soul. How she must be dreading this ordeal. It hardly seems Christian to refuse."

Laura intercepted another of those hopeful glances, and she knew she must go. Her mama ruled her, not with an iron hand but a moist eye. She could be quite ruthless in her tactics. Now she was using the big cannon: guilt. Next she would start ruing her lack of grandchildren, and the unlikelihood of ever having any, when Whitchurch was so sparse of partis.

Very well, then, she would go. But she would not go with high hopes this time. Her tender heart had hardened—it would not be bruised by heedless gentlemen. Perhaps she could be of some small help to Olivia. She was older and more objective. She would recognize a fortune-hunter, at least.

"Very well, Mama. We shall go, but I want it clearly understood, you are not to hound me into trying to make a match. This time I plan to enjoy myself."

Her mother looked at her as if she were a moonling. "Why, Laura, would you not like to make a match?"

"Indeed I would, and as soon as we return, I shall look sharply about me for some local gentleman requiring a chatelaine for his castle."

Mrs. Harwood paid no heed to this assertion. There were no gentlemen for Laura to marry in Wiltshire, and her daughter would not lift a finger to nab them if there were. She wondered at times if Laura was not a changeling.

She hopped up from the sofa. "I'll get the fashion magazines. We shall require new gowns. And your hair, Laura. You must do something with that haystack."

She was gone, and Laura sat on, thinking. It seemed willful and perverse to return to the scene of her humiliation. She went warm all over when she remembered that Season in London. The endless hours at the balls, where she had sat against the wall, watching the other girls dancing, or stood up with the less desirable gentlemen. She hadn't the knack of putting herself forward. She felt awkward and naive. Her gowns looked provincial. The wine tasted horrid and gave her a headache. On those rare occasions when one of the more dashing bucks took notice of her, she became tongue-tied.

Mama had failed to get vouchers for Almack's. Really, it had been the worst six weeks of her life. When they left London at the end of the Season, she had breathed a deep sigh of relief and vowed never to repeat that humiliating experience.

Well, she would not repeat it. This time it would be different. At least she knew enough not to get her gowns made by Mrs. Eggerton in the village. She would make the short trip to Andover and have that French modiste tend to her needs. She and Mama would go to London a week early, to add those elegant accessories a Season required. The black-jacketed gentlemen who had looked at her and quickly looked away would be dangling after Olivia; they would not treat Olivia's friend and cousin with their former derision.

But really her best defense was that she no longer cared for any of that. She was going as a spectator, to enjoy the show. Even a spectator at the greatest show in England required a touch of town bronze, however, and Laura turned her mind to her toilette. Her toilette soon led her to the mirror to assess her appearance.

She gazed at the reflection of a bemused young lady wearing a slightly ironical smile. She had seen the expression on matrons during that infamous Season, and envied their detachment. When her mother called

her hair a haystack, she referred to its style, not its color. It was a deep chestnut, but it did sit rather amorphously on her head. Its natural curl was hard to control at its present length. She would have a London coiffeur do it à la cheribime, with short curls playing wantonly about her forehead and ears.

Her eyes were not possible of changing. Eyes were eyes, hazel and not squinty or crossed in her case. That smattering of freckles across her nose must be bleached away by lemon juice. As she matured, the bone structure of her face became more prominent, showing high cheekbones and a strong chin. She meant to carry that chin in the air, to show her disdain. Her slender figure would be best enhanced by more sophisticated gowns than a deb wore. Bows and ruffles had never become her. As this was not her first Season, she need not limit herself to maidenly white.

Some vestige of excitement began to coil in her. The humiliation of her first Season had never been quite laid to rest. Perhaps this was her chance to squash it.

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Over the next weeks, life became a busy round of studying fashion magazines, searching out materials and patterns, dashing to Andover to consult with Madame LaRue, and writing letters to Cornwall to confer with Hettie Traemore in preparation for the trip. Hettie and Olivia would stop at Whitchurch en route to London to pick up the Harwoods. Laura suggested going to London at least a week before the Season opened, to begin preparations. Her greatest regret was that she had not a single friend from her first Season to look up. The few girls she had known more than superficially had all made good but not grand marriages and moved back to the provinces. They had corresponded for a year; then as their families began to grow, the letters waned and finally stopped.

Laura decided that was all to the good. There would be no reminders of her former disgrace. She would begin this Season with a clean slate. The ace in her hand was that her expectations were not high. So long as Olivia made a good match, the Season would be called a success. And there was not a doubt in the world that Baroness Pilmore could have her pick of the partis.

Chapter Two

It was early in April when the baroness and her chaperone drew up to Oakdene in a grand but antiquated and extremely dusty traveling carriage. It was a berlin, dating from the middle of the previous century, with small wheels in front, larger ones behind. Its roof was a green leather dome, the doors mahogany with gilt panels trimmed in pink flowers. Venetian shutters at the windows were drawn to block out the sun. At the front was the driver's seat, looking for the world like a giant man's boot, turned up at the toe.

The whole contraption was so enormous and so stoutly built that the six hardy nags harnessed to it were puffing from exertion. It belonged in a museum, and the only possible reaction was to laugh, until Laura recalled that it was she who would have to drive through London inside it. Well, at least it had those shutters to hide her shame.

"Oh, dear, what on earth is that?" her mama said weakly. "It looks like a small mansion on wheels."

Laura peered with the keenest interest through the saloon window to see what sort of appearance the ladies made. When at last the step was drawn down and the ladies descended, they were seen to look at home to a peg in their baroque chariot. Hettie Traemore was wrapped up in a black cape with a nest of burgundy feathers covering her head like a bowl. Olivia wore a green traveling suit, brilliant as new grass, heavily epauletted with gold trim and many brass buttons. Her bonnet was similar to her aunt's, but smaller. She had grown into a large girl, approximately five feet and nine inches. She walked at an awkward gait, gazing all around and up at the house as she advanced. The host of admirers Laura had been imagining mentally evaporated.

Laura feared the baroness would need every ounce of her tin and every guinea of her dowry to attach even a modest parti. She took heart when Olivia was actually before her, with her bonnet removed. Her tousled red curls were not unattractive. Aside from the freckles, her face was quite pretty. A pair of dancing blue eyes spoke of a cheerful disposition, and her curtsy was a model of grace.

Olivia looked up and said, "Did I do it right? Ma-

demoiselle Dupré has been giving me lessons."

"Very elegant," Laura replied.

There was no grace in Hettie Traemore. She moved with the labored steps of an invalid, putting her weight on a black thorn walking stick. "What a trip," she sighed. "You must marry a London gentleman, Livvie, and let him take you home, for I cannot even think of driving all the way back to Cornwall." Her sallow face looked haggard. Under her eyes, purple smudges spoke of sleepless nights.

The ladies were led to the saloon, where they gratefully sunk on to the sofa. "I would give my eye tooth for a nice cup of tea," Hettie sighed.

Tea was brought, and while it was drunk, the visitors sang the praises of their carriage. They didn't know how they could have made such a journey without it. "How anyone can endure being tossed about in those light barouches and landaux is beyond me," Mrs. Traemore said. "Our berlin sits the road very well, does it not, Livvie?"

"Oh, yes. It has four leather springs, which make it impossible to overturn. When that driver became impatient at Taunton and tried to pass us, it was his carriage that overturned. There was not room on the road for two carriages. We cannot travel so quickly as the lighter carriages—only six miles an hour—but we are perfectly safe and excessively comfortable."

Laura foresaw a wearying trip, if they were to block the busy road to London with a pace of six miles an hour. The carriage might not be dangerous, but the wrath of fellow travelers might quite possibly put their lives in peril.

"Are you looking forward to your presentation, dear?" Mrs. Harwood inquired of Olivia.

"Indeed I am. I am all atremble to think of meeting the queen."

Her naiveté in granting frumpy old Queen Charlotte top priority was further evidence of just how far Cornwall was from London.

"But you will enjoy the balls and parties," Laura said.

"I have got a dozen gowns made up. You will tell me whether they need more trim, cousin," she replied, "for of course you know all about London. Is it true they party all day long?"

"They trot pretty hard at the height of the Season,"

she replied vaguely.

Olivia's eyes shone with excitement. "I want to see the horses at Astley's Circus, and the animals at Exeter Exchange."

These treats at least did not require an escort, and they were promised.

Mrs. Traemore required three days of rest before she could be persuaded to continue the journey. During that time, Olivia never left Laura's heels. She trotted after her like a puppy, asking questions, and volunteering information about her own life, which appeared to consist of riding and taking assorted lessons to prepare her for her debut. She was such a good-natured child that Laura soon grew fond of her. One could certainly not say that her title and fortune had gone to her head. She put on no airs, nor did she apologize for her rusticity.

"I have never walked out with a gentleman. In fact, I have never been alone with one. If anyone tries to kiss me, I shall land him a facer," she confided one evening after dinner. "Would that be considered farouche, cousin?"

"Not so farouche as a gentleman trying to kiss you. You would do quite right to—er—land him a facer, but perhaps you ought not to use the language of grooms when you are in London."

"Our grooms would not say that. They would 'draw his cork and darken his daylights,' " she explained. "I shall miss them, for in the usual way I spend most of my time at the stable. I wanted to bring my mounts with me, but Aunt Hettie said you would know where I can buy one."

"Tattersall's would be the place," Laura advised. Olivia's ignorance of city life was so thorough that Laura, with her few scraps of knowledge, continued to pass as an expert.

"You will take me," Olivia said.

"I am afraid ladies do not go there, Livvie. We must ask one of our gentlemen friends to perform that office for us."

"I am so glad I have you to advise me, for I am a regular greenhead. I don't know what I should do if you had not come."

Laura just smiled uncomfortably. All this was very gratifying, but, in fact, she had no gentlemen friends in London to perform such errands as this, and once

they arrived, Olivia would soon realize it. "You can always hire a mount," she said. "That is what I shall do."

"Yes," Olivia said reluctantly, "but the best mounts are not usually for hire, are they?"

"Riding in London hardly requires the best mounts. In Rotten Row, the pace is not so fast as you are used to. It is more of a social outing, meeting friends. . . ."

Olivia nodded understandingly. "We shall escape to the country for a good bruising ride from time to time. Some of your gentlemen friends will accompany us. You know, there is just one thing that confuses me, cousin."

Laura looked to hear what this might be.

"I wonder that you did not accept an offer during your first Season, or during the few years since then." Laura colored up, but Olivia soon found her own reason. "I expect you are very choosy. I cannot be so particular. I have only this one Season to find a husband. Auntie thinks that with my dowry and your connections, I might find someone."

Laura could not imagine where this illusion of her vast experience and connections came from. Perhaps to Olivia and her aunt, sequestered in Cornwall, any lady who had had a Season was seen as experienced. The occasional letters she wrote to Cornwall mentioned the highlights of a whole year—a few balls and assemblies and an occasional trip here or there. From this they had made her into their mentor, when she was not much better equipped than they to guide Olivia through the shoals and narrows of a London Season. But she would do her best, for it was now patently clear that Olivia and Hettie Traemore had no more notion of society than they had of building a cathedral.

The day for their departure finally came. Mrs. Harwood's carriage was used to carry their trunks. Laura hoped she could talk the ladies into it, and let the berlin carry the luggage, but she had no success. Hettie's back required the carriage that held the road, and held up traffic for miles.

By the time they reached London, the carriage was widely known by sight, for half of the ton had spent time behind it. In fact, it had become such a byword that it had been given a title: its green dome and slow pace earned it the nickname 'the Turtle.' But its heavy

bulk and leather springs did provide an exceedingly comfortable ride. Its interior was so spacious that a folding table could be arranged between the banquettes to hold needle work or a book. As Mrs. Harwood pointed out, when she could find a moment's privacy with her daughter, "It's like sitting at home on the sofa. You'd hardly know you were moving."

"We hardly were moving," Laura said, laughing. "I looked out the window at the crest of a hill, and counted nineteen carriages behind us, trying to pass. The grooms were shaking their fists and hollering."

"Were they hollering? The berlin is so well insulated that I didn't hear them."

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The trip of seventy-five miles from Oakdene to London took two days of hard driving. At twilight of the second day, the coach lumbered up to the door of a handsome brick mansion on Charles Street.

"Do you think it will do?" Hettie asked, with a worried glance to Laura, the expert. "It has a ballroom, and the dining room seats twenty. We hired the servants with the house, just bringing our own groom. And, of course, my dresser and Livvie's woman went on ahead of us to make things ready."

"It will do admirably," Laura decreed. Much better than the little house from which I made my bows five years ago, she added to herself.

All was elegance inside. An impressive butler, Collins, greeted them at the door and led them into a marble-floored entrance. Statues in niches peered down on them from the walls. The first glimpse showed a staircase flowing gracefully upward at their left. They went into the largest saloon, an impressive chamber created by Adam, with embossed ceilings and two of his famous fireplaces. The predominant color, set by curtains and sofas, was a pale strawlike gold. Some green in the carpet and odd chairs gave the feeling of a meadow in spring.

"It was hired furnished, of course," Hettie said. "Lord Montford is not coming to London this year. The estate agent said he needed the money, poor soul. He must be in deep trouble to let out his house to strangers for a thousand pounds."

"That is pretty steep for six weeks!" Mrs. Harwood exclaimed.

"I feel badly taking advantage of him. But then we

are taking the hire of his servants off his hands, so in all he will be getting two thousand. I hope it helps to settle his cash problem. Now before we take another step, ladies, what do you say to a nice cup of tea?"

Hettie hobbled on her thorn stick to the most uncomfortable-looking chair in the room and eased herself into it with a grunt. She needed a firm chair for her back. Olivia found the bell cord and pulled it, and in minutes, servants appeared bearing silver trays laden with tea and dainties.

The evening was spent settling into their new home and perusing the journals for entertainments.

"How will anyone know we are here?" Hettie asked.

"We must put a notice in the journals," Laura said.

Hettie just shook her head at such cleverness and repeated once again that she didn't know what they should do without her.

Chapter Three

Even Olivia and Hettie were not so green as to think anything took precedence over a trip to the shops the next morning. They had to see what wares were for sale and, of course, check out the toilettes of the other ladies. Laura went to Olivia's room to prevent her from donning her green uniform with the brass buttons and epaulettes. She found Olivia and her dresser, Fanny, a country woman in her mid-twenties, just sorting through the gowns in the clothespress.

Fanny had the appearance of a kitchen servant, not only in her cap and apron, but in that she had herself not a trace of elegance. Ladies' dressers were usually as stylish as their mistresses' castoff garments could make them.

"What should I wear, cousin?" Olivia asked, and stood waiting to be told.

This was Laura's first chance to see the girl's entire wardrobe, and it was a depressing sight. Much money had been spent on buying expensive material, then having it fashioned into gowns suitable for an ambitious merchant's wife in Cornwall. The fault was largely one of excess, however, and a good modiste could no doubt tame the outfits down to acceptability. Laura selected the plainest gown in the closet and a blue pelisse.

"Lord a'mighty!" Fanny exclaimed. "You never

mean you're going to wear those old rags, with a dozen new gowns hanging in the closet? You'll be a laughing stock, Miss Livvie."

"Miss Harwood knows what should be worn," Olivia said doubtfully, and handed Fanny the gown. Fanny's grumble was not entirely audible, but its gist seemed to be that Miss Harwood didn't want any competition.

When Fanny had left, Laura said, "Do you always let your servants speak so freely, Olivia?"

"I pay no heed to Fanny. She is an old grouch, but she has been with me from the cradle, you know, and I cannot be savage with her. She loves me like a sister."

There was one more hurdle to be got over before they left, and that was to forbid taking the berlin onto the busy streets of London.

"It is much too large. It would clog the street and hold up traffic," Laura explained. "Indeed our own traveling carriage is too large, but as we have nothing else, we must take it."

"But what about my back?" Hettie demanded.

"Our carriage seats are much harder than yours," Mrs. Harwood assured her.

The matter caused a little ill feeling, but in the end they took the Harwood's carriage, with a special padded board for Hettie's back. She called this item her recliner and held it in high esteem. She had brought it from Cornwall, in case Lord Montford's chairs proved uncomfortable.

As they bowled along New Bond Street, with carriages so close you could reach out and touch them, Hettie allowed that the berlin would not do for London. "We must get a city carriage," she said, as calmly as if she spoke of a bonnet.

"Laura's friend will arrange for it," Olivia said. "He is going to buy me a mount at Tattersall's."

"Who is this gentleman, Laura?" Hettie asked. "Will you drop him a note and ask him to call?"

As Laura had no idea whom she might apply to, she said, "I have no one particular friend in mind, Mrs. Traemore. I shall think about it." The only name that occurred to her was their own family groom. In a pinch, Parkins could do it.

"We shall want the carriage right away."

They alighted and spent a delightful hour strolling through the shops, buying a few gewgaws, and ogling the ladies' toilettes.

"The ladies are very skimpy dressers," was Hettie's comment. "I expected more elegance. Why, you see prettier bonnets than this at home in St. Ives' Church on Sunday."

Laura was busily examining an arrangement of silk flowers in a shop window, wondering if the primroses might lend an air of style to last year's bonnet, when she felt a touch on her arm, and a man's voice said, "It is Miss Harwood, is it not?"

She looked up, surprised, and recognized Mr. Meadows. She would not have called him an old friend, exactly—more of an old acquaintance. Although he did not live in her parish, he had relatives there and had been attending the assemblies on and off for some years. A respectable bachelor of some fortune and a fairly pleasing countenance, he was not the sort of gentleman to excite a lady to passion. He was tall and rather heavy. His hair was dark, his features regular, but lacking that dash of liveliness that might have won him the term 'handsome.'

"Mr. Meadows, what a pleasant surprise."

"Are you in London for the Season?" he asked.

"Yes, with my cousin." She introduced the others, and they stood chatting while the crowds strolled by.

If she had met Mr. Meadows on the street of Whitchurch, they would not have exchanged more than three phrases. Having met in London, however, made them feel closer. Mr. Meadows asked if he could buy the ladies a cup of coffee.

Hettie expressed keen interest in a cup of tea, and before more was said, he had whisked them into a tea shop.

"Where are you staying?" Mr. Meadows asked, and was told.

"I hope you will call on us, if you have a moment free, Mr. Meadows," Laura said. "We do not have many friends in London yet."

"Is Baron Pilmore in town?" he asked Olivia, and had confirmed what he already suspected. The baroness was a deb. "Where are you from?" he asked with growing interest.

"I am from Cornwall," she replied.

"You have had a long trip!" he said, smiling equally at Olivia and her chaperone.

"We could never have done it without the berlin," Hettie told him. "It is an old carriage. It causes a bit of

bother on the highways, but it gives a wonderful ride."

A little smile of surprise lit up his face. "A berlin, you say? I believe I ... saw it myself. A green, rounded roof?" His eyes met Laura's; she blushed.

"Mrs. Traemore plans to buy a town carriage," she said.

"And I want to buy a mount," Olivia added, looking significantly at Laura.

Laura caught her meaning at once. As Mr. Meadows was being uncommonly friendly, she said, "Perhaps you could advise us, Mr. Meadows. We are four ladies without the benefit of a man in our household."

There is nothing more likely to flatter a gentleman than to be appealed to for advice on horses and carriages. Mr. Meadows knew of half a dozen excellent rigs and mounts that were on the block. The ladies spent the next half hour outlining their needs. Olivia wanted a lively goer for herself, and it was soon made clear that money was no object in the purchase of the carriage. The only stricture was that it must have a good, firm backing for Mrs. Traemore. After two cups of tea, he escorted them to their carriage, promising to devote his afternoon to securing what they wanted and to call on them that same evening to report.

"He seemed very gentlemanly," Hettie said. "I am so thankful that you came with us, Laura, for Livvie and I would have had no notion how to set about finding a carriage and horse."

They returned home for lunch, with Laura in high aroma. She was grateful that Mr. Meadows had come to her rescue, but one gentleman hardly constituted the necessary circle of friends for a successful debut. When she discussed the matter with her mother, they decided that as they were staying at such a fine house, they might screw themselves up to dropping Mrs. Aubrey a note. She was Mr. Meadows's aunt, the relative he visited at Whitchurch. She was toplofty and domineering, but she might open a few doors.

Before the note could be written, Collins came to the door and announced, "Mrs. Aubrey, to see Mrs. Harwood."

In Whitchurch, Mrs. Aubrey only called at Oakdene when an election was in the offing. She was considered very much a grande dame. Her sister was married to Lord Perry; she herself had nabbed a member of

Parliament and lived in a fine mansion. In the larger pond of London, she was a much smaller frog, but any ally was welcome. As she had bounced her only daughter off the year before, she would be au courant with the necessary steps to launching a deb. In appearance she was a tall, hatchet-faced lady who turned out stylishly on the slender allowance she had to work with.

She came sailing in, showing no trace of her usual haughtiness, but all covered in smiles and eagerness. Even while she greeted the Harwoods, her eyes skimmed across the room to assess the baroness. This was the reason she was here. She meant for her nephew to nab the Season's prime heiress, and it would be helpful to know what plans the Harwoods had for the baroness. Mrs. Aubrey was a little disappointed to see that the girl, while no tearing beauty, was by no means an antidote. There would be stiff competition. Her being practically a giant was no problem; Robert was tall as a tree himself.

"I came running the instant Robert told me he had met you, Miss Harwood," she said, simpering at Laura. "I know your calendar will soon be full, and I must get you all for dinner one evening before you are booked up. Say, tomorrow?"

The baroness and Hettie looked to Laura for guidance.

Laura said, "As we just arrived yesterday evening, we are not very busy yet. That will be lovely, Mrs. Aubrey." She went on at once to add, "We have just been discussing our toilettes. Perhaps you can suggest the best modiste?"

"They are all so busy this time of year, but I shall ask my woman to look after you. Madame Dupuis—the French do have a certain style, do they not?"

"Oh, indeed," Laura agreed, and mentioned Madame LaRue from Andover.

Mrs. Aubrey complimented the baroness on Lord Montford's house, on her bravery in coming all the way from Cornwall, and on anything else she could lay her tongue to. Tea was served, and while they partook of it, Laura dropped a few hints to discover what amusements the Season had to offer.

"Of course the only subject on anyone's lips this year is Lord Hyatt," Mrs. Aubrey said.

This dasher's fame had spread as far as Wiltshire,

though not quite to Cornwall. It was Laura who recognized the name. "The artist? I saw a copy of his painting of Lady Emily Cowper in Whitchurch. It was very lifelike."

"Lady Emily is excessively pleased with it. Hyatt has made her look beautiful," she said, with a disparaging lift of her brow. "Oh, yes, he is an excellent artist. He has an exhibition at Somerset House at the moment. Such a squeeze! Every lady in town is vying to have him paint her."

She guarded her lips with her raised fingers to indicate she was about to relay a choice bit of gossip and added, "Mind you, I would not let my daughter within a city block of the fellow. Rackety! He flaunts his mistress in public. Her portrait is the star of the show. Lady Devereau, a baronet's widow. Fast as greased lightning, they say, but she is accepted everywhere since she nabbed Hyatt. She is monstrously pretty, to judge by her picture."

"I daresay we can go to see his pictures without sinking ourselves," Mrs. Harwood said uncertainly.

"You mustn't miss the exhibition. You will meet everyone there. I have seen it, but Robert mentioned he planned to attend. I shall tell him you are interested." She looked sharply to see if any other gentleman's name arose as their escort. Incredibly, it seemed Robert had got in before anyone else in town. This was doubly remarkable in that, in the general way, Robert was as slow as a snail, and in her own opinion, about as attractive.

Before she left, she had taken the ladies under her wing for the entire next day. She would bring Madame Dupuis to them in the morning; Robert would take them to the exhibition in the afternoon, and in the evening, they would dine at her table. She left, flushed with success, to boast to her friends that she was giving her neighbors a hand in launching Baroness Pilmore—a great heiress. Forty thousand, along with an estate and a tin mine in Cornwall.

That evening, Mr. Meadows came to report on his search for a carriage and a mount for Olivia and to assure them that he would be delighted to escort them to Somerset House the next afternoon. All this was wildly exciting for the baroness, who usually spent her days riding and her evenings playing Pope Joan with the servants.

"Until we get you outfitted with a rattler and prads," he said, "we shall use my carriage." His eyes met Laura's, and again she saw that glimmer of a smile.

They had a moment's privacy while Olivia helped Mrs. Harwood arrange Hettie's recliner to the latter's satisfaction. Mr. Meadows inclined his head to Laura and said, "Am I correct in thinking the baroness's berlin is the rig that clogged traffic for ten miles east of London yesterday?"

"Absolutely correct, Mr. Meadows. The sooner you can find a suitable city carriage, the better."

"There is a cartoon in one of the shop windows. The berlin has been christened the Turtle. The whole town is curious to learn who owns it. Your baroness will certainly be the Season's Original."

His approving tone told Laura that this was acclamation of a high order, and she took it in the proper spirit. "Sunk before we begin," she laughed.

"On the contrary. I have had half a dozen fellows clamoring for an introduction when I mentioned that I had met the baroness. Her being unknown has raised curiosity to a high level. Will you all be attending Lady Morgan's ball this weekend? It is the first large do of the Season."

Laura frowned, as though uncertain whether that particular card had arrived. "I am not sure. . . ."

"Do come," he urged.

"Actually, I am not certain that the baroness has met Lady Morgan, and I know that I have not."

"Auntie will arrange it."

Hettie's recliner was arranged to her satisfaction, and the conversation continued along general lines for twenty minutes, at which time Mr. Meadows took his leave.

"We had best hit the tick, as we will be trotting all day tomorrow," Hettie said. "I wonder now, with Mr. Meadows along, do you think I need go to see the pictures with you, Laura?"

"Not if you would be more comfortable at home, ma'am," Laura said.

"I shall go to Mrs. Aubrey's dinner, but for the rest of it—I am sure we may depend on Mr. Meadows to look after you at that exhibition. He will not let Lord Hyatt get at Livvie."

Like Laura, Mr. Meadows had risen to the emi-

nence of a deity. When Laura lay in her grand canopied bed that night, she could hardly believe that everything was working out so well—and it was all Mr. Meadows's doing. He improved on closer acquaintance. She detected a little humor in him. Although she had come to town with no thought of attaching a gentleman herself, it now seemed possible that Mr. Meadows might provide her a flirt at least. She slept like a baby, then awoke to another day of excitement.

Chapter Four

Madame Dupuis was a tyrant. Olivia, while bidable, was by no means without a mind of her own. In her view, unfortunately, elegance was synonymous with clutter. She objected to having lace, spangles, ribbons, and buttons removed from her gowns.

"You do not require both flowers and lace at the bodice, *ma chère*," Madame Dupuis pointed out. "They would hide your necklace."

"My diamond necklace is quite large," Olivia said, frowning. "Very well, then, take off the lace."

"Oh, but flowers and diamonds—they would clash," Laura said, looking hopelessly at the modiste, who agreed wholeheartedly. "Keep the lace, and remove the silk flowers."

Seeing that her mentor was in league with Madame Dupuis, Olivia reluctantly subsided into acceptance. She had noticed that ladies in London had no notion of style and did not want to stand too high above them.

Before leaving, Madame Dupuis took a look at the coiffures of both ladies and recommended Monsieur LaPierre, who was a wizard with hair. It was arranged that he would come to them the next morning.

"I expect curls are not the style in London," Olivia sulked. "Monsieur LaPierre will shear us like a pair of lambs."

"I am sure he will not. You don't want to look strikingly different from the other ladies, Livvie," Laura said. "It will be taken as vulgar, seeking after attention."

"If you say so, cousin," Olivia replied. "I wonder how Mr. Meadows would like my hair arranged."

"You will find better partis than Mr. Meadows. With your dowry and title, you may look as high as you please."

Olivia gave her a sly smile. "Is that your way of saying that you have a tendre for Mr. Meadows yourself, cousin? If so, pray tell me and I shan't be rolling my eyes at him. I have not quite fallen in love with him yet."

Laura felt sure that once Olivia met more dashing gentlemen, she would forget Meadows. "He and I are just friends, and I hope you will not be rolling your eyes at anyone, or you will be taken for a hurly-burly girl."

"Then how am I to let a gentleman know I welcome his advances?"

"There are more subtle ways. You may smile and be pleasant."

"But should I not be pleasant with everyone?"

"Yes, but you may be a little more pleasant with those you favor."

"You mean behave as you behave with Mr. Meadows? I saw you two whispering last night. What did he say?"

"He was just speaking of your berlin."

"Ah," she smiled, taking this for a compliment to her carriage.

It was time for lunch, and soon time to prepare for the outing to Somerset House to see Lord Hyatt's paintings of beautiful ladies. Mr. Meadows arrived punctually, bearing a gift of bonbons. He had intended them as a compliment for the baroness but found himself, to his consternation, presenting them to Laura, who was the first to greet him. She accepted them shyly, but without demur.

"For the ladies," he said, smiling at Olivia.

* * * *

Olivia was fond of her cousin, but it occurred to her at that instant that Laura was just a tiny bit forward. Mr. Meadows had intended those bonbons for her. His intimate little smile said so.

When they went to the carriage, she noticed that Mr. Meadows chose the seat beside herself. His first conversation was directed to her as well. "This is one of the rigs that I have in mind for you, Baroness. The owner lent it to me for you to try. Let me know what you think."

It was a suitable rig for a lady, but he was soon given to understand that a plain black carriage with no trim to speak of was not what she had in mind. She

found it 'rather plain' and soon said bluntly that it was too dull. He frowned in confusion and pointed out that she could have her crest emblazoned on the door.

"I don't want black. It looks like a funeral coach," she said. "Something more colorful, with gilt trim, was what I had in mind. With velvet squabs, not old, black leather. There is no place inside this one for doing anything except sitting. We have a letdown table in our berlin."

Poor Meadows saw that what she wanted was another berlin, as spacious inside as her old, but magically small enough outside to suit London's busy streets.

"I saw Lady Sifton driving a rather nice, dark green barouche with gilt appointments yesterday morning," Laura mentioned. "Perhaps something like that."

"At least not black," Olivia said firmly.

As they approached Somerset House, such a throng of carriages clogged the street that they decided to descend at the corner and walk the rest of the way.

"Is London always so busy?" Olivia asked, looking around in consternation. "At home we don't get this many people for the Mop Fair."

Meadows smiled at Laura over the baroness's head, to show he took the girl's rusticity in good part. "Londoners will always turn out for something new," he explained. "Lord Hyatt is the rage this year. Last year it was Lord Byron who had the town on its ear."

They finally squeezed their way into the exhibit hall and reached the closest wall to examine the paintings. The greater part of the crowd was at the other end of the room. "That must be where Hyatt is holding court," Meadows explained. "I'll try to wangle an introduction when the crowd disperses."

"We don't want to meet him," Olivia said earnestly. "Mrs. Aubrey told us he is not the thing. We shall just take a quick look and leave, before someone tries to present him to us."

Meadows blinked in surprise to hear his treat disparaged. Every lady in London was dying to meet Lord Hyatt. Meadows had been to school with him, and while the two were not bosom bows, they were on friendly terms.

The group strolled along, admiring the paintings. There were blond ladies and raven-haired ones, each more beautiful than the one before, and each painted

in a setting to enhance her particular charms. One languorous blonde reclined on a chaise longue, with flowers twined in her hair. A brunette was dressed for riding. Her proud head was tossed back, as if challenging the world.

"Surely all the women in London cannot be as beautiful as this," Olivia exclaimed. "I see no evidence of these beauties on the street, or even here, at Lord Hyatt's exhibition. I believe he has become the fashion because he makes the ladies look prettier than they are."

"That is part of it, certainly," Meadows agreed. He stopped in front of the loveliest portrait of them all. "Except for Lady Devereau," he said, gazing at a painting of a raven-haired beauty with soulful eyes and a sad smile. She sat in a peacock chair, dressed in blue, and wearing ropes of pearls. The monkey perched on the chair's back provided an incongruous touch and a stunning contrast. "She really does look like this," he sighed.

"No one could be that gorgeous," Laura said.

"Look for yourself. There she is, just coming in."

They all turned to stare at the living likeness of the portrait. It was a marvelous picture, but Lady Devereau did not fall one iota short of perfection either. She was outfitted from head to toe in a soft shade of violet that enhanced her ethereal beauty. A broad-brimmed chapeau dipped flirtatiously over one eye. Her skin was like Devon cream, her eyes two bits of twilight sky, heavily fringed in black velvet lashes. She did, in fact, own a monkey and often went out with it, but on this occasion she had left Mogo at home. Many heads turned to follow her progress toward the throng around Lord Hyatt.

When she had passed, Olivia worried her lip and finally said, "Aunt Traemore said I should have my portrait done while I am here. As Lord Hyatt makes everyone look so pretty, I should like to have him do me, but I daresay it would be considered too fast. If he would come to Charles Street, my aunt and cousins could chaperone me."

Meadows said, "I am afraid Lord Hyatt works nowhere but at his atelier, Baroness. He has had a special building erected behind his own mansion on Park Lane, with the proper lighting and props and so on. He never works anywhere else. At his own place,

he can control the crowds."

Laura thought Hyatt sounded a pompous ass, trying to draw attention to himself by these tricks. "I do not believe Sir Thomas Lawrence is so adamant about where he will work," she sniffed.

"He has a studio, I believe," Meadows pointed out.

"I happen to know Lawrence went to Cray's Foot for a week to paint Lady Castlereagh," she said, "and he is the best painter in London." The only reason she knew of his going to Castlereagh's country estate was that she had read it in the social columns.

"Well, there is no point asking Hyatt to paint anywhere else but his atelier," Meadows said. "He even made Prinney sit for him there. He said Carleton House was too hot."

"He painted the Prince Regent!" Olivia exclaimed. "Oh, then I must have him paint me. But auntie will never agree to go to his atelier. The chairs are bound to be too soft for her back."

"I would be happy to chaperone you, if Miss Harwood would come with us," Meadows said promptly.

"You had best speak to your aunt," Laura told her cousin. "It is not for me to make this decision, but if she agrees, I shall accompany you and Mr. Meadows. I hardly think she will agree, however. The man is a rake."

"Hyatt is very busy. He may well be booked up months in advance," Meadows said, and the subject was dropped.

There was a commotion at the far end of the room. Laura was curious to see Lady Devereau with her flirt, and turned to stare, like most of the others at the exhibition. She saw the crowd parting to allow a tall gentleman to leave. Ladies reached out and touched his sleeve as he passed, cooing soft phrases at him. Lady Devereau had got pushed to one side in the melee, but she soon surged forward.

"Hyatt! I say, Hyatt!" she called.

Hyatt turned and leveled a glacial eye at her. "Lady Devereau," he said, with a stiff bow. "Delightful to meet you again. But you have come to see the pictures. You must not let me detain you."

Lady Devereau's lovely lips thinned, sparks shot from her matchless eyes. If she had been within striking distance of Hyatt, she would surely have

struck him. But he had already turned his back on her and was striding determinedly toward the door, his progress hampered by hangers-on.

The room gasped. Olivia did not notice. She said to Mr. Meadows, "Who is that wickedly handsome gentleman?"

"That is Lord Hyatt," Meadows announced, as proudly as if he were personally responsible for the phenomenon.

Laura gazed and felt she was seeing a vision. "He looks as if he had painted himself," she said, and smiled at such a strange utterance. What she meant was that he looked better than any man really looked. His painted ladies were all idealized—the lashes made a little longer, the eyes a little larger, the conformation of the face enhanced. The flesh-and-blood Hyatt was an idealization of manhood, with any small imperfections removed.

His well-barbered hair glinted like new straw in the sunlight. Beneath it, dark eyes glowed in a tanned face. She fished around in her mind to describe that face and came a cropper. It was not precisely rugged, yet not at all weak. The chin was firm, the jaw squared, the lips open in a flirtatious smile at one of the ladies clutching him.

It was the smile, she decided, that was the icing on the cake. It was a smile to melt the polar ice caps with its radiance. Lord Hyatt shook off the last clinging hand and escaped out the closest door. Laura remembered Lady Devereau and looked to see if she followed. The lady stood stock still. She no longer looked beautiful. Her features were drawn into a sharp mask of anger, and her eyes were narrowed in a way that promised revenge on Lord Hyatt.

"He's going out the side door. We'll catch him as he comes out," Meadows exclaimed, and hustled the ladies outside by a different door and around the corner.

As they hastened along, a door a little farther down the building opened, the straw-colored head peered out, and looked both ways before exiting. It occurred to Laura that the man was hounded like a hunted animal. If it was attention he had sought, he had succeeded beyond his wishes.

Hyatt spotted Mr. Meadows and smiled impatiently. "Meadows. I didn't see you inside," he said in a

pleasant voice. As he spoke, his infamous dark eyes skimmed over the ladies. A pair of provincial misses, he noted. One too young and unlicked to be of interest, the other a shade past the first bloom. Just the sort of ladies he would expect Meadows to be escorting.

"Baroness, Miss Harwood, this is Lord Hyatt, the artist," Meadows said. "Hyatt, I'd like to present Baroness Pilmore, from Cornwall, and her cousin, Miss Harwood."

The ladies curtsied; Hyatt bowed and murmured, "Charmed."

"I've never seen anything as pretty as your pictures," Olivia said. "Would you paint me?"

"It is a mad temptation." He smiled. "But alas! My calendar is full to overflowing." He tossed up his hands, to show the impossibility of obliging her and his sorrow at that turn of events.

"I made sure it would be, when you make all the ladies look so much prettier than they really are. Except Lady Devereau. She really is stunning. I am surprised you are leaving, when she has just arrived," Olivia said.

Hyatt looked as if he had been dowsed with cold water. His eyes opened wider, his jaw fell, and for a moment he was speechless. He soon recovered and assumed a tight smile. "Rumor to the contrary, we are not joined at the hip, Lady Devereau and I. I am late for an appointment," he said, casting a strange eye on Meadows. Laura, watching closely, discerned a glint of accusation, anger, and amusement in his look.

There was obviously some trouble between Hyatt and his mistress. He had been brutally curt with her, and he was not at all happy at Olivia's blunt question. Outrageous for the girl to have mentioned Hyatt's mistress in that insinuating way!

"Don't let us detain you, Lord Hyatt," Laura said.

They were the first words she had uttered. Hyatt turned his impertinent gaze on her and studied her for a long moment. The provincial miss wore a very ironical smile. There was knowledge in her eyes and amusement at his predicament. Although Hyatt had nothing against debs, he preferred experienced ladies. This quiet one seemed to embody the old saw that still waters run deep. It was a fleeting thought, soon forgotten.

"Yes, I really must run. It was delightful to meet

you, ladies. I expect I shall see you at all the balls."

He bowed and hurried off.

"My, is he not pretty?" Olivia said, and immediately forgot him. "If Lord Hyatt is too busy to paint me, we should get hold of another artist soon. Mr. Lawrence, did you say, Laura?"

"Sir Thomas Lawrence."

"You should contact him at once," Meadows suggested. "He will have his hands full, too, but he seldom turns down a commission. Paints too much, some say. His work is a little uneven. I am sorry we could not get Hyatt. Perhaps I can twist his arm a little."

"Offer him twice his usual commission," Olivia said.

"That wouldn't do it. He contributes his earnings to charity." But Meadows had a notion what might turn the trick. As soon as Hyatt learned the commission he had turned down was the lady who drove the Turtle, and who would certainly be one of the Originals of the Season, he would be more interested. Hyatt liked Originals.

"What was your meaning, then, Mr. Meadows?" Laura asked.

He gave a mischievous wink that sat oddly on his stolid face. "I shan't tell you until I have succeeded. Would you like to return to the exhibition or go for a drive in the park?"

Olivia chose the park, and as she was usually deferred to in such matters, that was where they went. They alighted and strolled around the grounds, where an unconscionable number of gentlemen accosted them, all eager to meet the baroness. They were, per force, introduced to Laura as well. When it came out that she had made her bows five years before, some of them claimed to remember her, but the blank look on their faces belied this polite lie.

When the ladies were taken home, Olivia said, "You certainly have a great many friends, Laura."

Laura just smiled, for she knew the futility of disclaiming credit for the throng of blue jackets. As they dressed for dinner at Mrs. Aubrey's that evening, she could only marvel at how well the Season was turning out, after her fears that it would be another disaster. They had even met the Season's social lion, Lord Hyatt. That would not have happened during her first Season.

The most outstanding feature of Mrs. Aubrey's dinner party was that their hostess handed them cards to Lady Morgan's ball. Lady Morgan had never met any of them, but like every other informed hostess, she had heard of the baroness, and was eager to get this large fish in her net.

The rest of the evening was pleasant but not outstanding. Mrs. Aubrey had taken pains not to include any competition for her nephew. Her only complaint was that Robert spent a little too much time with Miss Harwood.

Chapter Five

Monsieur LaPierre, who came to arrange the ladies' coiffures the next morning, was as good as Madame Dupuis had promised. He tamed the baroness's curly mop to some semblance of fashion, and, after informing Laura that the cheribime was *passée*, decided that it suited her.

"Oh, dear!" she exclaimed.

Monsieur LaPierre hurried on to reassure her. "You, *mam'selle*, are a lady who prefers style over fashion. That is rare. To be *à la mode*—that is accomplished by the latest bonnet or gown, easily acquired by anyone. Mais le vrai style—that is a gift," he said, and bowed.

Laura blinked to hear her quiet mode of dressing suddenly raised to the eminence of "style." "Merci," she murmured.

Monsieur Pierre smiled and continued, "You have the wisdom, *mam'selle*. Not for you the froufrou and furbelows au courant for the hour."

When he had left, Laura examined her coiffure and was pleased with it. Her natural curl was enhanced by the shorter length. One wayward lock slid over her forehead, to flirt about her temple. Her curls bounced gaily when she moved. She felt lighter, younger.... Next she examined her gown. It was of simple blue sarcenet, for the weather was not yet warm enough for sprigged muslin. The gown's severe cut followed the line of her body, not the fashion of the Empress style, which she had always found unattractive. Ladies were given small waists; why hide them under a bag dress?

Yes, the gown was attractive, but it was almost too severe. It lacked that dash that would set it apart.

Olivia, taking pity on her cousin's drab ensemble, handed her a mulled gold shawl.

"Try this around your shoulders," she suggested.

Laura tried it at her shoulders but was not satisfied. She let it fall lower, to the waist. Then lower still, till it rested on the top of her hips. That was different.... When she tied it, the fringed ends hung below her knees and swayed when she walked.

"That looks funny," Olivia said, frowning.

"I am too old to worry about appearing funny," Laura said, and tossed her shoulders at her own folly. "If such an aged creature as I did not look a little 'funny,' she would not be noticed at all."

"You told me it was vulgar to appear different."

"It is the last resort of ape leaders, child. At your age, you have no need of such stunts. My, that coiffure does look nice!"

Olivia was satisfied with this compliment. She was further pleased with Mr. Meadows's compliments, when he brought another carriage around for her to try that afternoon. "That is a very dashing coiffure, Baroness," he said.

Olivia flushed in pleasure and said, "Cousin Laura had her hair done as well."

"Very nice," he said dutifully, but Olivia noticed where his praise was first delivered and felt Laura did not have Mr. Meadow so firmly in her grasp as she thought.

Meadows was now treated like an old friend at Charles Street. He was to take the young ladies for a drive in the park and return for tea.

The new carriage was a bottle-green landau, with a split top that could be let down on sunny days or put up if the weather was inclement. The squabs were of the requisite velvet, and the trappings of gilt. Olivia fell in love with it on sight. The only objection was the softness of the seat backs.

"It's lovely!" she squealed. "How clever you are, Mr. Meadows, to find exactly what I want."

"Actually, it was Miss Harwood who suggested one like Lady Sifton's."

"But you found it. Auntie will have to use her recliner," she said, dismissing that problem. She did not bother to inquire for its cost, and when Mr. Meadows told her, she hardly listened.

"I must have it. Are the team for sale, too? I do

think the grays go uncommonly well with green. Much better than my carriage team. They are part draft horse. The berlin is very heavy."

"I borrowed the team from a chap I know. Warner is in dun territory and is selling his prads at a bargain price."

"Come in and Auntie will write the checks. Now all that remains is for you to find me a mount, and I shan't bother you any further."

"Why, have you forgotten I am to take you to Astley's Circus and to Exeter Exchange? I hope you will let me accompany you on your rides as well," he said, with pleasing promptness.

"We should be happy for your company, eh, Laura?"

"I must hire a mount," Laura said, with very little interest. She liked country riding, but jogging along at a walk in Rotten Row had no interest for her. "Or if Mr. Meadows is to accompany you, then perhaps ..."

"No need to hire one," he said. "My aunt would be happy for you to use hers, if you care to join us one day."

During the drive to Hyde Park, Olivia rejoiced at the felicity of her footmen's livery matching her new carriage, for the Pilmore footmen had worn green forever. It was her own favorite color. Did Laura not think her green suit with the brass buttons an excellent match for the carriage as well? Laura did not think the grass green of livery and that particular suit the best match for a bottle green carriage, but before she could reply, Meadows fired off a barrage of praise, so she said nothing.

His approval of the green livery finally confirmed Laura's growing suspicion that Mr. Meadows intended to attach Olivia. That halfhearted mention of her, Laura's, joining them for a ride 'one day' had pretty well told the story. He wanted to be alone with Olivia.

Laura wondered how she could ever have mistaken his friendliness as a compliment to herself. What a ninny she was to think Meadows, who had always held himself pretty high, should suddenly be interested in her. Of course it was the baroness in whom they were all interested. She must not make that mistake again. Her head had been turned by Monsieur LaPierre's praise, but meaningless compliments were part of a coiffeur's stock and trade.

As the other two chatted, with more flirtation than common sense in their talk, Laura reviewed Hettie Traemore's requirements for a husband for Livvie: 'a nice, sound, sensible fellow who will be content to return to Cornwall and not want to be jauntering off to London every season. We don't want Livvie to abandon her estate. He must have a good head for business—the mine is a great deal of work.'

Meadows seemed a good candidate. He had a small estate of his own, nothing to compare with Olivia's. He would not balk at removing to Cornwall, where he would be set up as the most important gentleman in the neighborhood. There was no point thinking any of the more illustrious peers would be so obliging in that respect. They had their own affairs to tend to and would certainly plan to spend much time in London. To put the cap on the match, Olivia seemed very fond of Meadows. The attraction went back to their first meeting. She had assumed Olivia would make a grander match, but as her cousin required neither money, an estate, nor a title, she could marry where she wished.

Laura mentally released Mr. Meadows with scarcely a wisp of regret. She must be sure to let Olivia know that Meadows had never been more than a friend to herself. They toured the park once, then got out to stroll in the sunlight. It was one of those fine spring days, warmer than summer, with hardly a breeze stirring the branches. Laura had a sense that Meadows had chosen one particular spot to descend. He suggested they alight at the northeast corner, despite a confusion of carriages there. Once they began walking, he seemed to be looking around for someone.

Before long, he exclaimed in a voice of simulated surprise, "Why, there is Lord Hyatt! You remember we met him at Somerset House yesterday, Baroness?" Most of his comments either began or ended with the word 'baroness.' Laura felt she had been reduced to a chaperone and resented it.

Hyatt came smiling forward, removing his hat to bow to the ladies. The sun struck his wheat-blond hair, giving him a halo. Yet, despite the halo, he bore no resemblance to a saint. There was mischief on his handsome face and dancing in his dark eyes. Oh yes, this meeting had definitely been arranged, and she

was highly curious to discover why.

"Baroness," he smiled, then turned to Laura. "And Miss—"

"Harwood," Meadows supplied.

As Hyatt's attention had turned to the baroness, Laura did not even honor him with a curtsy, but only nodded.

Meadows relinquished Olivia to Lord Hyatt and fell into step with Laura behind as they all strolled through the park. "Did you arrange to meet Lord Hyatt here?" Laura asked.

"I left a note at his house suggesting it. He was not home. I was not sure he would come."

"What was the reason for that, Mr. Meadows? I cannot think it wise to be setting up a rendezvous with such a man."

"You'll see," he said mysteriously.

She gave up chiding him and listened to Olivia and Hyatt instead. The rake's conversation did not sound objectionable.

"I understand you come all the way from Cornwall?" Hyatt was saying. "That is a long trip. I hope you have a comfortable carriage."

"Indeed, yes. Papa bought a berlin some years ago. It is the most comfortable rig you have ever seen."

Laura soon got a definite sense that Hyatt was egging her on. He inquired for the team and said, "Six horses! It must be a big carriage. I wonder that anyone could pass you on the road."

"They couldn't," she said simply.

He laughed. "I know it well, for I was stuck behind you for ten miles on my way back from Hyatt Hall, in Kent, cursing you roundly for that sluggish Turtle shell you inhabit."

"Oh, you were teasing, Lord Hyatt! But you will not be held up by me again. I have got a lovely new landau this very day."

"Then the cartoon in the shop windows must be changed."

"What do you mean?" she asked, and he explained, ending with, "It is a great compliment, you must know."

"You mean there is a picture of me in a shop window?" she exclaimed. "How exciting! I must see it. Whoever would have thought—and I didn't think I would make a dent in society."

"You will bowl it over, I promise you."

"I don't suppose there will be many ladies as rustic as I am," she said. "But really a cartoon is no compliment. More like an insult. Do I look horrid?"

He studied her a moment and said, "Now that I have had the opportunity of seeing you more closely, I cannot say it is a flattering likeness. But then I, as an artist, appreciate the impossibility of capturing such liveliness on paper. It is no insult, I promise you. You are in excellent company, flanked by the Prince Regent on one side and our Prime Minister on the other."

"Why, I am practically famous!" she laughed, and turned to relate this marvel to Laura, who had already heard the story from Mr. Meadows.

Laura was uncomfortable to see Olivia with this infamous rake and spoke rather stiffly. "Don't let it go to your head," she said. "The cartoon is of the Berlin, not you."

"I don't know why everyone makes such a fuss about my carriage. It was my Cousin Laura who insisted on the landau," Olivia explained to Hyatt. "She is up to all the rigs."

Hyatt's dark eyes slid to Laura. He wondered at her lack of enthusiasm in this meeting. He was not a vain man, but as he spent half his life running from ladies, he had thought a provincial miss would be pleased at his company. Miss Harwood's stony face made it clear she was far from pleased.

"Shall we return to the carriage now?" Laura said to Meadows.

"We just got here," Olivia pouted.

"Let us walk on a while," Meadows suggested, and they continued.

They walked four abreast now, Laura walking between Hyatt and Meadows. Hyatt addressed himself to Olivia, and Laura listened.

"You are wearing a new coiffure, if I am not mistaken?" he said.

"Yes, my cousin said I should. Monsieur LaPierre gave us both a new do."

"Is Miss Harwood your chaperone?" he asked.

Laura heard the question and was seized with rage. Chaperone! She was only twenty-two.

Olivia just laughed. "Good gracious, no! My aunt and Mrs. Harwood are chaperoning us. We are both on the catch for a husband. But Cousin Laura is so

fussy!" she added in a confidential tone.

Hyatt turned and saw Laura glaring at him. "It does not pay for even an Incomparable to be too fussy," he said, with a mischievous smile that at once acknowledged his own solecism, her anger, and his exaggeration of her charms to appease her—and laughed at the whole affair.

Laura's anger melted like a snowflake in the oven. There was something about the man.... One felt she had been set apart when he smiled at her. Laura said saucily, "I had not thought to hear Lord Hyatt recommend a lack of fussiness. You will not even paint less than perfection. How then can you expect a lady to shackle herself for life to just anyone?"

"You misunderstand me, ma'am. I am not recommending you take up with just any old yahoo—some such derelict as Lord Hyatt, for example. No, I am sure your suitors all hopped out of the very top drawer. Yet you were too fussy to choose among them."

"Just so," she said, with one of the new ironical smiles she had assumed for the Season. She could banter just a little with someone like Hyatt, but she was relieved when his attention returned to Olivia.

"Have you arranged for your portrait yet, Baroness?" he asked.

"My aunt is going to write to Sir Thomas Lawrence today."

He stopped walking and just stood, looking at her. That hair would be a challenge. It flamed like fire. A nice contrast to her complexion. The girl was a hoyden—a new style of model for him. He was becoming bored with society matrons.

"Tom is very busy just now," he said. "Mind you, he would do a bang-up job. If he cannot squeeze you in, let me know. I'll make time for you. It would be a shame for you to come all the way from Cornwall and not return with your portrait—as well as a husband, of course. Let us not forget the prime reason for your visit."

"Would you do me?" Olivia said at once. "I would much rather be done by you, for you make everyone look so pretty."

He inclined his head to her and said in a flirtatious way, "One would have to be a bad artist indeed to make you look anything else but charming, Baroness."

"I would have to be chaperoned," she said. "My

aunt would never let me go alone to your atelier."

If he took offense, he did not reveal it by so much as a flicker. "All my young lady models are chaperoned," he assured her. "But I do not allow a crowd of friends. A noisy audience distracts me. You, I fear, will already prove distraction enough," he finished, with a reckless smile.

"Mr. Meadows and my cousin have already offered to chaperone me," she replied. "Two friends will not be too many?"

Lord Hyatt agreed to this, and it remained only to set the hour. They stopped in the shade of a mulberry tree and sat on a bench.

Olivia looked all around and said, "I wish I could take off my shoes and stockings and run through the grass. I do it at home. It feels like cold velvet on your feet."

"Daresay you'd step on broken glass or worse here," was Meadows's mundane reply.

"Besides making a vulgar display of yourself," Laura added. She was unhappy that Meadows had somehow set up this meeting. She realized now that the purpose of it was to get Hyatt to paint Olivia. She did not in the least look forward to those endless sittings, while the two gentlemen flirted with Olivia and she sat twiddling her thumbs.

Lord Hyatt sat silent, just looking, first at Olivia, then around at the spreading park, which was dotted with trees. He was planning his portrait and realized that none of his studio props suited this girl from the wilds of Cornwall. She was at home to a peg in the great outdoors, where the vivid greenery complemented her fiery hair. He would paint her without a bonnet. He thought of her wish to take off her shoes and run barefoot through the grass. That was how he wanted to paint her. But where?

"What we must do is come some morning early, before anyone is here, and let you have a ramble barefoot," Meadows said, with a dotting smile at the baroness.

Hyatt's head turned to Meadows. Now there was an idea! With his full schedule, early morning sittings would suit him very well, and at that hour, Hyde Park would be deserted.

"Let us come tomorrow morning," he said.

Olivia blinked. "Do you like running in the grass

barefoot, too, Lord Hyatt?"

"No, but that is how I should like to paint you."

Olivia frowned. "That is not how you painted the other ladies," she pointed out.

"I try to place each model in the background that suits her. I see you outdoors, in some such place as this."

"But without my shoes?"

Meadows wanted to appease Hyatt and said heartily, "Why, Baroness, that would suit you right down to the ground. Bare feet—ground. A pun, I daresay. Said you liked to feel the grass."

"Definitely without your shoes," Hyatt said, "and without a bonnet as well. You must be physically in touch with the earth and the sky."

"That latter requirement will call for a very long ladder," Laura said. The whole affair sounded very bizarre to her. She was afraid Hyatt intended to make sport of Olivia in his painting.

Hyatt sensed her mood and replied coolly, "Not in a painting. The model's head and shoulders are often set against the sky. No doubt you have noticed that in pictures, the earth and sky meet. It is called perspective."

"I trust it is only her head and feet that will be in contact with nature. You do plan to permit her to wear a gown?"

A pink flush rose up the column of Hyatt's neck, to color his face. "When I wish to paint a nude, I usually hire a professional model. Society is rather prudish in that respect, though I personally think that all ladies ought to be painted without their clothes. The human body is the greatest challenge for an artist. We can get away with miscalculating the dimensions of a tree or a building, but if a human body is out by more than a small fraction, we are soon caught out."

"Of course I shall wear a gown," Olivia said. "What color do you think would look nice, Lord Hyatt?"

"Yellow. Not a dull, mustardy color, and not the strident yellow of a dandelion. Something along the lines of a primrose, if you have it."

"My gowns are all white, for I am making my debut," she said.

"Good God, I don't want a formal gown. Something very plain, unstructured—the simpler the better."

Olivia had no such article in her wardrobe. She

looked to her mentor for assistance. Laura had simmered down and began to envisage the sort of painting Hyatt intended to do. She felt he had chosen well. Livvie would look ludicrous in feathers and lace. Her vibrant charms showed to best advantage in a natural setting. She knew instinctively that he meant to show her as a girl, not a woman. He would want a simple outfit.

"Fanny has that yellow dimity frock...." she said.

Olivia laughed. "I will not have my portrait painted in my servant's old work clothes."

"It sounds the very thing. Wear it," Hyatt said, surprised that it was Miss Harwood, the one against his plan, who had grasped what he wanted. "If you have a wide-brimmed straw bonnet, bring it along as well. Not to wear, but perhaps to dangle from your fingers ..."

"I don't have one."

"I do," Laura said.

"Why would you bring such a thing to London, cousin?"

"I like to read in the backyard sometimes. It protects me from the sun."

"I could bring my aunt's pug," Meadows volunteered.

Hyatt considered this. "I would like some animal life in the picture...."

"Maybe you could borrow Lady Devereau's monkey," Olivia suggested.

Laura, noticing Hyatt's dilating nostrils, said hastily, "Perhaps a squirrel or some birds."

Hyatt nodded, surprised again that she had captured the essence of his painting. "Dogs can be a nuisance," he said, "but I don't rule it out entirely. Do you like dogs, Baroness?"

"I love them, but Auntie wouldn't let me bring any with me. I have a lovely old sheepdog at home."

They discussed the picture for another ten minutes; then Hyatt accompanied them to their carriage. "We shall meet here tomorrow at seven," he said. Before any more plans were discussed, a flock of admirers spotted Hyatt and their privacy was over.

In the carriage, Laura said, "You arranged that meeting to convince Hyatt to paint Olivia, Mr. Meadows."

"I asked him to meet us. I was by no means sure

he would come."

"How did you convince him to do Olivia's portrait?"

"It didn't take much convincing once he discovered she was the baroness from Cornwall, who came to London in the Turtle."

This pregnant comment gave rise to a few questions. Laura knew that Hyatt was enough of a sensation that he did not have to court fame by associating with the famous. Was it the baroness's fortune that attracted him? She must keep a sharp eye on him and discover if he was dangling after Olivia. If that was the case, she would have her hands full. Lord Hyatt would be a hard man to keep in line.

Olivia just sat, smiling smugly. Everyone was running after Lord Hyatt, but he had come running after her. London was not so very different from Cornwall, where she was the acknowledged queen. And here she had worried about failing in London. She was famous already, her likeness in shop windows, between the Prince Regent and Lord Liverpool. She need not worry any longer. She could relax now and begin to enjoy herself.

Chapter Six

Olivia went bursting into the house, calling to her aunt. "The greatest thing, Auntie! Lord Hyatt wants to paint my portrait after all. Is it not wonderful?"

It was Mr. Meadows who received the chaperone's grateful thanks and admiration for this tremendous piece of fortune. "Think of that! Our little Livvie done by Lord Hyatt. We have you to thank, Mr. Meadows. I don't know what we would have done without you."

This familiar accolade was enough to warn Laura she had been dethroned, but she added her warning anyway, as insurance against future accusations. "You recall that Lord Hyatt has a reputation with the ladies, Mrs. Traemore."

Hettie smiled tolerantly on her old mentor and more warmly on her new. "Mr. Meadows will go along to his studio to chaperone. And of course you, too, Laura."

"Actually, Hyatt plans to do the painting in Hyde Park," Meadows mentioned.

"Fancy that! Hyde Park," Hettie exclaimed.

"That is certainly respectable. I have been for a

drive through it myself. Unexceptionable."

"We are going at seven o'clock in the morning, and I am to wear Fanny's old yellow dress with the grass stains," Olivia said, laughing.

"Seven a.m. He is an early riser, to be sure. But we can do better than Fanny's old frock. Though not one of your white gowns. They would be bound to pick up grass stains."

"Laura suggested Fanny's old yellow dress, and Lord Hyatt thought it a good idea. I am to pose in my bare feet."

Laura received a questioning stare. "Livvie will catch her death of cold in her bare feet when the dew is still on the ground."

"If you do not think it is a good idea, you have only to say so," Laura said hopefully.

Meadows cleared his throat and said, "Daresay she can wear shoes till he is actually painting the feet."

"Why can she not wear slippers?" Mrs. Traemore asked.

"Hyatt plans to paint her as a sort of—nymph of nature, in her bare feet," Laura explained. "I own I am not entirely happy with it, ma'am. I told him we would have to consult you. If you disapprove ..."

Mrs. Traemore turned to Mr. Meadows for guidance. He said, "It is a great coup to get him. Every lady in London is on thorns to be done by Hyatt. I shan't leave her side for a moment."

Any course that kept Meadows by Olivia's side was bound to be adopted. Mrs. Traemore sent off for a pen and paper on the instant, and Mr. Meadows agreed to deliver the note to Hyatt that same day, to ensure that all was in order.

The ladies had no outing that evening and spent the time planning Olivia's ball. Their list of guests totaled five people. At the top was Mr. Meadows, followed by Mrs. Aubrey, Lord and Lady Morgan, and Lord Hyatt.

Mrs. Traemore found nothing ludicrous in arranging a vastly expensive ball for such a small audience. "Fancy that, Livvie. Two lords and a lady, and we have only been here a few days. I daresay by the time the ball arrives, we shall have the room full to overflowing."

After they went upstairs, Mrs. Harwood and Laura discussed the painting. "I foresee opportunities for

mischief, doing the picture at a public park," Laura said. "A crowd invariably collects around Lord Hyatt wherever he goes. His last model was his mistress, Lady Devereau. She is the talk of the town."

"I don't see why they don't get Lawrence to do her. Hettie had not even heard of Lord Hyatt two days ago. Why is she suddenly so eager to have him now?"

"Because Mr. Meadows arranged it. You must have noticed he has been canonized."

Her mother gave a resigned sigh. "I hoped he was beginning to feel something for you, Laura."

"Oh, he was, Mama. He felt that I was an excellent means to ingratiate the baroness. But he may have outwitted himself by dragging in Lord Hyatt. Not that he would offer himself, but once his set get a whiff of her, Meadows may be left out in the cold. Hyatt's friends are bound to be from the very tip of the ton."

"At least they will help to fill up that immense ballroom. It seems an expensive way of getting a husband for Livvie, does it not?"

"Indeed it does, but she is enjoying it all very much. She can afford one grand, expensive season. Better than we could, I fear."

"I never begrudged the expense, dear, just the outcome. Let us just hope that Livvie has more success than we had."

On this reminder of her failure, Laura went to bed.

* * * *

The baroness spoke to Fanny to arrange for her yellow frock. "You must wash it and have it ironed by seven, Fanny."

"You might have told me before eleven o'clock."

"I just remembered."

"What do you want to wear that old rag for, with your closet full of new gowns?"

"Cousin Laura suggested it. Lord Hyatt agreed."

"Aye, I thought as much. Your fine cousin Laura is out to spike your gun, milady. Jealous as a green cow. She had your nice curls chopped off till you looked like a shorn lamb and had the ribbons ripped off your new gowns. Now she is having you painted in rags. It's time to grasp the nettle and put your foot down. If you don't look sharp, she'll steal whatever beau you settle on."

"I fear I am the one who has stolen her beau, Fanny. She denies it, but I believe she is in love with Mr. Meadows."

"Let her have him. You can do better than a Mr. Meadows. How about this Lord Hyatt? Quite an Adonis, I hear."

"He is the most handsome thing you ever saw. He looks for the world like the picture of the Angel Gabriel in my Bible Stories for Children at home, except of course for the wings."

"And a lord to boot," Fanny said, nodding her head sagely. "I'll stake my head he's after you for more than a picture."

"But Mr. Meadows is nicer," Olivia said simply.

"I daresay Miss Harwood has her sights set on Lord Hyatt?"

"She agrees that he is very handsome, but she has warned me that he is fast."

"That is her stunt to keep you away from him. Pay her no heed, missie. Go for the title, say I." Olivia looked interested but said nothing. "I'll launder the yellow frock and get up early to press it."

* * * *

Laura was awakened by a rude shaking in the morning. Daylight had hardly dawned, and she was still tired. It was Olivia, come to rouse her for the early appointment in the park.

"It is six o'clock, cousin. Time to get up."

"Yes, I'm coming," Laura yawned, and dragged herself out of bed. She opened the curtains, hoping for rain to forestall the outing. A brilliant beam of sunlight pierced her eyes.

Mr. Meadows arrived punctually at twenty to seven. Between coffee and the crisp morning air, Laura was fully awake by the time they reached Hyde Park. It was lovely in the early morning, with no crowds to distract them from the acres of greenery. Sunlight shone through the new leaves and fuzzed treetops with a golden haze. It looked like some ancient Eden, only of course a little more cultivated.

Hyatt was not to be seen, but he had left a footman to direct them to the spot he had selected. It was off the beaten track, a sort of wilderness hidden by hedges.

He wore a navy smock and was hatless, and even in that strange outfit he looked stunningly handsome. His easel and tools were already arranged, ready for work, when he came forward to greet them. "Let me see the dress," he said to Olivia as soon as they had all

exchanged greetings. She removed her pelisse and bonnet and circled for him to examine her. The frock was utterly without style and worn nearly threadbare. It had a simple round neck and short, puffed sleeves. The top was fitted, the full skirt gathered to allow easy movement. There was not a single scrap of ornament on it.

"Excellent!" he decreed. "I want you to stand there, just between the mulberry tree and those soaring pines. Move around a little, till I see what pose suits you."

"Shall I take my shoes off?"

"There is no hurry with that. The grass is still wet."

Olivia went to the spot chosen and began an artless little dance, lifting her skirt and moving to some imaginary music. Laura could not help thinking how embarrassed she would be in Olivia's place, but her cousin had never looked more natural or graceful. Sunlight glinted off her Titian curls and lit her youthful face.

"I freckle in the sun, Lord Hyatt," she called. "You must promise to paint them out if I get spots."

"On the contrary. I shall paint them in if they don't materialize." He arranged his two hands as a frame, to select the perimeter of his sketch and to place Olivia in it. "Hold the hem of your skirt up with one hand," he ordered. Olivia complied. "No, the other hand, Baroness." Again she did as he said. "Turn your head to the side—just a little. I think I might do your face in three-quarter profile. You have lovely cheeks."

Laura and Meadows stood behind Hyatt to see what pose he was choosing. "Do you want the straw hat?" Laura asked him.

"I think not. Her hand looks so graceful, just poised in the air, does it not? With her skirt lifted in the other, as if she were dancing. Perhaps we'll toss the hat on the grass beside her, as if she had cast it aside. It will add to the spontaneity."

Laura laughed. "I did not realize that spontaneity was so carefully planned."

He flashed a quick smile at her. "You don't believe that old canard that art imitates life, Miss Harwood? No, indeed, we improve on it. Our spontaneity is all contrived. There is a thermos of coffee in that basket, if you and Mr. Meadows would like to find a seat and have a drink." As he was busy, Laura and Meadows

followed his advice.

Meadows said, "I know you had some reservations about this scheme, Miss Harwood, but you can see Hyatt is all business when he works."

"Yes, you are right. He is quite a perfectionist, I think. I wish I could afford to have my picture done by him."

"Once he realized who the baroness is, he was keen to do her. I thought he might be."

"What do you mean, exactly? Is it her being a wealthy baroness?"

"That—and the fame she will soon have. She will be a great hit, you must know. Everyone is talking about her already, and she hasn't even appeared in public yet."

"Lord Hyatt does not have to court fame in that way."

"It is not fame he is courting. He does whoever catches his interest. My own opinion is that he wanted to do the lady who came to town in the Turtle. That alone was enough to tell him the baroness was an Original."

Laura found Mr. Meadows entirely conversable, but she could not fail to notice that he was happiest when discussing the baroness. His enthusiasm appeared genuine, but did he like her for herself or for her fortune?

Hyatt worked for a little over an hour; then Olivia said she was tired, and the session was over. Meadows and Laura joined them at the easel.

"Are we allowed to see the sketch, or are you one of those artists who make everyone wait till the oeuvre is complete?" Laura asked.

"To astonish you with the brilliance of my conception and execution? Need you ask, Miss Harwood? Naturally I am of that repellent sort." She read the laughter in his eyes and went to examine his work. "Take a good look, for once I begin applying the paint, I do keep the picture under wraps, to prevent well-meaning but unwanted advice."

He had sketched in the outline of Olivia, poised between the spreading mulberry and the soaring fir trees. No paint had been applied yet, except for a patch of yellow and green. Hyatt stood behind Laura, while Olivia complained to Meadows about the fatigue of her arms.

"I was just testing the colors to see if I would get the desired effect," he mentioned.

"It suggests a meadow in springtime. You often do see yellow flowers scattered about the meadow. And usually some white and blue flowers, too. I like the blue ones best myself, but I see what you are about. You will call this 'Springtime,' or some such thing, I collect?"

"My first thought was 'Primavera,' but I wish to make it more individual than just a pretty young woman symbolizing spring. It is a portrait, after all. I shall call it 'The Barefoot Baroness.' It suits her. I am delighted that she mentioned running through the grass in her bare feet. It is just the primitive touch I wanted."

Laura looked uncertain. "You aren't going to make it a travesty, I hope? Poke fun at her, I mean." His admiring tone had already lessened her fears on that score. "Parody that delightful girl? Good God, no! Where did you get such an idea?"

"Your other paintings all have sophisticated backgrounds. This one is—unusual."

"The baroness is an unusual lady," he said, his eyes sliding to where she sat with Meadows, drinking coffee. "Society has not got at her and spoiled her yet. It will be a tribute to her youth and naturalness, not a travesty."

Laura followed Hyatt's gaze and studied her cousin, who was babbling merrily. "Yes, she is unspoiled."

Hyatt looked at Laura for a moment. When he spoke, his words surprised her. "Don't let them spoil her," he said softly.

"Who? What do you mean?"

"You are older—an experienced lady. Your friends would not all be suitable for the baroness."

She blinked in astonishment. He came close to calling her a dasher, which was the most foolish thing anyone had ever said to her. Her first response was anger, followed swiftly by a pleasanter sensation. Lord Hyatt thought her a dasher! He thought her an experienced lady, which removed the sting from the heedless 'older.'

Her ironic smile fell into place. "I shall be at pains to protect the girl," she said. "And my first priority, sir, is to call you to account. Yesterday you were too busy

to do my cousin. Today, your schedule is magically freed. What are your intentions?"

His smile was not one jot short of flirtation. Hyatt never limited himself to one flirt at a time. "My intention, Miss Harwood, is to paint her. What my intentions are vis-à-vis your charming self are yet to be discussed. I expect you will be taking the baroness to Lady Morgan's ball this evening?"

"Indeed I shall."

"Then we shall discuss my intentions at that time, if you will do me the honor of standing up with me."

"I will be very happy to, Lord Hyatt."

He began assembling his gear. "How does it come I have not met you before?" he asked over his shoulder.

"I have not taken in a Season recently."

"I know that much. I would have met you, if you had. Why did you not?"

At a loss for an answer that did not tarnish her image, she said vaguely, "I found my first Season a dead bore."

He gave a cocky smile and said, "That must have been the Season I was in Italy, studying the masters. Not a word about mistresses, Miss Harwood, or you will reveal yourself for a dasher."

She turned quite pink and followed his advice regarding not mentioning mistresses. "No doubt your absence would account for the dullness. And now I see Olivia is ready to leave. Tomorrow, same time?"

Hyatt gave a mental smile at her blush. He was intrigued by that air of ironic innocence. "Seven is damned early, I know. You must have been cursing me at about the time the cock crowed this morning. This schedule will play havoc with your beauty rest. I shall see that you are sent home from the ball early—as soon as I have had my two dances with you."

"Two?" One dance was standard; two suggested a particular interest.

"We encroaching fellows—give us an inch. . . . But we are not debs, you and I, Miss Harwood," he said, in an effort to plumb her character. "Surely we fully mature adults may risk two dances, without having any peals rung over us. I would like to know you better."

"Oh, I do not improve on closer acquaintance," she said, and laughed nervously, but in her heart she felt it was true. Hyatt would soon become bored, when he

learned she was not the dasher he took her for. Better to make their meetings less frequent, and she might scrape through the Season without being revealed for the provincial miss she was.

He just looked, with a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. "One does not contradict a lady, but you must allow me to be the judge of that, ma'am. You have definitely improved since our first meeting."

"Perhaps that is because you failed to look at me the first time," she retorted.

They parted on this quizzing phrase, and he went to speak to Olivia. Laura was so excited she hardly listened to what they said, but she was soon aware that Olivia was now the butt of his praise, and for reasons totally at odds with what he seemed to like in herself. It was the baroness's 'freshness' and 'country charm' he mentioned. Laura had to conclude that Hyatt liked all kinds of ladies, providing they were youngish, with some modicum of beauty.

None of the party, including Lord Hyatt, paid the least heed to the young buck who drove into the park as they parted. Mr. Yarrow had borrowed his chum's nags to test them before making an offer. The park, before it was cluttered up with rigs, was the best place to do it, for the streets were full of postmen and delivery wagons and workmen as soon as the sun rose. He slowed his team to a walk, looked, then looked again. Lord Hyatt! By the living jingo, what had he stumbled onto here? Was Hyatt painting some lady in a public park? It sounded extremely unlikely, but Hyatt had said, "We'll meet tomorrow at the same time." And his footman was carrying a wooden case that might very well hold paints and brushes.

He glanced at his watch. It was quarter to nine, and they were leaving. Must have been here since eight or so. He'd just drop by tomorrow morning and see what was afoot.

Chapter Seven

Lady Morgan's ball was the Season's opening salvo. Everyone with any claim or pretention to social éclat was there, along with dozens of others who had managed to bribe or steal a ticket. It was a foregone conclusion that Lord Hyatt was the Season's social lion. Before long, it was known who was the lioness.

The Baroness Pilmore, flushed with excitement and looking more fashionable than she had ever looked before (though still less fashionable than most debs), was his partner for the opening minuet. Every eye in the room was on her.

"Who is that great, awkward ladder of a girl Hyatt is standing up with?" Lady Jersey asked her hostess.

Lady Morgan gave a disparaging laugh at her friend's pitiful ignorance. "You don't mean you have not met Baroness Pilmore, from Cornwall? Tin mines, forty thousand pounds—"

"So that is her! The lady who came to town in the Turtle? A very graceful dancer. I must give her a voucher to Almack's." Lady Jersey darted off to announce her discovery.

"I do not recognize Hyatt's partner. A country lumpkin. That carrot top suggests she is his cousin from Scotland," Lady Castlereagh whispered to Lady Jersey.

"Why, Amelia! You are out of it entirely. That is the tin heiress from Cornwall, Baroness Pilmore. Forty thousand pounds. Refreshingly unspoiled, don't you think? I am just about to give her a voucher to Almack's."

"Ah, the Turtle girl! I have just been admiring her hair. Such a lovely Titian shade."

"Baroness Pilmore, the tin heiress from Cornwall," Lady Castlereagh soon confided to a wondering Mrs. Drummond-Burrell.

"A delightful creature. So refreshing to see that fine complexion and smattering of freckles on her. The debs are all becoming so jaded one feels they have never seen the sun."

Before the set was over, any experienced lady realized that red hair, freckles, a tall build, and a laugh a shade louder than normal were the new criteria for acceptability. Pocket Venuses were no longer in style; they were reduced to 'squabs.' Hours of deportment lessons went flying out the window.

During the second act, Lord Hyatt's next partner, Miss Harwood, came under the microscope.

"The baroness's cousin," Lady Morgan confided to a bosom bow. "She is here to show the baroness the ropes. I had it of the baroness's chaperone, Mrs. Traemore. Miss Harwood must be up to all the rigs, as she has snagged Hyatt for the baroness so soon."

"A charming girl. A little longer in the tooth than the baroness, of course."

"Yes, Miss Harwood has been around forever. Lady Devereau's nose will be out of joint."

"Is it Miss Harwood or the baroness who is Hyatt's new flirt?"

"If he plans to take a wife this Season, then of course it would be the baroness. But you know Hyatt! That does not preclude his enjoying Miss Harwood's company as well."

"He never had much use for debts." Knowing smiles were exchanged.

Lady Devereau gained a ticket to the ball by means best not discussed; her partner was a banker to whom Lord Morgan owed ten thousand pounds. Her lovely nose was completely out of joint. Lord Hyatt exchanged a few words with her, but he did not honor her with a dance. His interest had never penetrated much deeper than her pretty face. Once it was on canvas, he was looking for fresh inspiration. If she had jilted her latest flirt on his account—well, it would not take her long to pick up a new one. She was becoming a byword for her affairs.

Laura was fully alive to the excitement Olivia was causing and was gratified to see her cousin bounced off to such a promising start. That her own star was rising never occurred to her. She knew Hyatt attracted a great deal of attention and assumed that the squinting eyes were on her partner.

"Did you do any work on my cousin's portrait this afternoon, milord?" she asked as they danced.

"Certainly not," he answered promptly. "I mean to draw it out for as long as possible, to ensure her chaperone's company."

A gurgle of laughter rose up in her throat. "That cannot be necessary. Mr. Meadows would be happy to see you whether you are painting the baroness or not."

He gave a playful grimace. "Spiked my own wheel with that dread word, chaperone! It has already been explained to me once that you are the baroness's friend and cousin, not her chaperone. As you are trying to palm Meadows off on me, am I correct in assuming that you and he are not a romantic item? I would not want to make enemies by poaching."

"You make me sound like a hare, or a pheasant."

"It was only a figure of speech."

"Yes, a figure of speech that denigrates a lady," she riposted.

"We gentlemen never take exception to being called fish," he pointed out, with a spark of mischief lurking in his eyes. "Surely that is our zoological genus, when we are told that ladies are 'angling' after us. But enough of metaphors. What I am trying to discover is whether you are Mr. Meadows's hare—or pheasant. Or anyone else's, for that matter."

She smiled vaguely and said, "Perhaps that depends on what sort of fish you are, milord. If you are a shark, then I am someone else's hare."

"And if I am an innocent freshwater gudgeon?"

"I would have to be a gudgeon to entertain that possibility."

"Excellent! We have achieved some common ground. We are both gudgeons. I have no use for miscegenation myself. And still you have not told me whether you are engaged to Mr. Meadows." He glanced at her left hand.

"I am not engaged to anyone."

"I rather thought Meadows was rolling his eyes at our barefoot friend. She is a hit already, by the by. You have done an excellent job of launching her."

"You must take the credit for that, Lord Hyatt. It is your standing up with her for the opening dance that accounts for it."

"I can think of forty thousand other reasons—and a tin mine—that had something to do with it, but as that is your first compliment to me, I shall blush shyly and expostulate that it is no such thing."

She shook her head. "Are you always so foolish?"

"No, only when I am with beautiful ladies. Among gentlemen, I am taken for a sensible fellow. I have even been known to discuss politics."

"It is news to me if a leopard can change its spots."

"Do you think we put me in the wrong species? Perhaps I should be classified as a chameleon."

After exchanging thrusts and parries with Hyatt for a whole set, there was no doubt in Laura's mind what category he belonged to: gazetted flirt. She wanted only to retire to some quiet corner and sip a glass of wine to restore her equanimity, for she was not accustomed to such excitement.

She soon realized that her wallflower days were over. The evening was a steady round of dancing. In

some magical manner, she had become one of the chosen ones. The most dashing, most eligible gentlemen stood in line to partner her. How had it happened? Five years ago, when she was younger and prettier, they had not even glanced at her. Suddenly they were falling over themselves to know her. And it was not only the gentlemen either.

Three of Almack's hostesses had offered her vouchers. "For you and your charming cousin, the baroness."

That, of course, was the answer. All the world wanted to know Olivia. No doubt the tin mine and the dot had something to do with it, but the spread of Olivia's fame would not have been so rapid and rampant without Hyatt's attentions. He was the catalyst that had set off this explosion of popularity. She must take care that Olivia did not get burned.

Who was that awkward concern she was standing up with now? He looked a rakish sort—one of the younger set, a handsome enough fellow, but not out of the very top drawer. The shoulders of his jacket were wadded, and the waist pinched too tightly. His cravat was too complicated, and his laugh just a little overdone.

She asked her partner, a dasher called Sir Hugh Standish, who the man was.

"That is young Yarrow," he replied. "He'll come into his uncle's baronetcy one day, and an abbey in Devon, but he won't hold on to it long, the way he is going. He is a gambler. He has no bad reputation with the ladies, however."

"You are mistaken, Sir Hugh. A gambler always has a bad reputation with any lady of common sense." Especially when he is dangling after an heiress.

Laura paid no special heed to Lord Hyatt during the rest of the evening. She had had her dance with him and did not plan to have another. She saw him from time to time, standing up with all the prettiest debs. Their smiles told her they were being flirted with and complimented as she had been. She was enjoying her own success so much that she scarcely noticed. When dinner was announced, Hyatt suddenly appeared at her side.

"We gudgeons are not only used for bait," he said, with an exquisite bow. "We eat, as well as being eaten."

"Oh, are you eating with us?" she asked, surprised.

"I arranged it with Meadows and the baroness. If you have made other arrangements, I shall call Meadows out. He was to tell you."

"He did say he had made arrangements, but he did not say with whom."

"Ah, well, he did not want you to set up a rebellion against the scheme," he said, placing her hand on his arm and strolling toward the dining room.

"Why would I do that? I am honored that you are joining us."

Hyatt had expected some persiflage and was momentarily reduced to silence by her polite reply. How did she manage to say all the right things, yet give the impression that she was far from honored? One could not fault her for a lack of politeness. She smiled and conversed intelligently, but when the dinner was over, Hyatt was left with the unusual sensation of having been tolerated, rather than welcomed. He had not made a conscious decision, but somewhere at the bottom of his mind the idea was floating about that he would squire the baroness about for a week or so to get to know her. He always painted the face last, after he knew his model fairly well. These outings would be more enjoyable with a conversable lady along for diversion.

Intrigued, he forged on. "Shall we have our second dance now?" he asked, as they returned to the ballroom.

"You have forgotten the baroness is to go home early, as she has an early rising."

"I have not forgotten. Her aunt or Mr. Meadows can take her home."

"And how am I to get home?" she asked.

"In my carriage, ma'am. We also have an early rising, but as we are not to be captured on canvas, a soupçon of dissipation will not matter."

"It will be better if I accompany Olivia and Mr. Meadows," she said with another polite smile to conceal her mood. She was greatly excited, yet more than a little terrified at Hyatt's persistence. She would no more have gone alone with him in a carriage than she would have gone with a tiger.

He tilted his head to one side and studied her. "Which of us is it you distrust?" he asked bluntly.

She returned his look, then said, with just a touch of asperity, "I have never found Mr. Meadows anything

but completely trustworthy, Lord Hyatt."

His smile stretched to a grin, and he said recklessly, "He sounds a dull dog. No wonder you refuse to be his hare. Whenever you feel a need of some . . . danger in your life, my carriage is at your disposal. À demain." He bowed and left.

Laura escaped, uncertain whether she had just received a setdown or a compliment. The baroness was voluble on the way home, chattering about the wonder of her first 'real' ball, for the do's at home hardly merited the name ball after the present evening's wonders.

"Who was the Guards captain you were standing up with, Livvie?" Mrs. Traemore asked. She had dragged herself out for the ball and spent most of the evening in the card parlor, along with Mrs. Harwood.

"That was Captain Milton. He got a bullet in his shoulder in the Peninsula. The man who moved like a wooden soldier was Sir Edward somebody or other—only he was very old. Thirty or more. Lord Peter Croft told me I had lovely hair, and Mr. Yarrow said—oh, by the by, Laura, he is coming to watch Lord Hyatt do my picture tomorrow. You don't think Lord Hyatt will mind?"

"We were not to tell anyone! Lord Hyatt does not want a crowd!" Laura exclaimed in vexation.

"I only told Mr. Yarrow."

"He is the very one you should not have told. He is a gambler."

"I'll hint him away," Meadows said. He was sunk to riding bobbin in the crowded carriage. "Your cousin is right, Baroness. You don't want Yarrow's rackety set traipsing at your heels. Not the thing. Isn't that right, Mrs. Traemore?"

"Indeed, yes!"

"What is the matter with him? He seemed very nice," Olivia persisted.

"He goes through money like water," Meadows said.

"He would not go through my money. How he spends his own is of no interest to me. I do not plan to marry him after all."

"That is true," Mrs. Traemore said, for she never liked to deny Olivia anything.

"You'll marry from among the set you associate with," Meadows explained, "so it is best to associate with gentlemen who are fit to marry. Only common

sense."

"That is true, Livvie," her aunt agreed.

"Mr. Yarrow was the most amusing gentleman I met all evening," Olivia pouted.

"He did seem a lively, good-natured fellow," Mrs. Traemore said at once. "Livvie brought him to the card room. He got me a glass of ratafia. Very gentlemanly of him, was it not?"

Mr. Meadows accompanied the ladies to the door but did not go in. He found a moment to speak to Laura after the others had gone inside.

"I am a little surprised that Mrs. Traemore was not more helpful about young Yarrow," he said, frowning.

"She never denies Olivia anything. We must keep an eye on him, Mr. Meadows. And on Lord Hyatt as well. His conversation is not ... is a little ... I mean for a young girl," she ended in confusion.

"Perhaps I did the wrong thing to arrange this sitting with Hyatt. I had no idea how it would turn the baroness into an object of curiosity."

"What of Lord Hyatt himself? Can we completely trust him?" she said, and listened closely for Meadows's verdict.

"He would never throw himself at a young deb unless he meant to marry her. For amusement, he prefers more mature ladies." He gave her a knowing look and said, "It is you who must be wary of him, Miss Harwood." Then he laughed, but it was not an easy laugh. He had seen how Hyatt dangled after Miss Harwood and was concerned on her account. She was a regular greenhead. "You must not take his attentions seriously."

"I did not come down in the last rain, Mr. Meadows. I recognize a flirt when I see one. It is Livvie I am concerned about. I would appreciate your help in watching Yarrow."

"Between the two of us, he won't get a sniff of her."

He left, satisfied that his quest of the baroness was proceeding satisfactorily.

Chapter Eight

The baroness had no trouble arising at six o'clock the next morning for her sitting. Laura was fatigued, and she looked it. They had not got to bed till one o'clock. She was a little annoyed to see that Lord Hyatt

showed no sign of dissipation. He had his easel set up when they arrived and had been working on the background since daybreak. Some of the trees and sky were filled in already.

"You must have been here for hours!" she exclaimed when she saw the canvas.

"You weren't supposed to peek once I began applying paint," he scolded.

"At this rate, you will be finished in no time."

"I am a fast worker," he replied, pinning her with a mischievous eye.

She refused to recognize any ambiguity in the speech. "Good! Truth to tell, I find these early mornings a trial after a late night."

"Aha! So you went on to another party last night. I thought as much."

"Indeed we did not. We went straight home."

"Then why do you speak of a late night?"

"We were not in bed till one o'clock."

"That late," he said, laughing. "Three or four might be considered late—hardly one o'clock."

She looked at him as if he were mad. "I only had five hours' sleep. I feel like a dishrag this morning."

"You most assuredly do not look like one, if that is any consolation. Personally, I don't mind a touch of fatigue in my models. A slight drooping of the eyelids is romantic, if it is done right. And even a little shadow under the eyes."

"You may find those tokens in the baroness. My eyelids are not only drooping, but will be closed as soon as you begin work."

He mixed the pigments for the skin tone and selected a clean brush. "It was my understanding that ladies slept all winter, to be rested for the exertions of the Season."

"We do not quite hibernate at Whitchurch."

"A lively spot, is it? It stands to reason. If it has kept you from London all this time, it must have some peculiar charm."

As it had nothing of the sort, Laura did not pursue this topic. "Did you bring any coffee today?" she asked, looking for the thermos.

"In that hamper." He nodded at it.

"Would you like some?"

He shook his head and watched her as she poured. Hyatt was always looking for a new type of model. He

had taken Miss Harwood for the typical older, experienced lady he often painted, but he was beginning to realize he had erred. She was older than a deb, and of course wiser, but he was beginning to doubt her experience. That thin veneer of town bronze faded at times to reveal the naive girl beneath. He soon decided he wanted to paint Miss Harwood and was considering what pose and what expression he would use to suggest that intriguing combination of—what was it? Innocence and something else that he could only call common sense. "No, but I'd like to paint you," he said, and watched for her face to light up in delight.

He seldom said this to a lady. More usually, they were begging for the honor. To his considerable astonishment, Miss Harwood appeared unmoved.

"I have already had my portrait done," she said.

"Lawrence?"

"A Mr. Wiggins, from Whitchurch. He made me look like a Methodist. I have sworn off having my portrait taken, but I thank you for offering, Lord Hyatt. I realize it is a great honor," she added as an afterthought.

Hyatt stood, momentarily stunned into silence. She had declined! Miss Harwood did not want him to paint her picture. He had refused to do the Prince Regent until he was all but threatened with treason, but a Miss Harwood from Whitchurch cavalierly dismissed his offer.

"I would not make you look like a Methodist," he said, when he had recovered from the shock of refusal.

His astonishment brought a very natural smile to her lips. "I know it well! You would, no doubt, transform me into a beauty, but still I must decline your extremely generous offer."

He couldn't make sense of it. "There would not be any charge, if that is what . . ." He could construe no other possible reason. Perhaps she had heard of the Prince paying him a thousand pounds, but that was really a donation to charity.

"It isn't the money. You are busy and have to work in these extra assignments at the crack of dawn. Much as I appreciate the offer, I cannot envisage rising at six for the remainder of the Season."

He was about to suggest afternoon sittings, but he recovered his wits in time. He did not have to beg for models after all. Olivia resumed her pose, holding the

hem of her skirt up, with her arm poised in the air, and Hyatt began to paint.

Laura sat with Meadows, considering Hyatt's startling offer. Why did he want to paint her? He only painted celebrities—and his mistresses. . . . Lady Devereau was not precisely a celebrity, or had not been one before Hyatt painted her. What would people think if a portrait of Miss Harwood suddenly appeared at his exhibition? Olivia was different—she was to be the Season's star. But an unknown Miss Harwood from Whitchurch? Hyatt obviously had no serious interest in her. She was a passing fancy of the moment. A flirt, in other words. No, it would not do. He might get out of hand, and she knew she could not cope with a Lord Hyatt bent on romantic mischief.

She had observed people gossiping behind Lady Devereau's back at Lady Morgan's ball. Hyatt had hardly spoken to her. If that was the fate of his flirts, she was not eager to join them.

The painting session proceeded without interruption until after eight o'clock, at which time Mr. Yarrow arrived. He was casually outfitted in a belcher kerchief and a waistcoat of a strident canary yellow. The buttons on his jacket were not much smaller than saucers. Hyatt looked up with a scowl but said nothing. Yarrow nodded to Mr. Meadows and Laura but went to stand at Hyatt's elbow.

"A jolly fine picture, Lord Hyatt. But don't you think the baroness's hair is a little too dark?"

"I have not put in the highlights yet."

"And her gown—why is she wearing that old thing? Supposed to be an heiress. I should think a few diamonds—"

"Go away," Hyatt said, through thin lips.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to disturb you." He ambled over to Meadows and Laura. "The baroness invited me," he said.

"Lord Hyatt doesn't like a crowd when he is working," Laura said coolly.

"The baroness told me. I am hardly a crowd. I haven't told a soul." He looked hungrily at the coffee. "Hyatt is a bit of a grouch, ain't he?"

"Perhaps you had best run along, Yarrow," Meadows said.

"I'll just wait and have a word with the baroness. She told me I could come." He strolled off, but when

the session was done, he was back, and Olivia seemed troublesomely happy to see him. She joined him at his carriage, while Meadows went to discuss the intrusion with Hyatt.

"I told him to shab off. Seems the baroness invited him," Meadows said.

"Tell her to uninvite him. He's the worst sort of distraction, a clapperjaw."

"I'll give him the hint."

Laura stayed sitting where she was, her attention on Olivia and Yarrow. She thought Hyatt might join her when Meadows went to speak to Yarrow, but he did not. She put his air of annoyance down to Yarrow's interruption and was happy that the question of painting her again did not arise. They all parted soon after.

"Same time tomorrow?" Hyatt said, as they got into the carriage. "Or would the ladies prefer eight o'clock?" He looked at Laura, who looked to Olivia for guidance, though she noticed that Hyatt had taken note of her complaints.

"Now that Yarrow knows, we had best come at seven again," Meadows said. "He'll never keep it to himself. We'll have half the town here if we do it late in the morning."

Hyatt said, "If that happens, we'll remove to my studio."

The two carriages left. The ladies returned to Charles Street to prepare for afternoon callers. Several gentlemen had asked permission to call, and every one of them came, some with friends. The afternoon was a regular squeeze. That evening, the ladies were to attend the opening play at Drury Lane. Mrs. Aubrey was invited to make up the sixth in their party, the others being the full contingent from Charles Street, and Mr. Meadows. Hettie Traemore felt she could tolerate an evening of sitting, so long as she had her recliner to console her.

A lively rendition of *The Taming of the Shrew* was enjoyed immensely by the audience. For Laura, the evening's greater thrill was the invasion of their box by a throng of gentlemen met at Lady Morgan's ball. At intermission, she had the unusual sensation of occupying the most crowded box in the theater. People were queued up in the hallway, waiting to get in. It seemed the whole polite world was there—except for

Lord Hyatt. He was not present. Mr. Yarrow, by dint of pushing and shoving, managed to squeak through and gain a private word with Olivia.

"By the living jingo, Baroness, I am glad you recommended this play to me. There was never anything like it. It is famous good sport. I am sheering off before the next act. A bunch of fellows have been hounding me to sit down to a game of cards. Hyatt was pretty miffed that I went to watch him work this morning. Making a dashed mess of your picture, if you want my opinion. You look like a bran-faced country lumpkin—in the picture, that is to say. Very pretty in the flesh. I should think he could paint out your freckles, at least."

"Oh, no. He said he would paint them in, even if I managed to fade them with lemon juice."

"The man is a lunatic. Not a doubt of it. Where are you going tomorrow night?"

"To dinner and two routs," she said, naming them.

"Save me a dance at the first rout. The fellows will never leave me alone. By midnight, they will have me off somewhere, winning my money from me."

"You should not gamble so much, Mr. Yarrow."

"I hate it, to tell the truth. I only go because the polite parties are such dead bores. Now if you would come to the Pantheon with me some evening, I would forgo my game of cards. Will you do it?"

"Surely the Pantheon Bazaar is not open at night!"

"Ha, ha, that is famous, Baroness. The Pantheon Bazaar. As if I would invite you there, where the cits and commoners shop. No, I mean the Pantheon Dance Hall, where the masquerade parties are held."

"I don't believe I have received an invitation there," she said uncertainly.

This too roused Mr. Yarrow to hoots of appreciative mirth. "An invitation—that is famous, Baroness. You are as droll as can stare. You don't need an invitation. Anyone who has the price of admission may go to the Pantheon. You will find more lightskirts than anything else."

"That sounds horrid, Mr. Yarrow!" she exclaimed.

"Nothing of the sort. Everyone goes. Why, you have not had a Season until you have gone to the Pantheon. Great fun, and unexceptionable. I go all the time. You wear a mask and domino, so no one will know who you are."

"I should have to ask my aunt."

"I shouldn't do that, if I were you. The gray squadron will always squash any plan for merriment. And be sure you don't tell that man-milliner of a Meadows. He would keep you wrapped up in cotton wool, missing all the fun. I don't know how you ever fell into the hands of such a dull fellow. You would do better with people your own age. Balls and plays are for the old-timers. The real sport is not there."

"I thought you liked the play!"

"I like the audience," he said, smiling at her with his reckless, bold smile. "If you had not told me you would be here, you wouldn't see me within a mile of the place. A dull scald, I can tell you. About the Pantheon—"

"I shall think about it," Olivia said. Knowing she was to have only one Season, she wanted it to include as many amusements as possible, and she was worried to think that the sport of people her own age was escaping her. She looked at Mr. Meadows, she looked at Laura, and she realized they were eons older than she. What did they know about anything?

When intermission was over, the black jackets returned to their own boxes, and the play resumed. Olivia was much struck with the sly trick played on Kate. That is how people behaved, trying to run a girl's life and make her do what they wanted. Well, they would not tame her! Though Petruchio was very handsome. The actor had somewhat the same square shoulders as Mr. Yarrow; also the same curled brown hair and loud laugh.

With an early sitting in the morning, Mr. Meadows took them straight home after the play. "Many people mentioned going out for dinner after the play," Olivia said. "I am very hungry."

"I am feeling peckish myself," Hettie Traemore said supportively.

"We can have toast and tea at home," Mrs. Harwood suggested.

"It will take an hour to get served in a hotel. They are lined to the doors after a play," Mr. Meadows informed them.

Olivia recognized Petruchio's trick, denying Kate while pretending it was for her own good. "Everyone will be there!" Olivia exclaimed.

Laura feared 'everyone' was Mr. Yarrow and urged

the scheme of returning home at once. Outnumbered, Olivia had no option but to go with them, but she began to see that this older set had no notion of how to enjoy a Season.

"I would not have agreed to have Lord Hyatt do my portrait if I had known I had to be home at midnight," Olivia sulked.

"Why, Livvie, midnight is pretty late for us," her aunt said apologetically. "We never stay at up that late at home."

"That is all the more reason we should do it when we are in London."

"When your portrait is finished, then you can stay up later," Meadows said, to appease her.

"Then I hope it is done soon. And furthermore, I don't know why I have to wear that horrid yellow dress of Fanny's."

"She is tired," Mrs. Traemore explained to Meadows. "A nice cup of cocoa and toast will put her back in curl."

Olivia was too tired to argue further, but she took her little grudge to bed with her. And before much longer, she would escape her protectors to find the real London.

Chapter Nine

The Season continued its hectic pace. Lord Hyatt ran nearly as tame as Mr. Meadows at the mansion on Charles Street. When the recliner was required, he was as likely as Meadows to fetch it and knew to a millimeter how to adjust it to Mrs. Traemore's satisfaction.

Laura could not feel the outings the baroness arranged were at all pleasant to him. He must have seen the horses at Astley's Circus any number of times, and when he took Livvie to see the wild animals at Exeter Exchange, he hardly glanced at the famous hippopotamus. On both these outings, Laura noticed his eyes were more often trained on the baroness than the show they had paid to see. He gazed at her as if he were infatuated, smiling when she squealed at the performance of the bareback riders at the circus. At the Exeter Exchange, he even drew out a sketch pad and did a quick drawing of the baroness. He behaved like a man infatuated; yet when the outings were over,

his conversation was more often directed to Laura.

"I fear we are distracting you from your work," she said.

"I am always working. Today I chose the expression for the baroness's portrait."

"Is that what you were drawing? What sort of expression did you choose?"

"A look of pure delight. It is reassuring to see that not all young ladies are blasé. Mind you, when folks look at the picture they will not suspect the rapture was caused by a monkey grabbing a lady's bonnet and tramping on it. It is the glories of nature that will take credit."

He waited for some flirtatious mention of the monkey in Lady Devereau's painting and was relieved when it did not come. "Olivia is still quite innocent, despite your fears that I and my racy friends would ruin her," she said.

He made a bow. "I did you an injustice, Miss Harwood, and I apologize. The girl is overly indulged by her aunt, but that is not your fault. Since being with you and your cousin, I see your role is quite different from what I assumed. You and Mr. Meadows are in loco parentis." He had often noticed it. They watched the baroness with all the concern of worried parents. They struck him, at times, as a married couple, for they seemed to communicate without words. Laura had denied any romantic entanglement with Meadows, but he began to wonder if this was mere discretion, since she had not received an offer.

"Actually, I was flattered that you thought me so dashing," she replied, with a pert smile.

At that moment, he chose Miss Harwood's pose. He still wanted to paint her. It was that impish look that attracted him, that unsuspected dash of daring in a quiet, sedate lady. Discretion would always come first, but there was enough of the hussy to keep him interested. "But not dashing enough to be painted by Hyatt, eh?"

"It is the lady's fate when the painting is finished that deters me," she replied. The name Lady Devereau did not arise, but he understood her meaning, and was angry.

The mornings were taken up with the paintings in Hyde Park. It soon became necessary to remove the sittings from the park to Lord Hyatt's studio. Mr.

Yarrow could not keep his great secret to himself. First he brought a couple of chums to the park; soon his chums had each invited a group of friends. The ladies in the party considered the outing an early morning picnic and brought along hampers of food. Olivia wanted to join the youngsters and was unhappy standing still, holding up her skirt hem. The uninvited ladies were more interested in scraping an acquaintance with Lord Hyatt. They hung in a flock at his shoulder, twittering and complimenting and hinting that they should like to be painted by him.

"We shall move the sitting to my studio tomorrow," he said, as he packed up to leave that day. The session had lasted only forty-five minutes. Very little had been accomplished. "It won't be necessary to come so early. Nine o'clock will be fine, if that suits the ladies?"

Laura heard it with relief. "That will be fine," she replied. She sensed a withdrawal in Lord Hyatt, a certain stiffness, and wondered at its cause. It must surely be due to the uninvited crowd, she surmised. He could not have taken a pet because she refused to sit for him, could he? No matter if he had. What she said was perfectly true. It would cause rumors, and she had no wish to be classed with the Lady Devereaus of the world.

Olivia, instead of apologizing for having brought the unwanted crowd down on Hyatt's head, was off consorting with the enemy. Yarrow had got her off to one side and was flirting his head off. Mr. Meadows and Laura exchanged one of their silent looks, and he went after the baroness to herd her into his carriage.

Having finished early, they returned to Charles Street before nine o'clock. "If I had my mount, I could ride in Rotten Row this morning," Olivia said. "Have you found one for me yet, Mr. Meadows?"

"We have been so busy...."

"I shan't trouble you with yet another job on my behalf," she said, with a bold toss of her curls. "Mr. Yarrow is bringing a mount around to Charles Street at ten o'clock."

"It is no trouble!" Mr. Meadows exclaimed. "A great pleasure, Baroness. I shouldn't buy anything Yarrow recommends. It will be a flashy piece of mischief. Bolt and leave you in the dust, if I know anything."

"Oh, but I do not want a sluggard. I particularly told him I want a goer. I am not buying it, however.

Mr. Yarrow is borrowing it from a friend."

"Do you plan to ride with Mr. Yarrow this morning, Livvie?" Laura asked, casting a worried look to Meadows.

"Yes, with Mr. Yarrow and a group of his young friends. A lady does like to be with people her own age from time to time," she added saucily.

Mr. Meadows, who was nudging thirty, felt the full odium of her thoughtless words. He was also worried to see the baroness fall in with such fast company. "I had best go along," he said.

"Why, you sound as if you do not trust me, Mr. Meadows," Olivia said boldly.

"Not at all. It is Yarrow and his set I cannot trust."

The baroness went upstairs to change into her riding habit as soon as they reached home. It was for Laura to tell Mrs. Traemore of Olivia's plan. She had little hope that the chaperone would scotch it.

"Livvie will be happy to get on a mount again," she smiled. "She has complained of missing it. She is a bruising rider, you must know."

"I cannot feel Mr. Yarrow is a proper escort for her," Laura said.

"That nice young fellow who got me a glass of ratafia at Lady Morgan's ball? Why, what is amiss with him?"

Laura looked to Mr. Meadows for assistance. She could not like to blacken the young man's character. No real harm was known of him, save for his gambling. His behavior was rackety, but no polite doors had actually been closed to him as yet.

"Bit of a rackety fellow," Meadows said.

"Then perhaps you will go along to play propriety," Mrs. Traemore suggested.

"That is bound to turn her against me," Meadows said. It was a telling speech. Until this point, he had not expressed his intentions openly, although Laura was in little doubt that they were serious. "She is just beginning to taste society. She won't thank me for following after her, like the ghost at the feast."

"A ghost?" Mrs. Traemore said, staring at his bulk and wondering if she had heard aright. "I cannot imagine what you mean, Mr. Meadows. Livvie is very fond of you. Whenever she wants anything, she always says, 'I shall ask Mr. Meadows.'"

"I daresay I must go," he agreed reluctantly. Then

he brightened and said to Laura, "Perhaps you will come with me? My aunt will be happy to lend you her mount."

"I should like it, of all things!" Laura said. In fact, she had no desire to go, but wanted to lessen Mr. Meadows's burden.

He sent off at once for his and his aunt's mounts while Laura went upstairs to change. It was a good hour before Mr. Yarrow appeared at the door, leading a sly-looking bay mare with white stockings on her forelegs. Laura and Mr. Meadows rode behind, to ensure a good view of their charge. It was for Laura to express the family's gratitude to Mr. Meadows, for no one else had thought of doing it.

"I think you know why I am always eager to be of help to the baroness," he said.

"You plan to offer for her?"

"I would have done it before now, if she were not so far above my touch. Her fortune is considerably greater than my own, to say nothing of her having a title in her own right."

A formal alliance with Meadows seemed an excellent thing, and Laura encouraged him. "Your situation is not inferior to Mr. Yarrow's," she pointed out, wondering if it was Hyatt he meant.

"That boy will be in debt before the Season is out. The baroness could not choose more poorly if she tried. Though of course he is handsome. And young. Odd she did not fall for Hyatt, if it is a charmer she wants. At least she spared us that."

"Yes, it is odd. I fear he succumbed to her charms too easily."

"Or perhaps he is too old. Same age as myself," he added with a frown. "But of course he flies much higher."

"Is his reputation very bad?" she asked.

"I don't mean to denigrate him. He is considered excellent ton, but he is a man of vast experience with the ladies, you know. One would have no hope of competing with him. Yarrow is an unlicked cub. I hope the baroness will soon tire of his eternal bragging and braying."

At the park, however, Olivia continued to be enamored of Mr. Yarrow. When he broke into a gallop, disturbing the polite pace of the other riders, Olivia was right behind him.

"I told her she must not gallop!" Laura said.

"Do I gallop after her and read her a lecture, or wait till she returns?" Meadows asked.

"They are coming back now. I'll read the lecture," Laura said, to keep Meadows free of the shadow of propriety.

She delivered her scathing attack to Mr. Yarrow. "If you cannot behave like a gentleman, Mr. Yarrow, you are not fit company for a lady," she said. "You know perfectly well that galloping is not permitted here."

"Jezebel is such a goer she got away on me," he said, without even blushing for his lie. "It won't happen again."

He resumed the proper pace. When he was beyond earshot of the others, he said to Olivia, "What is the point of a track if you can't ride? That is just like these people. You cannot stand up with the lady you want to for more than one set. You cannot stay for more than a short visit when you call on her, and you can never be alone with her for a minute, without some dashed Nosey Parker sticking his nose into your business."

"You never have called on me," Olivia said.

"Not much point, is there? There would be a raft of chaperones. Now if we were to go to the Pantheon masquerade, we would have some privacy. What about tonight?"

"We are having the Morgans to dinner and going to the play with them after."

Yarrow gave a commiserating nod. "I have managed to get hold of a lady's domino and mask anyhow. You just give me the nod when you feel you can get away."

"I don't think I should."

"All the girls do it. Why, Angie Carstairs goes twice a week, at least."

"How does she get away?"

"Claims a sick headache. Tells her chaperone she is going home for a bit of a lie-down, then nips off with us."

"If I said that, my cousin and Mr. Meadows would accompany me home."

"Of course they would. So does Angie's chaperone. What she does, she goes to bed in her gown and nips down the servants' stairs and out the back door. We have the rig waiting at the corner. Nothing to it, if you have a bit of pluck." He looked a challenge at her.

The baroness prided herself on her pluck. "Perhaps next week."

"We ain't going tonight, in any case. Cowan has managed to get us into Mrs. Hyde's gaming hell. No limit on the betting," he boasted. "A fellow may plunge as deep as he likes. I shan't invite you along, for even Angie won't go there. Not the place for ladies."

This concern for her reputation assured Olivia that Mr. Yarrow was a model of propriety. They continued their ride, with Olivia's mount "getting away from her" next time to share the blame. Mr. Yarrow was not tardy to give chase. Laura and Meadows were waiting for them when they returned, and they immediately took Olivia home.

"Very kind of you to escort the baroness, Mr. Yarrow, but I am buying her own mount for her this afternoon and shall accompany her when she wishes to ride," Mr. Meadows said.

Olivia was consoled with the notion of having her own mount at last. Mr. Yarrow, she thought, would not have hesitated so long to procure it. She dutifully reminded herself that Mr. Meadows had been very kind to her, but really he was a bit of a slow top.

The next week proceeded without undue incident. A staid mount who never "got away from her" was procured for Olivia and given a few outings in Rotten Row. Olivia's presentation was the main concern, and there was little danger of encountering Mr. Yarrow at that staid do. The baroness also made her bows at Almack's and was convinced at last by the strict formality of this select club, by the eagle-eyed patronesses, the orgeat and the Scottish reels, that established society do's were a dead bore. Next week, she would try the Pantheon with Mr. Yarrow and his friends.

Chapter Ten

The painting sessions removed to Lord Hyatt's atelier, which was a large, glass-walled room attached to the back of his mansion in Park Lane. The chaperones were much more comfortable in upholstered chairs than on a park bench. One end of the studio was set up as a drawing room for the audience. There was a carpet on the floor, lamps, tables and all the appurtenances of a polite drawing room.

But the most interesting feature was the view through the windowed wall of a garden in the heart of busy London. Tulips and daffodils nodded in the morning sun. As space was limited, the trees were all evergreens, which did not cast too much shade on the flowers.

The Season continued. Matches were arranged, hearts were broken, reputations and fortunes were lost and made in about equal proportion. Lady Devereau soon had two new ornaments for her arm: a jeweled minor peer and a diamond bracelet.

The baroness's painting was nearing completion. No crowds came to bother the party at Hyatt's studio, but an occasional friend dropped in. Lord Talman, the Duke of Castlefield's heir, came twice. Laura suspected the baroness was the drawing card, and when he returned on the third day, which was the last sitting, she was convinced of it.

When Laura initially heard that her cousin was to make her bows, it was some such grand match as Lord Talman that she envisaged for the baroness. A marquis of impressive pedigree, rich in his own right, and heir to a dukedom, he was one of the Season's prime catches. To put the cap on it, his character was unblemished.

Physically he was not the sort to set a girl's blood racing, but then no one was perfect. He was of a bookish turn of mind, tall, thin, pale, a trifle high in the instep. All the other debs appreciated his eligibility, but Laura feared Olivia was unimpressed.

On the marquis's second visit Olivia snipped, "I don't see why Lord Talman is permitted to come and stare for an hour at a time, when Lord Hyatt turned Mr. Yarrow away."

Laura replied, "Lord Talman behaves himself. He does not bring a crowd and turn the sitting into a public circus."

"He makes my flesh crawl, the way he stares."

There was no denying Olivia had changed. Whether it was the unaccustomed attention of society or Mr. Yarrow that turned her head was difficult to say, but certainly she had lost that first eagerness to please. To add to the difficulty of managing her, she no longer looked to Laura as her mentor.

When Lord Talman once again appeared for the last sitting, Olivia gave him a very cold glance, then

looked away without even nodding. Talman took up a seat beside Laura.

"The baroness seems out of sorts today," he said in a low voice.

"The strain of the sittings is beginning to tell on her," Laura invented.

"Yet Hyatt works faster than most painters. He is a fine artist. Have you seen his engravings?"

"Engravings? I had no idea he did engravings."

"He doesn't do the engraving himself; he designs the pieces and has them sent out to be done. It is a long, laborious process, you know, and Hyatt admits he hasn't the patience for it. I am here to purchase his London Life series for Mama. She is very pleased with his Country Life series. Would you like to see them?"

"Where are they?" Laura asked. It occurred to her that this might be an invitation to Lord Talman's house. She was eager to go but feared that Olivia might dig in her heels and refuse.

"Why, they are in the back room. I am surprised you haven't seen them." He rose quietly and had a word with Hyatt. Hyatt frowned and seemed to be objecting, but Talman spoke again, then beckoned to Laura. She followed him into an office off the studio. "This is the new London Life folio," he said.

A pile of leather-bound folios sat on top of an oak desk. Lord Talman lifted the cover to show Laura an engraving. It was a marvelous picture of an old sailor sitting on the edge of a dock, gazing out to sea. He held a pipe in one gnarled hand. A dilapidated cap shaded his eyes, giving him an air of mystery. "This was done down at the Blackwell Wharf, where the East India Company has its docks," he explained.

Tall masts of ships soared into the sky. Layers of clouds gave the engraving a somber tone. But it was at the man's face that she gazed longest. With a few strokes, Hyatt had suggested the end of a hard life. The man was not frowning, but a sense of nostalgia and resignation enshrouded him. Perhaps it was the pose, with the shoulders slumped forward.

Talman lifted the page, and a smiling green grocer greeted her, holding up a cabbage he had just lifted from his barrow. This one was in the prime of life. He was content with his lot. His face was as round and common as the cabbage, yet he was more than a type. One could sense his good humor—almost hear the

raucous sound of his laughter.

Talman kept turning pages, giving glimpses of postmen and linkboys, of hackney drivers and seamstresses. All his models were from the lower strata. One engraving was of two women of the street. The young, pretty one was obviously just beginning her career, and a pace behind her stood a derelict hag at the dog end of hers. It was not an indictment, but a compassionate character study.

Laura was overwhelmed with the work. She had no idea Hyatt was a serious artist. "I thought he only painted society," she said.

Talman laughed. "No, he calls those things at Somerset House his 'relaxation paintings'. This is his real work."

"But why does he not exhibit it?"

Talman just shrugged. "I don't know. Perhaps he is afraid the critics will savage him. He is insecure regarding his work—needlessly so. Anyone can see he is a genius. The new Hogarth. This set is a companion to the Country Life series I mentioned. It features farmers and shepherds, dairy maids and grooms, each in his native habitat. Unidealized, you know, with the warts and wrinkles in place. Yet there is an austere beauty to it. Even without advertising or exhibiting, they are being snapped up by collectors."

"I should like to see the Country Series," Laura said, glancing around for another set of folios.

"Hyatt told me the Prince asked for a copy last week. Hyatt sent him over the last one he had here, though of course there are more at the engravers. I have a set at home, if you would like to see them."

She professed a polite interest, and Talman continued, "In fact, I was hoping you and the baroness, and of course your chaperones, would spend the weekend at Castlefield, my father's estate. It is not far from London. Mama is having a house party this weekend." He named several prominent guests, including two Cabinet ministers and several peers. "But perhaps I have left it too late. I have been trying to screw up my courage to ask her all week—the baroness, that is. I am afraid I have not had much encouragement."

Laura was flustered. She recognized the invitation for a great compliment but knew as well that neither Mrs. Traemore nor Olivia would realize it. "It sounds

charming," she said. "I don't believe we have anything important on this weekend. Of course I must ask Mrs. Traemore before accepting. I'll have her write you a note, shall I?"

"Perhaps I should go home with you to urge her on?"

It was agreed that he would call that afternoon. He mentioned some of the entertainments planned. "Just a simple weekend. Nothing grand, but Mama has arranged a dinner party and a rout. We enjoy excellent riding at Castlefield. There would be no need to bring your own mounts. We keep several ladies' mounts at home."

This last treat was the likeliest to lure Olivia from London. She was missing her bruising rides. "It sounds lovely."

Talman inclined his head closer and said, in a confidential tone, "Do try if you can convince the baroness. She is so busy in London I can seldom get near her."

The door opened, and Lord Hyatt's head peeked in. "The portrait is finished," he announced.

They both turned. Talman said, "I was just showing Miss Harwood your engravings, Hyatt."

"Miss Harwood will not be interested in that. You should not bore a lady with that heavy stuff, Talman," Hyatt said modestly, but he peered uncertainly to see how Laura had liked them.

"They are—wonderful," she said, grasping for the right word. "Beautiful" seemed inappropriate, though he had drawn a haunting beauty from his mundane models and settings. "So different from your society portraits. I had no idea you did this sort of work. I especially like the mood of the old sailor engraving."

She opened the cover to study the top engraving again. Talman said, "I shall mention the weekend to the baroness," and left. Hyatt moved forward to take his place by the desk.

"How did you come to get interested in this sort of work, Lord Hyatt?" she asked.

"This is my first love, my only love, really," he replied. "This is the sort of work I did originally. I began with sketches from country life. When that was done, I came to London and did these. Mama told me I was becoming 'strange,' loitering about the alleys and slums of the city. I should mix more with my own sort."

I was not happy without a paint brush or pencil in my hand, so I began painting what is called 'my own sort,' whatever that may be. Sometimes I feel I have little in common with my own sort. They are blind to reality, what goes on in the rest of the country to give them—us—our privileged life."

Laura listened and realized there were depths to Hyatt that she had never imagined. She had thought him only a fashionable fribble, but that was merely the surface. She could well imagine that once he began to mingle in society, he would be lionized, the more so as he flattered the ladies. Two weeks of flattery had changed Olivia's behavior. Hyatt had withstood it for years without becoming impossible.

"That is why you donate their commissions to charity?" she said.

"A nobleman is not expected to work for money. That would be *infra dig*. Any of us with a soupçon of talent is expected to ply his earnings into charity works. Lord Byron did the same. Not that I mean to equate my poor skills with his!"

She gave a quizzing look. "You are too modest, Lord Hyatt. It is difficult to equate apples and oranges, but I would assess your work to be of more lasting worth than Byron's poetry. It sounds absurd to compare his eastern poems with your society portraits, but they are of that sort—not real. Oh, I did not mean to offend you!" she said with a quick, rueful look.

"On the contrary, I am flattered, Miss Harwood. Laura—if I may call you so," he said, looking to see if she objected. She nodded, pleased with him. "It is a lovely, gentle name. It suits you. I have wanted to use it these last days, to ease my exacerbated spirits."

"It is Yarrow and that set—"

He shook his head ruefully. "Truth to tell, it is your baroness. She seemed such an unspoiled creature when I began her portrait. I envisaged her as one thing. Then before my eyes, she changed. She no longer seemed at home in her woodsy setting. I fear she will not be flattered at her likeness. When she nagged at me for the tenth time about 'that horrid dress,' I was tempted to stick a tiara on her saucy head."

Laura blushed for her cousin's behavior. "She was not accustomed to so much attention. It has gone to her head, I fear. Lord Talman is her latest conquest.

He has invited us to Castlefield for the weekend."

"I didn't think he came so often for the pleasure of watching me work. My only question was whether it was the baroness or yourself who was the drawing card," he said, with a quizzical smile.

"Me!" Laura exclaimed, and laughed. "Indeed, no. I am merely his confidante."

"There is no accounting for taste," he said, with a gallant bow that suggested the baroness was not his own first choice. "Will you go to Castlefield?"

"I have some hope that the lure of horseflesh might win her over. She would prefer to stay in town and rattle about with Yarrow, I expect. He has arranged an outing this afternoon—which means Mr. Meadows and I must tag along behind, to play propriety."

Hyatt knew that Laura was frequently in Meadows's company. Her casual linking of their names suggested a growing closeness between them. "You have known him for some time, I believe?"

"His aunt lives at Whitchurch, so he has been going there for years." He waited, nodding, but she said no more.

After seeing Hyatt's engravings, Laura felt that she had passed up an opportunity at immortality by refusing to sit for him. She felt sure that his works would last. How marvelous to have a likeness of herself, done by a true genius. She wished he would broach the subject again. She sensed some change in him. He had not flirted with her since the day she refused his second offer to paint her. He was too gentlemanly to sulk, but she had been aware of a distance in his manner. And she was too shy to bring the idea forward herself.

She looked at him a moment, just smiling, then said, "Well, may we see the painting of the baroness now?"

"Of course. It is customary to open a bottle of champagne to toast the work's success. You will tell me whether this one merits champagne or ale."

When they went into the studio, the others were at the easel, examining the picture. At a glance, Laura thought it very much like his other society portraits, only in a different setting, of course. The same idealization of Olivia's charms was there. But as she studied it, she noticed the expression on the face was a little off. A nymph of nature should look innocent.

That 'rapture' he had mentioned was nowhere in evidence. There was a jarring air of pride in Olivia's uplifted chin, a touch of ennui in the glazed eye. Laura sensed that he had become bored with it. He had not bothered to paint in the straw bonnet, for instance, as he had planned.

"Lovely!" Olivia cooed. "I love it, Lord Hyatt! May I take it home to show Auntie?"

"It is not dry yet. I am not quite happy with the face—the eyes," he said, gazing at his work.

"You must not change a thing! I look so pretty. Is it not very lifelike, cousin?"

"Very lifelike," Laura agreed. Then she glanced at Hyatt, and their eyes held. She read some secret amusement in them. His ennui with the work had escaped Olivia. She looked pretty, and that was all that mattered.

"Between you and the baroness, you will certainly set a new style," Talman said, studying the portrait. "I foresee all the ladies removing their jewels, borrowing their maids' frocks, painting freckles on their faces, and running barefoot through the drawing rooms of London."

Mr. Meadows also thought it a jolly fine picture. There was some quiet talk of how much should be paid and which charity the check should be delivered to.

Talman turned discreetly away to converse with Laura. "The baroness has agreed to come, if her aunt approves. I must have a word with Hyatt, but I shall go to Charles Street a little later to add my persuasions to hers. I hope the baroness is not disappointed with the stable," he said. Obviously that was what had won Olivia over.

"I fear such a trip will require the Turtle, Lord Talman," Laura warned him. "Mrs. Traemore will never venture outside of London without it."

"I should love to see it! I must be the only man in London who was not caught behind it during its voyage to town."

Suddenly Hyatt appeared at Laura's elbow. "You have not told me. Do we christen the work with champagne, or ale?"

"Oh, champagne!" Talman decreed. "We cannot insult the baroness with ale, Hyatt. Even if it is not one of your best works," he added frankly.

The champagne was produced and drunk, and Mr.

Meadows escorted the ladies home.

In the studio, Lord Talman said, "I don't suppose you would be interested in joining us at Castlefield this weekend, Hyatt? Mama would love to have you."

"Let me know if the baroness's party agrees to go."

"Do I sense competition?" Talman asked warily.

"Not for the baroness."

"I see." Talman realized Hyatt did not care for the baroness and assumed his acceptance hinged on her refusing. He wanted Hyatt's presence, and to encourage his coming he said, "Miss Harwood is a nice girl. Sensible. She was mad for your engravings, you know. You were mistaken to think the ladies would not appreciate them. You ought to have them exhibited."

"A few ladies have seen them. Their usual comment is, why do I waste my time on such things, when I can paint so nicely."

"The fate of you geniuses," Talman joked. "A man is never a prophet in his own country, and I would add that seldom in his own lifetime either."

"Now you are making me blush, Talman. You won't forget to let me know if the baroness's party is going to Castlefield?"

"Certainly. That sounds like an invitation for me to leave."

"I have a little business to attend to."

They parted, and Hyatt returned to stare at the painting on the easel. It was a horrible, botched thing. Yet the sitter had loved it. Society would love it. The only bit of originality in it was the setting and costume, and that was hardly original. Marie Antoinette and the great court ladies had amused themselves by playing peasants at the Petit Trianon. Of course they had no real interest in the country life. It was merely a fashion.

His mind roved to Laura Harwood. He was surprised and gratified that she had approved of his engravings. Odd, too, that she had mentioned his own favorite, the Old Sailor. She was one of those quiet girls who improved on longer acquaintance. He had seen a good deal of her unobtrusive management of the baroness. She always maintained her calm and her good manners. She had what Mama would call countenance. He hoped she would be at Castlefield. He would like to know her better, hopefully away from the baroness . . . and Mr. Meadows.

Chapter Eleven

It was uphill work convincing Hettie Traemore that a trip of twenty-five miles was anything but an imposition. She was fully alive to the wonders of Lord Talman being the Duke of Castlefield's eldest son. It would be very fine to see Livvie a duchess, but still—twenty-five miles. Over four hours, and her back in agony every step of the way.

"We shall take the Turtle and your recliner," Olivia said. "We must go, Auntie. Lord Talman has a famous stable, and you know how bored I have been without proper riding."

It was not only the lure of the stable that had decided the baroness to accept Talman's invitation. A quick glance at the atlas in Lord Montford's study had confirmed what she already suspected. Gatwick, where Mr. Yarrow and his friends were visiting that weekend to attend a boxing match, was less than ten miles away. She would inform him this very night of the visit and arrange to meet him in the drapery shop in Gatwick on Saturday morning to set up a proper tryst, after she had got the lay of the land. A tryst would be possible, when she meant to spend the better part of her time on horseback. She would lose whatever horrid old groom they insisted on sending with her, and meet Mr. Yarrow, who was now "John" in her private thoughts. That would show him she was full of pluck.

"We can set a comfortable pace and still be there in one morning," Mrs. Harwood pointed out. "It would be a shame to do Livvie out of the visit. House parties are part and parcel of a Season. And Castlefield! Why, it is one of the finest estates in the country."

"I shall never have another Season," Olivia said, adopting a moue.

Her pouts won Hettie over, as they invariably did. "I daresay I can put up with it. I'll take my powders with me to ease the pain."

When Lord Talman had the inspiration of mentioning that his mama was also a martyr to her back and had an excellent sawbones to tend her, the ordeal became positively desirable. Hettie courted doctors the way other ladies courted eligible gentlemen.

The ladies remained at home that evening to prepare for the visit. Olivia had to resort to sending a note

to Yarrow by her footman. Laura oversaw Olivia's packing to see that Fanny was including all the essentials. A few undesirable additions had been made to her toilette over the days. A set of gaudy paste buckles adorned her dancing slippers, and her fans were blossoming into vulgar prominence by an addition of ribbons and dangling beads.

"I wonder if Mr. Meadows will be attending," Laura said. He had deserted them that evening to visit an ailing uncle.

"Lord Talman didn't say," Olivia replied, with not the least concern.

Laura had mixed emotions. It seemed hard that he should be excluded when he had devoted so much of his time to escorting them. If Talman was seriously interested in Olivia, he was much the better match. On the other hand, Meadows would provide her with a partner, which was a matter of some concern. She was by no means sure of finding any agreeable acquaintances in such high company, and it would be useful to have someone to help her mind Olivia.

The Turtle, washed and polished for the journey, caused a great sensation as it lumbered through the streets of London, drawn by a team of six monstrous horses. Lord Talman's traveling carriage set a sedate pace before it to show them the way. By the time they reached the Chelsea Road, they had collected a gaggle of urchins and noisy bucks, who had nothing better to do than follow it. Certainly the pace of six miles an hour was too slow to outrun them, but at the edge of town, they abandoned their jeering and returned to find new entertainment.

The traveling party enjoyed a leisurely drive through the wooded countryside, dotted with villages famous for their greens, usually with a church on one side. At times the Mole River appeared as they drove south, always causing a sensation with the Turtle. Merchants left their shops and pedestrians stopped to stare at the bizarre rig. The marquis's crested carriage added to the stir. It was well known in these parts.

When the Turtle left the main road and followed Talman's carriage into a graceful park, even Olivia was impressed. A noble heap of stone soared skyward, half hidden by beeches and oaks and fir trees. As they drew nearer, the house was seen to be done in the French style. In front, a dome was surmounted by a

balustrade, which in turn was topped with urns. A row of statues stood solemn guard from the roofline. Carleton House shrank into insignificance beside it.

Laura was half afraid to enter, and when she did, her fears were not lessened. There was so much gilt trim on every wall, so many painted ceilings and marble fireplaces and artworks that she felt stifled.

"Lovely!" Olivia said, smiling blandly at Lord Talman.

"I shall send for Mama," he said. "Papa has not come from London yet, but he will be here for dinner."

The duchess came hobbling forward, her weight borne by a humble black thorn walking stick. Lord Talman performed the introductions. The duchess's rheumy eyes gave Olivia a close scrutiny, then moved to Hettie Traemore's black cane, a twin of her own, and she smiled sympathetically.

"Another cripple like myself, eh? Show Mrs. Traemore to a chair, son, and order a cup of tea. Or would you like a lie-down after your trip, dear?"

Hettie said, "I would give my eye tooth for a nice cup of tea."

"Eye teeth! I wish I had never heard of eye teeth. I have one acting up on me and am afraid to have it drawn. The roots really do go up to the eye. It will be torture having it out. And imagine what a hag I shall look without my tooth."

She hobbled to a chair and nodded approvingly as Hettie's recliner was put in place. "Very wise," she said. "I could have provided you a board, but there is no saying when you are traveling. I spent the worst weekend of my entire life at Prinny's wretched pavilion in Brighton. The chairs and sofas were all so damned soft I had to have a local carpenter manufacture me a board. Between the heat and the agony of my back, I never want to see Brighton again."

The tea came, and the uninvalided company was subjected to a quarter of an hour's vying with horror stories of agonies endured from bad backs.

"But the youngsters don't want to hear this sad stuff. Their turn will come soon enough," the duchess said, and cackled maliciously. "Perhaps the ladies would like to go upstairs and refresh themselves before joining the others in the garden, son."

Talman had the servants take the ladies upstairs to chambers that matched the grandeur below. "Did

you ever see such a house!" Laura exclaimed to her cousin. "Imagine being the mistress of all this," she added artfully.

"It is very fine, if you care for this sort of thing," Olivia replied. Her tone said that it meant nothing to her. "I shall put on my riding habit, for I mean to go to the stable immediately."

"You must meet the other guests first, Olivia."

"But I want to ride," she pouted.

"You shall, soon. It would be rude to ignore the other guests."

"Everything that is fun seems to be forbidden."

"Riding is not forbidden. Lord Talman especially mentioned there would be plenty of riding."

"I daresay his friends are all dull sticks like himself. They would not approve of what we younger folks like to do. Like attending the Pantheon, in London," she added, and looked slyly from the corner of her eyes to gauge Laura's reaction. Yarrow's mention of the light-skirts to be found there in such lively abundance gave her pause about going.

"Lord Talman is not an old stick. He is amusing and intelligent. No person of common sense would approve of that," Laura said firmly. "It is not to be thought of." Seeing Olivia's sly look, she added, "Is it Yarrow who suggested it?"

"He has been there. He says it is great sport."

"I daresay it is all right for a gentleman to go, but a lady must not even consider it. Why do you not wait till after lunch to put on your riding habit? Lord Talman may have something else planned for this afternoon."

"I shall ride, no matter what he has planned," Olivia said, but she did not change into her habit, so Laura said nothing more.

Talman was waiting at the bottom of the grand staircase to direct them to the garden. He led them down a marble-floored hallway, into a small sitting room, and out a set of French doors to a miniature Garden of Versailles. Laura had not seen that French marvel, but it was known by reputation as a wonder in the world of horticulture.

Even as this thought flitted through her mind, Lord Talman said, "It is the inverse of the Garden of Versailles. Whereas le Notre arranged a raised terrace with the land falling away on the sides, my ancestor

devised this sunken terrace, with the ground rising all around." Grass and rock gardens formed the inclines above the terrace.

In the center of the terrace, a fountain threw water into the air. Statues and urns were strategically placed to delight the eye. Groups of guests wandered about, enjoying the sights and sounds and scents of this earthly delight. A broad avenue down the center was bordered with poplars. At its end, a tapis vert stretched into the distance.

"It is marvelous!" Laura gasped. "I have never seen anything like it."

Talman looked to the baroness for an echo of this sentiment. "Where are the stables?" she asked.

"They are west of the main building. We must have that ride soon. Let us go and greet some of the other guests now."

A few of them had spotted Talman and came forward. Some of them were known from London and smiled expectantly to see the baroness among them. Others were unknown, but all were from the very tip of the ton.

"There is someone here who is eager to see you," Talman mentioned a moment later. "Ah, there he is. He has spotted you."

Laura looked and saw the unmistakable form of Lord Hyatt quickly advancing from the direction of the fountain. The sun struck his golden hair, giving him an aura of romance. She knew he and Talman were good friends, yet she was surprised to see him here. She was especially surprised that he was eager to see her. But of course that was mere civility. She noticed, however, that it was herself he spoke to first.

"Laura, how delightful to see you again. I am happy you came. Baroness," he added, with a smiling bow. In the confusion of meeting, Olivia did not notice for a moment that he had called her cousin "Laura," when he had called her "Miss Harwood" before.

Olivia took his eagerness as a compliment to herself. "Now you must not ask to paint me again," she said coyly. "I am still recovering from those tiresome sittings. Though the garden would make a fine backdrop for me, would it not?"

"Very colorful," Hyatt agreed. He no longer expected any acumen from the baroness. His sole reason for doing her outdoors was that he wanted a touch of

wilderness for her. This formal French arrangement was suitable for no one but a queen. "Shall we enjoy a stroll through these marvelous grounds?"

"I see what you are up to!" the baroness said, though Hyatt had directed himself to Laura. "You are looking for another backdrop for me. I told you, no more posing."

"I would not dream of subjecting you to that indignity again, Baroness," he assured her.

"Not this visit, in any case. I have come to ride. Lord Talman is going to show me the stable," Olivia said. "I shall be riding this afternoon."

She had not met more than half of the guests, but Talman was still infatuated. He welcomed the opportunity to get her to himself and agreed to go to the stables at once.

Hyatt offered Laura his arm. She smiled with becoming modesty and placed her fingers on it gingerly as they strolled toward the fountain. She glanced around, hoping to see Meadows.

"There is a lovely, refreshing breeze. I was just enjoying the spray on my face, imagining I was at the ocean," he said.

"This is a far cry from the ocean. So formal and rigid. Not that it is not lovely," she added hastily, lest he took the comment for disparagement.

He said, "It is not my preferred style, but of course a great showcase. One would not want to miss seeing it. It is one of the wonders of England."

"Is Mr. Meadows here?" she asked.

"What brought him to mind? Was it the words 'one of the wonders of England'?" he asked, with a teasing smile.

"Good gracious, no. It is just that Olivia is being a trifle difficult. He is a great help to me in watching her."

"He's not here. You may rely on Talman's vigilance. He won't let her stray far. How does it come you didn't know whether Meadows was coming? He is a great and good friend of yours, I think?"

"He often escorts us in the evening, but we did not go out last night, so we didn't see him."

His next question seemed irrelevant. "He does not call when you are remaining at home, then?"

"No, not usually." She pondered his remark. It almost sounded as though Hyatt was trying to discover

the degree of closeness between Meadows and herself. Or perhaps he was trying to learn Olivia's feelings for Meadows, on Talman's behalf.

"I thought, as you two have been friends forever, that there might be a match in the offing."

"Oh, no! We initially thought he and the baroness—but that was before she turned into a ninny-hammer." It was her he was curious about!

They reached the fountain and stopped. Hyatt said, "Just close your eyes and you will feel the spray from the fountain, carried on the breeze. It is more refreshing than ale."

She closed her eyes and felt the echo of water on her face. "Lovely," she murmured. Her lashes formed fans on her cheeks. In this romantic spot, she looked quite beautiful.

"I thought you would like it," he said in a soft voice.

She opened her eyes and said, "Oh, Lord Talman told me his mama has a copy of your Country Life folio. May I see it?"

Her eagerness appeared genuine. "I see the butler has just come to ring us to luncheon, but after lunch I would be happy to show it to you."

"What will you paint next, Lord Hyatt?"

"Won't you call me Hyatt? I have already assumed a friend's privilege by calling you Laura."

"I hope we are friends. But you didn't answer my question."

"And you did not call me Hyatt," he said, with a quizzing grin.

"What will you paint next, Hyatt? You have already done high life and low life."

"What remains?"

"Middle life. You could do the bourgeoisie."

"That was my plan. We think alike, you and I, Laura."

The butler sounded his bell. Hyatt took a closer grip on her elbow and led her inside at a fast pace.

"You must be very hungry," she laughed, as they sped past less swift diners.

"I am, but it is not the food that causes this gallop. I want to rearrange the place cards."

He seemed to know his way around the mansion very well. With never a wrong turn, he sped down corridors and around corners until they came to the dining room. He went up and down the table, glancing

at cards, and exchanged two.

"Is it some lady you want to cajole into posing for you?" she asked, looking to see what he was up to.

"Certainly not. The lady has already had the good sense to refuse. It is only her charming company I want. And I promise not to coerce you into posing."

She looked at the card and saw it was her own that he had moved to place beside his.

"Perhaps you shouldn't do that," she said. "The duchess might notice."

"She wouldn't notice if we all sat on the floor. Her butler makes the seating arrangements. Danson won't mind. I'll tip him the clue that this is your seat for the rest of the weekend. Do you mind?"

"No," she said, blushing up to her ears.

The other guests began straggling in, and the gentlemen drew the ladies' chairs. Soon they were all seated, with two empty places remaining near the head of the table.

"Where is my son?" the duchess demanded. "It is unlike him to be late for lunch. He knows I hate cold food. Find him, Danson, and serve the soup. We will not wait for him."

Laura looked up and down the table and noticed that the other empty seat was Olivia's. She cast a guilty look at Hyatt, who beckoned Danson and whispered in his ear, "The stable. Tell 'em to get a move on."

Danson nodded and left. The soup was just being removed when the tardy couple entered, flushed from their dash.

"Sorry, Mama, folks," Talman said, drawing Olivia's chair.

Olivia just smiled at the party and sat down without apologizing. It was an inauspicious beginning to what Laura feared was going to be a bad weekend.

Chapter Twelve

Laura was free of Olivia for the afternoon, at least. Lord Talman took the baroness riding. His aim was to impress her with the extent of his future estate; hers to find a secluded spot to meet John Yarrow. She did enjoy riding for its own sake, however, especially on the prime goer supplied from the Castlefield stable. Olivia could be an amusing partner when things were

going her way. She was more at home on horseback than in a polite saloon. Any little roughness in manner could be ascribed to the exigencies of riding. With an escort catering to her every whim, the ride was a success all around. Olivia found the very place for her tryst with John.

The Mole River wound its way through the duke's estate. Willows had been allowed to grow tall along the banks, enhancing the view and affording protection from the prying eyes of any laborer or rider who chanced by. At some distance from the house, the river was forded by a wooden bridge. In her note to John, she would ask him to meet her at the bridge.

"Let us return to Castlefield now," she suggested, as soon as she had found her spot.

"I was going to show you the tenant farms," Talman reminded her.

"I should adore to see them, but truth to tell, Lord Talman, I am fatigued. Perhaps another time ..."

He immediately cropped out into apologies. "It was thoughtless of me to weary you after your trip, Baroness."

"I scarcely had a glimpse of your lovely gardens," she smiled, turning her mount back toward the house.

Talman was suitably impressed at her maidenly lack of stamina and set a sedate pace on the return trip.

Laura also enjoyed her afternoon. Hyatt took her to the library to show her the Country Life folio. Fine as it was and eager as she was to praise, admiring twelve engravings could not occupy an entire afternoon. They spent another hour going through the picture gallery. Hyatt sighed in envy before the masterpieces assembled there.

"Just look at how Titian has rendered the hair on his model," he said. "There is no one who can do red hair like Titian. It seems to melt the canvas with its flame, yet it is by no means garish. See how it fades around the edges to a mere suggestion of color. I feel like a drawer of rough cartoons when I look at such genius."

"He achieves a very soft effect," Laura said.

"It is the Italian light—a poor excuse for my inferior execution of color."

They moved along to some Dutch masters, where it was Vermeer's sharp technique that came under his

admiration. "One could feel he was there, in the room, enjoying a glass of wine with those ladies," he said, shaking his head in envy.

"It does give an odd sensation, that wine forever trickling into a glass. So lifelike. I keep waiting to see the glass overflow."

"A moment caught in amber. I realize my lack of formal composition when I look at a Vermeer. How carefully he balances his forms and chiaroscuro." She frowned. "That is only a smart way of saying light and dark spots," he explained.

"But one artist cannot excel in everything, Hyatt. I daresay Titian and Vermeer spent months on a single painting. You work much more quickly."

"Too quickly! It is a lack of respect for art to dash them off as I do."

"Surely it depends on the subject. You do single characters, not formal compositions."

"I know my limits. One day—after I have got the bourgeoisie down on paper—I shall attempt something more ambitious. A group scene of some sort."

Laura nodded politely. "Do you always paint people, as opposed to landscapes or buildings or animals, I mean?"

"Yes, I cannot seem to work up the necessary enthusiasm for anything else but people. I can admire the work of others. Stubbs! How that man can paint a horse! I need to feel a—how shall I say it—a mental or emotional link with my subject."

"Aha! Now the truth comes out. So that is why you paint so many beautiful ladies."

He gave an impish smile and replied, "I never could work myself into a lather over a mount, or a tree. I require a lady to fire me."

"Or an old sailor," she said, undeceived by his bantering. She waited, thinking he might now mention painting her, but he only prattled on about art.

"I like to do physically unattractive people, too. One soon tires of painting beautiful ladies. A contrast is always interesting."

"Whom will you paint next?" she asked.

"I know whom I should like to paint," he said archly. His smile told her she was his next choice.

"As a contrast to the baroness? Is it youth and age you mean to contrast, sir?" she asked, feigning offense.

"Let us say youth and maturity. I would like to do

you in a civilized setting—a library, perhaps, preferably with shoes."

"One would have thought books more appropriate."

"Now you are being pedantic, Laura."

"No, just immature, despite my advanced years. When our youthful beauty fades, we must attempt to attract by wit."

"You cannot be much older than the baroness. And certainly not a shade less beautiful." He watched, bemused, as a flush crept into her cheeks.

"You must not forget to point out the insignificant difference between her forty thousand dot and my princely ten."

"One of us ought to mention the odium of 'caparisons' at this juncture."

"You're the one who started it," she said, with an expression dangerously close to a pout.

"I beg to differ! I said a contrast. One may contrast a violet and a wild rose without disparaging either. It is a matter of taste. *De gustibus non disputandum*, according to an old Latin proverb."

"*De Latinibus non comprehendum*," she retorted.

"I see you caught the gist of it, at least. Do you study Latin?"

"On the contrary, I avoid it at every opportunity."

"That confirms my suspicion that you are wise beyond your years. All—how many of them is it?"

"If I were a gentleman, I would be considered to have attained the age of reason a year ago."

"I was afraid you were going to say if you were a gentleman, you would call me out for the impertinence of that question, but you are too young to be concerned over age. I feel ladies mature more quickly." His dark eyes glowed with pleasure as they bantered. Laura feared at every speech that she would make a fool of herself, but carried on gamely.

"Instead of studying dead languages, we study life."

He listened, not quite smiling, but well entertained.

"Have you plumbed the depths of life's meaning, Laura?"

"Don't be absurd! I am not so conceited as to think I have succeeded where great minds have struggled in vain. But I think it has something to do with accepting our circumstances, whatever they may be, and of course trying to leave the world a better place than we found it, in some small way."

"That is the hard part, is it not?"

She frowned. "I didn't mean anything deep—just helping the less fortunate when we can."

"I was taught a man—or woman, I suppose—ought to leave his mark. I took it personally, that I ought to change the world in some manner. Men are more inclined to egotism, I daresay."

"Some few Caesars or Napoleons do change the world," she said, thinking about it. She was always more comfortable discussing something other than herself. "Strange the names that come to mind—monsters of ambition, really."

"The true heroes are the men like Jenner, who invented the inoculation against cowpox, or James Watt, who is revolutionizing industry with his steam engine."

"Or even creative artists, who write beautiful music, or paint pictures," she added. "That is a compliment, Hyatt."

He bowed playfully. "I thank you on behalf of my colleagues, but cannot believe I am changing the world one iota."

"Your folios are capturing our era for the future, at least. Historians are important, too. And your portraits give pleasure."

They moved along the gallery to a Rembrandt. "Here is the giant of portrait painters," he said, gazing at a self-portrait of the artist. "How can a depiction of an ugly old man be so beautiful? The colors are dull; the background practically nonexistent. Age may have something to do with that—the pigments are overlaid with dirt. The duke doesn't take proper care of his artworks. But when all is said and done, what mesmerizes one with Rembrandt is those few square inches of the model's face."

"It is the eyes, I think. That old saw that the eyes are the mirror of the soul seems true here. Can't you see the sorrow in his eyes? One could almost think it was despair, yet surely Rembrandt had cause to be content. He was famous."

"This was done toward the end of his life. He was in despair. Bankrupt, his wife and son dead. And for all his genius, his austere style of painting was out of fashion." To lighten the mood, he said, "He ought to have had a sideline in fashionable portraits, like Hyatt. But enough of Hyatt, and art. Let us go out and enjoy

the sunshine."

Hyatt borrowed a whiskey and took Laura for a tour of the estate, impressing her vastly with all the grandeur that Olivia had not bothered to look at. They drove past acres of pasture, where cattle grazed idly on rich grass; along the banks of the river, admiring the tenant houses; through the spinney and park, and dismounted at the orchard for a stroll.

Hyatt offered his arm to assist her over the rough grass. When his fingers slid down and grasped her fingers, she did not say anything, but she was surprised at the intimacy. It was a novelty for her to walk hand-in-hand with a gentleman, and such a dasher as Hyatt had never come her way before. She even thought he might try to kiss her in the privacy of the orchard, and wondered what she would do. But when they reached the end, they just turned around and went back to the whiskey, thence back to the house.

And she was just a little disappointed that he had continued to behave so properly. But really he had never behaved with anything but perfect propriety when she was with him. Flirtation between ladies and gentlemen was hardly improper. Where had he got his dashing reputation? He seemed not only sensible but modest, despite his fame and wealth.

Olivia and Talman had returned some time before. Olivia was bored from looking at the roses, and fast falling into a fit of the sulks.

"Where have you been all afternoon?" she demanded, when Laura and Hyatt joined them.

"Driving, and walking," Laura replied. "Did you have a good ride?"

"The baroness soon tired," Talman said. "I have been trying to convince her to have a lie-down. Travel is so wearing." He was still enamored and trying to find excuses for the baroness's ill temper.

Her alleged fatigue did not prevent her suggesting a new outing. "Let us all drive into the village," she said. "Gatwick must be close by."

"Crawley is closer, and larger," Talman said. "But it is a little late to set out now."

"Crawley?" Olivia said, frowning. It was Gatwick that she had arranged as their meeting place. They were not to meet until the morning, however, so she did not press for the trip now. "I should particularly like to see Gatwick."

"There is an interesting old church there," Talman mentioned.

"Then we shall go tomorrow morning. What shall we do now? Could we play shuttlecock?"

"I thought you were tired," Talman reminded her.

"I am rested now, after looking at the roses for so long."

"Croquet would be less strenuous," Talman decided, and sent for the mallets and balls and hoops.

For the remainder of the afternoon, the four played croquet, which amused Olivia sufficiently that she tolerated the game without much ill humor.

The duchess had no strenuous entertainment planned for the evening. Castlefield was returning from London in time for dinner. One of the guests, a Miss Anderson, was a singer of some note, and entertained the guests after dinner with a few songs. Olivia became restless during the third one. She fiddled with her skirt, plaited the fringe of her shawl, whispered to Talman, and finally excused herself on the grounds of fatigue.

Not quite trusting her cousin, Laura left with her to make sure she did go to bed. She wondered about that request to go to Gatwick. Was the chit up to something? There was no point asking her outright. She must get at it by indirection.

"Did you enjoy your day?" she asked, as they mounted the grand staircase.

Olivia yawned. "A dead bore, but tomorrow I shall have a decent ride."

"Your mount was satisfactory then?"

She was roused to some enthusiasm by this question. "A sweet goer! She is called Briar. I'm sure she could give me a bruising ride, but Talman kept to a canter. He wanted to show me all his father's cattle and things."

"Castlefield is a magnificent estate."

"Yes, but who wants to live in a museum, cousin?"

They had reached Laura's room. "What time shall we go to the village tomorrow?" she asked.

"Oh, are you going, too?" Olivia said.

"I thought it might be amusing."

"It seemed to me you were pretty well amused by Hyatt. Mr. Meadows's nose will be out of joint."

"He is not my beau."

"Hyatt is much more amusing," Olivia said, as

though she had no interest whatsoever in Meadows herself. "You were right to say I could do better than Mr. Meadows."

"Lord Talman is certainly a good deal better, so far as eligibility goes."

"If you mean he is richer, I cannot disagree, but they are both dead bores. Good night, cousin."

There was indeed no disputing taste, if Olivia preferred that jackanapes of Yarrow to Lord Talman or even Mr. Meadows. Laura spared a thought for Meadows, wishing he were there to accompany the party to Gatwick tomorrow. Perhaps Hyatt would join them. . . . On this happy thought, she slept.

Chapter Thirteen

Olivia and Laura were up at eight the next morning after their early retirement. The butler directed them to the morning parlor, where an array of covered dishes on the sideboard awaited the early risers. Lord Talman and Hyatt soon joined them. The informal seating at the nearly empty table allowed the gentlemen to sit where they wished. Talman hastened to a chair beside Olivia, and Hyatt sat across from Laura.

After the requisite compliments on the ladies' fresh appearance, Talman said, "By the by, we shall have to put off our visit to the church at Gatwick till this afternoon, Baroness. The guests want a tour of the house this morning. I think you might enjoy it, too."

Olivia ignored the mention of the church. It was the timing that threw her into a pelter. "You must know the house by heart, and I shan't mind missing the tour. Really, it is not my sort of thing at all."

Talman's jaw dropped, but he was too polite to verbalize his shock. "I conduct the tour when I am home. Mama is no longer well enough to climb all the stairs, and the servants aren't familiar with all the features of interest."

"But you said we would go to Gatwick this morning," she pouted.

"We can go this afternoon as well."

"I want to ride this afternoon."

"There is no problem here. Ride this morning instead. I shall arrange for someone to accompany you," Talman said, displeased at her persistence. "Hyatt, perhaps you would accompany the baroness on a ride

this morning."

"It would be a pleasure," Hyatt said.

Laura detected a thinning of his lips that belied the words, and she blushed for her cousin. "This is nonsense, putting everyone out," she said firmly. "We shall tour the house this morning and go to the village this afternoon, Olivia."

Olivia tossed her impertinent shoulders. "You must tour the house by all means, cousin. As Lord Hyatt wants to accompany me, we shall go to Gatwick."

"I thought it was settled we were going there this afternoon," Talman said in confusion.

"Oh no, I shall ride this afternoon," Olivia smiled, content now that she had her own way.

Talman, by no means afflicted with modesty, soon figured out that the baroness chose to visit the village that morning to be free to ride with him in the afternoon. He would have preferred that she accompany the tour in the morning but soon concluded that she required something from the village.

"What time would you like to go to Gatwick, Baroness?" Hyatt asked.

"I should like to be there by ten," she said, mentioning the hour for her assignation at the drapery shop with John Yarrow. He was to linger among the thread and buttons until she arrived. "Before it is too hot, you know," she added, to give it an air of casualness.

"Will you come with us, Laura?" Hyatt asked. She read the pleading in his eyes and was strongly tempted to say yes. On the other hand, Olivia had been so rude to Talman that she did not want to further slight him by preferring a visit to Gatwick to a tour of Castlefield. She did want to take a tour of the famous house for its own sake as well.

Talman looked at her expectantly. "I am eager to explore Castlefield," she said, with an apologetic smile at Hyatt.

"It is well worth seeing," Hyatt said, glancing hopefully to the baroness, who ignored him.

Other guests began arriving, and the group remained at the table, talking and drinking coffee, until nine o'clock.

Olivia, whose only interest was to escape, said primly, "I shall go and visit with Aunt Hettie before going to Gatwick. She always takes her morning toast

and tea in bed. Her back is the worst in the morning."

Talman, who would have liked the hour alone with her, could hardly object to this errand, and he accompanied her to the bottom of the stairs.

Hyatt said, "What would you like to do, Laura? We have a whole half hour before I dash off to Gatwick."

They strolled out into a walled garden at the side of the house. "Do you mind going with Olivia?" she asked.

He crossed his fingers in plain view and said, "I am charmed. I could say that without lying if you were coming with us. But you ought to see Castlefield. I wonder why the baroness has no interest in her future home. This, I collect, is a courting visit?"

"Only on Lord Talman's side, I fear. The girl is certainly up to something. Why does she insist on Gatwick, when Crawley is larger, and closer?"

"And why ten o'clock? It sounds like an assignation. Who could she be meeting?"

"Mr. Yarrow," Laura said with a tsk of annoyance. "If you see his yellow curricule, steer her away."

"Easy as steering a whirlwind."

Laura gave a commiserating smile. "I really should go with you," she said.

"No, stay and enjoy the tour. I shall make sure she gets home undamaged."

"It is very kind of you."

"Your thanks is my reward. You will enjoy the tour, I think. The Peacock Room is one of the points of interest," he said, and continued with a few anecdotes and historical facts about the house.

Soon it was time for him to meet Olivia. Laura went to alert her mother to the tour, and for the next two hours forgot all about Olivia Pilmore, as she was guided from one splendor to another, gaping and gasping with admiration, and eventually fatigue, for it was a very large house.

Lord Hyatt spent a less enjoyable morning. The baroness's idea of conversation was to laugh at the quaint carriages and farmers they passed on the road, and to tell him at every picturesque view that he ought to paint it. It was ten o'clock when they entered the village. Hyatt looked sharply about for a yellow curricule but saw none.

"The church is just at the end of the High Street," he said, as she had mentioned the church. Really,

there was not a deal to amuse a lady in the village.

"Lovely, but first I must just dash into the drapery shop and buy a—some new silk stockings," she invented. "Mine have got a hole in the toe."

Her artless excuse did not deceive Hyatt for a moment. "I'll go with you," he said, and drew to a stop in front of the shop.

"You will not want to waste your time dawdling about in here. Why do you not run along and have a look at the church? It will save time."

So much for her eagerness to view the church. "I need some buttons," he said, and dismounted. A boy darted forward to grab the reins.

Olivia looked up and down the street. John's cur-ricule was not in evidence, but she had no doubt he was inside, waiting for her. "What sort of buttons do you need? I'll get them for you—my gift, Lord Hyatt."

"You are too kind, but I always select my own buttons."

This was impossible. It was by the buttons and ribbons that she was to meet John. Hyatt would certainly recognize him and tell Laura. Olivia was temporarily bereft of inspiration but hoped John would have the wits to hide behind the folds of muslin when he saw Hyatt. She peered to the back of the shop but saw no sign of him.

"I feel dreadfully weak, Lord Hyatt," she said. "I wonder if you would mind darting across to the chemist's shop and getting me some hartshorn."

"The clerk here will have some," he replied, with a sapient look, and held her by the elbow, forcing her to accompany him while he spoke to the clerk.

"The lady is feeling faint. Could she have a glass of water, please?" he said.

The clerk was happy to oblige such exalted clients, and darted off for the water. Olivia fanned herself with her handkerchief while peering all about the shop. While she drank the water, Hyatt made a more thorough examination of the premises and had soon determined that there was no one there except two harmless housewives, intent on selecting their summer muslin. His vain hope was to hustle her out of the shop before Yarrow arrived.

"Feeling better now? Shall we select those stockings?" he said.

She scowled. "No, I feel considerably worse. I asked

for hartshorn, not water."

Hyatt drew a deep sigh and spoke to the clerk.

"I am afraid I have no hartshorn—perhaps a glass of wine for the lady?" the man suggested.

"Lovely!" Olivia smiled. "And a chair, if you would be so kind."

She was soon settled comfortably in, sipping wine, and waiting. "Why do you not run along and see the church now, Lord Hyatt?" she suggested again. "As I am feeling so dreadfully faint, I shall wait for you here."

He leveled a determined stare at her. "I would not dream of abandoning a lady when she is unwell. I shall suggest to Mrs. Traemore that you spend the afternoon in bed to recover."

An angry splotch of red blossomed on her cheeks. The baroness knew she had met her match in determination, but she was far from giving up. If she could not talk to John, she would leave him a note, to be delivered by the clerk. She beckoned this helpful person forward. "Do you have a ladies' room? I am suddenly feeling very nauseous," she said, with a quick, angry glance at the cause of her condition.

The clerk literally wrung his hands. "Oh, dear! It is hardly a ladies' room—merely a convenience for the staff."

"That will be fine," she said, and rose. "Where is it?"

He pointed to a corridor behind the desk. "On the left."

She pranced off, with a triumphant grin at Hyatt.

"Does the room have a window?" Hyatt asked the clerk.

"No, nor even a mirror. I fear the lady will not be comfortable there."

"No window, eh? Then she will slip you a note before she leaves. Don't deliver it," he said, and dropped a coin into the clerk's hand to buy his assistance. The man looked a question. "My niece is trying to arrange a runaway match. We are staying at Castlefield. His Grace will appreciate your help," he said, dropping these impressive hints to assure compliance.

"Oh, my! Castlefield, you say."

"Just so. There will be no need to send the note there, however. Just tear it up, or burn it."

Hyatt had read the baroness well. Her first interest was to look for a window. Finding none, she dashed a note off to John to leave with the clerk. When she came out and saw Hyatt in close conversation with the man, however, she feared his trick. She would not leave her note with the clerk. She would hide it among the wares. John was up to all the rigs. He would find it. The clerk would tell him which counters she visited.

"I am feeling much better now," she smiled, and came forward. "Where would I find the stockings, sir?"

The clerk directed her to one side of the store. Hyatt followed while she examined the wares. There was still no sign of Yarrow. He wandered off a few paces, looking idly about at the buttons but not bothering with the farce of buying any. Olivia moved on to the hosiery. With her back to him, she stuffed her note under the stockings as she selected a pair to purchase, quite oblivious to size and color. She took her selection to the clerk.

When he told her the price, she laughed merrily. "Oh, dear! I have come without any money. Hyatt, could you lend me some?"

Hyatt glanced at the pair of mustard yellow stockings she held and shook his head. He paid for them and accompanied Olivia to the street, relieved to get her away from the shop.

"I expect you are eager to get back to Castlefield," she said. "I am all finished. What a lovely selection of stockings they had there."

"We have not seen the church."

She glanced to the end of the street, where the spire of an old stone church rose into the sky. "There it is. We can see it quite well from here."

"We shall examine the interior," he said, to punish her.

Olivia gave a bored sigh. "What for? If you want to remain in the village, let us have a cup of tea." She took his arm and drew him forward. He went without argument, but he did not intend to treat her to tea. The church was beyond the tea shop.

As they drew near the tea shop, the door opened and Yarrow came catapulting out. Olivia saw him and gave a little squeal of pleasure.

"Well, by Jove, if it ain't Olivia!" Yarrow exclaimed, in a very poor simulation of surprise. He bowed to her and Hyatt.

"I had no idea you were visiting Mr. Jantzen," Olivia said, thus revealing her close familiarity with his doings.

"Just dropped down for the weekend. Boxing match, you know. I am surprised you ain't in the drapery shop, Olivia." He cast a guilty glance at Hyatt and added, "The ladies, you know. Always like to have a rifle through the goods in every shop."

"I have already been there," she said, narrowing her eyes in a meaningful way. "Buying stockings. I looked through the threads and things, but I only bought stockings."

"Just so. The stockings. Well, it was jolly nice chatting with you. See you back in town next week, I expect?"

"Certainly," Olivia said. "We leave Monday morning. Only two more days," she added, as though she were incarcerated, and not being entertained in the most lavish home in the country.

Yarrow made an awkward, exaggerated bow and strutted on to the drapery shop, where he had soon found his billet-doux nestled among the silk stockings.

Afternoon, between three and four. Mole River, bridge, willow trees. Couldn't miss it. He pocketed the note and sauntered forth, smiling.

Lord Hyatt kept the baroness at the church for half an hour, at which time his own patience gave out and he took her back to Castlefield. Her lively spirits left him in no doubt that she had hoodwinked him. Left a note at the stocking counter, very likely, but there was no point charging her with it. The hussy lied as naturally as a dog scratched his fleas.

The tour was just finishing when he reached Castlefield. He met Laura and went out to the garden for a private word with her. "Yarrow was there," he said. "I did my best, but from her smug smiles, I fear she outwitted me." He gave her a lively rendition of his morning.

"What a wretched imposition to saddle you with her. I should have gone. But the tour was fascinating. Did you know not less than three monarchs have slept in the Royal Suite?"

"I know it well. If they slept on the mattress that is presently there, they had a deuced uncomfortable night. About the baroness—when do you figure she plans to make her break?"

"She is riding with Talman this afternoon, and there is the rout party tonight. The rout party is the more likely time, don't you think? Or perhaps tomorrow."

"Yes, but if she comes down with an attack of vapors this afternoon and cancels her ride, you had best put a lock on her door and a guard beneath her window."

She shook her head in vexation. "It is enough to put a person off marriage, to see what a nuisance children are."

He smiled bemusedly, to see her so concerned. "I doubt you were ever a moment's trouble to anyone. Children usually take after their parents, you know, so you should not have to worry. Yours will be quiet and well behaved. The Hyatt youngsters, of course, will be a different matter."

"Oh, but I would not want my children to be as dull as I!"

"I said quiet, not dull. If you must be throwing my words back at me, Laura, at least be accurate."

He took her arm and began walking along the path. "Now if only we could think of some manner of taming my brood and enlivening yours."

"There, you see! You said enliven! You do think I am dull."

"We are discussing your hypothetical children. If you married a dull man, they might be dull."

"What makes you think I would marry a dull man?"

He stopped and looked at her with a quizzing smile. "What made me think you were quiet. You are turning into a harpy. What I was trying to say is—what was I trying to say?"

She resumed walking. "I expect you were saying that I should marry someone lively, and you should marry a dullard. Why, if I didn't know better, I might take it for a proposal," she said, and laughed. Her easy joke showed Hyatt that this notion had never occurred to her.

"I did not call you a dullard!"

"Well, you meant it," she said.

Again he stopped walking and peered down at her. "Is this our first argument, my dear?"

She reviewed their acquaintance and replied, "I believe it is."

"Good. We would not want things to be too quiet."

The lunch bell sounded from the door. "Just when we were getting to know each other." Hyatt tsked. "One never really knows another person until they have shared a good argument."

"That was not a good argument. It was hardly even a disagreement."

His reckless smile peeped out. "Then you agree you are dull."

"I will admit that I am usually quiet, but if you think I will stand still for—"

"It was a joke! And you knew it all along, shrew."

"Upon my word, I don't see why you are taking your ill temper with Olivia out on me. I am not the one who outwitted you with my pranks. You have called me a dullard and a shrew, and as well as said I have poor taste in gentlemen!"

"No, no! I acquit you of the last charge. I think you are coming to appreciate me, now that we have enjoyed our first spat."

He turned her around and escorted her to the dining room. Laura's head was in such a whirl that she wasn't sure she understood his meaning. As soon as she caught a glimpse of Olivia, she forgot everything else. She knew that satisfied smile. The chit had certainly arranged to meet Yarrow, and she must be on her toes to prevent it.

Chapter Fourteen

Lunch was successful, and as the baroness was safely disposed with Talman for the afternoon, Laura agreed to sit for Hyatt in the garden. It was not to be a formal painting, but only a pencil sketch, done by the fountain, with a wide-brimmed bonnet to protect her from the sun.

"I shall be soaking wet by the time you finish," she scolded. "The spray is drenching me." This was a gross exaggeration. Actually, she enjoyed the cooling breeze, which carried a refreshing moisture in it.

"It will give your hair a curl."

"Now you are deriding my coiffeur. If I am not careful, I shall end up in your gallery of social misfits. I notice I do not merit an oil painting."

"They are frippery stuff. I really prefer my engravings. Perhaps I shall have this engraved."

They bickered and flirted and enjoyed a lovely afternoon. Guests stopped from time to time to watch Hyatt at work. He could hardly ask two Cabinet ministers' wives and a marchioness to leave, but they were well bred enough to keep their comments to a polite minimum. At four-thirty he set down his pencil.

"You can see it now, if you wish," he said.

Laura hopped up and went to examine his sketch. "Oh, it's lovely!" she exclaimed. "I wish I were as pretty as that."

It was lovely, too, but not in the exaggerated manner of his society paintings. He had caught her with a particularly sweet smile, one she didn't know she possessed. She looked all soft and warm, as if she were in love. The knowledge of what caused it brought a flush to her cheeks.

"With my compliments," he said, handing it to her.

"Would you mind signing it?" she said. His pencil sketched a tall, bold H, followed by a squiggle, and the date. Then he turned the paper over and wrote something on the back.

He was just handing it back to her when Talman came pelting forward. "Is the baroness not with you?" he asked.

Olivia and Hyatt exchanged a shocked look. "We thought she was with you," Laura said.

"No, she got tired before we had been out an hour, and we came back. I have been giving Mama a hand with the arrangements for tonight's party. The baroness said she was going to join you two in the garden."

Laura felt the gravest misgivings. "We haven't seen her since lunch. Is her mount in the stable?"

"It must be. We left them there more than an hour ago," Talman replied.

"That's plenty of time for her to have shabbed off again," Hyatt said. "Let us have a look."

The three of them darted to the stable, to learn that the baroness had returned not ten minutes after returning with Talman and gone out again.

"Did you send a groom with her?" Talman demanded, for he wanted to blame someone for the situation.

The groom shook his head. "She said she was just hacking about the park. She didn't want an escort."

"You shouldn't have let her go alone."

"She was very insistent, milord. Shall I send someone to look for her?"

"I'll go myself," Talman said through clenched teeth. He cast an accusing eye on Laura and added, "How very strange. The baroness has a broad streak of independence, has she not?"

"You must not worry, Lord Talman," Laura said, to appease him. "The baroness is an excellent rider, and she would not have left your property."

"It is not Miss Harwood's fault," Hyatt said, rather angrily.

"We'll help you look," Laura said.

"No need for you to trouble yourself, Laura," Hyatt said.

Talman called for his mount, Hyatt for another, and they went galloping off. As Laura was wearing a light muslin gown, she could not join them, but she set off through the park at a swift pace on foot, knowing it was a vain effort. She felt that if she did not walk off her temper, she would strike Olivia when she was eventually brought home.

* * * *

At the bridge, the baroness had long since tethered Briar and stood hand in hand with Yarrow, gazing down into the water.

"The visit has been horrid," she pouted. "And when I go back, they'll ring a peal over me. Talman has no notion of entertaining guests. He made them tour his stupid old house all morning. But tonight he is having a rout," she said, cheering at the prospect.

"Daresay the old goat plans to make an offer."

"He will be a duke one day," she said, to incite Yarrow to jealousy. "He's ever so rich, with half a dozen estates."

"You have your own title. You don't have to marry to gain a handle. As to six estates—why, a man can only live in one house at a time. Nothing but a nuisance, having to run six houses for your poor relations to batten themselves in."

"How large is your estate, John?" she asked.

"I'll come into an abbey when my old Uncle Charlie sticks his fork in the wall. How big is your place?" He knew the baroness was a great heiress but had not yet determined the exact extent of her holdings.

She adopted her moue and said, "You sound as if that's all you're interested in."

"By the living jingo! That's not true. You asked me first. I am in love with you. I have been wanting to kiss you ever since I first spotted you, dancing in your bare feet in that park. Just like something out of an old Greek fairy tale. Phoebe, or Diana, or one of those nymphs."

"You never did kiss me," she said encouragingly.

Yarrow felt he had been too slow, and he grabbed her into his arms for a violent embrace. Despite her waywardness, Olivia had never been kissed by a man before. She had pictured a more civilized attack. A little sweet talk first, then a kiss on the fingers. She was frightened and pushed Yarrow away.

Deuce take it, she had as well as asked him to kiss her, he thought. He held more tightly and pushed his lips against hers, while she wriggled to free herself.

That was how Talman found them: Yarrow forcing his attentions on the struggling baroness. Talman let out a holler and came galloping forward, ventre à terre. He dismounted, grabbed Yarrow by the collar, and kicked him into the river. Yarrow landed on his back and lay, spluttering and cursing. Seeing he was only a boy, Talman did not feel obliged to challenge him to a duel but satisfied himself with a few rough words.

"If I ever see your sniveling face on my property again, I'll set the hounds on you. Now be off. Come along, Baroness."

Olivia looked from one to the other. She had felt strange stirrings of excitement when John kissed her, but really he did not look at all attractive, all soaking wet and spluttering as he dragged himself from the water. Talman looked much more handsome. And besides, she was deeply embarrassed.

"Let us go home at once," she said, glaring at Yarrow.

She mounted and went docilely along. If Talman had been the least bit sympathetic, he might have won a bride that day. He was now convinced, however, that the baroness was not the bride for him. A hussy!

"It was unwise of you to venture into the woods alone," he snipped. "You said you were too tired to continue our ride."

"I suddenly felt much better. We can continue our ride now, if you like."

"It will be best if I turn you over to your aunt."

"You won't tell her, Lord Talman!"

"Certainly I shall. I shall also advise that she keep a closer watch on you. If you are determined to make a cake of yourself, Baroness, you might at least have the courtesy not to do it while under my father's roof."

There was no hope of dissuading him. Olivia had suspected from the beginning that he was one of those stiff gentlemen. This being the case, she didn't bother trying, but thought about John instead and how it had felt when he held her tightly against his hard chest. He was a real man, and he kissed like a man. Talman, she felt, would not be so delightfully savage. Her daydreams had been sadly dull, compared to the reality of lovemaking.

Lord Talman sent her upstairs and went at once to report to Mrs. Traemore. A guest, Mrs. Campbell, seeing his angry stride, hovered outside the drawing room to admire a marble statue of Apollo. Talman was too upset to close the door properly, thus allowing Mrs. Campbell to hear every word that passed, and even to see the duchess's face.

Mrs. Traemore and Mrs. Harwood sat with the duchess, looking at old drawings of Castlefield. They were all three bored to flinders and welcomed the intrusion, until they heard its cause. Mrs. Traemore and Mrs. Harwood went upstairs at once to chastise Olivia. Unfortunately for Mrs. Campbell, they closed the door behind them, but the eavesdropper had heard enough to be assured of a sensation when she purveyed her gleanings.

"I was never so taken in in my life," Talman said to his mother. "I thought her unspoiled, natural. She is a hussy to the tip of her toes. I regret that she is to spend two more days with us."

His mama shook her head at his stupidity. "Don't be such a gudgeon, son. Do you forget you have two younger brothers who are on the catch for a monied bride? Either Rodney or Rufus would snap at her. Pity they ain't here this weekend. I'll send them to London next week. You must keep up a show of friendship with that saucy piece and let them have a go at the tin mine."

"I would not wish her on either of them," he felt obliged to say, although he soon realized his error. "Rufus is not at all nice in his demands for a bride. Such a baggage as the baroness would suit him excellently."

"I rather think Rodney . . ."

He looked surprised. "Rodney? Surely Rufus—"

"Either one. Now send a note up to the baroness, asking how she is feeling. Ask her for a dance this evening. Not the opening minuet, mind. That will raise expectations. The aunt is quite conversable. I shouldn't mind having her for a connection. My sawbones is coming to have a look at her back."

The baroness received Talman's note with ill-concealed glee. She enjoyed showing it to her aunt and Mrs. Harwood, after they had cut up so rusty. Most of all she enjoyed showing it to Laura, who thought she was so perfect. Laura had spotted Talman and the baroness from the park and dashed to the house to hear the story.

"Lord Talman is not so disgusted as you feared, cousin," Olivia crowed, handing the note over. "He apologizes for his temper, you see, and expresses every concern for my comfort."

Laura could only conclude that Talman was in love with the baroness. Nothing else could account for this about-face. She had heard the whole story from Lord Hyatt when she returned from searching the park.

He had heard it from Lady Sumner, who had it from Mrs. Campbell, who had 'accidentally' overheard Lord Talman from the hallway when he brought the baroness to Mrs. Traemore. There was no hope of keeping the tale quiet now.

"It might be best if the baroness not attend the rout this evening," he had suggested. "I fear Talman will ignore her. He is very high in the instep, you must know. There is no telling what the baroness might do if she feels she is being ignored."

"I shall try to convince her to have a headache."

"Which does not mean that you must stay away," he added.

"I daresay I am tainted as well, and I have not a tin mine to wash away my sins."

Reading Talman's note, she had to wonder how he had overcome his scruples and asked Olivia to give him a dance at the rout. She suspected the hand of Hyatt and went belowstairs to see what she could learn. She found him loitering about the drawing room to intercept her. He drew her into the library.

"I knew a large dot had magical magnetic powers to attract gentlemen," Laura said, "but surely Talman is

not dangling after her fortune. He is as rich as Croesus." She mentioned the note.

"Richer," Hyatt said. "That cannot be it. I wonder if the twins will be here. That might account for this volte-face. They are not so stiff as Talman, nor so well greased. That is only a surmise, of course, based on nothing but my reading of human nature."

Talman's change of attitude remained a mystery, but as it cleared the way for a less harrowing visit, it was welcome. Dinner that evening was to be a grand affair, with guests from the neighborhood joining the party. Even more guests would come later for the rout party. A sense of excitement invaded the house, as servants darted to and fro, arranging flowers and chairs in the ballroom and preparing the feast. The ladies had to spend considerable time preparing their finery, and Laura soon went upstairs.

With added guests, the seating at dinner was subtly rearranged. Lord Talman did not sit beside the baroness. To show his continued pleasure with her party, however, he sat beside Laura, and conversed politely during dinner. Hyatt sat at her other side, giving her the two most eligible partners at the table. She noticed that Talman was livelier with the lady on his other side than with her, and she asked Hyatt who she was.

"That would be Lady Elizabeth Grange, Lord Dinsmore's eldest daughter. She was the odds on favorite to win Talman before he met the baroness. Not one of this or any other Season's livelier belles, but not unattractive. With no real claim to beauty, she has at least escaped the family failing of a squinty eye and is well dowered. I rather think she will be rising in his esteem now."

"Pity, but then he and Olivia really did not suit."

Hyatt looked uncertain. "I thought we had agreed that opposites attract. Lady Elizabeth and Talman are as like as peas in a pod. Your baroness would have brought life to Castlefield."

They glanced down the table, where the baroness, undismayed by the stiff jaws all around her, was making excellent headway with a Lord Justin, a younger son who required an heiress and had no objection to Cornwall.

"That was your theory, Hyatt. I did not express agreement. Now that this has happened, I find I do not

agree at all. There would be constant bickering if two such unlike creatures were shackled for life to each other."

He listened, suddenly serious, and frowned. "But then, you know, old married folks come to resemble each other after a decade or two. I daresay that two opposites would rub along better than you fear."

"The few intervening decades of disagreement might not bother the livelier partner. I think the quiet one would suffer."

He gave a bold smile. "Don't give me my *congé* yet, Miss Harwood. I sense that you are not so quiet as you have been letting on. I have noticed a quite delightful propensity to argue with every word I say. Do you know, I believe you have been shamming it all along. You are as bad as the baroness. It is your lack of a tin mine that has been keeping you in line all the while."

She smiled blandly. "You misread the cause for my docility. It is that I have wisely chosen friends who are not at all quarrelsome."

"Sounds damned dull to me," he laughed.

Laura did not agree verbally, but as she reviewed her few past romantic associations, she had to admit that none of the gentlemen was very dashing. Mr. Meadows was fairly typical. She had forgotten all about him, since striking up this little flirtation with Hyatt. How much had she really cared for him, when she could forget him so easily? She knew that Lord Hyatt would linger longer in her memory.

When she went abovestairs to put the last touches on her toilette for the dance, she glanced at the sketch Hyatt had done. She remembered that he had written something on the back of it, and turned it over. She read, "To Lovely Laura, in thanks for a memorable visit."

How thoughtful. She smiled fondly. Memorable? It would be memorable for her, but she did not doubt for a moment that Hyatt would forget it and her as easily as she had forgotten Meadows. In any case, she had this lovely memento. She would frame it and hang it in her bedroom. But first the flirtation would continue for a few hours. Hyatt had asked her for the opening dance.

Chapter Fifteen

At the ballroom, Laura stopped before entering to admire the massed banks of flowers and to enjoy that delicious prelude of anticipation before the evening began. It always reminded her of the moment before the curtain rose at the theater. One knew the general nature of the night's entertainment, but there were always a few surprises. Had she had the least premonition of what awaited her that night, she would have turned tail and run back upstairs as fast as her legs could carry her.

The baroness, who accompanied Laura and Lord Hyatt, fully expected Talman to come trotting. Her nose was out of joint to see him ask Lady Elizabeth for the opening dance. Her heart was untouched, of course, but slighted pride lent an angry sparkle to her eyes and a determined tilt to her chin. While Laura gazed around at the gathering crowd, Olivia said to Hyatt, "I shall give you the first dance, Hyatt."

He replied, "I am highly flattered, ma'am, but Laura has already agreed to stand up with me for the opening set."

"Laura? You two have become mighty close in a short time."

A pink flush crept up Laura's throat. Her first sensation was embarrassment; her second was a twinge of worry. The baroness in this mood held great potential for mischief. "Why do you not have the first set with Olivia, Hyatt?" she suggested.

He frowned at her seeming indifference. "Because I have already asked you, and you have accepted."

Looking from one to the other, it occurred to Olivia for the first time that her cousin had made a prize catch. The whole world doted on Lord Hyatt. Until that casual 'Laura,' the baroness had always assumed he was in love with herself.

"It is no matter," she said with a shrug. "I shall stand up with someone else." Her glittering eyes turned to Talman, who was leading Lady Elizabeth to the floor. There were other gentlemen aplenty in the room, but none of them was rushing in her direction, and it was vital that she have an escort to outshine Talman. Her lips thinned in vexation.

"You stand up with Olivia, Hyatt," Laura repeated. "We shall have the second set instead."

"You need not fear I have decided to set my bonnet at you," Olivia said bluntly to Hyatt.

He read the plea in Laura's eyes and reluctantly agreed. "I know very well why you have suddenly resorted to asking me to dance," he said. "You have disgusted Talman with your vulgar behavior and do not want him to see you in your disgrace, spurned by all the gentlemen. Let it be a lesson to you, milady. Even a baroness can go too far. You, I fear, have gone the length of your rope."

"If you're going to be horrid, you can stand up with Laura," she snapped.

"That is the end of my lecture. Just a word to the wise. And now we shall find a partner for Laura."

This was soon accomplished, and the two couples went to the floor to join a set. The baroness felt the full odium of her position. The guests noticed that Talman had deserted her. Ladies stared at her, wearing smug smiles or whispering behind raised fans. To show her indifference, she smiled and flirted with Hyatt, hoping the old gossips would think she had refused Lord Talman. What did she care for any of them? Talman was a dead bore. She preferred John Yarrow to any man in the room, and as soon as she returned to London, she would tell him so.

Re-established on her pedestal by Hyatt, Olivia soon found a partner for the next set. Talman came forward at its end and asked her for the third. Olivia agreed, but she agreed very coolly to show him how little she cared. Talman sensed that the baroness was angry, and to conciliate her advisers he stood up next with Laura.

The rout swelled to a fashionable squeeze as guests from the neighborhood arrived. Most of the new arrivals were strangers to Laura. It was not until the middle of the set that she saw a face she recognized very well indeed. Lady Devereau had landed in. How on earth had she finagled an invitation? She was the very sort Lord Talman would despise.

Her toilette, while attractive, bordered on the sensational. She was outfitted in violet lace, with two short ostrich feathers tucked into her raven hair. Diamonds glittered everywhere—in her ears, at her neck, and on her arms. A long expanse of white throat extended too low for modesty. The enticing conformation of her breasts had every eye in the room riveted.

Talman spotted her and gave a tsk of annoyance.

"Just look who Cousin Jerome has brought to call. Papa will be furious."

"Is the gentleman with Lady Devereau your cousin?" Laura asked. She had heard the name of Lady Devereau's new flirt in London. So that was how she got here!

"We all have a few dirty dishes in the family" was his curt way of acknowledging it. "Lord Jerome is ours. His father is Lord Syndel. Fortunately, Jerome is only a younger son. He cannot mortgage the Grange to buy diamonds for his lightskirts. I wager the hussy talked Jerome into visiting the Grange for the weekend on purpose to come to this rout and annoy Hyatt. She has taken Hyatt in aversion since he refused to take her under his protection. He made the mistake of painting her earlier on. She is very lovely, of course," he added. "I daresay there was something between them. God, I hope she doesn't plan to make a scene."

Laura made note of Talman's information. She knew that Hyatt was not responsible for the lady's presence, yet in a way he was. If there had not been "something between them" she would not have come. Like Talman, she hoped the lady would not make a scene. She garnered up the baroness and fled the room.

Hyatt also noted Lady Devereau's arrival. His heart clenched in anger when she smiled across the room at him. He knew that smile! It was the same glittering smile she had worn when she barged into an ex-lover's box at the theater and returned the man's nightshirt—to his wife. It was the smile she had worn when she had another married lover's crest painted on the carriage he had give her and drove to call on his wife. And it was the smile she had worn when he refused to paint her again, as Venus rising from the waves. He had kept the first portrait; she wanted another for herself. "You will live to regret it, Hyatt," she had warned then.

The woman was incorrigible. Across the room, he caught her eye and glared. Then he turned his back on her and strode out of the room. If she meant to humiliate him, she would at least not do it in front of the entire assembly. This was just the sort of contretemps the duke hated. Mind you, the duchess would be vastly amused.

He decided to take a glass of punch to the library,

feeling in his bones that Lady Devereau would not be far behind. Nor was she. She shot out after him like an arrow from the bow. Hyatt went straight to the punch bowl in the refreshment parlor. To his chagrin, Laura was there, with the baroness and their escorts. Hyatt just smiled and snatched a glass of punch, planning to flee at once to the library.

He wondered why Laura was staring in such a wild-eyed way. Then a whiff of violet perfume assailed him, and he knew. Marie Devereau always drenched herself in the sickening scent. He turned to confront her and saw a drift of violet lace swing past him, toward Laura. He put down his glass and followed her. His heart was in his mouth.

Lady Devereau ignored everyone in the room except the baroness. "You must be Baroness Pilmore," she smiled sweetly. "I have heard so much about you. I am Lady Devereau." She shook Olivia's hand.

Olivia recognized the beautiful face before her but was only vaguely aware of the lady's awful reputation. She accepted the offered hand. "I am happy to meet you, Lady Devereau. This is my cousin, Miss Harwood," she said. The ladies exchanged a stiff curtsy. "I have admired your portrait at Somerset House," the baroness said politely.

"And your portrait, I hear, will soon be joining it. You will quite put me in the shade."

Olivia was accustomed to this sort of toad-eating. "Not at all. You are very pretty for an older lady," she replied, with no intention of giving offense.

Lady Devereau laughed gaily. "Out of the mouths of babes," she said. From the corner of her eyes, she saw the flicker of a black arm and turned to cast a defiant eye on Lord Hyatt. "As an older lady, I shall give you a word of advice, Baroness. You must be wary of fortune hunters. I have heard the on-dit that that scoundrel, Yarrow, nearly succeeded in raping you this afternoon." She lifted her infamous eyes to Laura and added, "You are the baroness's chaperone, I believe? You ought to keep a closer eye on her, instead of flirting with Hyatt."

Laura felt as if she were in a nightmare. This conversation could not really be taking place. An awful silence had fallen on the room, as necks craned and ears stretched to hear such farcouche words as "rape" strike the air.

"You are quite mistaken," she said weakly. "Yarrow did not try to ... he only met her by chance. And I am not the baroness's chaperone, but her cousin," she added more firmly.

"It was my understanding that you are battenning yourself on the baroness, in payment for looking after her. Is that not the case?"

Hyatt had heard enough. He put his arm on Lady Devereau's wrist to try to lead her away. She shook him off as if he were a gnat. He read the determination in her stare and looked helplessly at Laura, for he had deduced that Marie was taking her revenge on him through Miss Harwood. Marie had not been fooled that the baroness was his choice.

"One can understand why you were so diverted," Lady Devereau continued. "Hyatt is an amusing rattle, to be sure, but you mistake your quarry if you think to bring this sly dog to the sticking point. Many Incomparables have caught cold at that." Her scathing glance told Laura that she was no Incomparable.

"You would know about that, Lady Devereau," Laura replied, stunned at her own daring.

"A provincial miss might not recognize it, but Hyatt is a gazetted flirt, my dear. It is here today, gone tomorrow—with only a painting and a ruined reputation for a memory."

Laura was aware of the staring eyes and the listening ears. Her quaking insides froze to ice. How dare this creature barge in and ruin the party! She adopted her ironical smile and said, "But it is a beautiful painting, Lady Devereau. It makes you look so lovely I scarcely recognized you in the flesh. And I am sure Lord Hyatt's reputation will recover, for he now behaves with perfect propriety."

A gasp from the audience stabbed the air. Lady Devereau knew she had been bested—and by this country bumpkin who looked as if butter would not melt in her mouth. "His might, but will yours?" she retorted, and swept from the room.

Lord Jerome had come looking for her. She grasped his arm and said in a carrying voice, "Take me back to the ballroom, Jerry. I am bored to tears. I feel like waltzing. Tell the dear duke I must have a waltz."

In a refreshment parlor, a loud buzz rose up to the rafters as the guests realized it was over and they could now begin discussing it. "Outrageous," "hussy,"

and "the outside of enough" were some of the more polite comments.

The baroness was enjoying herself hugely. "Bravo, Laura!" She laughed. "I never knew you could be so rude."

"Why not? I am your cousin, after all," Laura said, and whisked Olivia off to the library to escape the prying eyes.

Hyatt followed them, wondering what words he could possibly say to mitigate Marie's insults. He snatched a tray from a passing waiter and carried a bottle of wine and glasses to the library. A smile lurked on his lips. He was pleased with Laura's attack. He knew she had breeding but was surprised that she possessed such sangfroid under fire.

Now that her moment had passed, however, Laura felt quite faint and collapsed on the nearest sofa. "You were splendid!" Hyatt smiled, passing the wine. "This calls for a toast."

"To Lady Devereau!" Olivia said, lifting her glass.

"No, to Miss Harwood," he parried, and quaffed the wine, for he felt the need of it himself. "I am most dreadfully sorry, Laura. I would not have brought this down on your head for the world. What must you think of me?"

"It is not your fault, though I think you might have stood up for me and told her I was not flirting with you."

"But you were! In fact, you are," Olivia pointed out.

"I am not!"

"You told me it was vulgar to roll my eyes at my beaux. You have been rolling your eyes at Hyatt all day."

"This is all your fault," Laura said, realizing instinctively that offense was her only defense. "You see now what your clandestine meeting with Yarrow has accomplished. Talman is disgusted with you. Lady Devereau is no doubt making your name a byword this very instant."

"We were only kissing," Olivia pouted.

"I cannot imagine what Talman will say when he hears of this altercation."

"I can," Olivia laughed. "He will pull his stiff face and say that Lady Devereau is 'not the thing.' I must own, I liked her."

Talman soon came pouncing in. "I have just heard!

Baroness, Miss Harwood, you must allow me to apologize. How Jerome ever allowed that creature to talk him into bringing her here—not the thing, that woman."

Olivia uttered a faint giggle to hear her prediction come true.

"It is my fault, and I am very sorry," Hyatt said. "I have just been apologizing to the ladies."

"I have no doubt you were her target, but it was unladylike of her to take out her spleen on my guests."

"Where is she now? What is she doing?" Hyatt asked.

"She asked for a waltz. I told the musicians not to play any. She took a miff and has claimed a sick headache. Instead of asking Jerome to take her away, she insisted she was too upset to travel and went up to bed. I shall have her breakfast sent to her room tomorrow to keep her away from the invited guests. I shall have Jerome remove her as soon as she has eaten. Really, she is impossible. I had the butler put her in the east wing, where she shan't bother anyone. In the yellow room," he added, and smiled at Hyatt.

"What is the peculiarity of the yellow room? Does it have good, stout walls?" the baroness asked.

"It locks from the outside. I asked the butler to lock the door and hide the key over the door frame. He is to let her out tomorrow morning."

"That's horrid!" Olivia said. "What if there is a fire during the night?"

"Then I might let her out," Talman said. He shook his head ruefully. "I ought to get back to the ball. I expect you folks will want a moment to recuperate, but don't stay away too long. It will only fuel gossip if you all disappear."

"I'll go with you," Olivia said, jumping up.

Left alone, Laura and Hyatt exchanged a conscious look. "Did you jilt Lady Devereau?" Laura asked. "Is that why she is so angry with you?"

"It was not so much a jilting as a refusal to respond to her advances. I only wanted to paint the lady. I paid her to sit for me. When I pay a model, I usually keep the painting. Marie—Lady Devereau—decided she wanted to keep the painting. I refused."

"Why did you want to keep it?"

Hyatt looked confused. "I don't know, really. I do like to keep a representative sample of my own work."

Marie's picture is one of my best. But it was her insistence that really got my back up. I daresay she'll end up with it."

"I would give it to her, if I were you. The woman has no breeding—causing a row at a polite party."

"There is nothing like breeding, when all is said and done. You have noticed I do not fly into a pelter when you refuse to humor me with a flirtation."

"If you expect me to roll my eyes at you, Lord Hyatt, forget it. I must have been behaving very badly if both Lady Devereau and Olivia think I am your flirt."

"No one will look to either of those ladies for a sensible reading of your behavior. One must always consider the source of an insult. If you consider flirting with me an insult, that is to say. Personally, I do not consider this a flirtation."

She looked a question at him. "Indeed! What do you call it when you trail at a lady's apron strings for an entire weekend? You must forgive Olivia if she has misunderstood the matter. I wonder how Lady Devereau knew."

Hyatt just sat, quietly watching. The evening's excitement had brought an animation to Laura that was lacking before. She had responded with unexpected fire to Lady Devereau's malicious attack. Yes, there was more to Miss Harwood than he had suspected. And even before this discovery he had been half in love with her. Her quiet charm and breeding were attractive. To discover she had a sharp tongue when she was in a temper was delightful.

"There are other reasons than flirtation for dogging a lady," he said thoughtfully.

Her color heightened as she looked at him uncertainly. He could not be implying what she thought. Oh no, she surely misunderstood. But as his head inclined to hers, she knew she had not. His arms came out and pulled her against his chest. She looked at him with dark, frightened eyes; then her eyelids fluttered closed as his lips found hers.

The gentleness of his kiss surprised her. She had thought Hyatt would be a rougher lover, but his arms cradled her gently, and his lips were more pleading than predatory. Calmed by his tender approach, she let her arms encircle him and responded to his warm lips.

Later, she was quite at a loss to understand how

this polite embrace had escalated to scalding passion. There had been no sense of an attack, but a slowly rising fever that seduced her into an unladylike fervor. His arms tightened very gradually. At no particular moment was she aware of it, but she noticed when the pressure against her lungs became painful. She could not fail to notice when a low growl emanated from his throat, to blend with her own anguished moan.

That was when she tried to draw away. A secret thrill surged through her when he would not let her go but held her to him by main force. By then, his lips were ruthlessly plundering hers. Really, she could not blame him entirely. It just seemed to happen. Human nature swelled over them both in a wave of desire that left her weak.

When at last she succeeded in putting an inch between them, Hyatt's warm fingers stroked her throat. They brushed down the column of her neck to cling with shuddering intimacy to her bare shoulders. His hot lips were at her ear, uttering words she had never thought to hear. "You darling, delightful hussy, hiding your fire behind that prim smile. I am mad for you. I want to kiss every inch of your—"

"Eeek!" she squealed, and jumped up, as Olivia came bouncing in at the doorway.

"Laura! What are you doing!" the baroness demanded in censorious tones. She hurried forward, her eyes wide with reproach and curiosity. "Upon my word, this is pretty rich! You all cutting up at me, when John was doing no worse than this. Not as bad, in fact. At least I was fully dressed, and standing up. Hyatt was nearly on top of you."

"I will have you know I am fully dressed," Laura replied, pulling at the bodice of her gown, which had slipped awry during the tussle.

"I hope you have got an offer from him, or there is absolutely no excuse for this. And I shall tell your mama," she added, with childish spite.

Hyatt straightened his tie and glared at the wretched girl. "You may be very sure my intentions are honorable, miss," he said. "Which is more than can be said for Mr. Yarrow's."

"That's all you know about it. So are you engaged, Laura?" she asked eagerly. This startling news was enough to make her forget her accusations.

"Certainly not!" She looked at Hyatt, who smiled

softly, as his glowing eyes held hers.

"It is customary for a lady to consider an offer before accepting—or declining," he explained to Olivia.

"How long should she wait?" Olivia asked.

In her unsettled state, Laura paid no heed to that ominous question. "What was it you came to tell us?" she asked, trying for an air of dignity.

"Did you not hear the gong? Everyone is going into dinner."

Laura had some vague recollection of hearing a gong. It had blended with the bells and other unreal sounds that eddied around her during that embrace.

Dinner made a diversion. As they left the room, Laura got Olivia a step ahead of Hyatt and said in a commanding whisper, "Don't mention any of this to anyone."

"Surely you will accept him, cousin."

"I need a little time to think about it."

Olivia gave a conspiratorial smile. "Very well, but I don't think you should leave him hanging too long. Lady Devereau is remaining overnight, you must know. If you refuse, why, there is no saying that he won't take refuge with his former lover."

"Really, Olivia. You should not say such things."

"You shouldn't do such things," Olivia smiled boldly.

Laura feared she had lost the last vestige of control over her troublesome cousin. And to make it worse, Hyatt's smile told her he was thoroughly enjoying her discomfort. She wanted to go upstairs alone, but with the shadow of Lady Devereau hanging over them, she knew she must continue to act nonchalant for several hours yet. The only slight alleviation to her condition was that Lady Devereau had retired for the night.

Chapter Sixteen

Laura feared that supper would be a ghastly meal. People would be gossiping about Lady Devereau's performance, with herself as adversary. They were already whispering their heads off about the baroness. At dinner, they would have two of the three infamous ladies at the same table. Lord Talman had not asked them to join his table, but at least they had Lord Hyatt for an escort. She realized how outré she and Livvie had become, when they must look to Hyatt to lend

them a touch of respectability.

It was beyond human nature to ignore the three-some, and their table did receive a deal of attention. But somehow, between Hyatt's nonsense and Livvie's lack of concern and a euphoria that swelled up in her when she remembered Hyatt's embrace, Laura actually enjoyed the interlude. She could not say she enjoyed the viands. In fact, when the meal was over, the only thing she could actually recall eating was a stalk of asparagus that Hyatt had fed her.

She had felt flattered, yet she recalled with a wince having chastised Olivia for accepting a petit four from Yarrow's fingers at another party. Olivia had noticed the asparagus incident, too. She cocked her head to one side and gave her sly smile, as though to say, Aha, I see it is a case of do as I say, not as I do.

Laura's greatest fear—that Olivia would broadcast Hyatt's proposal, if one could call it a proposal—did not come to pass. Actually, he had not asked her to marry him. He had merely announced that his intentions were honorable. That could mean that he was considering a proposal—testing the waters, as it were, to see if they would suit. There was hardly a worse-suited couple in all of London than Hyatt and Miss Harwood. He was a wealthy peer, a dasher, and a womanizer, sought after by not only the nubile debs, but by such high fliers as Lady Devereau. Miss Harwood was a provincial miss who wanted only a respectable match to save herself from spinsterhood.

But now that he had kissed her and whispered those unbelievable words in her ear, she realized that any other parti would be unthinkable. If Hyatt did not come up to scratch, she would return to Whitchurch, put on her caps, and set up as a spinster.

When dinner was finally over, it was one o'clock. Surely she could retire now without appearing to flee the scene of her shame. When Olivia raised her fingers to stifle a yawn, it was a good enough excuse to suggest they both retire. To Laura's considerable surprise, Olivia agreed without argument.

"Just one more dance," Hyatt said, with a wheeling smile. "Now that we are as well as engaged, even you cannot object to standing up with me a second time," he pointed out.

"We are not engaged," she said simply.

Hyatt regarded her blushing embarrassment with

satisfaction. "What, are you planning to jilt me? After your stout defense of my character in the refreshment parlor, I felt myself as good as accepted."

"You are being perfectly nonsensical," she said, grasping Olivia by the wrist to lead her away.

"Aren't you going to kiss her good night?" Olivia asked Hyatt.

"Not in front of an audience," he parried, but his glowing eyes said he would like to.

Laura said, "Good night, Hyatt," and darted upstairs, dragging Olivia along with her. "That was an ill-bred thing to say," she scolded.

The baroness turned a sapient eye on her cousin. "Then I expect I shall hear you repeat it, for tonight you have done all the things you have been telling me not to do. You were very rude to that nice Lady Devereau. You sneaked off to the library to cuddle with Hyatt, after cutting up stiff with me for meeting John." As a parting shot she added, "And I saw him feeding you that asparagus, too. You are a fraud, cousin."

Then a conspiratorial smile flashed out and she threw her arms around Laura. "I like you much better, now that you have acquired a few human failings. Love becomes you. Good night."

She was gone, leaving Laura alone to ponder the situation. Olivia was quite right. She was a fraud, dispensing her rules and regulations, and breaking every one of them as soon as Hyatt tossed his hankie at her. She had obviously lost the last vestige of control over the chit. She had failed to maneuver Olivia into an engagement with Lord Talman—and, truth to tell, she was not sorry. He was a dull clod of a fellow, too concerned with appearances. Yarrow was too much the opposite, however, and a gambling fool to boot. She must try to keep him from Olivia after they returned to London. But in her heart she knew that if Olivia felt about Yarrow as she felt about Hyatt, wild horses would not keep them apart.

The morning brought a few unpleasant surprises. Mrs. Traemore had got wind of Laura's misdeeds and came to her room before breakfast to take her to task.

"I hear you have made yourself a byword, Laura," she said accusingly. "It seems hard to scold little Livvie for a bit of childish carry-on when you, who are looking after her, have been throwing yourself at Lord Hyatt's head."

"I have not been throwing myself at Hyatt," Laura said, but she said it apologetically, without conviction.

"You are not blushing like a blue cow either, I suppose," Hettie retorted. "I wonder if I did right to entrust Livvie to you. No wonder she misbehaves, when she has you for a model."

"I have done the best I can with Olivia. If you are not satisfied with my company, Mrs. Traemore, I shall be very happy to return home."

"Yes, now that you have nabbed a title for yourself! And never mind that you did not bring Talman up to scratch for Livvie. I begin to see why you were so eager for Livvie to look ridiculous in her portrait. You wanted to give Hyatt a disgust of her, so you made her take off her shoes and pose in Fanny's old, faded, yellow frock, with the grass stains on the hem. Fanny told me as much, but I, like a fool, would not listen to her."

"Yet you seem to have heard, without listening. It was not I but Lord Hyatt who chose Olivia's outfit for the painting."

At this juncture, Mrs. Traemore's eyes fell on the sketch of Laura. "I see Lord Hyatt did not have you don a servant's gown for your painting."

"It is not a painting, merely a little sketch that he did in the garden."

A nasty smile settled on Hettie's lips. "You are welcome to your rake. Livvie would not have him if he crawled on his hands and knees."

"I shouldn't think that very likely, Mrs. Traemore."

"Nor do I, for it seems he is still in love with the Devereau hussy, if gossip is to be believed. Mrs. Campbell tells me she saw him creeping into her room last night in his stocking feet, after all decent folks had gone to bed."

Laura's face blanched. "I don't believe it," she said in a small voice.

"He has conned you properly, greenhead. Mrs. Campbell not only saw him go in, she kept an eye on the door, for she got her room changed around the corner when Lady Devereau moved in. She watched for ten minutes, and he did not come out."

"Did she also put her ear to the door?" Laura asked, hiding her grief with sarcasm.

"She did, but they were whispering. She did hear the bed springs groan, however."

"That is disgusting," Laura said, and she turned

her back to her caller.

Hettie felt she had done her duty and had quite enjoyed it. Talking Laura down from the boughs could wait for another time, for of course Laura must remain in London with Olivia. With her bad back, she could not be expected to jaunter about town till all hours of the morning. "We will be leaving for church at nine o'clock," she said. "Best get downstairs and have some breakfast."

Laura heard, but she was unable to answer. She just stood, with her back to her caller, until the door was closed. She felt as if a mule had kicked her in the stomach. Everything inside her hurt, but she shed no tears. She had always known Hyatt for a rakehell. Why should she be surprised? He had probably had to claim his intentions were honorable a dozen times this season alone, as he was really not at all discreet about where and when he embraced a lady.

Lady Devereau's prophetic words came back to haunt her. "Here today, gone tomorrow—with only a painting and a ruined reputation for a memory." She strode to the bureau, snatched up the sketch, and tore it in a dozen pieces, then threw it in the wastebasket. She didn't want any physical reminders of this unholy interlude. Her memories alone would be quite enough.

After she had destroyed the sketch, she sat on the edge of the bed, regretting her hasty deed. Another whole day to be got in before they could return to London, and thence home to Whitchurch.

Her second Season had been a greater disaster than her first. It would require all her breeding to carry on, but she'd be damned if she meant to let Lord Hyatt and his mistress destroy her reputation.

Ten minutes later, she opened the door and went down to the morning parlor. A fair crowd had gathered, but she noticed from the doorway that Hyatt was not there and was thankful. When Talman rose to draw her chair, she smiled politely. She took her plate to the sideboard and put a small amount of food on it, determined to force herself to eat something. She complimented Talman on his rout and discussed roses with Lady Meaford.

Soon the baroness and her chaperones joined the table. As soon as she decently could, Laura rose and took her leave.

"I shall meet you outside in forty minutes for

church, Mama," she said.

Olivia grabbed Laura's skirt as she turned to flee. "He is in the garden waiting for you," she whispered, and smiled encouragingly.

Laura went directly upstairs. Let him wait! What could Hyatt possibly have to say to her? If he meant to continue the flirtation, he would charm her into acquiescence. If he was tired of it, he would laugh it off. How is my fiancée this morning? Or am I being previous to call you my fiancée? No doubt you are too wise to accept my offer. She could almost see the wary light in his eye as he backed off from her.

Her hostess had left a book of poetry by the bedside to beguile a restless guest to slumber. Gray's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* just suited her somber mood. At the appointed hour, she put on her bonnet and went belowstairs. She hardly felt the jarring of her heart when Hyatt was seen loitering below.

He looked up the stairs as she descended, and smiled. "Does that bonnet mean you are going to church? I thought we might have a ride this morning."

She gave him a chilly smile. "I always attend church on Sunday, Lord Hyatt, but I shan't attempt to coerce you into anything so respectable. By all means you must have your ride."

"I usually do my worshipping out-of-doors. Trees were made before cathedrals. Will you ride with me this afternoon?"

"I have made other plans," she said, and whisked past him to join a group of ladies bent on going to church.

Hyatt stood looking after her, with a frown puckering his brow. Now what the devil was bothering Laura? He could understand if she had ripped up at him after the set-to with Marie Devereau last night, but she had taken that in her stride. There should be no more trouble with Marie. He had promised to give her the damned portrait, to be rid of her. He had done it as much to please Laura as for any other reason, since she had asked rather pointedly why he wished to keep it. That had certainly sounded like jealousy. A lady was not jealous about a gent she didn't care for.

She had not joined him in the garden, and he knew she had received his message, because the baroness nipped out after her breakfast and told him so. It was beginning to look like a concerted effort to avoid him.

Damn, if she meant to refuse his offer, she might at least have the common courtesy to tell him so, instead of leaving him in limbo. He expected more propriety from Miss Harwood. But in the contrary way of human nature, the worse she behaved, the better he was coming to love her.

During the church service, Laura racked her brain to think what she could do that afternoon to avoid Lord Hyatt. When the minister announced that he was giving a guided tour of the church that afternoon, she decided to attend it. A church was sure to be safe from that reprobate, Lord Hyatt.

She mentioned her plan to her mother on the way home. "Why would you want to do that, dear?" her mother asked in perplexity. "The whole point of it is to show the parishioners how the church is falling apart. He is going to take up a collection to make the repairs afterward." Laura had missed that part. "It is not a shilling he will expect either, but a couple of guineas."

"It is a lovely old church. I shall subscribe one guinea," Laura said. It was a bargain price to keep her at distance from Hyatt. When she announced her plan at luncheon, three other ladies decided they would join her.

"We can go in my carriage," Lady Meaford said.

Laura breathed a sigh of relief. She and three other ladies would fill up the carriage, in case Hyatt planned to join them. From the stiff face he was wearing, this did not seem likely.

He did not approach her after lunch. Some of the youngsters were having a game of croquet, and when Lady Meaford's carriage swept through the park, Laura recognized Hyatt's gleaming blond head and broad shoulders. Lady Devereau, she assumed, had been served her breakfast in bed and left. Laura did not see her that day, and none of the other guests mentioned her.

Laura took two memories of the church tour home with her. One was of Reverend Burnes prodding the perishing rock with his cane. A fine white powder had sifted down when he knocked it, reminding her of confectioner's sugar being sifted on to a cake. It was surprisingly white. The other was of standing a hundred yards back from the church to see the condition of the lead roof. She had worried that it would be dangerous for men to have to hang on to its

steep inclination to replace the aging lead.

Mrs. Burnes served cake and tea after, and the ladies left their donations in a silver bowl on a side table on their way out. She noticed that Lady Meaford left five guineas, but there were also shillings and crowns and half crowns in the bowl, so she did not feel like a skint.

Tea at the vicarage precluded having to take tea at Castlefield. There remained only dinner and Sunday evening to be got in. They were to leave early Monday morning. Laura was at pains to avoid Hyatt at dinner. This was made easier, as he had not been to the bother of rearranging the seating. She refused to look across the board at him, but she felt that his dark eyes were often turned in her direction.

As no entertainment was planned on a Sunday, Laura went upstairs while the gentlemen took their port, claiming that she had letters to write. Olivia had been pestering her throughout the day to ask whether she had accepted Hyatt. Fearing that she would come again, Laura arranged stationery on the desk and even dated one sheet of Castlefield's embossed letter paper. It would be fun to write home to some of her friends on such prestigious paper.

She owed her cousin Belle Harwood a letter, and desultorily wrote a few lines. Before long her pen fell idle, and she sat, just gazing at the picture of a ship above the desk. A small brass plaque bore the title "Shipwreck." The ship had a great many sails and plunged precariously into waves that threatened to engulf it. Rocks loomed ahead. Change the sea to society and the subject just suited her own situation. She felt she had plunged headlong into a mess that was as doomed as that ship, tossed on a stormy sea.

When she heard a tap on the door, she picked up her pen and called, "Come in." She arranged a bland smile to greet Olivia.

The door opened, and Lord Hyatt's form loomed in the dim light from the hallway.

Chapter Seventeen

Laura leapt up from the desk. "Hyatt! You can't come in here!" she exclaimed.

"Then you come out," he demanded. "I want to speak to you."

His tone brought her anger to the boil. "I have nothing to say to you, sir," she replied, tossing her head.

He took a quick peek up and down the hall to make sure he was unobserved, before striding into her room and slamming the door. "I take leave to disagree, Miss Harwood. When I make a lady an offer of marriage, I expect the courtesy of an answer, one way or the other."

"I see you are eager to reclaim your freedom. In that case, you may consider yourself reprieved. And if I may just make a suggestion, Lord Hyatt, in the future you should be more discreet as to where you embrace a lady, and these nominal offers would not be necessary."

"I did not consider it a nominal offer!"

"In point of fact, you did not offer at all, despite your behavior, so it is unnecessary for me to refuse. You have done what society requires, and saved your somewhat questionable reputation by pretending your intentions were honorable. Now you may go."

He stiffened at her angry words, which accused him of trifling with her at best and even hinted at an attempted seduction. "I don't give a damn what society thinks!" he said angrily.

"You have made that amply clear, sir. I, however, do have some concern for my reputation. My concerns are best served by not seeing you again. Good day."

"Just what, exactly, are you accusing me of?" he demanded, fire in his eyes.

"With regard to myself, I am accusing you of nothing worse than a lack of propriety. What charges your relations with Lady Devereau lay you open to is your concern."

"I am not in the least concerned about Lady Devereau."

"It is perfectly obvious you care for nothing but yourself," she sneered. It occurred to Laura that, barring the fact that Hyatt had his shoes on, she was now in much the same position as that infamous lady. Hyatt had once more come slipping into a lady's room, closing the door behind him. Anyone might pass and hear his voice. She would be ruined.

"There is nothing between Marie Devereau and myself," he stated categorically. "And I have done nothing to jeopardize your reputation either."

"We disagree on what constitutes nothing," she said haughtily. "You forget my lack of a scarlet past. A gentleman's forcing his way into my bedchamber and closing the door is not a mere nothing to me. So perhaps you would be kind enough to leave," she said.

She made to brush past him to open the door. Hyatt reached out and grabbed her wrist, to swing her around facing him. "You are swift to accuse, madam." His dark eyes burned into hers. At this close range, she could even feel his breath on her cheeks. "It seems to me that if anyone was trifling with anyone's affections in this affair, I am not the guilty party."

She wrenched away. "I suspect you are always the guilty party where ladies are concerned, Lord Hyatt."

He swallowed his anger and sorrow and said mildly, "Then I can only wonder that you lowered yourself to indulge me for two whole days. But then your formidable propriety will no doubt save you from the taint of even Lord Hyatt's degeneracy. Good night, Miss Harwood."

He opened the door and flung himself out. It was only by good luck that he was not seen. His temper was too high to consider anything but his anger at first. It was not until he had stepped out into the garden to cool off that the folly of his deed came over him. He had not meant to be so caustic. He had gone fully expecting to clear up whatever small misunderstanding had arisen and to leave an engaged man.

Instead of that, he had caused a flaming row. But damn, she had made a mighty high mountain out of an innocent call at her room. She had accused him of everything but theft. Who the devil did Miss Harwood think she was?

* * * *

In her room, Laura went on trembling legs and closed the door behind him. Her insides were shaking worse than the ship in the picture. She felt she had been well and thoroughly battered against those rocks and was slowly sinking into the frothing waters of the icy Atlantic. But it was over now. She would not have to talk to Hyatt again. She would never even have to see him again. Tomorrow she and Mama would remove from Charles Street, and she would once again put the turmoil of the London Season behind her. If any whisper of this weekend reached London, it would

soon be forgotten. Hyatt, or perhaps Olivia, would institute a new and more interesting scandal for society to gape and gasp over.

To avoid having to talk to anyone—Mama or Hettie or Olivia—Laura undressed and went to bed, where she relived the awful moments when she had confronted Lord Hyatt and turned him off. Every word exchanged was etched sharply in her mind. "I did not consider it a nominal offer!" he had said. But of course he had to say that, to save his handsome face. If he had truly loved her, he would not have crept into Marie Devereau's room in stocking feet. After two hours of tossing and turning, she finally slept.

She awoke the next morning to a leaden sky. Wind moved the branches of the trees in the park, warning of approaching rain. All the guests were in a hurry to leave and resume the pleasures of the London Season. Hyatt had either left before them or remained away from the table. Laura didn't care which, but was only thankful that he had at least enough sensitivity to avoid her.

The remaining guests had to come out and see the Turtle at close hand. They bestowed laughing admiration on its size, conformation, and sturdy construction. The Duke and Duchess of Castlefield came along to wave good-bye. They nudged their eldest son forward with a promise to bring his brothers to call on the baroness very soon. They were so very sorry the twins had not been here this weekend. Olivia accepted the attention as her due and left with a smile on her face.

"You have not forgotten we are attending Mrs. Simpson's rout party this evening, Laura?" She said, as the Turtle bowled comfortably through the park of Castlefield. Three other rigs dawdled impatiently behind, determined to get ahead of it before they hit the open road.

"Did your aunt not tell you? I shall be returning to Whitchurch at once. Mama and I shall pack as soon as we return."

"Then you accepted Lord Hyatt! Congratulations! But could you not be married in London? Who will go with me to all the balls and parties if you leave?"

"Accepted Hyatt!" her mother and Hettie exclaimed in unison. "Laura, you never mean you got an offer from Hyatt!" her mother gasped. Hettie directed a

narrow-eyed, measuring stare on Laura.

"He did offer, Mama. I declined," Laura said.

"Are you mad?" her mother asked.

"Don't urge the match on her," Hettie said. "Hyatt is not quite the thing. He was carrying on with that Devereau woman last night. I had it of Mrs. Campbell and felt obliged to inform Laura."

"What a pity!" Mrs. Harwood said, wishing Hettie had kept her gossip to herself. Hyatt was too good a parti to shuck off without at least attempting to reform him. "But that is no reason to go tearing off home, Laura. There is still plenty of time. You may nab someone else."

"Yes, why don't you stay, Laura?" Hettie said.

It was an olive branch. Laura realized that her mother was unaware of their argument. That being the case, it would look very odd for her to insist on going home. Yet to continue the round of balls and parties seemed not only pointless but a torment.

"I think you were insane to refuse Hyatt," Olivia said. But she soon reverted to more interesting matters, such as Simpson's rout that evening. She would see John there, and they would skip off to the Pantheon masquerade. She knew now that it was unexceptionable for her to go. Laura would go herself, if she had the chance. The older ladies felt they had to recommend caution, but that did not prevent them from doing whatever they wished. Why should she miss out on the treats, when this was the only Season she would ever have?

It was a long, tedious drive home, with people gathering by the roadside at every village to gawk at the Turtle, and the cavalcade forming behind it. The groom adapted the kindly idea of pulling into a side road at each town to let the other carriages past, which delayed the slow crawl of the Turtle even further. With a stop for lunch, afternoon was well along by the time they reached London. Hettie Traemore was not the only one who was ready for a nice cup of tea and a little lie-down.

Laura felt as if she had been beaten with clubs. She ached all over, and to complete her misery, she had agreed to accompany Olivia to the Simpson's rout. Well, that was why she was here. She could hardly remain in London if she abandoned her duties. Despite her misery, she had no real desire to dash home to

Whitchurch. Staying was bound to throw her in touch with Hyatt, and she was curious to see how he behaved.

After a careful consideration of her position, she decided that she would behave exactly as she used to vis-à-vis Hyatt, before the lamentable party at Castlefield. She would treat him as a friendly acquaintance, no more, no less. If she cut him, people would begin to ask questions. Word of the affair at Castlefield might seep out. She had every hope of keeping it quiet. Her mother, Hettie, and Olivia were the only ones who knew she had received an offer. Only Olivia knew the whole of it, and she was proving uncharacteristically discreet.

Before dinner, the baroness went to Lord Montford's attics to root through his trunks for a mask. John had got her a domino and a plain blue mask. She wanted a finer mask, preferably one fashioned of egret feathers. Lord Montford's trunks held no egret feathers, but she chanced upon a peacock fan, which was even better. With the fan concealed under her skirt, she went to her room and spoke to Fanny.

"We have to make a mask out of this," she said.

"What do you want a mask for? I wager this is Miss Harwood's idea, to hide your pretty face. I don't know why you pay any attention to that harpy."

"This has nothing to do with Laura. In fact, you must not mention it to her. Ask no questions, Fanny. Just do as I say."

Fanny examined the large fan. She was a wizard with the needle, but this challenged even her ingenuity. After several attempts she had separated the feathers and reassembled them into something resembling a mask. She bent the feathers in such a manner that two eye holes were achieved, tacked them in place, and added an elastic band to go around the head. It was not quite the thing of beauty Olivia had been envisaging, but she was in such high spirits that she kissed Fanny and told her she did not know what she would do without her, which was all the reward Fanny ever wanted, or ever got.

Mr. Meadows called immediately after dinner to welcome the ladies home. When he learned their evening's destination, he added himself to the party. He listened eagerly to hear whether Talman had come

up to scratch. When nothing was said, he assumed he had not. Later, to his boundless relief, Laura confirmed it.

After all Olivia's trouble with the mask, John Yarrow did not attend Simpson's rout. He sent a billet-doux with another fellow, who slipped it to Olivia during a country dance. She read it as soon as she could get away. John had stayed over a few days in the country. His host had got up a horse race, and naturally Olivia would not want him to miss that. He was desperately mad to see her again and would certainly be back by Wednesday, and if not Wednesday, Friday for sure, for he would die if she took up with some other fellow.

On four successive evenings the peacock fan was tacked to Olivia's underskirt. It was much too big to fit into her reticule. From its place of concealment, it attended two routs, a ball, and the opening of a new play at Covent Garden, usually in company with Mr. Meadows, who was tolerated, but could not feel he was advancing his suit an inch. Olivia grew impatient with her absent lover. Finally impatience gave way to fear that she had lost him. The country host might have a sister; certainly he would have female neighbors. If John ever came back, she was ready to not only go to the Pantheon, but to dart to Gretna Green or the Outer Hebrides or Africa with him, if that was what he wanted.

Lord Rodney and Lord Rufus were brought to call at Charles Street, where they found it hard to believe that this listless creature had cut such interesting capers at Castlefield. All a take-in, by Jove. They wouldn't have the baroness if she came with a gold mine. The Turtle seemed the proper vehicle for this slow top. Their only question was why Talman hadn't nabbed her himself, since she was just the dull sort of lady he favored.

Laura Harwood also spent an enervating week. On two occasions she had the opportunity of being civil to Hyatt, who was so polite in return that she feared he was making fun of her. He bowed once from across the room, just before he asked Lady Debora Holmes to waltz with him. On the other occasion, they actually exchanged words.

"Are you enjoying the Season, Miss Harwood?" he enquired, when he met her at the refreshment table at

Mrs. Esmond's ball.

"Very much, thank you," she replied. "And you?"

"I usually manage to enjoy myself," he said. When this was analyzed for the ninth or tenth time, Laura found it to be egotistical. He 'managed' not to be bored, when he was the center of attention everywhere. How very obliging of him.

It was at the play at Covent Garden that the final blow fell on Laura's ill-fated romance. Lady Meaford, who had remained a friend since the weekend at Castlefield, stopped at their box during the first intermission.

"Have you heard the latest on-dit? This might interest you, Miss Harwood, since you are a friend of Hyatt."

Laura's heart hammered mercilessly. She was going to hear that he was engaged—that he had offered for Lady Debora. She willed herself to show no more than polite curiosity. "What is that, Lady Meaford?"

"I hear Lady Devereau got her portrait from Hyatt after all," she said. "She has removed it from Somerset House. I wager that is why she stormed into the duchess's rout that night. She will never take no for an answer, that one. I wonder how she convinced him to give it up." Her knowing little smile suggested what means Marie Devereau would naturally employ, and what would convince Hyatt.

Laura gave a cynical little laugh, while her heart broke to splinters within her. So that was Lady Devereau's reward for Hyatt's nocturnal visit in his stocking feet. For some foolish reason, the stocking feet bothered her as much as the rest. It lent a touch of slyness, of familiarity with the ways of adultery, to the liaison.

Wrapped up in her unhappy thoughts, Laura did not notice that John Yarrow was at the theater. Everyone else in the house knew it, for he and his friends made a great clamor. They laughed loudly through the dramatic scenes and hooted during the comic ones. In Yarrow's box, wine was passed with reckless abandon, not only during the intermission, but during the whole performance. Olivia spotted him the instant he arrived, of course. Soon she trained her glasses on him and was in alt when she saw him return the compliment. There was much staring at each other through the glasses for the next hour.

Yarrow did not feel his presence in Mrs. Traemore's box would do his cause any good, so at intermission he sent a message with Angela Carstairs, asking where Olivia was going after the theater.

"Home, for I fear I shall have a megrim," Olivia said, with a broad smile.

"Oh, no. We are all going to Peckford's rout party first. The food is horrid at the Pantheon, and very dear. We shall leave from Peckford's."

"John said I should have a headache and go home."

"Have a headache, and I'll take you home," Angela suggested.

"Mrs. Harwood and Laura would insist on taking me home."

"Then don't tell them. Leave a message with some other friend."

Mr. Meadows, occupying the fifth seat in the box, cupped his ear, but could not hear over the others' chatter.

When Olivia noticed, she smiled to disarm his suspicions. Could she trust him not to go darting off to Laura with the news that she had left? "I'll manage it somehow," she promised Angela. "Don't leave Peckford's without me."

"Foolish girl! You are all John has talked about all night. I swear he can't open his mouth without singing your praises. Miss Hanson would be very jealous if she could hear him."

"Who is Miss Hanson?" Olivia demanded.

"Why, she is the neighbor of the fellow he was visiting all week. A regular Incomparable. But you need not fear. Her papa sent John packing for some reason or other. They are so poky in the country there is no standing it. I must dash."

Olivia was thrown into conniptions of jealousy. She must get away somehow tonight, or she would lose John forever. Yet it seemed an impossibility. Between Laura, Mrs. Harwood, and Mr. Meadows (for Aunt Hettie would go home immediately after the play), they would watch her like a hawk. Her eyes slid to John's box, where she could see she was missing out on a delightful evening. John was making paper balls from his program and shooting them down into the pit. There, he had hit that bald man right on the head. How they all laughed. She longed with every fiber of

her being to be with youngsters who knew how to enjoy themselves, instead of stuck here with this dull lot.

She could hardly force a smile when Mr. Meadows drew a box of her favorite bonbons from his pocket and passed them to her. She didn't even thank him, but just accepted them and popped half a dozen into her mouth, one after the other, while she gazed at John through her glasses.

Chapter Eighteen

It seemed to the baroness that the play that evening lasted twenty hours. She couldn't think, with the racket of laughter all around her and the actors on stage ranting at each other. The audience clapped at every appearance of a certain stout female with feathers in her hair.

At long last there was a wild burst of applause and the curtain fell. After a series of curtain calls, with the fat actress who had played the main role taking a dozen bows, the audience began making those stirring motions involved with rescuing shawls and reticules. It was over, thank God!

And still Olivia had formed no plan of escape. But she meant to attend the Pantheon that night, if she had to walk over the dead bodies of her aunt, of Mrs. Harwood, cousin Laura, and Mr. Meadows to do it. She would go if she had to fight her way out of Peckford's with guns blazing.

Around her the audience was loud in its praise of the performance. Mr. Meadows came forward to place her shawl about her shoulders. "That was quite an experience, was it not?" he smiled. "It will be something to tell your children one day, Baroness."

"Whatever do you mean?" she asked, wondering if she had missed some excitement on stage while watching John. Had an actor expired, or been pelted off the stage?

"Why, I wager this will be the great Mrs. Jordan's last role. I would not have missed it for a wilderness of monkeys. She is getting on to be playing Lady Teazle, of course, but there is some magic in the woman. I think she must be part sorceress."

"Was that Mrs. Jordan?" Olivia demanded. She felt cheated. She had been hearing of this legend for years.

Now that she had "seen" her, she could not even say what the play had been. "She is awfully fat," she said crossly.

"Aye, but she is tall and carries the weight well." He smiled benignly and turned to assist the other ladies, and eventually they left their box.

There was an interminable delay as they waited for their carriage to fight its way through the melee outside the theater, and a further delay while Hettie was dropped off at Charles Street. With Mr. Meadows to protect the ladies, Mrs. Harwood decided to skip the rout, and went home with Hettie. After a prolonged series of farewells, the carriage was finally on its way to Peckford's.

Laura enjoyed the evening as much as a lady with a broken heart could. Mentally she appreciated that she was viewing Mrs. Jordan's final role, but emotionally she was miles away. Once she had ascertained that Lord Hyatt was not at the theater, her mind began darting about London in search of him. Her first act at any outing was always to examine the room for a sight of him. She did so again when they reached Peckford's. Whatever part of the room he occupied, she made a point of heading to the part farthest from him. A cursory look failed to spot his blond head in the ballroom.

Almost unconsciously she had adopted the habit of running through the various entertainments offered each night, trying to figure out where Hyatt might be. She had expected he would attend Mrs. Jordan's opening at Covent Garden. When he was not there, she pondered alternatives. Lady Montagu's ball was the other notable party that evening. Olivia had declined the invitation to that grand but dull affair. Laura had thought Hyatt would make an early appearance there, then go to Peckford's smaller but livelier do, where all the young ton would meet. Perhaps he would arrive any moment.

Meanwhile, she must look about for a partner, as Mr. Meadows would want to stand up first with the baroness. Lord Talman still had some hope of winning the baroness's fortune for one of his brothers, and came forward to ask Olivia for a dance. The baroness accepted, feeling that Talman would be easier to get away from than Mr. Meadows. Her attention was on the doorway, for John had not arrived yet. Meadows,

disappointed, stood up with Laura.

Halfway through the set, Yarrow and his crew made a noisy appearance. Laura was unhappy to see them, but Olivia had not mentioned Yarrow since the affair at Castlefield. Unacquainted with Yarrow's itinerary, Laura assumed he had been in town all week, and as he had not been pestering the baroness, she thought he had found some new lady to harass. Mr. Meadows made but an indifferent partner. He feared the baroness had a tendre for Talman after all, as she had accepted his escort so eagerly.

During Laura's dance with Meadows, Lord Hyatt appeared at the doorway with a group of bachelors. He was never difficult to spot. A current of excitement always buzzed through the room at his entrance. Heads turned, necks craned, and eyes squinted for a glimpse of him.

"There is Hyatt, just come in," Meadows mentioned gloomily. "I daresay the baroness will give him the next dance. I shall try for the one after that."

"Try for the one after this, Mr. Meadows," she replied. "I doubt Hyatt will ask Olivia for a dance." Or Miss Harwood either, she added to herself.

At the end of the music, one of the other gentlemen from their set asked Laura for the next dance, and she accepted gladly. She did not want Hyatt to see her unpartnered. She gave scarcely a thought to Olivia. When Meadows was with them, he made himself responsible for her welfare, so Laura could take a break from this onerous chore.

Olivia's eyes narrowed when Hyatt entered. Her plan was beginning to take shape. John was standing at the side of the room, making various grimaces and head motions that told her he was impatient to be off. She must avoid Mr. Meadows and Laura, and that meant fooling them into thinking she was dancing with someone else.

As soon as the music stopped, she said to Lord Talman, "I see Lord Hyatt has just come in. I must have a word with him about my portrait. Thank you for a lovely dance, Lord Talman."

He bowed punctiliously. "The pleasure was mine, Baroness. I look forward to seeing you at your ball. You won't forget the card for Rufus and Rodney? So very kind of you—"

"Yes, yes," she said, and darted off toward Hyatt.

"Lord Hyatt, may I have a word with you?" she said. Placing her fingers on his elbow, she detached him from his group to lead him into the hall beyond.

Meadows saw them go and felt sure Hyatt would be the baroness's next partner. Laura watched in confusion, hoping that Olivia had not taken the shatterbrained notion of trying to arrange a reconciliation between her and Hyatt. Olivia frequently scolded her for having lost such a prime parti. What was the wretched girl up to? When the music resumed, Meadows danced with one of the other ladies from their set. It was a rollicking country dance. Between the exertions of the moves and the loud music, coherent thought was impossible.

Olivia peered from the hallway to see that her two jailers were occupied. Then to be rid of Hyatt, she said, "When will you bring my portrait to Charles Street? My aunt is eager to see it. Is it dry yet?"

"It is dry enough to move, though not completely set. I can have it sent over tomorrow, if you are eager to have it."

"Oh yes, I am dying to see it. So you will bring it along tomorrow?"

"I will have it sent, Baroness," he repeated.

Olivia paid no heed to this subtlety. "Wonderful. Thank you so much. I'll let you go now, Lord Hyatt. I am sure you are eager to find Lady Devereau. Actually, I have not seen her this evening."

She fluttered a wave at him and darted upstairs for her wrap. Hyatt was annoyed at the reference to Lady Devereau but relieved that he had not been coerced into partnering that wretched chit of a girl. As the dance had already begun, he would have to wait half an hour for the next set. His eyes skimmed around the floor until he spotted Laura. A scowl drew his eyebrows together as he strolled into the refreshment parlor, where he was soon surrounded by a flock of admirers.

Olivia snatched up her pelisse and went downstairs, where John and his crew awaited her. Other guests were arriving. Under cover of the confusion, Olivia slipped behind a potted palm and got out without her hostess recognizing her.

"By Jove, it took you long enough!" were John's first words, after not seeing his beloved for close to a week.

"You changed the plan," Olivia retorted sharply. "I had a deuced hard time escaping from Mr. Meadows and Laura."

"It'll get easier with practice," he said nonchalantly.

"Do you have my domino?"

"Where's the spare domino, Charlie?" he called to his friend, as they hastened to their carriage.

"I don't have it. You lent it to Miss Hanson last week."

This was a new outrage for Olivia to consider. "Then you will just have to lend me yours," she said to John. "I cannot let my gown be seen. Someone might recognize it."

"Dash it, all white gowns look alike."

Angela Carstairs came to the rescue. "The fact that it is white will alert any Nosey Parkers hanging about that Olivia is a deb. You must lend her yours, John."

"I don't see why everything must be left up to me." He held the door while Olivia climbed into his rig.

She had never been inside it before. To a lady accustomed to the baroque opulence of the Turtle, it seemed a shoddy thing. It was hardsprung and crowded. Empty wine bottles rolled around the floor. The crowding allowed John to slide his arm around her, however, and she was soon distracted from lesser consideration.

"Did you miss me, John?" she asked shyly.

"By the living jingo, I missed you every hour of the day. Did Angela tell you I beat the stuffing out of Hanson in a curricule race to Brighton? Sixteen miles an hour. I won a monkey off him."

"Would that be Miss Hanson's brother?" Olivia asked stiffly.

"Who else would it be? Did they cut up stiff at Castlefield when they got you home?"

"Yes, they were horrid," she said, hoping for support.

"I would have beaten the stuffing out of Talman if he hadn't been your host. I feared he'd take it out on you."

"Oh, no, he is a real gentleman."

"Did he offer for you?" Angela asked.

Sensing that a negative might lower her value, Olivia replied, "I didn't give him the chance. He keeps calling on me ten times a day. Tonight he asked me if his twin brothers could come to my ball."

"If you're planning to fill the house with such lumber as the Castlefield lot, you can keep my card," John said.

"They have already been invited," Olivia replied. This did not seem the moment to tell him he was not to receive a card. Even her biddable Aunt Hettie had drawn the line there.

The conversation continued, mostly about the rousing time enjoyed at Gatwick, until Olivia's head began to ache. When the carriage drew to a stop on the south side of Oxford Street, they arranged their masks.

"Good God, what is that thing?" Yarrow exclaimed, when he saw her peacock mask. The feathers had become tattered from long battering under her skirt.

"It is a mask," she said through gritted teeth.

"Don't expect to be seen on my arm in that. It looks like it came off the ark. Luckily I have a spare in the side pocket."

Olivia removed her mask and put on the blue one he handed her. It did not match the black domino and was hardly less tattered than the one John casually threw into the gutter.

Yarrow handed Olivia his domino but did not help her put it on. The elegant structure and the fashionable crowd flocking about the doorway of the Pantheon led Olivia to believe the place was not so bad as she had feared. When they entered, the magnificence of gilt trim glimmered under the light of the chandeliers. It was a moment before she realized that the guests were less elegant than the edifice. Several of the men were staggering, and the accents issuing from their companions had never been heard in a polite saloon, unless their owners were passing a tray of drinks.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed. "This looks very—"

"I told you you would love it," John said.

"No, I do not love it. It seems horrid. But since we are here, let us have one dance, and then return to Peckford's. If we are back soon, Mr. Meadows won't know I ever left."

"We cannot stand up and jig it until we have wet our whistles," John said.

"But I want to dance now!" she insisted. It was the first time since arriving in London that a gentleman had set his wishes ahead of hers.

"I see I must tame you, wildcat," John said, but he

said it with a smile that stirred a remembrance of his wicked embrace, and she went along without further argument.

Yarrow led the group upstairs, where boxes were arranged along a balcony, to look down on the dance floor below.

"Champagne, my good fellow, and be snappy about it," he ordered when the waiter came to their table.

The wine arrived. Yarrow put his hand in his pocket and drew out three pennies. "This one is on you, Charlie," he said.

Charlie came up with a shilling. The waiter stood, waiting to see the color of their money before drawing the cork. "Deuce take it, put it on my tab," Yarrow said, becoming surly. "I come here all the time."

"We don't give credit, sir."

Angela began rooting in her reticule and produced the rest of the money.

"The next one is on you," Yarrow said to Olivia. "You are the one who has a monopoly on gold."

"I thought you said tin," Charlie mentioned.

"Gold, tin—it all comes down to the same thing in the end. The little baroness is as rich as a nabob—and a dashed sight prettier."

"I don't carry money with me. A gentleman usually pays when he asks a lady out," Olivia said curtly. She felt it showed poor breeding to discuss money in public. And the way John said it—as though it was the money he was interested in, and not her. Really, he had behaved very badly all evening. There were never embarrassments of this sort when she went out with Mr. Meadows. But there was not this sense of excitement and adventure either. Her flesh got goosebumps when John called her a "wildcat" and said he must tame her.

The waiter opened the champagne and filled their glasses. Almost before Olivia had raised her glass to her lips, John and Charlie had finished theirs and emptied the rest of the bottle into their glasses. Olivia drank quickly. The sooner they finished the wine, the sooner they could have their dance and leave.

"Shall we go downstairs now?" she said a moment later, when the champagne was gone.

"Just one more bottle," John said. "I am dry as a cinder in the sun. Waiter!"

"You don't have any money," Angela reminded him.

"Dash it, if he won't take my IOU, he will not refuse the baroness's. Here, my good man."

The waiter ignored him. Yarrow, already deep into his cups, rose on unsteady legs and charged forward, knocking over a chair and bumping into another drunkard. The man was a large brute with hulking shoulders.

"Here, watch where you're going," the brute grumbled.

"Watch it yourself, you mawworm."

"Who are you calling a mawworm?"

"You, you ugly tub of lard."

Without further ado, the brawl began. Yarrow hadn't a chance against his opponent. He was shorter, lighter, drunker, and less trained in the bruising art. The first blow caught him on the nose and sent him sprawling against a table. Charlie was soon on his feet, pitching himself into the fray. The larger man had his supporters as well, and before long, a dozen men were beating each other.

Olivia cowered into her domino and said to Angela, "Let us leave, before the constable arrives."

"We can't leave now. This is the best part!"

She hopped up and went to watch the brawl. Olivia was afraid to join the ladies shouting around the edge of the show, for their language left no doubt that they were actresses or worse. When a hedge bird slid onto one of the empty chairs at her table, however, and began to make some very improper advances, she found courage to join Angela. She saw Yarrow stretched out on the floor with blood coming from his nose. She felt one spurt of womanly compassion, but it was not strong enough to propel her forward to his assistance. When he lurched to his feet and cast up his accounts on the floor, she was well and thoroughly disgusted.

Her only desire was to leave and never see Mr. Yarrow or the Pantheon again. What was she thinking of to come here? She tugged at Angela's elbow. "Let us call the carriage and go home," she begged.

"Spoilsport," Angela taunted.

In desperation, Olivia looked around, hoping to see a friend. She was ready to throw herself on the mercy of the first person she recognized, but she soon realized these were not the sort of people one would meet in polite saloons. The men leered menacingly,

and the females, for she would not call them ladies, tossed their heads in derision. Why had she come to this horrid place?

There was nothing for it but to leave alone and hope to find a hansom cab in the streets. She had no money to pay the driver, but she would give him her pearl ring for a marker until she could retrieve it with money. She turned to find the stairway and saw three Bow Street Runners advancing at a run. Oh lord, now what? Would she end up in the roundhouse, disgraced forever?

Chapter Nineteen

Laura did not enjoy that set of dances. The old quizzes had set up a rebellion against the waltz. She wished the younger ladies would organize one against the country dance, which played havoc with the coiffure and turned the face an unbecoming scarlet. Was it only slightly older ladies like her who felt this way? Or was the real cause of her distress the possibility that Livvie was up to some mischief with Hyatt? By the end of the set, Laura wanted to go abovestairs and brush her hair, but what she really needed was a glass of wine to cool down.

Her escort accompanied her through the milling throng to the refreshment parlor. As soon as she set a toe into the room, she realized her error. Hyatt was there. Worse, he was talking to Mr. Meadows. They both looked at her—not just a glance, but a long, meaningful look. From their air of excitement, she sensed that something was afoot, and looked for Livvie's red head. The baroness was not with Hyatt, as she had feared. A little surge of hope rose, then plunged to the ground when she saw the frown on Hyatt's face. Whatever Livvie had done, it had obviously disgusted him. She refused to be part of it.

"Perhaps you would get a glass of wine for me, Mr. Talbot, and bring it to me?" she asked of her partner for the last set. "I shall wait in the ballroom, just inside the door."

"Very wise. This goes beyond a squeeze. It is a crush."

She fled to the nearly deserted ballroom and sat on the first empty chair, twisting her fingers in anxiety. She could just imagine what Olivia had told Hyatt.

"Cousin Laura is blue as megrims since you left. Why do you not ask her to dance?" She wondered, too, whether he would come....

She was not long left in doubt. Even before Mr. Talbot returned, Hyatt's tall form appeared in the doorway. He quickly scanned the room, while Laura shrank into the smallest possible space, hoping he would not see her. Surely he was looking for her? At length he spotted her and came pacing forward. The speed of his advance suggested some urgency.

But when he arrived, his first speech was totally different from what she had expected. "Have you seen the baroness recently?" he asked.

"Not since she stood up with Lord Talman. I thought she was with you. That is—Mr. Meadows mentioned something of the sort."

"I only said two words to her, before she slipped upstairs. Meadows has taken the notion she tipped you both the double and went off with Yarrow. He is gone as well."

Laura was thrown into a spasm of fear. "Oh, dear! I had hoped she was through with Yarrow. He has not pestered her all week. Perhaps she is upstairs. I'll have a look." She rose to leave. "Thank you for telling me, Lord Hyatt." "Let me know if she is there."

"Yes," she said, and darted off.

When Mr. Talbot returned a moment later with a glass of wine, Hyatt told him that Miss Harwood was feeling faint and had gone upstairs. Naturally Laura and Meadows wanted to keep the baroness's latest spree quiet. Hyatt went into the hallway to await Laura's return.

He knew as soon as he saw her pale, worried face that she had not found the baroness. He mentally cursed the wretched child for giving Laura such a difficult time. Laura spotted him and was grateful for his support in this crisis.

"She's not there. The maid said she was there half an hour ago, snatched up her pelisse, and left. Where can she be?"

"Probably on the Great Road North to Gretna Green," Hyatt said grimly. "Meadows is having a look at the Pantheon. He heard the fellow with Yarrow mention something about it. I'll take a quick scoot up north."

"That is very kind of you, Lord Hyatt, but I think

Mr. Meadows is right. Olivia asked me about the Pantheon a while ago. Naturally I told her it was not the thing."

"That was your mistake. You should have told her it was a staid do. We'll go to the Pantheon first; if she is not there, Meadows and I shall arrange to cover the other alternatives. I still feel Yarrow has his eye on her blunt. He's badly dipped."

Laura heard that "we'll go to the Pantheon" with joy and gratitude but felt compelled to object. "There is no need for you to trouble yourself, Lord Hyatt. Very kind—"

"You can hardly go alone. I assume you came in Meadows's carriage?"

"Yes."

"Grab your pelisse, then. I shall make some excuse to Mrs. Peckford."

Laura darted back upstairs. When she came down, Hyatt already had on his cape. "I've called for my rig. I told Mrs. Peckford the baroness has a headache, and Meadows has taken her out for a breath of air. We are taking her home," he said.

He took her elbow and led her out. His carriage soon appeared. Hyatt held the door and Laura hopped in. "The Pantheon, Oxford Street," he called to his driver.

He got in and said, "If the chit keeps this sort of thing up, she'll have no hope of making a respectable match. There were already rumors at Castlefield."

"I know it very well. She has changed completely since she came to London. She used to be very bid-dable. The attention has gone to her head. Did she say anything to you—"

"She asked me when she might have her portrait."

"Then you were her excuse to escape from Mr. Meadows. He is kind enough to help me mind her. I doubt if his love will withstand much more of this Turkish treatment. She won't even get an offer from him if she does not watch her step."

"He hopes to marry the baroness, then?" Hyatt asked, interested. He had decided that Laura and Meadows were a match, as they were constantly seen together.

"Oh yes. And it is not creampot love either. Not entirely. He seems genuinely devoted."

"That explains it," Hyatt said cryptically, and was

of course asked what he meant. "It seems to be the new custom for ladies to abuse those gentlemen who are fond of them."

"I cannot imagine what you mean, Lord Hyatt!" she exclaimed.

"Can you not, Miss Harwood? I no sooner expressed my feelings for you than you began castigating me as some sort of monster."

Her sense of wrong was still green, and she replied stiffly, "That is a different matter altogether."

"It has in common unmerited abuse of a gentleman by the lady he—cares for."

"Unmerited?" she exclaimed. "Upon my word, if sneaking into a lady's chamber in your stocking feet in the middle of the night does not merit abuse, I should like to know what does."

"I was not in my stocking feet, and I did not sneak in. I knocked on the door. It was your intransigence that—"

"I am not talking about my room, Lord Hyatt," she said.

"Then whose?" he asked, genuinely confused for a moment. Before long, the truth dawned on him. "You are referring to Lady Devereau?"

"Did you visit other ladies' boudoirs as well?"

"There is a good and simple explanation for my calling on Lady Devereau."

"There is no point trying to whitewash your sins with euphemisms, Lord Hyatt. A gentleman 'calls' at the front door, with his hat in his hand. If you have fabricated some excuse, I do not wish to hear it."

"An accused man is always allowed to present his defense," he pointed out. "Even murderers are granted that minimal justice. Am I worse than a murderer?"

"Can we not quit this subject?" she said impatiently.

He was not so easily put off. If she would not listen, he would present his defense by indirection. "I did it for you," he said, sure that this would rouse her to curiosity.

"Indeed? And how, pray, did I benefit from that midnight rendezvous? Did you arrange to be seen, thus ensuring that I would be spared the mistake of accepting your offer? You cannot expect me to be taken in by such blatant sophistry as that."

"Talk about the pot calling the kettle black! If that

is not sophistry—" Her curiosity had risen to an unbearable height, and she looked to hear what he might say next.

Knowing he had hooked her, Hyatt fell silent. After a moment's pause, Laura said, "Well, why did you go, then?"

"You are not interested. I shan't bore you with my poor defense."

"I hear you gave Lady Devereau her portrait," Laura said, with a knowing look. "That, too, was for my benefit, no doubt."

"But of course. That is why I went to visit her, to tell her she might have the portrait. I figured that was the easiest way to conciliate her. She had become an embarrassment—well, you saw for yourself at Castlefield."

"Do you usually call on ladies in your stocking feet, when your visit is so innocent?"

"Only when I fear some busybody is listening. Who was it that saw me? Mrs. Campbell?"

"It was Mrs. Traemore who told me. Everyone at Castlefield knew about it," Laura said. She wondered if Hyatt was telling the truth. Like the rest of the world, she had assumed Lady Devereau's persistence had won, and she had secured Hyatt. But as Laura reviewed the past week, she recalled that she had not seen them together.

"Your stiff-necked behavior confirmed it, if anyone was so naive as to doubt," he informed her.

"There is no point blaming me. What did you expect me to do?"

"I hoped that the woman I planned to marry would trust me, at least enough to hear my side of the story."

"You never wanted to marry me anyway," she said.

"Of course not. That is why I asked you."

"We're here," Laura said, as the carriage drew to a stop. The resolution of their argument must wait until later.

Hyatt opened the door without waiting for his driver. He glanced toward the Pantheon and saw three bucks staggering out, drunk as Danes. "You'd best wait in the carriage," he said to Laura.

"So this is the infamous Pantheon!" she said, gazing at it. She was overcome with a strong desire to enter. She had been hearing about it forever. In her mind, it glittered with the allure of forbidden fruit.

Only the most dashing ladies entered these portals, and she was a little angry with herself for having missed it. Perhaps Livvie was the wise one after all. She was squeezing more excitement into her Season than Laura had had in her whole life. Clandestine meetings with gentlemen, tossing over such an unexceptionable suitor as Talman, and now coming here. "I should like to see it, Hyatt."

Hyatt noticed that she had unconsciously dropped the "Lord," which had been bothering him all evening. He saw that expression of unfulfilled yearning on her face, and suspected its cause.

"It is no fit place for ladies. And besides, you don't have a domino or mask."

"Olivia might need me," she said, to proffer some poor sort of excuse at least. She looked hopefully for Hyatt's opinion. He frowned. "I must at least see it!" she said crossly, revealing the true purpose of her insistence.

"Miss Harwood, I take leave to tell you, you are a fraud. Beneath that prissy exterior beats the heart of a wanton. You are over twenty-one, and if you wish to enter the Pantheon without even a mask to cover your shame, I cannot prevent it. But if you are set upon by a marauding band of rakes, it is on your own head. Don't put it in my dish. I strongly disapprove of this shameless spree," he said, with a smile that showed his total approbation.

He watched, fascinated, as her lips parted in a bold smile. "One more sin will not be noticed in your dish, Hyatt. Don't be so unchivalrous."

"This is how a man loses his reputation," he joked, taking her arm to lead her to the entrance. "A prey to every beautiful hussy who comes along and bats her eyelashes at him. Take care or I'll be tapping at your boudoir door later tonight."

"Surely you can do better than a prissy fraud such as I. One hears the Pantheon is full of lightskirts."

"My usual fare, of course," he said blandly, "but one likes a change from time to time."

"I was joking!"

He held the door and she entered. The lobby was empty, save for the doorman and two females who were having no luck within and had decided to grab the next gent before he got inside.

"You had best stay here," Hyatt said. "Stick close to

the doorman while I take a run inside."

"I cannot stay alone!" she said, clinging to his arm as a couple of bucks strayed into the hallway. They were looking from the lightskirts to Laura in an assessing way.

"No more you can," he agreed. "I'll take you back to the carriage."

As he spoke, a sudden pounding of feet and raised voices were heard from the stairway. "Come along, gentlemen. The roundhouse is waiting. You can send for bail when you've sobered up."

"Oh, dear!" Laura exclaimed, clinging tighter to Hyatt's arm.

They both watched as Bow Street led a band of miscreants out. Laura spotted Yarrow, his nose bloodied and his eyes glazed with drink. She looked at Hyatt, and he lifted his eyebrows to tell her he recognized the fellow.

"Livvie must be here," Laura whispered. "At least she has escaped incarceration."

"It is usually the gentleman who takes the brunt in these cases," he said, with an air of mock injury.

"I wonder if Mr. Meadows managed to rescue Olivia. We should make sure, before we leave."

"I'll take a run upstairs, while Bow Street is within shouting distance to protect you."

Before this was necessary, Mr. Meadows came down, holding a much subdued baroness on one arm and Miss Carstairs on the other. Olivia was sniffing into a handkerchief; Miss Carstairs was trying to look blasé.

"Found her," Meadows said. "Unharmful but pretty badly shaken up."

Olivia interrupted her sniffing to say, "It was horrid! I should have listened to you, cousin. He didn't even bring enough money to buy wine. You won't tell Aunt Hettie."

"We shall settle on some story in the carriage," Laura said, patting the baroness's shoulder. She glanced at Hyatt to thank him and saw the look of disappointment on his face. "I must go with her. Thank you, Hyatt. You have been very helpful."

"Meadows can take her home," was all he said.

"I'll see that both these young ladies get home safely," Meadows said, nodding to Angie and Olivia. He planned to take Miss Carstairs home first. He had not

had the baroness in such a chastened state before and hoped to take full advantage of it. "No point upsetting the old ladies. We shall say the baroness was feeling fagged, and I brought her home. You'll see that Miss Harwood gets home, Hyatt?"

"Yes, certainly. We might return to Peckford's for a waltz first." Seeing the blue mask dangling from Olivia's fingers, he turned to her and took her hand. "I hope you have learned your lesson, Baroness. Now dry your eyes, and run along." When he removed his hand, he held her blue mask.

They left, and he dangled the mask in front of Laura. "A lady should never visit the Pantheon without a mask."

That wicked smile broke out. "Could we?" she asked. "Livvie said it is horrid."

"It is, but with a hardened rake to guard you, lesser rakes will keep their distance—if they know what is good for them. I wonder—we cannot be the only people who have been caught unprepared." He went to the doorman and returned with a black mask, purchased at an inordinate price.

Laura put on the blue mask, Hyatt the black, and together they went into the ballroom. She was trembling with excitement. Never before in her life had she willingly gone into a treacherous situation, and she realized what wonderful excitement she had been missing.

When Hyatt drew her into his arms, she gazed up at him. The mask turned him into a stranger. Dark eyes glittered dangerously behind it, and below, his lips parted in a reckless smile.

"Does it live up to your expectations?" he asked.

"Oh, it is wonderful!" The reeling music and Hyatt holding her close produced some enchantment. If this was sin, then she was born a sinner, for she had never enjoyed a dance so much. She was unaware of the din of uncouth voices raised in mirth or anger. She did not notice that some of the gentlemen danced with both arms around their companions to keep from falling over. She was only aware of being held by Hyatt, in the magic circle of his arms, while they moved in unison to the music.

"Do you believe me?" he asked.

"What are you talking about, Hyatt?"

"That I paid only a brief visit to Lady Devereau, to

tell her she might have the portrait. I only wanted to be rid of her. She was becoming a wretched nuisance."

It was easy to believe what she wanted so badly to believe. "I suppose so," she said, "but—"

"Are there other sins on my part that require explanation? Let us tackle the whole dish now, Laura, while you are in this generous mood."

She thought of the groaning bedsprings. It did not necessarily take two to make such noises. Lady Devereau, presumably, had been in bed. She would not lower herself to mention it. As Laura hastily reviewed what she knew of Hyatt, she could find no outstanding offenses. In fact, if he was telling the truth about Lady Devereau, it was she who had acted badly. "I behaved like a ninnyhammer," she said simply. "I even tore up that lovely sketch you did of me, and have regretted it a dozen times since."

"I'll do another," he said, his voice husky with pleasure. "A proper portrait, in oils."

"Would you? How shall you do me?"

"As an angel—with a cleft foot," he added, and laughed. His arms drew her more tightly against him.

"You have already done a barefoot lady."

"Then I shall set your halo slightly aslant, to reveal you are in danger of becoming one of the fallen angels."

"I own I do enjoy the Pantheon. Perhaps I am a fraud for warning Livvie away, then coming myself at the first opportunity."

"It is temptation that makes sinners of us all. There is no merit in being unaware of temptation. It is withstanding it that builds character."

"Then we shall leave now," she decided.

"I thought you were enjoying yourself."

"I was, but that mention of a cleft foot jolted me."

"You darling, foolish girl! Satan is a long way from getting you in his clutches," he said, and he gave her a ruthless kiss, right in the middle of the ballroom.

Caught off guard, Laura was stunned into momentary immobility. This could not be happening! Even Livvie had never done anything as outré as this. She pulled away, looking all around for signs of outrage and finding none. "Hyatt!" she squealed. "What are you doing?"

"I am succumbing to temptation. Let us get out of here."

He drew her out of the ballroom, through the lobby, and into his waiting carriage, all at breakneck speed. "If anyone recognized me, I am sunk!" she wailed.

"And unfortunately, Lady Jersey, that unstoppable old gossip, did see you."

"Lady Jersey would never attend the Pantheon."

"She did tonight. Lady Emily Cowper as well, and Queen Charlotte. She spilled her snuff in shock when she saw you."

"Oh, you are too ridiculous," she laughed. "Why did you try to frighten me?"

"I was just setting myself up as your rescuer. A ruined lady requires a gentleman to do the right thing by her. Nothing short of marriage can save you now, Miss Harwood."

He removed first his own mask, then lowered hers. In the dim shadows, she saw that his playful mood had altered subtly. He was still smiling, but it was a different smile—softer, intimate. Before she could assess its component parts, the carriage gave a lurch, throwing her against him. Hyatt's arms closed around her, and his lips found hers.

In her mind, she was back in the Pantheon, reeling helplessly to the insidious strains of the waltz. Then his lips firmed, and she was wafted off to some loftier plain, above mere earthbound mortals. She soared into the ether, her halo perilously askew as she responded to Hyatt's embrace.

It was much later when she said, from the comfort of his shoulder, "Are you sure we would suit, Hyatt? I am really not the dashing sort of lady you take me for."

"I have a very good idea who and what you are, darling. I did mistake you for an experienced lady at first, but then I also mistook the baroness for a country charmer. It was not long before I realized your true nature: a conciliator. A lady of good sound sense, who realized her charge was a pain in society's collective neck, and with a kind enough heart to try to alleviate the situation."

"And is that my great attraction—that I will pour oil on the waters you have disturbed? Smooth ruffled feathers—"

"You have been through enough. I shall behave with such monumental propriety that you will never have to conciliate again. How I am to explain a wife

who goes jauntering off to the Pantheon without even the decency to put on a mask first is another matter."

"I would not want you to be too proper, Hyatt. I do like a little abandonment in my gentlemen."

"Gentleman!" he objected, and obliged her with a delightful show of abandonment.

They did not return to Peckford's, but drove through the streets of London for half an hour instead, planning their wedding. They would marry at Whitchurch, "To show you off to all my friends," she said. "We cannot do it until after Olivia's ball. She has still not found a husband."

"Meadows is awake on all suits. She'll be engaged this very night."

"He will have to speak to Mrs. Traemore first. And you will have to convince Mama."

"Has she taken me in aversion?"

"She knows a rake when she sees one," she lied shamelessly.

"No matter, a man likes to have to struggle to win his prize. I'll offer to do her portrait."

"No! You always fall in love with ladies when you do their portraits. I refuse to have you seduce my mother!"

"Then you must chaperone us," he said, and tried his wiles on Mrs. Harwood's daughter instead, with very good luck.

Chapter Twenty

The other ladies were already assembled when Laura floated down to breakfast the next morning. Hettie Traemore wore a satisfied smile, the baroness a smug one, and Mrs. Harwood a strained one. Laura wore her best sprigged muslin.

"You'll never guess what, Laura," Mrs. Traemore announced. "Our little Livvie has had an offer! Pretty fast work, eh?"

"How very nice," Laura said, and went to bestow a congratulatory kiss on the baroness. "There is no need to inquire for the gentleman's name, I think. Mr. Meadows has come up to scratch."

"Yes, it is Robert," Livvie said, with a more natural smile than she had worn for several weeks. Her veneer of pride had dissolved in the heat of Robert's love. He had never seemed so strong and dashing as when he

had read that lecture to Yarrow. All his past kindnesses had been reviewed over the intervening hours: his getting a carriage and mount for her, his frequent gifts of bonbons, his unswerving devotion to her least whim. But really it was last night's ferocity that had tilted the scales in his favor. A gentleman can be too kind and loyal for his own good.

"I would draw your cork if it weren't drawn already," he had said fiercely to Yarrow when he rescued her from the Pantheon. His eyes had blazed, and his hands clenched into fists. "How dare you take advantage of this innocent girl! You are not fit to touch the hem of her skirt. If I ever see you oiling around her again, I'll put a bullet through you."

That easily the baroness was restored to her former state of pristine vulnerability, and Mr. Meadows was exalted to hero-dom. Before they were halfway home, he had released the flood of his pent-up love. He wanted to cherish her and fight off all the other gentlemen. He worked himself up to such a fit of passion that his embrace sent the same shivers up Olivia's spine as Mr. Yarrow's had done a week before. Mrs. Traemore's approval was a mere formality. He knew he had won his baroness, her dowry and her tin mine, till death should them part. And to do the man justice, it was the baroness herself who was considered the greatest prize.

Laura was bursting to make her own announcement, but this morning belonged to Olivia, and she praised her cousin's ingenuity and Mr. Meadows's eligibility, and even allowed that she had always thought him very handsome indeed. All the ladies in Whitchurch thought so. If the baroness deduced from this that she had snatched him from under her cousin's nose, no one seemed to mind, except Mrs. Harwood.

Mr. Meadows duly appeared at ten o'clock and was closeted with Hettie Traemore for five minutes, three of which were spent arranging the recliner for her back. At five after ten, they both emerged, wreathed in smiles. Within a half hour, the engaged couple were on their way to insert the announcement in the journals. Hettie went to the study to write the glad tidings to her cronies in Cornwall.

Mrs. Harwood drew a deep sigh as she gazed at her own mateless daughter. What did the girl find to smile

about? She would go home, having lost out on even that boring Meadows.

"You are looking pretty pleased at Livvie's catch," Mrs. Harwood said through thin lips.

"No, Mama. I am pleased with my own. Hyatt will be coming to speak to you at eleven."

Mrs. Harwood's mouth fell open. "You never mean it! Lord Hyatt! Laura, my dear. I could not be happier for you. Why, this quite puts cousin Olivia's catch in the shade."

"There is no shade when you are in love, Mama," Laura said, with a mooning smile. But then Mrs. Harwood could not even mentally criticize her daughter when she had executed this stunning coup. Lord Hyatt! She could scarcely believe it.

"Maybe he'll do your portrait," she said inanely, as though that took precedence over marrying her.

"He spoke of doing yours, Mama," Laura said, and laughed.

Really, the girl was acting like a simpleton. "You'd best go upstairs and get ready to meet him." She noticed then that Laura was already wearing her best day frock. "So had I," Mrs. Harwood added, and ran off to put on her lace cap with the blue ribbons. There was something in Hyatt that brought out the coquette in ladies of all ages. How her poor Laura would ever cope with the rascal was enough to send chills up her spine, but not enough to prod her into any words of discouragement. Lord Hyatt! She could not be more shocked or delighted if Laura had got an offer from the Prince Regent himself.

In the saloon, Laura sighed luxuriously. She rose to touch her curls and make a few faces in the mirror. Then she quietly closed the door and did a little waltz of joy, humming to accompany herself, for she was much too happy to sit still.

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