REGENCY
Annie Burrows
Lord Havelock's List

ANNIE BURROWS

Lord Havelock's List

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Be careful what you wish for…Lord Havelock is in need of a wife. But with no time for a society wedding and no stomach for girlish fripperies his options are limited. So, with help from his friends, he draws up a list of qualities he does desire in a wife…When orphaned Mary Carpenter discovers her handsome new husband's list she's hurt – and incensed. If he thinks she'll sit meekly by, be 'compliant' and 'a mouse', he's got another think coming! Is it perhaps time for Mary to make a list of her own, and change the rules of their relationship for ever… ?

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‘Come, you need not be afraid,’ Havelock said, with a sincerity that made her wish she could trust him.

Made her wish she could let go of her habitual distrust of the entire male sex just once.

‘I won’t let you fall.’

It wasn’t falling she was worried about. It was the increasing frequency with which she was having foolish, feminine thoughts about him. Foolish, feminine reactions, too.

There were skaters of all ages, shapes and sizes twirling about on the ice. All looking as though they were having a splendid time. Life didn’t offer many opportunities like this—to try something new and exciting. And the ice probably wouldn’t last all that long. Mary might never get another chance to have a go at skating.

When had she last let herself go the way they were doing? Living in the moment?

Having fun?

When had she got into the habit of being too afraid to reach out and attempt to take hold of the slightest chance at happiness?

She reached out and took the hand Lord Havelock was patiently holding out to her, vowing that today, at least, she would leave fear on the bank, launch out on to the ice and see what happened.

AUTHOR NOTE

Some of you may have read my Christmas novella, GOVERNESS TO CHRISTMAS BRIDE, in the *Gift-Wrapped Governesses* anthology, in which the hero, Lord Chepstow, flees London when his good friend Lord Havelock suddenly decides to get married. He wouldn't have found it so scary had Lord Havelock not asked for his help in compiling a list of wifely qualities. The next thing, he was sure, he would be expecting him to scour society drawing rooms for a woman who matched them. And once marriage-minded ladies scent husband material, there is no saying who they won't get their claws into!

Well, Lord Chepstow stumbled into love anyway. But what, readers have wanted to know, happened to Lord Havelock—the man who so startled him by asking for help in compiling the list of what makes a perfect wife?

Here, at last, is his story …

Lord Havelock's

List

Annie Burrows

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My lovely new editor Pippa—such a pleasure to work with.

ANNIE BURROWS has been making up stories for her own amusement since she first went to school. As soon as she got the hang of using a pencil she began to write them down. Her love of books meant she had to do a degree in English Literature, and her love of writing meant she could never take on a job where she didn't have time to jot down notes when inspiration for a new plot struck her. She still wants the heroines of her stories to wear beautiful floaty dresses and triumph over all that life can throw at them. But when she got married she discovered that finding a hero is an essential ingredient to arriving at 'happy ever after'.

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Chapter One

December 1814

'Ho, there, Chepstow! Need some advice.'

Lord Chepstow, who'd been sauntering across the lobby of his club, paused, recognised Lord Havelock and grinned.

'From me?' He shook his head ruefully. 'Lord, you must be in the suds to want my advice.'

'I am,' said Lord Havelock bluntly. Then glanced meaningfully in the direction of the club's servant, who'd stepped forward to take his coat and hat.

Chepstow's grin faded. 'Need to find somewhere quiet, to talk in private?'

'Yes,' said Lord Havelock, feeling a great weight rolling off his shoulders. Not that he had much hope that Chepstow, of all men, would come up with any fresh ideas. But at least he was willing to listen.

As soon as they'd passed through the door to the library—the one room almost sure to be deserted at this, or any other, time of the day—he said it.

Out loud.

'Got to get married.'

'Good grief.' Chepstow's jaw dropped. 'Would never have thought you the type to get some girl into trouble. Not one you feel you have to marry, at any rate.'

Havelock clenched his fists in automatic repudiation of such a slur on his honour, causing Chepstow to raise his own hands in a placatory gesture.

'Now I come to think of it...' Chepstow said, carefully moving a few feet out of his range, 'sort of thing could happen to anyone.'

'Not me,' Havelock insisted. 'You know I've never been much in the petticoat line.' He lowered his fists as it occurred to him that, actually, Chepstow might be the very chap to help him, after all.

'You have been though, Chepstow. You've had some really high-flyers in keeping, haven't you? And still managed to stay popular with ladies of the ton. How d'ye do it, man? How d'ye get them all eating out of your hands, that's what I need to know.'

'By opening my purse strings to the high-flyers,' said Chepstow candidly, 'and minding my manners with the Quality. It's perfectly simple....'

'Yes, if all you are looking for is something of a temporary nature. But if you had to get married, what kind of woman would you ask? I mean, what sort of woman do you think would make a good wife? And how would you go about finding her, if you only had a fortnight's grace to get the knot tied?'

Chepstow froze, like a stag at bay. 'Me? Married?' He slowly shook his head. 'I wouldn't. The trick is avoiding the snares they lay for a fellow, not deliberately walking straight into one.'

'You don't understand,' Havelock began to say. But Chepstow wasn't listening. He was looking wildly round the room, like a hunted animal seeking cover. And then, with obvious relief, he found it in the form of a pair of young men just barely visible above an enormous mound of books on one of the reading desks, engaged in earnest conversation.

‘Let’s ask Ashe,’ he said, grabbing Havelock by one arm and towing him across the floor with an air of desperation. ‘Kind of chap who reads books when he don’t need to is bound to know something worth knowing about matrimony.’

Which was rot, of course. But Chepstow was clearly panicking. Anybody who thought they could get away with manhandling him across a room, whilst babbling about books, had obviously lost his wits.

But then the topic of matrimony was apt to do that to a fellow. He wouldn’t willingly put his head in the noose if there was any alternative. But, having racked his brains for hours, Havelock simply couldn’t find one.

So he’d decided that the only thing to be done was to see if he couldn’t somehow sugar-coat the pill he was about to swallow. Find some way, unlikely though it seemed, to find a woman who wouldn’t oblige him to alter his entire way of life.

Who wouldn’t try to alter him.

‘Ashe, and, um...’ Chepstow floundered as he shot a blank look at the second man at the table with Ashe.

‘Morgan,’ said the Earl of Ashenden, waving a languid hand at his companion. Havelock had seen Morgan about, at the races, Jackson’s, this club and various social events, though had never had cause to speak to him before. Son of some sort of nabob, if memory served him. Nothing wrong with him, so far as he knew. Just not out of the top drawer.

Not that he cared a rap for any of that. Not at a time like this.

Introductions dealt with, Chepstow thrust Havelock into a chair, then perched on the edge of his own as though ready to take flight at a moment’s notice.

‘Havelock has decided he wants to get married,’ he announced, rather in the manner of a man who has just tossed a hot potato out of his burnt fingers. Then he practically pounced on the waiter, who’d ventured into the library to see if any of the young gentlemen needed refreshment.

‘We need a bottle of wine,’ declared Chepstow with feeling.

‘Not want to,’ Havelock explained once the waiter was out of earshot. ‘Have to. Need to. And before you start questioning my ton, no, it isn’t because I’ve suddenly started seducing innocents,’ he growled, shooting Chepstow a resentful look. ‘That’s not it at all.’

‘Steady on,’ said Chepstow, pushing enough books aside that the waiter would have room to put a bottle and some glasses down when he returned. ‘Sort of mistake anyone could make. With you looking so...out of sorts. And then broaching the topic the way you did.’

‘Gentlemen,’ said Ashe in that quiet way he had that somehow made everyone listen. ‘Perhaps the best thing to do would be to let Havelock explain, in his own words, just what his problem is and how he thinks we may be of assistance? Before he feels compelled to call on his seconds.’

At Morgan’s look of alarm, Ashe chuckled quietly. ‘It is a foolish man who casts a slur on Havelock’s honour these days.’

‘I don’t, and never have, challenged my friends to duels.’

‘You shot off half of Wraxton’s ear,’ put in Chepstow.

‘He wasn’t my friend.’ Havelock folded his arms over his chest and glared across the table at Ashe. ‘And it wasn’t me he insulted. But...a lady.’

‘Oho! And I thought you said you weren’t in the petticoat line.’

‘I’m not. Never have been. It wasn’t like that—’

‘From what I heard,’ put in Ashe mildly, ‘if it hadn’t been you, it would have been her husband who challenged him.’

‘He should have done,’ snapped Havelock. ‘Only...’ He sighed, and pushed his fringe out of his eyebrows irritably. ‘I lost my temper with him first.’

‘Never mind,’ said Ashe soothingly. ‘At least someone shot him. That is the main thing.’

‘I shouldn’t have done it,’ admitted Havelock, as the waiter returned with a tray of wine and clean glasses. Meeting Wraxton had been nothing like the first duel he’d fought. Wraxton would have killed him stone dead if his pistol hadn’t misfired. And therefore he’d wanted to kill him right back. If it hadn’t been for a freakish bout of hiccups throwing his aim off, causing him to nick the man’s ear rather than put a hole through what passed for his heart, he would have done. And would then have had to flee the country or face charges for murder.

Seeing how close he’d come to bringing dishonour on his family through sheer anger had pulled him up short. Since then, he’d made much more effort to keep a rein on his temper.

Although few people were foolish enough to think they could get away with goading him, after the affair with Wraxton. The tale had got about that he’d deliberately marked the man. That he was a crack shot.

Which just went to show what idiots most people were.

‘I only wish,’ he said, pouring himself a generous measure of wine, ‘my problems now could be solved by issuing a challenge, picking my seconds, then putting a bullet into...someone. But the fact is I need to get married,’ he said glumly. ‘And soon. But I don’t want to end up shackled to some harpy who will make my life a misery by constantly nagging at me to reform. And the thing with women,’ he said, lifting the glass to his mouth, ‘is that you never can tell what they’re really like until after they’ve got you all legally tied up.’ He took a gulp as he recalled just how many times he’d seen it happen. One minute they’d been blushing brides, tripping down the aisle all sweetness and light, and the next they’d become regular harpies, henpecking the poor devil who’d married them into an early grave.

‘Well, the answer, then, is to make sure of the woman’s character before you wed her,’ said Ashe with infuriating logic.

‘And just how am I supposed to do that in the limited time I have available?’

‘Marry someone you know well,’ said Morgan as though it was obvious.

‘God, no!’ Havelock seized his glass and threw the rest of its contents back in one go. ‘I can’t face the thought of actually living, in the same house, with any of the girls I know really well. And anyway, they wouldn’t oblige me by marrying quickly. They’d want a big society affair.’ He shuddered. ‘Not to mention a massive trousseau, and so forth.’

‘So, to be blunt, you want a girl who will take you exactly as you are, and won’t demand a big society wedding.’

‘Exactly.’

‘You are looking for a mouse,’ put in Morgan. ‘A mouse so desperate for matrimony she’ll take what little you’re prepared to offer.’

‘That’s it,’ he cried, startling the sneer from Morgan’s face. ‘That would work. Morgan, you are a genius.’

‘You’d better be prepared to accept someone plain, then,’ returned Morgan, somewhat taken aback by his enthusiasm for a suggestion he’d made with such sarcasm. ‘And probably poor, as well.’

Havelock leaned back for a moment, considering. ‘Don’t think a plain face would put me off, so long as she’s not a complete antidote.’

‘Just a moment,’ put in Ashe. ‘Though, for whatever reason, you have decided to marry now, and in such haste, you must not forget the matter of succession. All of us, except perhaps you, Morgan,’ he said, giving the nabob’s son a dry smile, ‘have a duty to marry and produce sons to take over our responsibilities in their turn.’

‘Point taken,’ said Havelock before Ashe could state the obvious. It went without saying that he’d have to find someone it wouldn’t be too much of a hardship to bed.

‘I notice you haven’t denied needing a girl with a sizeable dowry,’ said Morgan, looking at him through narrowed eyes. ‘Is that why you need to marry in such a hurry? In need of an heiress, are you?’

At that point Chepstow, who’d got through two drinks to Havelock’s one, let out a bark of laughter.

‘Just because I’m not one of the dandy set,’ said Havelock, self-consciously putting his hand to his neckcloth, which he’d knotted in a haphazard fashion much, much earlier that day, and no doubt looked even further from the apparently effortless elegance attained by the other men about the table, ‘that don’t mean I haven’t a tidy income.’

Morgan eyed the pocket of Havelock’s jacket, which had somehow got ripped half off during the course of the day, and then lowered his gaze to his muddied boots, which he hadn’t stopped to change after the devastating interview with his lawyers. He’d walked and walked whilst trying to come up with a solution, before he’d noticed he was passing his club, and decided to come in and see if anyone else could come up with any better ideas.

‘I don’t need a woman to bring anything but herself to the union,’ he finished belligerently.

Once again it was Ashe who defused the tension, by summoning the waiter who’d been hovering at a discreet distance, and asking him to fetch ink and paper.

‘What we need to do, I think, is to make a comprehensive list of exactly what you do need, before we set our minds to the problem of how you may acquire it.’

‘There,’ cried Chepstow triumphantly. ‘Didn’t I say that Ashe was the very fellow to help? I’ll just...’ He half rose from his chair.

Havelock only had to glare at him for a second or two to take the wind out of his sails. A gentleman didn’t bail out on his friends when they’d gone to him for help. Havelock had stood by Chepstow every time he’d needed help getting out of a scrape. Now the boot was on the other foot, he expected a similar show of loyalty.

Chepstow subsided into his seat with an air of resignation and, in a hollow voice, asked the waiter, who just then arrived with the writing materials, to bring them another bottle of wine.

‘So,’ said Ashe, dipping the pen into the ink, ‘you do not require beauty, or wealth, in your prospective bride. But you do require a compliant nature—’

‘A mouse,’ repeated Morgan derisively.

Ashe shot him a reproving look over the top of his spectacles.

‘Undemanding. And not one of the circle in which you habitually move.’

At Havelock’s shudder, Ashe wrote, not of the upper ten thousand on his list.

‘Any other requirements?’ He paused, his hand hovering over the paper.

Havelock frowned as he considered.

‘Quite a few, actually. That’s what makes it all so damned difficult.’ He ran his fingers through his hair, for what felt like the thousandth time that day. Not that it made any difference to the style, or rather lack of it. It was fortunate he wasn’t obsessed with his appearance, for his thick, curly hair did whatever it wanted. Impervious to comb, or pomade, the only thing was to keep it short and hope for the best.

‘I don’t want a woman with any family to speak of,’ he said with feeling.

‘You mean...no titled family?’ The nabob’s son shot him a glance loaded with sympathy. ‘Wouldn’t want them looking down on you.’

Before Havelock had a chance to get up, seize the fellow by the throat and give him a shaking, Ashe put in mildly, ‘Morgan is not aware of how very well connected you are, Havelock. I am sure he meant no insult.’

No, Havelock sighed. He probably didn’t. And anyway, he’d already decided to forgo the pleasure of indulging in a decent set-to with anyone within the walls of this club.

‘Look, I’m related to half the bloody ton as it is,’ he explained to the bemused Morgan. ‘What with stepbrothers, and stepsisters, and all the attendant stepcousins and aunts and uncles and such like all thinking they have a right to poke their nose into my affairs, I don’t want someone bringing yet another set of relatives into my life and making it any more complicated, thank you very much.’

He saw Ashe write the word orphan on the list.

Morgan nodded. ‘Makes sense. And an orphan, a girl with no family to support her, is all the more likely to agree to the kind of bargain you seem determined to strike.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

Chepstow poured a large measure of wine into Havelock’s empty glass and nudged it towards him.

‘I am sure Morgan meant nothing you need take offence at, Havelock,’ reproved Ashe in the reasonable tone that so many men found damned supercilious.

He was beginning to understand why.

Havelock folded his arms and glared across the table.

To his credit, Morgan met his look without blinking.

Ashe removed his spectacles and set to polishing them with a silk handkerchief he produced from an inner pocket of his tailcoat. ‘May I make a suggestion?’

‘I wish you would. It’s why I came in here, after all. See if anyone could help me find a way through this...morass,’ said Havelock.

‘Well, for myself,’ said Ashe diffidently, ‘I could not stand to be married to a woman who did not possess a keen intellect.’

‘Lord,’ said Havelock, aghast. ‘I wouldn’t know what to do with a bluestocking!’

‘Oh, come,’ said Lord Chepstow, his devilish grin returning for the first time since they’d sat down. He then proceeded to offer a variety of suggestions about what exactly a man could do with a bluestocking, her garters, and various other items of apparel before descending into a spate of vulgarity that, though a little off the topic at hand, did at least serve to lighten the atmosphere.

When they’d stopped laughing, had wiped their eyes, topped up all their glasses and called for another bottle of wine, Ashe brought them all back to the point.

‘You mustn’t forget that this woman, whoever she may be, will be the mother of your children, Havelock. So, as well as considering what kind of woman you could tolerate living under your roof, you should also ask yourself what kind of children do you want to sire? For myself, I would hope my own offspring would have the capacity to make me proud. I would hate to think,’ he said, giving Havelock a particularly penetrating look, ‘that I had curtailed my own freedom only to produce a brood of idiots.’

Havelock ran his fingers through his hair yet again. ‘You are in the right of it.’ He sighed. ‘Must think of the succession. Very well, put that on your list, Ashe. Not completely hen-witted.’

Since Ashe was taking a sip of wine it was Morgan who picked up the pen and wrote that down.

‘I want her to be kind, too,’ declared Havelock with some force. ‘Good with youngsters. Not one of these women who think only of themselves.’

‘Good, good, now we are really getting somewhere,’ said Ashe, as Morgan added these further points to the steadily growing list.

‘It’s all very well making a list,’ put in Morgan, tossing the pen aside. ‘But how do you propose finding a woman who meets all your requirements? Put an advertisement in the papers?’

‘God, no! Don’t want the whole world to know how desperate I am to find a wife. I’d have every matchmaking mama within fifty miles of town descending on me with their simpering daughters in tow. Besides...’ he shook his head ‘...it would take too long. Much too long. Only think of having the advertisement put in, then waiting for women to reply, then sifting through the mountain of responses, then having to interview them all...’

Morgan let out a bark of laughter. ‘You are so sure you will have hundreds of replies, are you?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Havelock testily. ‘I’ve had women flinging themselves at me every Season for the past half-dozen years.’

‘And during summer house parties,’ put in Chepstow.

‘There was that Christmas house party, wasn’t there,’ Ashe added, ‘where—’

‘Never mind that!’ Havelock interrupted swiftly. ‘I thought we’d agreed never to speak of that episode again.’

‘Then there was that filly at the races,’ said Chepstow.

Morgan laughed again. ‘Very well. You have all convinced me. Havelock is indeed one of those men that society misses regard as a matrimonial prize.’ Though the way he looked at Havelock conveyed his opinion that there was just no understanding the workings of the female mind.

‘And you wouldn’t believe some of the tricks they’ve employed in their attempts to bag me,’ he said bitterly.

‘Couldn’t you simply settle with one of these women who’ve shown themselves so keen to, um, bag you? That would save you time, wouldn’t it?’

Havelock gave Morgan a cold stare, before saying, ‘No. Absolutely not. Can’t stand women who flutter their eyelashes and pretend to swoon, and flaunt their bosoms in your face at every opportunity.’

Modest, he noted Ashe write on the bottom of the list, out of the corner of his eye.

‘And anyway, the girls I already know, the ones who have made it plain they want me, have also made it plain they want a damn sight more from me than I’m willing to give. I’d make them miserable. So then they’d make damn sure they made me miserable.’

Ashe dipped his pen in the inkwell one more time, and wrote, not looking for affection from matrimony.

Morgan frowned down at the list, sipping at his drink. ‘What this list describes,’ he said thoughtfully, ‘is a woman who is willing to consider a businesslike arrangement. Someone from a respectable family that has fallen on hard times, perhaps. Someone who would like to have children, but has no hopes of gaining a suitor through the normal way.’

‘Normal way?’

‘Feminine wiles,’ supplied Morgan helpfully.

‘Oh, them,’ huffed Havelock. ‘No. I definitely don’t want a wife who’s got too many feminine wiles. I’d rather she was straightforward.’

Honest, wrote Ashe.

‘Good grief,’ said Chepstow, peering rather blearily at the list. ‘You will never, ever, find a woman who has all those attributes, no matter how long you look.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Morgan. ‘There are any number of genteel poor eking out an existence in London right at this moment. With daughters aplenty who’d give their eye teeth to receive a proposal from a man of Havelock’s standing, from what you tell me. I’m tolerably sure that he could find one or two amongst them who would have at least a couple of the character traits he finds important. Particularly if he’s not going to be put off by a plain face.’

Havelock leaned forward in his seat. ‘You really think so?’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘And do you know where I might find them?’

Morgan leaned back, crossing one long leg over the other, and stared hard at the wall behind Havelock’s head. The other men at the table waited with bated breath for his answer.

‘Do you know, I rather think I do. I could probably introduce you to a couple of likely prospects tomorrow night, if you don’t mind—’ He broke off, eyeing Havelock’s less-than-pristine garb, and laughed. ‘No, you don’t look like a chap who stands on ceremony. And I have an invitation to a ball, given by people who will never be accepted into the very top echelons of society, for all their wealth. Yet, amongst their guests, there are always a number of people in the exact circumstances to be of use to you. Good families, fallen on hard times, who have to put up with what society they can get. I dare say every single female there of marriageable age will look upon you as a godsend.’

‘And you wouldn’t mind taking me to such a ball?’

‘Not in the least,’ said Morgan affably. ‘Is that not what friends are for? To help a fellow out?’

It was. He'd been on the verge of being disappointed in Chepstow. But really, the fellow had done what he could. He'd brought him to Ashe, who'd helped him to get his thoughts set down in a logical fashion, and introduced him to Morgan, who was going to give him practical assistance.

'To friendship,' he said, raising his glass to the three men sitting round the table with him.

'And marriage,' said Ashe, lifting his glass in response.

'Let's not get carried away,' said Lord Chepstow, his glass stopping a mere inch from his lips. 'To Havelock's marriage, perhaps. Not the institution as such.'

'Havelock's marriage, then,' said Ashe.

'Havelock's bride,' said Morgan, downing his own drink in one go and reaching for the bottle.

'Yes, don't mind drinking to her,' said Chepstow. 'Your bride, my friend.'

And let's hope, thought Havelock as he carefully folded the list and put it in his pocket, that the woman who possesses at least the most important of these attributes will be at the ball tomorrow night.

Chapter Two

'Can you really do nothing better with your hair?'

Mary lowered her gaze to the floor and shook her head as Aunt Pargetter sighed.

'Couldn't you at least have borrowed Lotty's tongs? I am sure she wouldn't begrudge them to you. If you could only get just a leetle curl into it, I am sure it would look far more fetching than just letting it hang round your face like a curtain.'

Mary put her hand to her head to check that the neat bun, in which she'd fastened her hair earlier, hadn't already come undone.

'No, no,' said Aunt Pargetter with exasperation. 'It hasn't come down yet. I am talking in generalities.'

Oh, those. She'd heard a lot of those over the past few months. Generalities uttered by lawyers about indigent females, by relations about the cost of doing their duty and by coach drivers about passengers who didn't give tips. She'd also heard a lot of specifics. Which informed her exactly how she'd become indigent and why each set of people she'd been sent to in turn couldn't, at present, offer her a home.

'Now, I know you feel a little awkward about attending a ball when you are still in mourning,' Aunt Pargetter went on remorselessly. 'But I just cannot leave you here on your own this evening to mope. And besides, there will be any number of eligible men there tonight. Who is to say you won't catch someone's eye and then all your problems will be solved?'

Mary's head flew up at that, her eyes wide. Aunt Pargetter was talking of marriage. Marriage! As if that was the answer to any woman's problems.

She shivered and lowered her gaze again, pressing her lips tightly together. It would solve Aunt Pargetter's problems, right enough. She hadn't said so, but Mary could see that keeping her fed and housed for any length of time would strain the family's already limited resources. But, rather than throwing up her hands, and passing her on to yet another member of the family upon whom Mary might have a tenuous claim, Aunt Pargetter had just taken her in, patted her hand and told her she needn't worry any longer. That she'd look after her.

Mary just hadn't realised that Aunt Pargetter's plan for looking after her involved marrying her off.

'You need to lift your head a little more and look about you,' advised Aunt Pargetter, approaching her with her hand outstretched. She lifted Mary's chin and said, 'You have fine eyes, you know. What my girls wouldn't give for lashes like yours.' She sighed, shaking her head. And then, before Mary had any idea she might be under attack and could take evasive action, the woman pinched both her cheeks. 'There. That's put a little colour in your face. Now all you need to do is put on a smile, as though you are enjoying yourself, and you won't look quite so...'

Repulsive. Plain. Dowdy.

‘Unappealing,’ Aunt Pargetter finished. ‘You could be fairly pretty, you know, if only you would...’ She waved her hands in exasperation, but was saved from having to come up with a word that would miraculously make Mary not sound as though she was completely miserable when her own daughters bounced into the room in a froth of curls and flounces.

Aunt Pargetter had no time left to spare on Mary when her beloved girls needed a final inspection, and just a little extra primping, before she bundled them all into the hired hack they couldn’t afford to keep waiting.

‘We have an invitation from a family by the name of Crimmer tonight,’ Aunt Pargetter explained to Mary as the hack jolted over the cobbles. ‘They are not the sort who would object to me bringing along another guest, so don’t you go worrying your head about not receiving a formal invitation.’

Mary’s eyes nevertheless widened in alarm. She hadn’t any idea her aunt would have taken her to this event without forewarning her hosts.

Aunt Pargetter reached across the coach and patted her hand. ‘I shall just explain you have only recently arrived for a visit, which is perfectly true. Besides, the Crimmers will love being able to boast that their annual ball has become so popular everyone wants to attend. But what is even more fortunate for you, my dear, is that they have two sons to find brides for, not that the younger is quite old enough yet, and I’ve heard rumours that the older one is more or less spoken for.’

As Mary frowned in bewilderment at the contradictory nature of that somewhat rambling statement, her aunt explained, ‘The point is, they have a lot of wealthy friends with sons who must be on the lookout for a wife, as well. Especially one as well connected as you.’

‘What do you mean, Mama?’ Charlotte shot a puzzled glance at Mary. It had clearly come as a shock to her to hear there might be anything that could possibly make Mary a likely prospect on the marriage mart, when all week they’d been thinking of her as the poor relation.

‘Well, although her poor dear mama was my cousin, by marriage, her papa was a younger son of the youngest daughter of the Earl of Finchingfield.’

Mary’s heart sank. Her well-meaning aunt clearly meant to spread news of her bloodlines about tonight as though she were some...brood mare.

‘But if she’s related to the Earl of Finchingfield, why hasn’t she gone to him?’ Dorothy, Charlotte’s younger, and prettier, sister, piped up.

That was a good question. And Mary turned to Aunt Pargetter with real interest, to see how she would explain the tangle that had been her mother’s married life.

‘Oh, the usual thing,’ said her aunt with an airy wave of her hand. ‘Somebody didn’t approve of the marriage, someone threatened to cut someone off, people stopped speaking to one another and, before you knew it, a huge rift had opened up. But Mary’s mother’s people still know how to do their duty, I hope, when a child is involved. Not that you are a child any longer, Mary, but you know what I mean. It isn’t fair for you to have to suffer the consequences of the mistakes your parents made.’

Charlotte and Dorothy were both now looking at her with wide eyes. Mary’s heart sank still further. In the few days she’d been living in their little house in Bloomsbury, she’d discovered that the pair of them had a passion for the kind of novels where dispossessed heiresses went through a series of adventures before winding up married to an Italian prince. She was very much afraid they’d suddenly started seeing her as one of those.

Still, since the Crimmers, who were in trade, weren’t likely to have invited an Italian prince to their ball, she needn’t worry they would attempt to push them into each other’s arms. Actually, she needn’t worry that either Lotty or Dotty would push her into anyone’s arms. They were both far too keen on eligible bachelors themselves to let a single one of them, foreign or not, slip through their own eager fingers.

She pulled her shoulders down and took a deep breath. No need to worry. Aunt Pargetter might talk about her suitability for marriage as much as she liked, but that didn’t mean she was at risk of

having some marriage-minded man sweeping her off her feet tonight. Or any night. She wasn't the type of girl men did want to sweep off her feet.

Men didn't tend to notice her. Well, she'd made sure they wouldn't by developing the habit of shrinking into the background. And by dint of following just a few steps behind her more exuberant cousins, she very soon managed to fade into the background tonight, as well. It was never very hard. Most girls of her age actually wanted people to look at them. Especially men. So there was always someone to hide behind.

Mary found a chair slightly to the rear of her aunt and cousins when they all sat down. By shifting it, only a very little, she managed to make use of a particularly leafy potted plant, as well.

Though she was now shielded from a large percentage of the ballroom, she had a good view of the main door through which other guests were still pouring in, greeting one another with loud voices as they flaunted their evening finery. If she hadn't already decided to keep out of sight, the wealth on display in this room would have totally overawed her. Dotty and Lotty scanned the crowd with equal avidity, whispering to each other behind their fans about the gowns and jewels of the females, the figures and incomes of the males.

'Oh, look, it's Mr Morgan,' eventually exclaimed Lotty, as a pair of young men entered the ballroom. 'I really didn't think he'd be here tonight.'

From that comment, and the fact that she and Dotty immediately sat up straighter, their fans fluttering at a greatly increased tempo, she guessed the man in question was what they termed 'a catch.' She could, for once, actually see why. The shorter of the two men was extremely good-looking, in a rugged sort of way, besides being turned out in a kind of casual elegance that made him look far more approachable than others of his age, with their starched shirt points and nipped-in waists.

'Who is that with him?'

Following slightly behind the handsome newcomer was a taller, rather rangy man with ferocious eyebrows.

'He must be a friend of his from school, or somewhere,' whispered Lotty. 'See the way Mrs Crimmer is smiling at him, giving him her hand and sort of...fluttering?'

Mary joined her cousins in watching the progress round the room of what must be decidedly eligible bachelors, given the way the ladies in every group they approached preened and fluttered for all they were worth.

By the time they reached their corner of the ballroom, Dotty and Lotty were almost beside themselves.

'Good evening, Mrs Pargetter, Miss Pargetter, Miss Dorothy,' said the tall, slender man, somewhat to Mary's confusion. This was the man who'd set her cousins all aflutter?

He must be very wealthy then, because he certainly didn't have looks on his side. Not like his companion.

'Allow me to present my friend,' Mr Morgan added. 'The Viscount Havelock.'

Dotty's and Lotty's heads both swivelled in unison as they tore their eyes from the man they considered the prize catch of the night, to the man they'd just discovered to be a genuine peer of the realm. They both pushed their bosoms out a little further, fluttering their fans and eyelashes at top speed.

The viscount, apparently unimpressed by their ability to do all three things at once, accorded them no more than a curt nod.

Then his gaze slid past them, caught her in the act of biting back a smile and stilled.

'And who is this?'

'Oh, well, this is my...well, almost a niece, by marriage,' said her aunt. 'Miss Carpenter.'

Mary's cheeks heated. She really shouldn't have been mocking the ridiculous way her cousins had been preening just because a titled man was standing within three feet of them. But he didn't look as though he minded. On the contrary, that bored, slightly irritated look he'd bestowed on them

had vanished without trace. If anything, she would swear he looked as though he shared her view that they were being a little silly.

And then he smiled at her with what looked like... Well, if she didn't know better, as if he'd just found something he'd been looking for.

'Do you care to dance, Miss Carpenter?'

'Me?' Her jaw dropped. She closed her mouth hastily, then shook her head and lowered it.

'N-no. I couldn't...' Lotty and Dotty would be furious with her. And insulted. And rightly so. It was almost a snub, to ask her, in preference to them, after they'd made their interest so blatant.

Could that be the reason he'd asked?

You never could tell, with men. What looked like an act of charity could be performed deliberately to spite someone else, or in order to put someone in their place. She stared doggedly at her shoes, her spirits sinking to just about their level. You couldn't judge a man by the handsome cast of his features. And she'd been foolish to have been even momentarily deceived by them and that rather...heartening smile.

It was a man's actions that revealed his true nature.

'My niece is in mourning, as you can see,' her aunt was explaining, waving her hand towards Mary's plain, sober gown.

'Really?'

She couldn't help looking up at the tone of the viscount's voice. It was almost as if he... But, no, he couldn't be pleased to hear she was in mourning, could he? That was absurd.

And there was nothing in his face, now she was looking at it, to indicate anything but sympathy.

'Perhaps,' he said, in a rather kinder tone of voice, 'you would be my partner for supper, later?'

'Oh, well, I...' The look in his eyes made her tongue cleave to the roof of her mouth. It was so...intent. As though he wanted to discover every last one of her secrets. As though he would turn her inside out and upside down, until he'd shaken them all from her. As though nothing would stop him.

It made her most uncomfortable. But at the exact same moment Mary decided she would have to somehow refuse his invitation, her aunt accepted it on her behalf. 'Mary would be honoured. Wouldn't you, dear?' She poked her with the end of her furled fan, as if determined to prod the approved response from her.

When she still couldn't give it, the viscount smiled again, then turned his attention to her cousins.

'And in the meantime,' he said, with surprising enthusiasm, 'would either of you two lovely young ladies show pity on a stranger, by dancing with me?'

Fortunately, before they could elbow one another out of the way in their eagerness to get their hands on him, the tall thin one held out his hand to Charlotte.

Mary sighed with relief as the foursome made their way out on to the dance floor. But her relief was short-lived.

'I believe you have made a conquest,' breathed her aunt in rapturous tones as she sidled closer, pushing a palm frond out of the way. 'Lord Havelock seemed most interested in you.'

'I cannot think why,' said Mary. She'd practically hidden herself behind a potted palm, she was wearing a plain gown that did nothing for her pale complexion and she'd turned down his offer of a dance. 'Perhaps he needs spectacles,' she wondered aloud. 'That might account for it.'

'Nonsense! He can clearly see that you have good breeding. My girls may be prettier than you,' she said with blunt honesty, 'but neither of them would know how to go on in his world.' She nodded towards the viscount, who was leading a glowing Dotty into the bottom set.

'Well, I don't suppose I would, either,' retorted Mary. 'It's not as if I've ever been a part of it.'

'No, but your mother was far more genteel than I've ever been. And your father, too—I dare say he taught you how a real lady should behave.'

Mary did her best not to react to that statement, though something inside her shrivelled up into a defensive ball at the mere mention of her father.

‘Papa was...very strict with me, yes,’ she admitted. Not that she would ever mention the form his strictness took, not to a living soul. Particularly not as he directed most of it firmly, and squarely, at her mother, rather than her.

‘And he certainly did have strong opinions about how a lady should behave,’ she also admitted, when her aunt kept looking at her as though she expected her to say something more. And he enforced those opinions. With loud demands, interspersed with terrifyingly foreboding silences, when he was sober, fists and boots when he was not.

‘I really do not want,’ she said tremulously, ‘an eligible parti to prefer me to either of my cousins. Especially not when they seem so taken with him.’

‘Well, that’s all very well and good, but he’s plainly only got eyes for you. Besides, both my girls would be far more comfortable with Mr Morgan. Not out of their reach, socially, you see, for all his wealth.’

Mary took a second look at her cousins as they skipped up and down the set. Though Dotty looked as though she was enjoying herself, Lotty was positively glowing. And had Dotty just shot Mr Morgan a coy glance over her shoulder while the viscount’s back was towards her?

She frowned. How could either of them prefer that great long beanpole of a man to the dashing viscount? Not only was he much better looking but he had a more amiable expression. She’d even thought she might have detected a sense of humour lurking in the depths of those honeyed hazel eyes. When he’d caught her smiling at the way Dotty and Lotty had reacted on learning he had a title, it had been like sharing a private joke.

Only, she reminded herself tartly, to suspect him of snubbing them rather unkindly a moment later.

She was in no position to judge him. Or think her own observations could have any sway over Dotty’s or Lotty’s decisions. Lords were notorious for being as poor as church mice. If his pockets were to let, then he’d be looking to marry an heiress. Which ruled them both out.

Besides, they knew Mr Morgan was wealthy. Which must make him terribly tempting.

Anyway, she was not going to harbour a single uncharitable thought towards them. Not when they’d been the only ones of her extended family to make room for her in their lives. The girls could have protested when their mother told them Mary was to share their room. But they hadn’t. They’d just said how beastly it must be for her to have nowhere else to go and emptied one of the drawers for her things.

Mary had tried to repay them all by making herself useful about the house. And until tonight, she’d thought she was beginning to make a permanent place for herself.

But it was not to be. Aunt Pargetter, who wasn’t even really an aunt at all, but only a distant connection by marriage, might be kinder than most of the relatives she’d met so far, but it was absurd to think she would house her indefinitely.

Even so, she was not going to tamely submit to her misguided plans to marry her off. No matter how kindly meant the intention was, such a scheme wouldn’t do for her.

In the morning, she would find out where the nearest employment agency was located and go and register for some kind of work. Not that she had any idea what she might do. She darted a look at Aunt Pargetter, wishing she could ask her advice. But it would be a waste of time. Aunt Pargetter, though kindness itself, was also one of those females who thought marriage was the height of any woman’s ambitions and wouldn’t understand her preference for work.

Well, then, she would just have to, somehow, discover where the agency was on her own. Although what excuse she could give for wishing to leave the house, she could not think. Everyone knew she had no money with which to go shopping. Besides, since she was a stranger to London, either Dotty or Lotty, or probably both, would be sent with her to make sure she didn’t get lost.

She became so wrapped up in formulating one plan after another, only to discard it as unworkable, that she scarcely noticed when the dancing came to a halt and people began to make

their way to the supper room. Until Viscount Havelock brushed the fronds of the potted palm to one side, smiling down at her as he offered her his hand.

'Are you ready for a bite to eat? I must confess, all this dancing has given me quite an appetite.'

'Oh. Um...' He wasn't out of breath, though. Her cousins were fanning their flushed faces, Mr Morgan was mopping his brow with a handkerchief, but Lord Havelock wasn't displaying the slightest sign of fatigue. He was obviously very fit.

Not that she ought to notice such things about a man.

Flustered by the turn of her thoughts, she took the viscount's hand and allowed him to place her hand on his sleeve.

It must just be that something about him reminded her of her brother's friends. Several of them had been of his class and had about them the same air of...vitality. Of vigour. And the same self-assurance that came with knowing they were born to command.

She regarded her hand, where it lay on his sleeve. The arm encased in the soft material of his evening coat felt like a plank of oak. Just like her brother's had. And those of his friends he'd sometimes brought home, who'd escorted her round the town. Not that this viscount actually worked for his living, like those lads who'd served in the navy. From what she knew of aristocrats, he probably maintained his fitness by boxing and fencing, and riding.

He was probably what her brother would have called a Corinthian. She darted a swift glance at his profile, taking in the firm set of his jaw and the healthy complexion. Yes, definitely a Corinthian. At least, he certainly didn't look as though he spent his days sleeping off the effects of the night before.

And, if he was one of the sporting set, that would explain why he wore clothing that looked comfortable, rather than fitted tightly to show off his physique. He might not be on the catch for an heiress at all.

Her cheeks flushed. She couldn't believe she was speculating about his reasons for being here. Or the body underneath his clothing. Not that she'd ever spent so much time thinking about a man's choice of clothing, either. Just because he seemed better turned out than any other man present, in some indefinable way, she had no business making so much of it.

'I hope the crowd of people we are following are heading to the supper room,' he said, breaking into her thoughts.

'I...I suppose they must be,' she replied, but only after casting about desperately for an interesting reply and coming up empty.

'You are not a regular visitor to this house?'

She shook her head. 'I have only been in London a few days,' she admitted. 'I don't know anyone.'

'Apart from the lady you are with. Your...aunt?'

Mary shook her head again. 'I had never even met her before I turned up on her doorstep with a letter of introduction from my lawyer. And to be perfectly frank, I'm not at all sure the connection is...'

Suddenly Mary wondered why on earth she was telling this total stranger such personal information. It couldn't be simply because there was something about him that put her in mind of her brother and his fellow officers, could it? Or because he'd given her that look, earlier, that had made her feel as though he was genuinely interested?

How pathetic did that make her? One kind word, one keen look, a smile and a touch of his hand and she'd been on the verge of unburdening herself.

Good grief—she was as susceptible to a good-looking man as the cousins she'd decried as ninnies not an hour earlier. She, who'd sworn never to let a handsome face sway her judgement, had just spent a full five minutes wondering how he managed to keep so fit and speculating about the cut of his clothes, and what lay beneath them.

'You don't really have any family left to speak of, is that what you were about to say?'

She couldn't recall what she'd been about to say. Nor even what the question had been. Her mind kept veering off into realms it had never strayed into before and consequently got lost there.

'Your...aunt, or whatever she is,' he persisted, while her cheeks flooded with guilty heat, 'said you are in mourning. Was it...for someone very close?'

Well, that dealt with the strange effects his proximity had been wreaking in her mind and body. He might as well have doused her with a bucket of cold water.

'My mother,' she said. 'She was all I had left.'

She might be in a crowded ballroom tonight, on the arm of the most handsome and eligible man in the room, but the truth was that she was utterly alone in the world, and destitute.

'That's c...' He pulled himself up short and patted her hand. 'I mean to say, dreadful. For you.'

They'd reached the doorway now and beyond she could see tables laid out with a bewildering array of dishes that looked extremely decorative, but not at all like anything she might ever have eaten before.

Since they'd both come without an invitation, space was found for them at a table squeezed into the bay of a window.

'Don't worry,' he said when he noted her gaze darting about anxiously. 'I shall make sure we find your aunt once we have eaten and return you to her side in complete safety.'

She was amazed he'd noticed how awkward she felt. And that he'd correctly deduced it was being separated from her aunt that had caused it. Most men couldn't see further than the end of their noses.

He must have noticed the way she'd eyed the food with trepidation, too, because he took great care, when offering her dishes, to ask if she liked the principal ingredient of each. Which deftly concealed her ignorance. For he could have explained what everything was, making her feel even more awkward, whilst puffing off his own savoir faire. As it was, since the other men at their table were passing dishes round, and helping the ladies to slices of this, or spoonfuls of that, nobody noticed anything untoward.

Eventually, her plate, like that of everyone else at the table, was piled high and conversation began to flow.

Except between Lord Havelock and her.

She supposed he'd gone to the length of his chivalry. She supposed he was waiting for her to make some kind of remark that would open up the kind of light, inconsequential conversations that were springing up all around them.

But for the life of her she couldn't dredge up a single topic she could imagine might be of interest to a man like him. Or the kind of man she suspected he was. She didn't really know a thing about him.

And though she was grateful to him for the way he'd behaved so far, she began to wish she was with her aunt and cousins. They would know how to entertain him, she was sure. They wouldn't let this awkward silence go on, and on, and on...

He cleared his throat, half turned towards her and said, 'Do you...?' He cleared his throat again, took a sip of wine and started over. 'That is, I wonder, do you enjoy living in town, or do you prefer the country? I suppose,' he said with a swift frown before she could answer, 'I should have enquired where you lived before you had to come to London, shouldn't I? I don't know why I assumed you had lived in the country before.'

'I lived in Portsmouth, actually,' she said, relieved to be able to have a question she could answer without having to rack her brains. 'And I haven't been here long enough to know whether I prefer it, or not.'

'But do you have any objection to living in the countryside?'

It was her turn to frown. 'I cannot tell. I have never lived anywhere but in a town.'

Oh, what a stupid, stupid thing to say. She should have made some remark about how...bustling London was in comparison to Portsmouth, or...or how she missed the sound of the sea. Or even better, asked him about his preferences. That was what men liked, really, wasn't it? To talk about themselves? Instead, she'd killed the potential conversation stone dead.

They resumed eating in silence for a few more minutes before he made a second, valiant attempt to breach it. 'Well, do you like children?'

'Yes, I suppose in a general way,' though she couldn't imagine why he might ask that. But at least she'd learned her lesson from last time. She would offer him the chance to talk about himself. 'Why do you ask?'

'Oh, no reason,' he said airily, though the faint blush that tinged his cheeks told her he was growing a bit uncomfortable. 'Just making conversation.' He reached for his wine glass and curled his fingers round the stem as though in need of something to hang on to. And then blurted, 'What do people talk about at events like this?'

For the first time in her life, she actually felt sorry for a man. He'd come here expecting to enjoy himself and ended up saddled with the dullest, most boring female in the room. And far from betraying his exasperation with her ignorance, and her timidity, he'd done his best to put her at ease. He'd even been making an attempt to draw her out. And wasn't finding it easy.

'I expect it is easier for them,' she said, indicating the other occupants of the table. 'That is...I mean...they all know each other already, I think.'

He looked round the table and she couldn't help contrasting the animated chatter of all the other females, who were universally fluttering their eyelashes at their male companions in the attempt to charm them. Then he looked back at her and smiled.

'Well, we'll just have to get to know each other then, won't we?'

Oh, dear. Did he mean to ask her a lot of highly personal questions? Or expect her to come up with some witty banter, or start flirting like the other women? That's what came of throwing a man even the tiniest conversational sop. She'd made him think she was interested in getting to know him.

'What,' he said abruptly, 'do you think about climbing boys?'

'I beg your pardon? Climbing boys?'

'Yes. The little chaps they send up chimneys.'

All of a sudden, the odd things he said, and the abrupt way he said them reminded her very forcibly of her own brother's behaviour, when confronted by a female to whom he was not related. He was trying his best, but this was clearly a man who was more at ease in the company of other men. Lord Havelock had no more idea how to talk to a single lady than she had as to how to amuse an eligible male.

He was staring at his plate now, a dull flush mounting his cheeks, as though he knew he'd just raised a topic that was not at all suitable for a dinner table, let alone what was supposed to be the delicate sensibilities of a female.

And once again, she felt...not sorry for him. No, not that. But willing to meet his attempts to entertain her halfway. For he was exerting himself to a considerable extent. A thing no other male she'd ever encountered had ever even considered doing. And though men did not usually want to hear what a woman thought, he had asked, and so she girded up her loins to express her opinion. It wasn't as if she was ever likely to see him again, so what did it matter if he was offended by it?

'It is a cruel practice,' she said. 'I know chimneys have to be cleaned, but surely there must be a more humane way? I hear there are devices that can produce results that are almost as good.'

'Devices,' he said, turning to her with a curious expression.

'For cleaning chimneys.'

'Really? I had no idea.'

'Oh? But then why did you ask me about them?'

His brows drew down irritably.

‘I beg your pardon,’ she said hastily, hanging her head meekly. Whatever had possessed her to question him? How could she have forgotten the way her father had reacted should her mother have ever dared to question his motive for saying anything, no matter how absurd?

There was a moment’s awkward pause. She darted him a wary glance to find he’d folded his arms across his chest and was glaring at his plate as though he was contemplating sweeping it, and its contents, from the table before storming off.

A kind of dim terror crept over her. A mist rising up from her past. Her own appetite fled. She pleated her napkin between nervous fingers, fighting to stay calm. He couldn’t very well backhand her out of the chair, she reminded herself. Not even her father had taken such drastic action, when she’d angered him, not in public, at any rate.

No—Lord Havelock was more likely to return her to her chaperon in frosty silence and vow never to have anything to do with her again.

She felt him shift in his seat, next to her. ‘Entirely my fault,’ he growled between clenched teeth. ‘No business bringing such a topic up at a dinner table. Cannot think what came over me.’

The mist shredded, blasted apart by the shock wave of his apology. She turned and stared at him.

‘I dare say you can tell that I’m just not used to conversing with...ladies.’

Good grief. Not only had he apologised, but he, a man, had admitted to having a fault.

‘I...I’m not very good at it myself. Not conversing with ladies, obviously, I can do that. I meant, conversing with members of the opposite...’ She floundered on the precipice of uttering a word that would be an even worse faux pas than mentioning the grim reality of chimney sweeps.

And then he smiled.

A rather devilish smile that told her he knew exactly which word she’d almost said.

With an unholy light in his eyes that sent awareness of her own sex flooding from the pit of her stomach to the tips of her toes.

Chapter Three

‘So you found your mouse,’ remarked Morgan, as they strode out into the night.

‘I’ve found a young lady who appears to meet many of my requirements,’ Havelock testily corrected him. He hadn’t been able to believe his luck when the bashful creature he’d had to coax out from behind her potted plant had admitted to being an orphan.

‘The only problem is,’ he said with a scowl, ‘the very things I like most about her make it devilish difficult to find out what her character is really like.’

‘How so?’

‘Well, it was damn near impossible to pry more than a couple of words out of her at a time.’ To think he’d congratulated himself on so deftly separating her from her more exuberant cousins, only to come unstuck at the dinner table.

‘I made a complete cake of myself.’ He sighed. She wasn’t like the girls he was used to sitting with at such events. Girls who either flirted, or threw out conversational gambits intended to impress and charm. She’d left all the work to him. And he discovered he was a very poor hand at it. In his determination to delve to the heart of her, he’d asked the kind of questions that had both puzzled and alarmed her.

Climbing boys, for God’s sake! Who in their right minds asked a gently reared girl about such a deplorable topic? Over a supper table?

Though in fairness to Miss Carpenter, she’d swiftly rallied and given an answer of which he could heartily approve. And shown her head wasn’t stuffed with goose down. Devices for sweeping chimneys, eh? Where could she have heard about them? If they even existed.

‘You know,’ said Morgan as they turned in the direction of their club, ‘either of her cousins would be only too glad to get an offer from you. Wouldn’t be so much work, either. That’s why I

made them known to you. Family not that well off, eager to climb the social ladder. Have known them some time, so I can vouch for them both being good girls, at heart.'

'No, thank you,' said Havelock firmly, recalling the way they'd fluttered and preened the moment they heard he had a title. 'Miss Carpenter is the one for me.'

'Very well,' said Morgan with a shrug. 'Perhaps you will get a chance to discover more about her when we go and visit her tomorrow.'

'Perhaps,' he said gloomily. He wished now that he had been more in the petticoat line. Had more experience with plumbing the depths of women's natures. He'd plumbed other depths, naturally, to the satisfaction of both parties involved, but had always avoided anything that smacked of emotion. The moment a woman started to seem as though she wanted to get 'close', he'd dropped her like a hot potato.

He'd thought it was safer.

And it had been. Not one of them had ever managed to get under his skin. The trouble was, keeping himself heart whole had left him woefully unprepared for the most important task of his life.

* * *

'Good morning, my lord,' gushed Mrs Pargetter.

Havelock favoured her with his most courtly bow. If he was going to be frequenting these premises, he needed to be on good terms with the hostess.

Miss Carpenter's cousins, whose names escaped him for the moment, fluttered at him from their strategic locations on two separate sofas, indicating their willingness to have him join them. Or Morgan. The hussies didn't appear to mind which.

Miss Carpenter, on the other hand, was sitting on a straight-backed chair by the window, looking very much as though she would like to disappear behind the curtains.

Morgan made straight for the younger chit, so he went and sat beside the elder. He'd paid this kind of duty visit to dance partners, the day after a ball, before. But he'd never realised how frustrating they could be if a fellow was serious about pursuing a female. You couldn't engage in meaningful conversation with teacups and macaroons being thrust under your nose every five minutes. Not that he'd had much success in the field of conversation when he had got her to himself.

'We hope you will permit us to take your lovely daughters out tomorrow,' Morgan was saying. Havelock scowled. He didn't want to take either of them anywhere.

The girls looked at each other. Then their heads swivelled towards the window where Mary was sitting.

'And you, too, Miss Carpenter, of course,' said Havelock, taking his cue from them. Morgan had been right. Man-hungry they might be, but they weren't totally ruthless in their pursuit of prey. They were willing to offer Miss Carpenter a share in their spoils.

'Oh, no,' said Miss Carpenter, blushing. 'Really, I don't think...'

'Nonsense, Mary,' said her aunt briskly. 'It will do you the world of good to get out in the fresh air.'

Her brows rose in disbelief. Since rain was lashing at the windowpane, he could hardly blame her.

'It isn't really the season for driving in the park, now, is it,' said Morgan with just a hint of a smile. 'I was thinking more in the lines of visiting somewhere like Westminster Abbey.'

Westminster Abbey? Was the fellow mad? Walking about looking at a bunch of grisly tombs? How was he going to find out anything, except whether the girl knew her kings and queens, by taking her to Westminster Abbey?

'It is so kind of you,' said the girl he was sitting next to, with a flutter of eyelashes up at Morgan, 'to think of taking us all out to see the sights. And Mary would love that, wouldn't you, Mary? She hasn't seen anything of London at all.'

Before Miss Carpenter had the chance to voice her horror at the prospect of being dragged out on an expedition to examine a lot of mouldering tombs, the door flew open and a boy, who looked as if he was about eight or nine years old, and was covered in flour, burst in.

'Mother, Mother, you have to come see...'

'Will, how many times have I told you,' shrieked Mrs Pargetter, 'not to come barging in here when we have callers?'

At the same moment, Miss Carpenter leapt from her chair and cut off his headlong dash into the room by dint of grabbing him about the waist.

She alone of the four women in the room was smiling at him.

'You're all over flour, Will,' she pointed out as he looked up at her in bewilderment. 'You don't want to spoil your sisters' pretty clothes, do you?'

She didn't seem to care about her own clothes, though. There was a little boy-shaped smudge on her skirts and a white handprint on her sleeve.

'No, 'spose not,' he said grudgingly, rubbing his twitching nose with the back of one hand, making him twice as likely to sneeze. 'But you've just got to see...'

'Come on,' said Mary, taking his dough-encrusted hand in hers. 'You can show me whatever it is that's got you so fired up. And later, when these visitors have gone, I'm sure your mama will want to see, as well.'

The boy glared at him, then at Morgan, then turned his floury little nose up at his sisters, as though roundly condemning them for considering the state of their clothes more important than whatever exciting development had occurred in the kitchens.

'Oh, thank you, Mary,' said her aunt.

'Not at all,' she replied, with what looked suspiciously like heartfelt relief.

* * *

'Did you see that?' he asked Morgan later, as they were going down the front steps. 'Her reaction to the floury boy?'

'Indeed I did,' he replied. 'Another item on your list ticked off. Or two, perhaps. She's not totally selfish and appears to be kind to children. Unless...well, I suppose she could have been using the child to make her escape.'

'Blast.' He peered out from under the front porch into the teeming rain. 'She might not have been thinking of the child at all. She might have just wanted an excuse to bolt. And she might well have given him a good scolding for spoiling her gown, once she was safely out of our sight. You see, that's the trouble with women. They put on a mask in public that makes you think they have the nature of an angel, but it comes straight off when they think nobody's watching. If only there was some way I could be sure of getting a genuine reaction from her.'

'Our trip to the Abbey tomorrow would be a perfect opportunity,' said Morgan as they dashed across the pavement into his waiting carriage, 'to set up some kind of scene,' he said, wrenching open the door, 'where she will be obliged to react without thinking too much about it.'

In the time it took Lord Havelock to get into the carriage as well and slam the door on the filthy weather, he'd gone from wanting to tell Morgan he hadn't been serious—for what kind of man deliberately set a trap to expose a lady's faults?—to realising that too much was riding on his making a successful match, in the shortest possible time, for him to take the conventional route.

So when Morgan said, 'Best if you leave the details to me', he raised no objection.

'I'll stage something that will take you as much by surprise as her,' said Morgan. 'So that if she's clever enough to work out what's afoot, the blame will fall upon me, not you.'

'That's...very decent of you,' he said. And then wondered why Morgan was being so helpful. They'd only met, properly, a couple of nights ago. And Morgan had sneered, and mocked, and generally behaved as though he'd taken him in immediate dislike.

'What's your lay, Morgan?'

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I mean, why are you so keen to get involved in my affairs?’

‘Just what are you accusing me of?’

‘Don’t know. That’s the thing. But it seems dashed smoky to me. When you consider that Chepstow, a man I’ve known all my life, skipped town rather than risk getting tangled with females intent on marriage.’

‘You can’t know that. He could have left town for any number of reasons.’

‘He’s running scared,’ Havelock insisted. ‘He would have bolted from the club after foisting me on to Ashe, if he’d thought he could get away with it.’

Morgan looked out of the window. Sighed. Looked back at Havelock. Lifted his chin so that when he spoke, he did so down his nose.

‘I have a sister,’ he said defiantly. ‘Who is of an age to get married. And I would walk over hot coals rather than see her married to a man like you.’

‘A man like me?’ His voice came out rapier sharp. ‘What, precisely, do you mean by that?’ He was from one of the oldest families in the land. Everyone knew him. He was welcome everywhere. Not a scandalous word had ever been whispered about him.

Except, perhaps, about the duels he’d fought.

Though he’d fought them over matters of honour, not dishonour.

‘A man,’ said Morgan in an equally chilling tone, ‘who won’t love his wife. The last thing I want is for my sister to get drawn into a loveless marriage.’

‘Oh.’ He shrugged. ‘That puts a different complexion on the matter. I have a sister myself. Well, half-sister, to be precise. But even so, I would walk over hot coals for her.’ In fact, that was very nearly what he was doing.

‘So you see why I’m keen to get you off the marriage mart, before she comes to town?’

‘Oh, absolutely. Would do the same myself, if I thought Julia was in danger of getting tangled up with an unsuitable man. Like a shot.’

They nodded at each other with grudging respect.

‘Westminster Abbey, though? Really, Morgan, could you not have thought of somewhere a little more conducive to courtship?’

Morgan’s craggy face relaxed into something resembling a smile. ‘You are the only one thinking in terms of courtship. I have no intention of taking a risk with either of those Pargetter girls. But it will be out of the wind and rain, at all events. And large enough that our two parties may drift apart...’

‘So that I can get Miss Carpenter to myself while you play the elder off against the younger,’ he said. ‘Morgan, you’re as cunning as a fox.’

‘Not really,’ he said diffidently. ‘Just well versed in the ways of women. I have,’ he added with a wry twist to his mouth, ‘two half-sisters, and a stepsister under my guardianship. There’s not much you can tell me about tears and tantrums, scenes staged to persuade me to do something against my better judgement, campaigns designed to wear a man down...’

‘I get the picture,’ he said with an appreciative shudder. ‘You clearly know exactly how the female mind works.’ And thank God for it. And for Morgan’s willingness to see him safely married before his own sister came to town for her Season.

* * *

‘Come on, Mary,’ Dotty urged. ‘That’s Mr Morgan and Lord Havelock knocking on the front door now and you haven’t even chosen which bonnet you’re going to wear.’

The girls, determined they should all look their best for this outing with the most eligible men it had ever been their good fortune to come across, had spent the previous evening, and the best part of this morning, ransacking their wardrobe for items to lend Mary.

‘The brown velvet,’ said Lotty firmly, ramming the bonnet on to Mary’s head. ‘Sober colour, to suit your sense of what you should be wearing for mourning, yet the bronze satin rose just takes the

plainness off. And if you say you don't care what you look like one more time,' she said, tying the ribbons deftly under her chin, 'I shall go off into strong hysterics.'

There was no arguing with the sisters. And if she persisted, she was afraid she was going to take the shine off their own pleasure in the outing.

Resigned to her fate, Mary trailed the girls down the stairs, hanging back while they launched themselves with great gusto, this time, at both of the gentlemen who'd come to take them out.

For Mr Pargetter, upon hearing Lord Havelock's name, had divulged that though he was only a viscount, and never likely to be an earl, he was very well-to-do.

While that information had sent his daughters into raptures, it had just made Mary wonder, again, what on earth he'd been doing at such an unfashionable event as the Crimmers' annual Advent ball. If he was as wealthy as Mr Pargetter thought, he couldn't have been searching for an heiress. She peered up at him, perplexed, as he handed her into the carriage. Could he possibly be thinking of going into politics? Perhaps he'd decided to mingle with the kind of men whose votes he would have to canvass and find out what they thought about various issues. Climbing boys, for instance.

Only, that didn't explain why he'd wasted so much time with her, when he could have been mingling with the men, who were the ones who had the votes.

It was only when he smiled at her that she realised she'd been staring at him with a puzzled frown all the while he'd been taking his own seat opposite her.

Swiftly, she averted her gaze and peered intently out of the window. She had to stop making conjectures about what drove Lord Havelock and make the most of her first foray out of the immediate vicinity of Bloomsbury to see if she could spot an employment agency. But no matter how she strained her eyes, she simply couldn't make out what might be engraved on any of the brass door plates of the buildings they passed. And it wasn't the kind of thing she could ask.

Lotty and Dotty wouldn't understand her desire for independence. The yearning to be able to stand on her own two feet and not have to rely on a man for anything.

Though at least they weren't making any attempt to include her in the flirtatious sallies they were directing at Mr Morgan and Lord Havelock. They'd drawn the line at getting her dressed up smartly and practically bundling her into the carriage.

And so intent were they on dazzling the two gentlemen that they didn't appear to notice when she started lagging behind them the minute they got inside the Abbey.

She'd started hanging back more out of habit than anything, but before long she was craning her neck in genuine awe at the roof, wondering how the builders had managed to get stone looking like acres of starched lace. She barely noticed their chatter gradually fading into the distance.

'Miss Carpenter?'

Lord Havelock was standing watching her, a concerned expression on his face. And she realised she ought to have made an effort, for once, to stay part of the group. Loitering here, obliging him to wait for her, might have made it look as if she wanted to be alone with him. And she didn't want him thinking that!

'It has just occurred to me,' he said, preventing her from stammering any of the excuses that leapt to mind, 'that it wasn't particularly tactful of us, was it, to arrange an outing to a place like this. With you so recently bereaved?'

Goodness. It wasn't like a man to consider a woman's feelings.

'I can clearly recall how it felt to lose my own mother,' he said, when she carried on gaping at him in complete shock. 'I was only about...well, a similar age to the floury boy of yesterday...'

'You mean Will?' The mention of her favourite cousin brought a smile to her lips without her having to make any effort whatever.

Lord Havelock smiled in response, looking very relieved. It was a warning that she really ought to make more effort to conceal her thoughts, if even a stranger could tell she was blue-devilled.

'You like the boy?'

‘He’s a little scamp,’ she said fondly. ‘The hope of the family, being the only surviving male, you see, and hopelessly indulged.’

‘Hmm.’ He crooked his arm and she laid her hand on his sleeve for the second time. The strength of his arm wasn’t as alarming this time. Perhaps because he’d shown her several kindnesses. Besides, if they walked swiftly, they could soon catch up with her cousins and Mr Morgan.

Only, how could she get him to walk faster, when he seemed set on strolling along at a snail’s pace?

‘But to return to your own loss,’ he said. ‘The one thing I would not have wanted to do, in the weeks immediately following my own mother’s funeral, was spend an afternoon wandering through a lot of tombs.’

‘Oh? But this is different,’ she said. ‘These tombs are all of very grand people. Not in the least like the simple grassy plot in the churchyard where my mother was laid to rest. No...this is...is history. I confess, I didn’t really want to come here. But now we are here...’

His face brightened. ‘Would you care to have a look at Shakespeare’s monument, then? I believe it is this way,’ he said, indicating an aisle that branched away from the direction the rest of the party were headed.

‘Oh, um...’ She couldn’t very well object, not when she’d just claimed to have an interest in old tombs, could she?

And what could possibly happen to her in a church, anyway?

‘Just a quick look, before we join the others,’ she said. ‘I don’t expect I shall have leisure to do much sightseeing, before much longer, and I would—’

She broke off, flushed and curled into herself again. She’d almost let slip that she was only going to stay with the Pargetters until she could find a paid position. What was it about this man that kept on tempting her to share confidences? It was time she deflected attention away from herself. It shouldn’t be too hard. All she’d have to do would be to ask him about himself. Once a man started talking about himself, nothing short of a riot would stop him.

‘You said you lost your own mother at a very young age. That must have been very hard for you.’

‘Oh, my father pretty soon made sure I had another one,’ he said with evident bitterness.

She wished she hadn’t said anything now. It was clearly a painful topic for him. And though she racked her brains, she couldn’t think of anything to say to undo the awkwardness she’d caused. An awkwardness that resulted in them walking the entire length of the south transept in silence.

‘What did you mean, Miss Carpenter,’ he eventually said, once they’d reached their destination, ‘about not having leisure to do much sightseeing?’

Oh, drat the man. Why did he have to keep asking such personal questions? He couldn’t really be interested. Besides, she had no intention of admitting that she wasn’t totally happy to reside with the Pargetters. Especially not now, when she could see Dotty and Lotty sauntering towards them. They’d been so kind to her. She couldn’t possibly hurt them by broadcasting the fact she wanted to leave.

‘Oh, look,’ she exclaimed, to create a diversion. ‘Sheridan!’

‘What?’

She pointed to the nearest monument. ‘Only fancy him being buried here. And Chaucer. My goodness!’

He dutifully examined the plaques to which she was pointing, though from the set of his lips, he wasn’t really interested.

‘Hi! You, boy! Stop!’

Mary whirled in the direction of the cry, shocked to hear anyone daring to raise their voice in the reverent atmosphere of the ancient building, and saw Mr Morgan shaking his fist at a raggedy urchin, who was running in their direction.

Lord Havelock let go of her arm and grabbed the boy by the collar when he would have darted past.

The urchin squirmed in his grip. Lashed out with a foot. Lord Havelock twisted his fingers into the material of the boy's collar and held him at arm's length, with apparent ease, so that the boy's feet, and swinging fists, couldn't land any blows on anyone.

The boy promptly let loose with a volley of words that had Lord Havelock giving him a shake.

'That's enough of that,' he said severely. 'Those aren't the kind of words you should ever utter when ladies are present, leave alone when you're in church. I beg his pardon, Miss Carpenter,' he said, darting her an apologetic look.

She was on the verge of admitting she'd heard far worse coming from her own father's lips, but Morgan was almost upon them, his beetling brows drawn down in anger. And her brief urge to confide in anyone turned tail and fled.

'What's to do, Morgan?'

'The little b—boy has lifted my purse,' Mr Morgan snarled. Reaching down, he ran his hands over the squirming boy's jacket, evading all the lad's swings from his grubby little fists.

A verger came bustling over just as Mr Morgan recovered his property. 'My apologies, my lords, ladies,' he said, dipping into something between a bow and a curtsy. 'I cannot think how a person like this managed to get in here.'

Dotty and Lotty came upon the scene, arm in arm as though needing each other for support.

'If you will permit me,' said the verger, reaching out a hand towards the boy, who had ceased struggling as though realising it was pointless when he was so vastly outnumbered. 'I will see that he is handed over to the proper authorities.'

'Yes, see that you do,' snarled Morgan as the verger clamped his pudgy hand round the boy's wrist. 'It comes to something when a man cannot even safely walk through a church without getting his pockets picked.'

'He will be suitably punished for his audacity, attacking and robbing innocent persons upon hallowed ground, never you fear, sir,' declared the verger.

Mary's heart was pounding. Could Mr Morgan really be so cruel as to have him dragged off to prison?

Lord Havelock, she suddenly noticed, hadn't relinquished his hold on the boy's collar.

'Hold on,' he said. 'Morgan, this isn't... I mean, I think this has gone far enough.'

The two men glared at each other, locked in a silent battle of wills.

The boy, sensing his fate hung in the balance, knuckled at his eyes, and wailed, 'Oh, please don't send me to gaol, sirs. For lifting a purse as fat as yours, I'd like as not get me neck stretched. And I wouldn't have lifted it if I weren't so hungry.'

'A likely tale,' said the verger, giving the boy's arm a little tug. But Lord Havelock kept his fingers stubbornly twisted into the boy's clothing.

Mary saw that Dotty and Lotty were clinging to each other, clearly appalled by the situation, but too scared of offending Mr Morgan to say what they really thought.

Well, she didn't care what he thought of her. She couldn't stand by and let a child suffer such a horrid fate.

'For shame,' she cried, rounding on Mr Morgan. 'How can you want to send a child to prison, when his only crime is to be hungry?'

'He lifted my purse....'

'Which he can see you can spare! You are so rich, I don't suppose you have ever known what it is to be hungry, to be desperate, to have nowhere to go.'

'Now, now, miss,' said the verger. 'We don't want raised voices in here. Please moderate your tone....'

'Moderate my tone!' She whirled on the plump, cassocked man. 'Your creed demands you feed the hungry, not toss them in prison. You should be offering him food and shelter, and help, not punishing him for being in want!'

Lotty and Dotty stared at her as though she had gone quite mad. Actually, everyone was staring at her. She pressed her hands to her cheeks, shocked at herself for speaking with such fervour, and disrespect, to a man of the cloth. For raising her voice at all. Whatever had come over her?

But then, the shocked silence that echoed round them was broken by Lord Havelock's crisp, biting voice.

'Quite,' he said with a decisive nod. And then turned to the verger. 'And I really don't care for the way you just spoke to Miss Carpenter. Look, Morgan, you have your property back, can you not...let him go?'

Mary took a step that placed her next to him. Side by side they faced the rest of the group.

He really was rather a...rather a wonderful person. She'd been able to tell he hadn't liked the notion of throwing the pickpocket in gaol, from the way he'd refused to relinquish him into the verger's custody. But she'd never expected him to spring to her defence, as well. It was just about the most...amazing, surprising thing that had ever happened to her.

'Thank you, my lord,' she breathed, darting him a shy glance. And noting that the way the sunlight glanced off his bright bronze curls made him look like... Well, with his strong hand clamped firmly behind the little boy's scrawny neck, he could have been a model for a guardian angel. The rather fearsome kind who protected the weak and downtrodden against oppression.

'Not at all, Miss Carpenter,' he replied grimly. 'I believe you have the right of it. This boy's nothing but a bag of bones. When,' he said, turning his attention to the dirty scrap of humanity he held in one fist, 'did you last have anything to eat?'

The boy squinted up at him. 'Can't remember. Not yesterday, that's for sure. Day before, mebbe...'

At that, even Morgan looked taken aback. 'Look,' he began, 'I had no idea...'

The boy's face twisted into an expression of contempt. 'Your sort never do. She's right...' he jerked his head in Mary's direction '...got no idea what it feels like to have nuffink. Or what you'll do just to earn a penny or two....'

'If you had the means to earn an honest living, would you, though?' Havelock shook him by the coat collar. 'Or would you just keep right on thieving?'

The boy snorted in derision. 'Who'd give me a job? I ain't got no trade. No learnin' neither.'

'If you can learn to pick pockets, you can learn an honest trade,' said Lord Havelock witheringly. Then he frowned. 'Don't suppose anyone would want to take the risk, though.' He closed his eyes, drew a deep breath and sighed it out.

'My town house could probably use a boot boy,' he said. 'You'd get a bed to sleep in, meals provided and a wage, if you kept your nose clean.'

The boy promptly straightened up and wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

'I got no wiper, but I'd try and keep it clean if I got all what you said.'

'Morgan? Will you let the matter drop if I take charge of the boy?'

'I... Well, if you are prepared to attempt to rehabilitate him, I suppose I can do no less.'

Dotty and Lotty heaved a sigh, showing they were as relieved as Mary to see the boy escape the full force of the law.

'Then if you will excuse me, ladies,' he said, bowing first to her cousins, and then to her, 'I had better take him there myself. Straight away. And hope that his arrival won't induce my butler to leave,' he grumbled.

He was scowling as he led the boy down the aisle. He didn't slacken his hold on his collar, either. Which was probably wise. Who knew but if he let the lad go, he wouldn't run straight back to whatever gutter he'd sprung from, and the associates who'd probably led him into his life of crime in the first place?

Damn Morgan for foisting this guttersnipe on him. Obliging him to leave, just when he was beginning to coax Miss Carpenter out of her shell.

Still, he supposed this little test had proved that she was capable of coming out of it when sufficiently roused. She'd been shaking like a leaf, but she'd managed to speak out against what was clearly a gross injustice.

For the sake of a child.

He pulled up short, turned and glanced back at her.

To find her gazing back at him, with a rapt expression on her face.

She hid it at once, by bowing her head and turning away, but he'd caught something in her look that had been encouraging. It was approval. And warmth. And, not to put too fine a point on it, something that verged on downright hero worship.

There would be no trouble getting to speak to her next time he paid a call. He could use the pretext of telling her how the boy had settled in to his new life. And take it from there.

'I want me penny,' said the boy, the moment they emerged from the great church door into the drizzle that they'd gone inside to escape.

'Your what?'

'My penny,' said the boy. 'That other cove said as how you'd give me a penny if I lifted his purse, then ran straight into you and let you catch me.'

'I,' said Havelock firmly, 'am not going to give you a penny.'

'I might have known. You swindler...'

'I'm going to give you something better,' he interrupted.

'Oh, yeah?' The boy's face brightened.

'Yes. I'm going to give you that job I promised. A man has to keep his word, you see? Especially when he gives it to a lady.'

Chapter Four

Overnight the drizzle drifted away, leaving the sky cloudless. When the girls awoke, there was a layer of frosted ice on the inside of their bedroom window.

They shivered, red-nosed, into their clothes and rushed downstairs to the warmth of the parlour.

The moment she got downstairs though, Mary wished it wasn't quite so cold in their room, or she could have found some excuse to stay there. For her aunt was still upset with her over what the girls had told her of their outing to Westminster Abbey.

'I cannot think what came over you,' said Aunt Pargetter as she poured Mary's tea. 'To have raised your voice to Mr Morgan...'

'I am sorry, truly sorry, if my behaviour has offended you.'

'It didn't offend me,' said Lotty, wrapping her fingers round the cup that contained her own, freshly poured, steaming hot tea.

'Nor me,' added Dotty. 'I only wish I'd had the courage to speak up for the boy when that nasty verger threatened him with gaol. He couldn't have been any older than Will.'

'It wasn't a matter of courage,' Mary protested. She wasn't a courageous person. Not at all. 'I just...' She shook her head. To be truthful, she had no idea why she'd picked that particular moment to finally speak her mind. She just... She'd had to endure so much, in silence, for so long. She knew what it felt like to have nothing. To be at the mercy of strangers. And yesterday, it was as though a lifetime of resenting injustice, of knowing that the strong naturally oppressed the weak and trampled down the poor for being of no account, all came to a head and erupted without, for once, her giving a fig for the consequences.

'I just couldn't help myself.'

'I'm not denying you were right to feel as you did,' said Aunt Pargetter. 'But to risk driving away such an eligible suitor, by openly challenging him like that...'

'Mary did just as she ought,' said Mr Pargetter, folding up his newspaper and getting to his feet. 'The consequences must take care of themselves.'

A tense silence hovered over the breakfast table after he'd left the room. Until Dotty cleared her throat.

'You know,' she said, 'it didn't do Mary any harm in Lord Havelock's eyes.'

'No,' added Lotty. 'He looked at her as though he thoroughly approved of her standing up for the boy.'

'Hmmph,' said her aunt. 'Well, I suppose that is something.'

And though her aunt let the subject drop, the atmosphere remained tense throughout the rest of the morning, as they all waited to see if either of the gentlemen would call upon the house again.

Either Dotty or Lotty kept a vigil by the window, while Mary kept close to the fire, steadily working her way through a basket of mending.

Until at length, Lotty let out a squeal of excitement.

'It's him! Them! Both of them! They've just got out of their carriage!'

Her cousins rushed to the mirror to check their appearance, before dashing to the sofa and striking relaxed poses. Which were only slightly marred by the way their chests rose and fell so rapidly.

It puzzled Mary to see the girls greet Mr Morgan with such enthusiasm, when his callous behaviour the day before had shocked them all so much.

She could have understood it if they'd flown to Lord Havelock's side, and showered him with praise, and pulled him down on to the sofa between them.

Instead, he was left standing just inside the door, watching them with a kind of amused disbelief.

Couldn't they see how...superior he was to Mr Morgan, in every way? When she thought of the way he'd lifted that boy out of the verger's reach...

Just as she was reflecting that she'd never seen a man use his physical strength to protect the defenceless before, he turned, caught her watching him and smiled at her.

Her stomach gave a funny little lurch. Her heart sped up.

She hastily lowered her head to stare at the sewing that lay in her lap.

She wasn't interested in him, not in the way Lotty and Dotty were interested in Mr Morgan. She just...she just couldn't deny it was flattering to have such a handsome, personable young man smile at her like that.

She hadn't been able to forget the look he'd shot her as he'd left the Abbey with the pickpocket still held firmly by his collar, either. Or the feeling that had come over her when he'd defended her from the verger's censure. It had washed over her again, several times the night before, while she'd been trying to get to sleep.

And it positively surged through her when he took a chair, carried it to her side and sat down.

'I bring good news,' declared Mr Morgan once the flurry of greetings had died down. 'The Serpentine has frozen over. Hard enough for us to go skating, if you ladies would enjoy it?'

Dotty and Lotty beamed and clapped their hands, saying what a wonderful idea it was. Just as though the incident the day before had never happened.

'You will be coming with us, won't you, Miss Carpenter?' said Lord Havelock, with a hopeful smile.

She shook her head.

'I cannot skate,' she said with what felt suspiciously like regret.

Regret? No! She didn't want to spend any more time than she had to with these two men. They both made her uncomfortable—Mr Morgan because of his harsh manner and Lord Havelock because of the tendency she had to say far more than she should when she was with him. And for feeling that she could say it to him. And most of all—she had to be honest with herself—because she found him so...attractive. Which made him downright dangerous.

'I will teach you,' said Lord Havelock, somehow turning up the warmth in his smile in such a way that she wished it wouldn't be such a terrible idea to draw closer to him and warm herself at it.

'Oh, Mary, please! You have to go,' begged Dotty.

‘Yes. For we cannot go out and leave you here on your own,’ pointed out Lotty.

And they both really, really wanted to go.

There was nothing for it but to surrender with good grace.

With cries of glee, the girls took her upstairs to ransack their wardrobe again, going back down only when all three of them were swathed in gloves, scarves, boots and several extra layers of petticoats.

Her cousins sat one on either side of Mr Morgan in the carriage, which meant that she and Lord Havelock were sat next to each other, with their backs to the horses.

Once they’d tucked luxurious fur rugs round their legs, they set off. Even though the carriage was very well sprung, and they had far more room than the three squeezed together on the opposite seat, every so often the jolting of the carriage meant that their legs bumped. Whenever she felt the warmth of Lord Havelock’s thigh pressing against hers beneath the concealment of the fur, everything else faded into the background. The chatter of her cousins, the buildings at which she was pretending to look through the window—none of it reached her senses. Once or twice, he made an attempt to speak to her, but she wasn’t able to give a coherent reply. It was a relief when they arrived, and the gentlemen got out so they could help the ladies down.

Lotty and Dotty stuck close to Mr Morgan, which meant Lord Havelock was left to escort Mary.

She laid her gloved hand on his outstretched arm and let him lead her to the frozen expanse of water, besides which several enterprising people had set up various stalls to earn what money they could from this unexpected cold spell.

The men hired skates from a booth where a ruddy-cheeked woman helped to fit them over their boots.

Dotty and Lotty rushed on to the ice, shrieking with laughter and clutching at each other for support as they almost fell over. Mr Morgan went to their rescue, offering them one arm each. Clinging to him, the trio set out, wobbling and giggling, across the frozen lake.

Which left her alone with Lord Havelock.

‘Come, you need not be afraid,’ he said with a sincerity that made her wish she could trust him. Made her wish she could let go of her habitual distrust of the entire male sex, just once.

‘I won’t let you fall.’

It wasn’t falling she was worried about. It was the increasing frequency with which she was having foolish, feminine thoughts about him. Foolish, feminine reactions, too.

She gave Lotty and Dotty a wistful look. They weren’t tying themselves up in knots about the wisdom of plastering themselves to a man and relying on his strength and balance to keep them from falling over. They were just enjoying themselves.

There were skaters of all ages, shapes and sizes twirling about on the ice. All looking as though they were having a splendid time. Life didn’t offer many opportunities like this, to try something new and exciting. And the ice probably wouldn’t last all that long. She might never get another chance to have a go at skating.

When had she last let herself go, the way they were doing? Living in the moment?

Having fun?

When had she got into the habit of being too afraid to reach out and attempt to take hold of the slightest chance at happiness?

She reached out and took the hand Lord Havelock was patiently holding out to her, vowing that today, at least, she would leave fear on the bank, launch out on to the ice and see what happened.

What happened was that the moment she set her feet on to the slippery surface, she very nearly fell over.

With a shriek that sounded remarkably similar to the ones erupting from her cousins’ lips, she grabbed at Lord Havelock, who was maintaining his own stance with what looked like total ease.

‘I hadn’t thought it would be so hard to just stand upright,’ she said. ‘How do you manage to make it look so effortless?’

He shrugged. ‘I’ve skated a few times before. But I had my share of falls the first time I tried it, I can tell you. If you have any sense of balance, you’ll get the hang of it in no time.’

Mary made a tentative effort to let go of his arm. Each of her legs promptly attempted to go in opposite directions. How vexing. It was only by clinging to Lord Havelock that she could even manage to stay upright.

‘Perhaps you will fare better once we get going,’ he suggested. And then, without waiting for her agreement, made a move that somehow set them both gliding away from the shore.

‘See? That’s better, is it not?’

‘Not,’ she gasped, clinging to his arm for dear life. She had no control over the situation at all. Whenever she attempted to wrest it back, her feet went skittering off all over the place, resulting in her having to clutch at him with increasing desperation.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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