The Earl's Untouched Bride

Annie Burrows

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ANNIE BURROWS
The Earl's Untouched Bride

Аннотация

Fearing a forced betrothal with a man known for his cruelty, Heloise Bergeron throws herself on the mercy of Charles Fawley, Earl of Walton. He believes himself attracted to her younger, beautiful sister, so what is he doing entertaining thoughts of marriage to the plain, quiet Heloise?But marry her he does. Returning to England with a convenient wife, who inspires a very inconvenient desire, Charles is about to discover just how untouched his French bride really is….

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Charles had taken her completely by surprise.

She didn't know what to do. No man had ever kissed her before.

But she didn't want to evade Charles, she discovered after only a fleeting moment of shock. What she really wanted, she acknowledged, relaxing into his hold, was to put her arms about him and kiss him back. If only she knew how!

Uttering a little whimper of pleasure, Heloise raised shaky hands from her lap and tentatively reached out for him.

"My God," he panted, breaking free. "I never meant to do that!"

The fierce surge of desire that even now was having a visible effect on his anatomy was an unexpected bonus. When the time was right, he was going to enjoy teaching his wife all there was to know about loving….

The Earl's Untouched Bride

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To my parents, who taught me to love reading.

Praise for Annie Burrows

"Annie Burrows is an exceptional writer of historical romance who sprinkles her stories with unforgettable characters, terrific period detail and wicked repartee."

—Cataromance

THE EARL'S UNTOUCHED BRIDE
ANNIE BURROWS

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Author Note

Recently I had the opportunity to look at some cover pictures from Harlequin Mills & Boon's very earliest publications. As a lover of all things historical, I found it fascinating that it was fairly easy to date each book, simply by the style of the cover art. The 1920s and 30s was replaced by a more patriotic and earnest tone during the war years. Then came a profusion of bright colors which reflected the hopes of a nation emerging from austerity and rationing.

Whatever decade we live in, though, one thing is certain. Though our lifestyles may change, the deepest needs of each human being remain the same. Each of us longs to feel valued—loved for ourselves, just as we are.

The hero and heroine of The Earl's Untouched Bride are both painfully aware of their own deficiencies. So aware that it is hard for either of them to believe another person can truly love them. I hope you enjoy reading their story, which is set against the turbulent times France and England had to face when Napoleon escaped from Elba and tried to reestablish his empire.

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Chapter One

Giddings opened the door to find His Lordship standing upon the step, his face set in such rigid lines a shiver went down his spine. It was a relief when the Earl of Walton looked straight through him as he handed over his hat and coat, turning immediately towards the door to the salon. Thank God young Conningsby had taken it into his head to pass out on one of the sofas in there, instead of staggering back to his own lodgings the previous night. It was far better that it should be a man who could answer back, rather than a hapless member of staff, who became the butt of His Lordship's present mood.

But Charles Algernon Fawley, the ninth Earl of Walton, ignored Conningsby too. Striding across the room to the sideboard, he merely unstoppered a crystal decanter, pouring its entire contents into the last clean tumbler upon the tray.

Conningsby opened one eye warily, and rolled it in the Earl's direction. 'Breakfast at Tortoni's?' he grated hoarsely.

Charles tossed the glass of brandy back in one go, and reached for the decanter again.

'Don't look as though you enjoyed it much,' Conningsby observed, wincing as he struggled to sit up.

'No.' As the Earl realised the decanter was empty, his fingers curled round its neck as though he wished he could strangle it. 'And if you dare say I told you so…'

‘Wouldn’t dream of it, my lord. But what I will say is—’

‘No. I listened to all you had to say last night, and, while I am grateful for your concern, my decision remains the same. I am not going to slink out of Paris with my tail between my legs like some whipped cur. I will not have it said that some false, painted jilt has made the slightest impact on my heart. I am staying until the lease on this apartment expires, not one hour sooner. Do you hear me?’

Conningsby raised a feeble hand to his brow. ‘Only too clearly.’ He eyed the empty decanter ruefully. ‘And while you’re proving to the whole world that you don’t care a rap about your betrothed running off with some penniless artist, I don’t suppose you could get your man to rustle up some coffee, could you?’

‘Engraver,’ snapped the Earl as he tugged viciously on the bell-pull.

Conningsby sank back into the sofa cushions, waving a languid hand to dismiss the profession of the Earl’s betrothed’s lover as the irrelevance it was. ‘Judging by the expression on your face, the gossip-mongers have already been at work. It’s not going to get any easier for you…’

‘My mood now has nothing whatever to do with the fickle Mademoiselle Bergeron,’ he snarled. ‘It is her countrymen’s actions which could almost induce me to leave this vile charnel house that calls itself a civilised city and return to London, where the most violent emotion I am likely to suffer is acute boredom.’

‘But it was boredom you came to Paris to escape from!’

He let the inaccuracy of that remark pass. Staying in London, with his crippled half-brother, had simply become intolerable. Seeking refuge down at Wycke had not been a viable alternative, either. There was no respite from what ailed him there. The very opulence of the vast estate only served as a painful reminder of the injustice that had been perpetrated so that he could inherit it all.

Paris had seemed like the perfect solution. Since Bonaparte had abdicated, it had become extremely fashionable to hop across the Channel to see the sights.

Leaning one arm on the mantelpiece, he remarked, with an eloquent shudder, 'I will never complain of that particular malady again, I do assure you.'

'What is it?' Conningsby asked. 'What else has happened?'

'Another murder.'

'Du Mauriac again, I take it?' Conningsby's face was grim. The French officer was gaining a reputation for provoking hot-headed young Englishmen to duel with him, and dispatching them with a ruthless efficiency gleaned from his years of active service. And then celebrating his kill by breakfasting on broiled kidneys at Tortoni's. 'Who was it this morning? Not anybody we know, I hope?'

'On the contrary. The poor fellow he slaughtered before breakfast today was a subaltern by the name of Lennox.' At Conningsby's frown, Charles explained, 'Oh, there is no reason why you should know him. He was typical of all the others who

have fallen by that butcher's sword. An obscure young man with no powerful connections.'

'Then how…?'

'He served in the same regiment as my unfortunate half-brother. He was one of those young men who constantly paraded through my London house, attempting to rouse him to some semblance of normality.' Sometimes it seemed as if an entire regiment must have marched through his hall at one time or another, to visit the poor wreck of a man who had once been a valiant soldier. Though few of them paid a second visit after encountering his blistering rejection. Captain Fawley did not want to be an object of pity.

Pity! If only he knew! If he, the ninth Earl, had been injured so badly, there would be not one well-wisher hastening to his bedside in an attempt to cheer him. On the contrary, it would be vultures who would begin to hover, eager to see who among them would gain his title, his wealth…

'At least he was a soldier, then.'

'He never stood a chance against a man of Du Mauriac's stamp, and the blackguard knew it! He sat there laughing about the fact that the boy did not look as though he needed to shave more than once a week! And sneered at his milk-white countenance as he faced him…God, the boy must have been sick with fright.'

Charles smote one fist into his palm. 'If only Lennox had asked me to be his second, I would have found a way to stop it!'

Conningsby eyed him with surprise. The only thing he had known about the Earl before his arrival in Paris was that, upon coming of age, he had caused a ripple through society by ousting his guardians from his ancestral home and subsequently severing all connections with that branch of his family. He had not known of a single man who dared claim friendship with the chillingly insular young lord. In Conningsby's capacity as a junior aide at the English embassy, he had dutifully helped him to find these lodgings in the Rue de Richelieu, and generally smoothed his entry into the social scene. It had been quite a surprise, the previous night, when the Earl had reacted as any man might on discovering the beautiful Parisienne to whom he had just proposed had run off with her lover. He had gone straight home to drown his sorrows. Though his head had proved stronger than Conningsby's.

'Couldn't have backed down, though, could he?' he ventured sympathetically. 'Wouldn't have wanted to live with an accusation of cowardice hanging round his neck.'

'Somebody should have found some way to save Lennox,' the Earl persisted. 'If only…'

He was prevented from saying anything further when the butler opened the door. 'There is a visitor for you, my lord.'

'I am not receiving,' Charles growled.

Giddings cleared his throat, and eyed Conningsby warily, before saying diffidently, 'The young person insists you would wish to see her.' He stepped forward and, in a voice intended

only for his master, said, 'She says her name is Mademoiselle Bergeron.'

Charles felt as though he had been punched in the stomach.

While he struggled to draw breath, Conningsby, who had remarkably acute hearing, rose gingerly to his feet. 'She has in all probability come to beg your forgiveness…'

'She shall not have it!' Charles turned to grasp the mantelpiece with both hands, his shoulders hunched. 'I shall not take her back. If she prefers some artist to me, then she may go to him and welcome!'

'But there may have been some dreadful mistake. Let's face it, my lord, the Bergeron household last night was in such a state of turmoil, who knows what may have been going on?'

They had gone to escort Felice to a ball, where the engagement was to have been announced. They had found Monsieur Bergeron slumped in his chair, as though all the stuffing had been knocked out of him, and Madame Bergeron suffering from a noisy bout of hysterics upon the sofa. The only clear piece of information either of them had been able to glean was that she had turned off the wicked maidservant who had aided and abetted her ungrateful daughter to elope with a nobody when she could have married an English earl.

The Earl was breathing rather rapidly. 'I am not safe to see her.' He turned back to face the room, his entire face leached of colour. 'I may well attempt to strangle her.'

'Not you,' Conningsby assured him.

The Earl looked at him sharply, then straightened up. 'No,' he said, his face freezing into a chillingly aloof mask. 'Not I.' He went to one of the fireside chairs, sat down, and crossed one leg nonchalantly over the other. 'You may show Mademoiselle Bergeron in, Giddings,' he said, keeping his eyes fixed on the door.

Conningsby got the peculiar impression he had just become invisible. And, though he could tell the Earl would not care one way or another, he had no intention of becoming a witness to the impending confrontation. It was one thing helping a man to drown his sorrows in a companionable way. Hell, what man hadn't been in a similar predicament at one time or another? But becoming embroiled with some hysterical Frenchwoman, with his head in its present delicate state, was asking too much! He looked wildly round the room for some other means of escape than the door through which Mademoiselle Bergeron would shortly appear. The only other exit appeared to be through the windows.

It took but a second to vault over the sofa on which he'd spent the night and dive through the heavy velvet curtains.

'Mademoiselle Bergeron,' he heard Giddings intone, as he fumbled open the shutter bolts.

Charles experienced a spurt of satisfaction when she paused on the threshold, her gloved hand fluttering to the heavy veil draped from her bonnet.

Instead of rising to his feet, he deliberately leaned back in his

chair and crossed his arms, eyeing her with unremitting coldness. She squared her shoulders, taking one faltering step forward. Then, to his complete astonishment, she broke into a run, flying across the room and landing upon her knees at his feet. Seizing his hand, she pulled it to her face, kissing it through the veil.

Impatiently, he snatched it back. Whatever she had been up to last night, he was not prepared to unbend towards her without a really good explanation. And probably not even then. To feel such strong emotions that they could reduce you to the state of mind where not even copious quantities of alcohol could anaesthetise them was something he did not care to experience again. He was just about to tell her so when she knelt back, lifting the veil from her face.

'Oh, thank you, milord! Thank you for letting me in. I was so afraid! You have no idea how unpleasant it is to walk the streets unescorted with feelings running so high…'

Charles reeled back in his seat. 'You are not…not…'

'Felice? No.' The young woman who knelt before him returned his look rather defiantly. 'I regret the deception, but I did not think you would agree to see anyone but her today. And so I led your butler to believe I was she. And, indeed, the deception was not so very great. You were expecting Mademoiselle Bergeron, and I am Mademoiselle Bergeron…'

'You are entirely the wrong Mademoiselle Bergeron,' he snapped. How could he have mistaken the much shorter and utterly plain Heloise for her beautiful, glamorous, and entirely

captivating younger sister? He couldn't blame the bonnet, though the peak of it did protrude from her face by over a foot, nor the heavy veil that was suspended from it, though it had concealed her features. He had wanted to see Felice, he acknowledged painfully. He had clung to the faint hope that there had been some dreadful mistake, and that she had come to tell him that she wanted no other man but him. And so he had seen what he wanted to see. What kind of fool did that make him?

Heloise swallowed nervously. She had been expecting a little antagonism, but the reality of facing a man whose heart had been broken was altogether more daunting than she had supposed it would be.

'No,' she persisted. 'I do not think you will find that I am when you hear what I have to propose…'

'I cannot imagine what you hope to accomplish by coming here and prostrating yourself in this manner,' he began angrily.

'Oh, no—how could you, when I have not yet explained? But you only need to listen for a very few minutes and I will tell you!' Suddenly very conscious that she was still kneeling like a supplicant at his feet, she glanced about the room.

'May I sit upon one of these so comfortable-looking chairs, my lord? This floor it is most hard, and really I do not see that you can take me at all seriously if I do not make some effort to look more rational. Only I did not know what was to become of me if you did not let me in. I was followed all the way from the Tuileries gardens by a contingent of the National Guard of

the most vile manners. They refused to believe at all that I am a respectable female, merely visiting a friend of the family who also happens to be an English milord, and that they would be entirely sorry for accusing me of the things they did—for why should I not be entirely innocent? Just because you are English, that does not make me a bad person, or unpatriotic at all, even if I am not wearing either the white lily or the violet. If they are going to arrest anyone, it should have been the crowd who were brawling in the gardens, not someone who does not care at all that the emperor has gone, and that a Bourbon sits on the throne. Not but that they got the chance, because your so kind butler permitted me to enter the hall the moment he saw how things were, and even if you would not see me, he said there was a door to the back through the kitchens from which I could return home, after I had drunk a little something to restore my nerves…'

The Earl found he had no defence against the torrent of words that washed over him. She didn't even seem to pause for breath until Giddings returned, bearing a tray upon which was a bottle of Madeira and two glasses.

She'd risen to her feet, removed her bonnet and gloves, and perched on the edge of the chair facing him, twittering all the while like some little brown bird, hopping about and fluffing its plumage before finally roosting for the night.

She smiled and thanked Giddings as she took the proffered drink, but her hand shook so much that she spilled several drops down the front of her coat.

‘I am sorry that you have been offered insults,’ he heard himself saying as she dabbed ineffectually at the droplets soaking into the cloth. ‘But you should have known better than to come to my house alone.’ Far from being the haven for tourists that he had been led to believe, many Parisians were showing a marked hostility to the English. It had started, so he had been reliably informed, when trade embargoes had been lifted and cheap English goods had come on sale again. But tensions were rising between die-hard Bonapartists and supporters of the new Bourbon regime as well. If factions were now brawling in the Tuileries gardens, then Mademoiselle Bergeron might well not be safe to venture out alone. ‘I will have you escorted home…’

‘Oh, not yet!’ she exclaimed, a look of dismay on her face. ‘For you have not heard what I came to say!’

‘I am waiting to hear it,’ he replied dryly. ‘I have been waiting since you walked through the door.’

Heloise drained the contents of her glass and set it down smartly upon the table that Giddings had placed thoughtfully at her elbow.

‘Forgive me. I am so nervous, you see. I tend to babble when I am nervous. Well, I was only nervous when I set out. But then, after the incident in the Tuileries, I became quite scared, and then—’

‘Mademoiselle Bergeron!’ He slapped the arm of his chair with decided irritation. ‘Will you please come to the point?’

‘Oh.’ She gulped, her face growing hot. It was not at all easy

to come to the point with a man as icily furious as the Earl of Walton. In fact, if she wasn't quite so desperate, she would wish she hadn't come here at all. Looking into those chips of ice that he had for eyes, and feeling their contempt for her chilling her to the marrow, Heloise felt what little courage she had left ebb away. Sitting on a chair instead of staying prostrate at his feet had not redressed their positions at all. She still had to look up to meet his forbidding features, for the Earl was quite a tall man. And she had nothing with which to combat his hostility but strength of will. Not beauty, or grace, or cleverness. She had the misfortune to have taken after her mother in looks. While Felice had inherited her father's even features and long-limbed grace, she had got the Corbiere nose, diminutive size, and nondescript colouring. Her only weapon was an idea. But what an idea! If he would only hear her out, it would solve all their difficulties at a stroke!

'It is quite simple, after all,' she declared. 'It is that I think you should marry me instead of Felice.'

She cocked her head to one side as she waited for his response, reminding him of a street sparrow begging for crumbs. Before he could gather his wits, she had taken another breath and set off again.

'I know you must think that this is preposterous just at first. But only think of the advantages!'

'Advantages for whom?' he sneered. He had never thought of little Heloise as a scheming gold-digger before. But then nor had he thought her capable of such fluent speech. Whenever she had

played chaperon for himself and her sister she had been so quiet he had tended to forget she was there at all. He had been quite unguarded, he now recalled with mounting irritation, assuming, after a few half-hearted attempts to draw her out, that she could not speak English very well.

Though the look he sent her was one that had frozen the blood in the veins of full-grown men, Heloise was determined to have her say.

'Why, for you, of course! Unless…Your engagement to Felice has not been announced in England yet, has it? She told me you had not sent any notice to the London papers. And of course in Paris, though everyone thinks they know that you wished to marry Felice, you have only to say, when they see me on your arm instead of my sister, "You will find you are mistaken," in that tone you use for giving an encroaching person a set-down, if anyone should dare to question you, and that will be that!'

'But why, pray, should I wish to say any such thing?'

'So that nobody will know she broke your heart, of course!' Her words, coupled with her look of genuine sympathy, touched a place buried so deep inside him that for years he had been denying its very existence.

'I know how her actions must have bruised your pride, too,' she ploughed on, astonishing him with the accuracy of her observations. Even Conningsby claimed he had not guessed how deep his feelings ran until the night before, when, in his cups, he'd poured out the whole sorry tale. But this girl, of whom he

had never taken much notice, had read him like an open book.

'But this way nobody will ever guess! You are so good at keeping your face frozen, so that nobody can tell what you are truly feeling. You can easily convince everyone that it was my family that wished for the match, and that they put Felice forward, but all the time it was me in whom you were interested, for I am the eldest, or—oh, I am sure you can come up with some convincing reason. For of course they would not believe that you could truly be attracted to me. I know that well! And if any rumours about a Mademoiselle Bergeron have reached as far as London—well, I have already shown you how one Mademoiselle Bergeron may enter a room as another. Nobody else need know it was quite another Mademoiselle Bergeron you had set your sights on. If you marry me, you may walk round Paris with your head held high, and return home with your pride intact!'

'You are talking nonsense. Arrant nonsense!' He sprang from his chair, and paced moodily towards the sideboard. He had ridden out malicious gossip before. He could do so again. 'The connection with your family is severed,' he snapped, grasping the decanter, then slamming it back onto the tray on discovering it was still empty. He was not going to be driven from Paris because a few tattle-mongers had nothing better to talk about than a failed love affair. Nor would anything induce him to betray his hurt by so much as a flicker of an eyelid. 'I see no need to restore it!'

He turned to see her little face crumple. Her shoulders sagged. He braced himself for a further outpouring as he saw her eyes

fill with tears. But she surprised him yet again. Rising to her feet with shaky dignity, she said, 'Then I apologise for intruding on you this morning. I will go now.'

She had reached the door and was fumbling her hands into her gloves when he cried out, 'Wait!' His quarrel was not with her. She had never given him a moment's trouble during the entire time he had been courting Felice. She had never voiced any protest, no matter where they had dragged her, though at times he had been able to tell she had been uncomfortable. All she had done on those occasions was withdraw into the shadows, as though she wished to efface herself from the scene completely. That was more her nature, he realised with a flash of insight. To have come here this morning and voiced that ridiculous proposition must have been the hardest thing for her to do. It had not been only the brush with the National Guard that had made her shake with fright.

He had no right to vent his anger on her. Besides, to let her out alone and unprotected onto the streets was not the act of a gentleman.

'Mademoiselle,' he said stiffly, 'I told you I would ensure you returned to your house safely. Please, won't you sit down again, while I get Giddings to summon a cabriolet?'

'Thank you,' she sighed, leaning back against the door. 'It was not at all pleasant getting here. I had no idea! To think I was glad Maman had turned off Joanne, so that it was an easy matter for me to sneak out without anyone noticing.' She shook her head

ruefully. 'It is true what Papa says. I am a complete imbecile. When I had to pass that crowd in the Tuileries, I knew how stupid I had been. Then to walk right up to the door of an Englishman, on my own, as though I was a woman of no virtue…'

Seeing her tense white face, Charles felt impelled to check the direction of her thoughts.

'Please, sit down on the sofa while you are waiting.'

She did so, noting with a start that her bonnet still lay amongst its cushions. As she picked it up, turning it over in her hands as though it was an object she had never seen before, he continued, 'Whatever prompted you to take such drastic steps to come to my house, mademoiselle? I cannot believe you are so concerned about my wounded pride, or my—' He checked himself before alluding to his allegedly broken heart.

She turned crimson, suddenly becoming very busy untangling the ribbons of her bonnet. Her discomfort brought a sudden suspicion leaping to his mind.

'Never tell me you are in love with me!' The notion that this plain young woman had been harbouring a secret passion for him, while he had been making love to her sister under her very nose, gave him a very uncomfortable feeling. 'I had no idea! I did not think you even liked me!'

Her head flew up, an arrested expression on her face when she detected the tiniest grain of sympathy in the tone of his voice. 'Would you marry me, then, if I said I loved you?' she breathed, her eyes filled with hope. But as he returned her gaze steadily

she began to look uncomfortable. Worrying at her lower lip with her teeth, she hung her head.

'It is no good,' she sighed. 'I cannot tell you a lie.' She sank back against the cushions, her whole attitude one of despondency. 'I'm not clever enough to make you believe it. And apart from that,' she continued, as Charles settled into his favourite fireside chair with a profound feeling of relief, 'I confess I did dislike you when you first came calling on Felice and she encouraged your attentions. Even though Maman said I was letting the family down by making my disapproval plain, and Felice insisted I was being a baby. But I couldn't help feeling as I did.' She frowned. 'Although, really, it was not you at all I did not like, so much as the idea of you. You see?'

He had just opened his mouth to reply that he did not see at all, when she continued, 'and then, when I got to know you better, and saw how much you truly felt for Felice, even though you hid it so well, I couldn't dislike you at all. Indeed, I felt most sorry for you, because I knew she never cared for you in the least.'

When she saw a flash of surprise flicker across his face, she explained.

'Well, how could she, when she had been in love with Jean-Claude for ever? Even though Maman and Papa had forbidden the match, because he has no money at all. I really hated the way you dazzled them all with your wealth and elegance and seemed to make Felice forget Jean-Claude.' Her face brightened perceptibly. 'But of course you hadn't at all. She merely used

your visits as a smokescreen to fool Maman into thinking she was obeying her orders, which gave Jean-Claude time to make plans for their escape. Which is all as it should be.' She sighed dreamily. 'She was not false to her true love.' She sat up straight suddenly, looking at him with an expression of chagrin. 'Though she was very cruel to you when you did not deserve it at all. Even if you are an Englishman.'

Charles found himself suddenly conscious of a desire to laugh. 'So, you wish to marry me to make up for your sister's cruel treatment of me? In fact because you feel sorry for me—is that it?'

She looked at him hopefully for a few seconds, before once more lowering her eyes and shaking her head.

'No, it is not that. Not only that. Although I should like to make things right for you. Of course I should. Because of my sister you have suffered a grievous hurt. I know you can never feel for me what you felt for her, but at least your pride could be restored by keeping the nature of her betrayal a secret. It is not too late. If you acted today, if you made Papa give his consent today, we could attend a function together this evening and stop the gossip before it starts.' She looked up at him with eyes blazing with intensity. 'Together, we could sort out the mess she has left behind. For it is truly terrible at home.' She shook her head mournfully. 'Maman has taken to her bed. Papa is threatening to shoot himself, because now there is not to be the connection with you he can see no other way out.' She twined one of the bonnet

ribbons round her index finger as she looked at him imploringly. 'You would only have to stroll in and say, "Never mind about Felice. I will take the other one," in that off-hand way you have, as though you don't care about anything at all, and he would grovel at your feet in gratitude. Then nobody would suspect she broke your heart! Even if they really believe you wanted to marry her, when they hear of the insouciance with which you took me they will have to admit they were mistaken!'

'I see,' he said slowly. 'You wish to save your family from some sort of disgrace which my marrying Felice would have averted. That is admirable, but—'

The look of guilt on her face stopped him in his tracks. He could see yet another denial rising to her lips.

'Not family honour?' he ventured.

She shook her head mournfully. 'No.' Her voice was barely more than a whisper. 'All I have told you is part of it. All those good things would result if only you would marry me, and I will be glad to achieve all of them, but—' She hung her head, burying her hands completely in the by now rather mangled bonnet. 'My prime reason is a completely selfish one. You see, if only I can persuade you to marry me, then Papa would be so relieved that you are still to pull him out of the suds that he will forget all about compelling me to marry the man he has chosen for me.'

'In short,' said Charles, 'I am easier to swallow than this other fellow?'

'Yes—much!' she cried, looking up at him with pleading eyes.

‘You cannot imagine how much I hate him. If you will only say yes, I will be such a good wife! I shall not be in the least trouble to you, I promise! I will live in a cottage in the country and keep hens, and you need never even see me if you don’t want. I shan’t interfere with you, or stop you from enjoying yourself however you wish. I will never complain—no, not even if you beat me!’ she declared dramatically, her eyes growing luminous with unshed tears.

‘Why,’ said Charles, somewhat taken aback by her vehemence, ‘would you suspect me of wishing to beat you?’

‘Because I am such a tiresome creature!’

If it hadn’t been for the fact Heloise was clearly on the verge of tears, Charles would have found it hard not to laugh.

‘Papa is always saying so. So did Gaspard.’

‘Gaspard?’

‘My brother. He said any man fool enough to marry me would soon be driven to beat me. But I feel sure…’ her lower lip quivered ominously ‘…that you would only beat me when I really deserved it. You are not a cruel man. You are not cold, either, in spite of what they all say about you. You are a good person underneath your haughty manner. I know because I have watched you. I have had much opportunity, because you never took the least notice of me when Felice was in the same room. And I would not be afraid to go away with you, because you would not ever wish to beat a woman for sport like he would…’

‘Come now,’ Charles remonstrated, as the first tears began

to trickle down her heated cheeks. 'I cannot believe your papa would force you to marry a man who would be as cruel as that…'

'Oh, but you English know nothing!' She leapt to her feet. 'He would very easily sacrifice me to such a man for the sake of preserving the rest of the family!' She was quivering from head to toe with quite another emotion than fear now. He could see that. Indignation had brought a decidedly militant gleam to her eye. She was incapable of standing still. Taking brisk little paces between the sofa and the fireplace, she did not notice that she was systematically trampling the bonnet, which had fallen to the floor when she had leapt to her feet. It occurred to him, when she stepped on it for the third time, that her sister would never have been so careless of her apparel. Not that she would have been seen dead in such an unflattering item in the first place.

'And, besides being so cruel, he is quite old!' She shuddered.

'I am thirty-five, you know,' he pointed out.

She paused mid-stride, running her eyes over him assessingly. The Earl's light blue eyes twinkled with amusement from a face that was devoid of lines of care. Elegant clothes covered a healthily muscled physique. His tawny hair was a little disarrayed this morning, to be sure, but it was neither receding nor showing any hint of grey. 'I did not know you were as old as that,' she eventually admitted with candour.

Once again, Charles was hard put to it not to burst out laughing at the absurdity of this little creature who had invaded the darkness of his lair like some cheeky little song bird hopping

about between a lion's paws, pecking for crumbs, confident she was too insignificant to rate the energy required to swat her.

'Come, child, admit it. You are too young to marry anyone!'

'Well, yes!' she readily admitted. 'But Felice was younger, and you still wanted to marry her. And in time, of course, I will grow older. And by then you might have got used to me. You might even be able to teach me how to behave better!' she said brightly. Then, just as quickly, her face fell. 'Although I very much doubt it.'

She subsided into the chair opposite his own, leaning her elbows on her knees. 'I suppose I always knew I could not be any sort of wife to you.' She gazed up at him mournfully. 'But I know I would have been better off with you. For even if you are as old as you say, you don't…' Her forehead wrinkled, as though it was hard for her to find the words she wanted. 'You don't smell like him.'

Finding it increasingly hard to keep his face straight, he said, 'Perhaps you could encourage your suitor to bathe…'

Her eyes snapped with anger. Taking a deep breath, she flung at him, 'Oh, it is easy for you to laugh at me. You think I am a foolish little woman of no consequence. But this is no laughing matter to me. Whenever he comes close I want to run to a window and open it and breathe clean air. It is like when you go into a room that has been shut up too long, and you know something has decayed in it. And before you make the joke about bathing again, I must tell you that it is in my head that I smell this feeling.

In my heart!' She smote her breast. 'He is steeped in so much blood!'

However absurdly she was behaving, however quaint her way of expressing herself, there was no doubt that she really felt repelled by the man her father thought she ought to marry. It was a shame that such a sensitive little creature should be forced into a marriage that was so distasteful to her. Though he could never contemplate marrying her himself, he did feel a pang of sympathy. And, in that spirit, he asked, 'Do I take it this man is a soldier, then?'

'A hero of France,' she replied gloomily. 'It is an honour for our family that such a man should wish for an alliance. An astonishment to my papa that any man should really want to take on a little mouse like me. You wonder how I came to his notice, perhaps?' When Charles nodded, humouring her whilst privately wondering why on earth it was taking Giddings so long to procure a cab to send her home in, she went on, 'He commanded Gaspard's regiment in Spain. He was…' An expression of anguish crossed her face. 'I was not supposed to hear. But people sometimes do talk when I am there, assuming that I am not paying attention—for I very often don't, you know. My brother sometimes talked about the Spanish campaign. The things his officers commanded him to do! Such barbarity!' She shuddered. 'I am not so stupid that I would willingly surrender to a man who has treated other women and children like cattle in a butcher's shop. And forced decent Frenchmen to descend to

his level. And how is it,' she continued, her fists clenching, 'that while my brother died of hunger outside what you call the lines of Torres Vedras, Du Mauriac came home looking as fit as a flea?'

'Du Mauriac?' Charles echoed. 'The man your father wishes you to marry is Du Mauriac?'

Heloise nodded. 'As commander of Gaspard's regiment, he was often in our home when my brother was still alive. He used to insist it was I who sat beside him. From my hand that he wished to be served.' She shuddered. 'Then, after Gaspard died, he kept right on visiting. Papa says I am stupid to persist in refusing his proposals. He says I should feel honoured that a man so distinguished persists in courting me when I have not even beauty to recommend me. But he does not see that it is mainly my reluctance that Du Mauriac likes. He revels in the knowledge that, though he repels me, my parents will somehow contrive to force me to surrender to him!'

Heloise ground to a halt, her revulsion at the prospect of what marriage to Du Mauriac would entail finally overwhelming her. Bowing forward, she buried her face in her hands until she had herself under control. And then, alerted by the frozen silence which filled the room, she looked up at the Earl of Walton. Up until that moment she would have said he had been experiencing little more than mild amusement at her expense. But now his eyes had returned to that glacial state which had so intimidated her when first she had walked into the room. Except…now his anger was not directed at her. Indeed, it was as if he had frozen her out

of his consciousness altogether.

‘Go home, mademoiselle,’ he said brusquely, rising to his feet and tugging at the bell pull. ‘This interview is at an end.’

He meant it this time. With a sinking heart, Heloise turned and stumbled to the door. She had offended him somehow, by being so open about her feelings of revulsion for the man her father had decided she should marry. She had staked everything on being honest with the Earl of Walton.

But she had lost.

Chapter Two

It came as something of a shock, once the door had closed on Heloise's dejected little figure, when Conningsby stepped in over the windowsill.

'My God,' the man blustered. 'If I had known this room overlooked the street, and I was to have spent the entire interview wedged onto a balcony when I fully expected to be able to escape through your gardens…'

'And the curtains were no impediment to your hearing every single word, I shouldn't wonder?' The Earl sighed. 'Dare I hope you will respect the confidentiality of that conversation?'

'I work for the diplomatic service!' Conningsby bristled. 'Besides which, no man of sense would wish to repeat one word of that absurd woman's proposition!'

Although Charles himself thought Heloise absurd, for some reason he did not like hearing anyone else voice that opinion. 'I think it was remarkably brave of her to come here to try to save her family from ruin.'

'Yes, my lord. If you say so,' the other man conceded dubiously.

'I do say so,' said the Earl. 'I will not have any man disparage my fiancée.'

'You aren't really going to accept that outrageous proposal?' Conningsby gasped.

Charles studied the tips of his fingers intently.

'You cannot deny that her solution to my…uh…predicament, will certainly afford me a great deal of solace.'

'Well,' said Conningsby hesitantly, loath to offend a man of Lord Walton's reputation, 'I suppose she is quite a captivating little thing, in her way. Jolly amusing. She certainly has a gift for mimicry that almost had me giving myself away! Had to stuff a handkerchief in my mouth to choke down the laughter when she aped your voice!'

The Earl stared at him. Captivating? Until this morning he had barely looked at her. Like a little wren, she hid in the background as much as she could. And when he had looked he had seen nothing to recommend her. She had a beak of a nose, set above lips that were too thin for their width, and a sharp little chin. Her hair was a mid-brown, without a hint of a curl to render it interesting. Her eyes, though…

Before this morning she had kept them demurely lowered whenever he glanced in her direction. But today he had seen a vibrancy burning in their dark depths that had tugged a grudging response from him.

'What she may or may not be is largely irrelevant,' he said coldly. 'What just might prompt me to take her to wife is that in so doing I shall put Du Mauriac's nose out of joint.'

Conningsby laughed nervously. 'Surely you can't wish to marry a woman just so that some other fellow cannot have her?'

The Earl returned his look with a coldness of purpose that

chilled him. 'She does not expect me to like her very much. You heard what she said. She will not even be surprised if I come to detest her so heartily that I beat her. All she wants is the opportunity to escape from an intolerable position. Don't you think I should oblige her?'

'Well, I…' Conningsby ran his finger round his collar, his face growing red.

'Come, now, you cannot expect me to stand by and permit her father to marry her off to that butcher, can you? She does not deserve such a fate.'

No, Conningsby thought, she does not. But then, would marriage to a man who only wanted revenge on her former suitor, a man without an ounce of fondness for her, be any less painful to her in the long run?

Heloise gripped her charcoal and bent her head over her sketchpad, blotting out the noise of her mother's sobs as she focussed on her drawing. She had achieved nothing. Nothing. She had braved the streets, and the insults of those soldiers, then endured the Earl's mockery, for nothing. Oh, why, she thought resentfully, had she ever thought she might be able to influence the intractable Earl one way or another? And how could she ever have felt sorry for him? Her fingers worked furiously, making angry slashes across the page. He had coaxed her most secret thoughts from her, let her hope he was feeling some shred of sympathy, and then spurned her. The only good thing about this

morning's excursion was that nobody had noticed she had taken it, she reflected, finding some satisfaction in creating a most unflattering caricature of the Earl of Walton in the guise of a sleekly cruel tabby cat. She could not have borne it if anyone had found out where she had been. It had been bad enough when her maman had laid the blame for Felice's elopement at her door—as though she had ever had the least influence with her headstrong and pampered little sister!

With a few deft strokes Heloise added a timorous little mouse below the grinning mouth of the tabby cat, then set to work fashioning a pair of large paws. Folly—sheer folly! To walk into that man's lair and prostrate herself as she had!

There was a knock on the front door.

Madame Bergeron blew her nose before wailing, 'We are not receiving visitors today. I cannot endure any more. They will all come, you mark my words, to mock at us…'

Heloise rose to her feet to relay the information to their manservant before he had a chance to open the door. Since her seat was by the window, where she could get the most light for her sketching, she had a clear view of their front step.

'It is the Earl!' she gasped, her charcoal slipping from her suddenly nerveless fingers.

'It cannot be!' Her papa sprang from the chair in which he had been slumped, his head in his hands. 'What can he want with us, now?' he muttered darkly, peering through the window. 'I might have known a man of his station would not sit back and take an

insult such as Felice has dealt him. He will sue us for breach of promise at the very least,' he prophesied, as Heloise sank to the floor to retrieve her pencil. 'Well, I will shoot myself first, and that will show him!' he cried wildly, while she regained her seat, bending her head over her sketchbook as much to counteract a sudden wave of faintness as to hide the hopeful expression she was sure must be showing on her face.

'Noo!' From the sofa, her maman began to weep again. 'You cannot abandon me now! How can you threaten to leave me after all we have been through?'

Instantly contrite, Monsieur Bergeron flung himself to his knees beside the sofa, seizing his wife's hand and pressing it to his lips. 'Forgive me, my precious.'

Heloise admired her parents for being so devoted to each other, but sometimes she wished they were not quite so demonstrative. Or that they didn't assume, because she had her sketchpad open, that they could behave as though she was not there.

'You know I will always worship you, my angel.' He slobbered over her hand, before clasping her briefly to his bosom. 'You are much too good for me.'

Now, that was something Heloise had long disputed. It was true that her mother should have been far beyond her father's matrimonial aspirations, since she was a younger daughter of the seigneur in whose district he had been a lowly but ambitious clerk. And that it might have been reprehensible of him to induce

an aristocrat to elope with him. But it turned out to have been the most sensible thing her mother had ever done. Marriage to him had saved her from the fate many others of her class had suffered.

The affecting scene was cut short when the manservant announced the Earl of Walton. Raising himself tragically to his full height, Monsieur Bergeron declared, 'To spare you pain, my angel, I will receive him in my study alone.'

But before he had even reached the door Charles himself strolled in, his gloves clasped negligently in one hand. Bowing punctiliously to Madame Bergeron, who was struggling to rise from a mound of crushed cushions, he drawled, 'Good morning, madame, monsieur.'

Blocking his pathway further into the room, Monsieur Bergeron replied, with a somewhat martyred air, 'I suppose you wish to speak with me, my lord? Shall we retire to my study and leave the ladies in peace?'

Charles raised one eyebrow, as though astonished by this suggestion. 'Why, if you wish, of course I will wait with you while mademoiselle makes herself ready. Or had you forgot that I had arranged to take your daughter out driving this morning? Mademoiselle—' he addressed Heloise directly, his expression bland '—I hope it will not take you long to dress appropriately? I do not like to keep my horses standing.'

Until their eyes met she had hardly dared to let herself hope. But now she was sure. He was going to go through with it!

‘B…but it was Felice,’ Monsieur Bergeron blustered. ‘You had arranged to take Felice out driving. M…my lord, she is not here! I was sure you were aware that last night she…’

‘I am engaged to take your daughter out driving this morning,’ he continued implacably, ‘and take your daughter I shall. I see no reason to alter my schedule for the day. In the absence of Felice, Heloise must bear me company.’

For a moment the room pulsed with silence, while everyone seemed to be holding their breath.

Then Madame Bergeron sprang from the sofa, darted across the room, and seized Heloise by the wrist. ‘She will not keep you waiting above ten minutes, my lord.’ Then, to her husband, ‘What are you thinking of, not offering his lordship a seat? And wine—he must have a glass of wine while he is waiting!’ She pushed Heloise through the door, then paused to specify, ‘The Chambertin!’

While Monsieur Bergeron stood gaping at him, Charles strolled over to the table at which Heloise had been sitting and began to idly flick through her sketchbook. It seemed to contain nothing but pictures of animals. Quite strange-looking animals, some of them, in most unrealistic poses. Though one, of a bird in a cage, caught his attention. The bedraggled specimen was chained to its perch. He could feel its misery flowing off the page. He was just wondering what species of bird it was supposed to represent, when something about the tilt of its head, the anguish burning in its black eyes, put him forcibly in mind of

Heloise, as she had appeared earlier that day. His eyes followed the chain that bound the miserable-looking creature to its perch, and saw that it culminated in what looked like a golden wedding ring.

His blood running cold, he flicked back a page, to a scene he had first supposed represented a fanciful scene from a circus. He could now perceive that the creature that was just recognisable as a lion, lying on its back with a besotted grin on its face, was meant to represent himself. The woman who was standing with her foot upon his chest, smiling with smug cruelty, was definitely Felice. He snapped the book shut and turned on Monsieur Bergeron.

'I trust you have not made the nature of my interest in your elder daughter public?'

'Alas, my lord,' he shrugged, spreading his hands wide, 'but I did give assurances in certain quarters that a match was imminent.'

'To your creditors, no doubt?'

'Debt? Pah—it is nothing!' Monsieur Bergeron spat. 'A man may recover from debt!'

When Charles raised one disbelieving eyebrow, he explained, 'You English, you do not understand how one must live in France. When power changes hands, those who support the fallen regime must always suffer from the next. To survive, a man must court friends in all camps. He must be sensitive to what is in the wind, and know the precise moment to jump…'

In short the man was, like Talleyrand, 'un homme girouette',

who was prepared, like a weather vane, to swing in whichever direction the wind blew.

Somewhat red in the face, Monsieur Bergeron sank onto the sofa which his wife had recently vacated.

'So,' Charles said slowly, 'promoting an alliance with an English noble, at a time when many Parisians are openly declaring hostility to the English, was an attempt to…?' He quirked an inquisitive eyebrow at the man, encouraging him to explain.

'To get one of my daughters safely out of the country! The days are coming,' he said, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and mopping at his brow, 'when any man or woman might go to the guillotine for the most paltry excuse. I can feel it in the air. Say what you like about Bonaparte, but during the last few years I managed to hold down a responsible government post and make steady advancements, entirely through hard work and capability. But now the Bourbons are back in power, clearly bent on taking revenge on all who have opposed them, that will count for nothing!' he finished resentfully.

Charles eyed him thoughtfully. Monsieur Bergeron feared he was teetering on the verge of ruin. So he had spread his safety net wide. He had encouraged his pretty daughter to entrap an English earl, who would provide a safe bolthole in a foreign land should things become too hot for his family in France. And he had encouraged the attentions of his plain daughter's only suitor though he was an ardent Bonapartist. Every day Du Mauriac

openly drank the health of his exiled emperor in cafés such as the Tabagie de la Comete, with other ex-officers of the Grand Armée. Much as he disliked the man, there was no denying he would make both a powerful ally and a dangerous enemy.

Finding himself somewhat less out of charity with his prospective father-in-law, Charles settled himself in a chair and stretched his legs out, crossing them at the ankles.

'Let me put a proposition to you.'

Monsieur Bergeron eyed him warily.

'I have my own reasons for not wanting my…er… disappointment to be made public. I wish, in fact, to carry on as though nothing untoward has occurred.'

'But…Felice has run off. That is not news we can keep quiet indefinitely. It may take some time to find her, if you insist you still wish to marry her…'

He made an impatient gesture with his hand. 'I am finished with Felice. But nobody knows for certain that it was her I intended to marry. Do they?'

'Well, no…'

'Then the sooner I am seen about in public with your other daughter, the sooner we can begin to persuade people that they were entirely mistaken to suppose it was Felice to whom I became engaged.'

'What are you suggesting?'

'Isn't it obvious? Since Felice is out of the picture, I will marry your other daughter instead.'

‘But—but…’

‘You can have no objections, surely? She is not contracted to anyone else, is she?’ He held his breath while he watched the cogs whirring in Monsieur Bergeron’s head. Heloise had spoken of proposals to which she had not agreed, but if her father and Du Mauriac had drawn up any form of legal agreement things might be about to get complicated.

‘No, my lord,’ Monsieur Bergeron said, having clearly made up his mind to ditch the potential alliance with the man whose star was in the descendant. ‘She is free to marry you. Only…’ He slumped back against the cushions, closing his eyes and shaking his head. ‘It will not be a simple matter of substituting one girl for the other. Heloise has so little sense. What if she won’t agree? Ah!’ he moaned, crumpling the handkerchief in his fist. ‘That our fortunes should all rest in the hands of such a little fool!’

Charles found himself rather indignant on Heloise’s behalf. It seemed to him that it was Felice who had plunged her family into this mess, but not a word was being said against her. And, far from being a fool, Heloise had been the one to come up with this coldly rational plan which would wipe out, at a stroke, all the unpleasantness her sister had created.

‘I beg your pardon?’ he said coldly.

‘Of course our family owes it to you to redress the insult my younger daughter has offered you. But I pray you won’t be offended if I cannot make Heloise see reason.’

His brief feelings of charity towards the older man evaporated.

He had no compunction about forcing his daughter into any marriage, no matter how distasteful it might be to her, so long as he stood to gain by it. If Charles hadn't already known that Heloise was all for it, he would have turned away at that point and left the entire Bergeron family to sink in their own mire.

'I am sure she will do the right thing,' he said, in as even a tone as he could muster.

'That's because you don't know her,' her father bit out glumly. 'There is no telling what the silly creature will take it into her head to do. Or to say. She is nowhere near as clever as her sister.'

Charles eyed Monsieur Bergeron coldly. He had encouraged Felice to ensnare him when she'd never had the slightest intention of marrying him. Heloise, for being, as she put it, too stupid to tell a lie, was castigated as being useless. On the whole, he found he preferred Heloise's brand of stupidity to Felice's sort of cleverness.

'A man does not look for a great deal of intellect in his wife,' he bit out. 'I am sure we shall deal well together. Ah,' he said, as the door opened and Heloise and her mother returned to the room. 'Here she is now, and looking quite charming.' Walking to her side, he bowed over her hand.

'Pray, don't overdo it,' she whispered, her eyes sparking with alarm.

Tucking her hand under his arm, and patting her gloved hand reassuringly, he smiled at her mother, who had also hastily donned her coat and bonnet. 'I am sure you will agree there is no

need for you to act as chaperon, madame, since the news of my engagement to Heloise will soon be common knowledge.'

Her jaw dropped open as she reeled back. 'You wish to marry Heloise?' she gasped.

'Why not?' he retorted. 'I have already settled the matter with your papa,' he turned to inform Heloise. 'He thinks your family should make recompense to me for the insult your younger sister offered me. Since I have rather got used to the idea of returning to England with a bride, it might as well be you. And, before you raise any foolish objections, let me inform you that I expect your full cooperation.' He bent a rather stern eye on her. 'I have no wish to appear as an object for vulgar gossip. I do not want anyone to know your sister jilted me. You will explain, if you please,' he said, turning once more to Madame Bergeron, 'that naturally you are upset by Felice's running off with a totally unsuitable man, but that it has no bearing on the relationship which already existed between me and her older, better-behaved sister.'

The woman plumped down onto the sofa next to her husband.

'People have grown used to seeing the three of us about together over the last few weeks. And while Felice was always the more flamboyant of the two, if we but stick to our story we can easily persuade people that it was Heloise all along who was the object of my interest. She is much better suited to becoming my countess, since her manner is modest and discreet. What man of breeding would want to take an outrageous flirt to wife?'

'Heloise,' her father now put in, rather sternly. 'I hope you

are paying attention to what his lordship is saying. As a dutiful daughter you must do all you can to protect the honour of this family. I expect you to submit to me in this, young woman! You will keep your mouth shut about how far things went between Felice and his lordship, and you will marry him.'

Meekly bowing her head, Heloise replied, 'Whatever you say, Papa.'

Not wishing to linger any longer with that pair of opportunists, Charles ushered Heloise to the door.

She stayed silent, her head bowed to conceal her jubilant expression from her parents, until they were outside. Her eyes ran over the smart two-wheeled carrick Charles had procured for the occasion with approval. She had recognised the vehicle the moment it had drawn up outside. He had borrowed it once before, from another English noble who had brought it over to Paris for the express purpose of cutting a dash in the Bois de Boulogne. When Charles had taken Felice out in it, he had hired two liveried and mounted servants to ride behind, ensuring that everyone knew he was someone, even if he had picked up his passenger from a modest little dwelling on the Quai Voltaire.

Borrowing this conveyance, which he could drive himself, giving them the requisite privacy to plan their strategy whilst contriving to look as though they were merely being fashionable, was a stroke of genius.

He tossed a coin to the street urchin who was holding the horses' heads, and handed her up onto the narrow bench seat.

‘You were magnificent!’ she breathed, turning to him with unfeigned admiration as he urged the perfectly matched pair of bays out into the light traffic. ‘Oh, if only we were not driving down a public street I could kiss you. I really could!’

‘We are already attracting enough notice, mademoiselle, by driving about without a chaperon of any sort, without the necessity of giving way to vulgar displays of emotion.’

‘Oh!’ Heloise turned to face front, her back ramrod-straight, her face glowing red with chagrin. How could she have presumed to speak in such a familiar fashion? Never mind harbour such an inappropriate impulse?

‘You may place one hand upon my sleeve, if you must.’

His clipped tones indicated that this was quite a concession on his part. Gingerly, she laid her hand upon his forearm.

‘I have decided upon the tale we shall tell,’ he said, ‘and it is this. Our alliance has withstood the scandal of Felice’s elopement with an unsuitable young man. I am not ashamed to continue my connection with your family. After all, your mother came from an ancient and noble house. That your sister has lamentably been infected by revolutionary tendencies and run off with a nobody has nothing to do with us.’

The feeling of happiness which his put-down had momentarily quelled swelled up all over again. She had known that if anyone could rescue her it was the Earl of Walton! He had grasped the importance of acting swiftly, then taken her rather vague plan and furnished it with convincing detail. She had always

suspected he was quite intelligent, even though he had been prone to utter the most specious drivel to Felice. What was more, he would never let her down by making a slip in a moment of carelessness, like some men might. He was always fully in control of himself, regarding men who got drunk and made an exhibition of themselves in public with disdain.

Oh, yes, he was the perfect man to carry her scheme through successfully!

'I was planning to announce my engagement officially at Lady Dalrymple Hamilton's ball last evening.'

'I know,' she replied. It had been his decision to make that announcement which had finally driven Felice to take off so precipitously. She had hoped to keep him dangling for another week at the very least. Heloise worried at her lower lip. She hoped Felice had managed to reach Jean-Claude safely. Although he had gone ahead to Switzerland, and secured a job with a printing firm, he had planned to return and escort Felice across France personally.

'No need to look so crestfallen. I do not expect you to shine in society as your sister did. I will steer you through the social shoals.'

'It is not that!' she replied indignantly. She might not 'shine', as he put it, but she had mingled freely with some of the highest in the land. Why, she had once even been introduced to Wellington! Though, she admitted to herself with chagrin, he had looked right through her.

He glanced down at the rim of her bonnet, which was all he could see of her now that she had turned her head away.

How shy she was. How hard she would find it to take her place in society! Well, he would do all he could to smooth her passage. It was her idea, after all, that was going to enable him to salvage his pride. He would never have thought of something so outrageous. He owed her for that. And to start with he was going to have to smarten her up. He was not going to expose her to ridicule for her lack of dress sense.

'Deuce take it,' he swore. 'I'm going to have to buy you some more flattering headgear. That bonnet is the ugliest thing I think I've ever seen.' He leant a little closer. 'Is it the same unfortunate article you trampled so ruthlessly in my drawing room this morning?'

She looked up at him then, suddenly cripplingly conscious of how far short of the Earl's standard she fell. 'It is practical,' she protested. 'It can withstand any amount of abuse and still look—'

'Disreputable,' he finished for her. 'And that reminds me. While we are shopping, I shall have to get you a ring.'

His eyes narrowed as a look of guilt flickered across her mobile little features. No wonder she did not attempt to tell lies, he reflected. Her face was so expressive every thought was written clearly there.

'What is it?' he sighed.

'First, I have to tell you that I do not wish you at all to take me shopping!' she declared defiantly.

‘You are unique amongst your sex, then,’ he replied dryly. ‘And what is second?’

‘And second,’ she gulped, the expression of guilt returning in force, ‘is that you do not need to buy me a ring.’ Holding up her hand to prevent his retort, she hastened to explain, ‘I already have a ring.’

He stiffened. ‘Our engagement may not have been my idea, mademoiselle, but it is my place to provide the ring.’

‘But you already have. That is—’ She blushed. ‘The ring I have is the one you gave Felice. The very one that made her run away. She gave it to me.’

‘The ring…made her run away?’ He had chosen it with such care. The great emerald that gleamed in its cluster of diamonds was the exact shade of Felice’s bewitching eyes. He had thought he was past being hurt, but the thought that she found his taste so deficient she had run to another man…

‘Yes, for until that moment it had not been at all real to her,’ he heard Heloise say. ‘She thought you were merely amusing yourself with a little flirtation. Though I warned her over and over again, she never believed that she could hurt you. She said that nobody could touch your heart—if you had one, which she did not believe—and so you made the perfect smokescreen.’

‘Is that estimation of my character supposed to be making me feel better?’ he growled.

‘Perhaps not. But at least it may help you to forgive her. It was not until you gave her that ring that she understood you really had

feelings for her. So then of course she had to run away, before things progressed beyond hope.'

'In short, she would have kept me dangling on a string indefinitely if I hadn't proposed marriage?'

'Well, no. For she always meant to go to Jean-Claude. But she did not mean to hurt you. Truly. She just thought—'

'That I had no heart,' he finished, in clipped tones.

Inadvertently he jerked on the reins, giving the horses the impression that he wished them to break into a trot. Since they were approaching a corner, there were a few moments where it took all his concentration to ensure they were not involved in an accident.

'Oh, dear.' Heloise was gripping onto his sleeve with both hands now, her face puckered with concern. 'Now I have made you angry again, which is precisely what I wished not to do. For I have to inform you that when we are married, if you forbid me to contact her, knowing that I must obey I will do so—but until then I fully intend to write to her. Even if she has wronged you, she is still my sister!'

The moment of danger being past, the horses having been successfully brought back to a brisk walk, she folded her arms, and turned away from him, as though she had suddenly become interested in the pair of dogs with frills round their necks which were dancing for the amusement of those strolling along the boulevard.

'Ah, yes,' he replied, reaching over to take her hand and place

it back upon his own arm. ‘You fully intend to bow to my every whim, don’t you, once we are married?’

‘Of course! For you had no thought of marrying me until I put the notion in your head, so the least I can do is be the best wife you would wish for. I will do everything I can,’ she declared earnestly. ‘Whatever you ask, I will do with alacrity!’ Pulling herself up short, she suddenly frowned at him suspiciously. ‘And, by the way, why did you suddenly change your mind about me? When you made me leave, you seemed so set against it!’

‘Well, your proposal was so sudden,’ he teased her. ‘It took me by surprise. Naturally I had to consider…’

She shook her head. ‘No, I may have surprised you, but you had made up your mind it was an absurd idea.’

‘So absurd, in fact,’ he countered, ‘that nobody would credit it. Nobody would believe I would take one Mademoiselle Bergeron merely to save face at being embarrassed by the other Mademoiselle Bergeron. And therefore they will have to believe that you were the object of my interest all along.’

When she continued to look less than convinced by his complete about-face, he decided it was high time he regained control of the conversation.

‘Now, getting back to the ring. May I enquire, although I somehow feel I am about to regret doing so, why your sister left it with you? The normal practice, I should remind you, when an engagement is terminated, is for the lady to return the ring to the man who gave it to her.’

‘I had it with me when I came to visit you this morning,’ she declared. ‘I was going to return it to you for her if you should not agree to my suggestion.’

‘Indeed?’ His voice was laced with scepticism. ‘And yet somehow it remains in your possession. How did that come about, I wonder?’

‘Well, because you were so beastly to me, if you must know! I told you the deepest secret of my heart and you laughed at me. For the moment I quite lost my temper, and decided I should do with it exactly as Felice said I ought to do! For you are so wealthy it is not as if you needed to have it back, whereas for me…’

She let go of his arm again, folding her own across her chest with a mutinous little pout which, for the first time in their acquaintance, made Charles wonder what it would be like to silence one of her tirades with a kiss. It would probably be the only way to stop her once she had built up a head of steam. Something in the pit of his stomach stirred at the thought of mastering her militant spirit in such a manner. He shook his head. It was not like him to regard sexual encounters as contests of will. But then, he frowned, when had he ever had to do more than crook his finger for a woman to fall obediently in line with his every whim?

‘I take it you meant to sell it, then?’

Heloise eyed his lowered brows contritely.

‘Yes,’ she confessed. ‘Because I needed the money to get to Dieppe.’

‘Dieppe?’ He shook himself out of his reverie. ‘What is at Dieppe?’

‘Not what, but who. And that is Jeannine!’

‘Jeannine?’ he echoed, becoming fascinated in spite of himself. ‘What part does she play in this farce, I wonder?’

‘She was Maman’s nurse, until she eloped with Papa.’

‘There seems to have been a great deal of eloping going on in your family.’

‘But in my parents’ case it was a good thing, don’t you think? Because even if they were terribly poor for the first few years they were married, since my grandpapa cut her off entirely, she was the only one to survive the Terror because her family were all so abominably cruel to the menu peuple—the common people, that is. Jeannine was cast out, but she married a fermier, and I know she would take me in. I would have to learn how to milk a cow, to be sure, and make butter and cheese, but how hard could that be?’

‘I thought it was hens,’ he reflected.

‘Hens?’

‘Yes, you said when you married me you would live in a cottage so that you could keep hens. Now I find that in reality you would rather milk cows and make cheese.’ He sighed. ‘I do wish you would make up your mind.’

Heloise blinked. Though the abstracted frown remained between his brows, she was almost sure he was teasing her. ‘I do not wish to milk cows at all,’ she finally admitted.

‘Good. Because I warn you right now that no wife of mine will ever do anything so plebeian. You must abandon all these fantasies about living on a farm and tending to livestock of any sort. When we return to England you will move in the first circles and behave with the decorum commensurate with your station in life. You are not to go anywhere near any livestock of any description. Is that clear?’

For a moment Heloise regarded the mock sternness of his features with her head tilted to one side. She had never been on the receiving end of one of these teasing scolds before. Whenever he had been playful like this, she had never been able to understand how Felice could remain impervious to his charm.

‘Not even a horse?’ she asked, taking her courage in both hands and deciding to play along, just once. ‘I am quite near a horse already, sitting up here in your carriage.’

‘Horses, yes,’ he conceded. ‘You may ride with me, or a suitable companion in the park. A horse is not a farm animal.’

‘Some horses are,’ she persisted.

‘Not my carriage horses,’ he growled, though she could tell he was not really the least bit cross.

The ride in the fresh air seemed to be doing him good. He was far less tense than he had been when they set out. Oh, it was not to be expected that he would get over Felice all at once, but if she could make him laugh now and again, or even put that twinkle in his eye that she could see when he bent his head in her direction to give her this mock scold, she would be happy.

‘What about dogs, then? What if I should go into some drawing room and a lady should have a little dog. Must I not go into the room? Or should I just stay away from it? By, say, five feet? Or six?’

‘Pets, yes—of course you will come across pets from time to time. That is not what I meant at all, you little minx!’

Pretending exasperation he did not feel, to disguise the fact he was on the verge of laughter, he said, ‘No wonder your brother said I should end up beating you. You would drive a saint to distraction!’

‘I was only,’ she declared with an impish grin, ‘trying to establish exactly what you expected of me. I promised to behave exactly as you would wish, so I need to know exactly what you want!’

He laughed aloud then. ‘You, mademoiselle, were doing nothing of the kind.’ Why had he never noticed her mischievous sense of humour before now? Why had he never noticed what an entertaining companion she could be when she put her mind to it? The truth was, he decided with a sinking feeling, that whenever Felice had been in the room he’d had eyes for nobody else. With her sultry beauty and her vivacious nature she had utterly bewitched him.

Flicking the reins in renewed irritation, he turned the curricle for home.

Chapter Three

His eyes, which a moment ago had been twinkling with amusement, had gone dull and lifeless. It was as though he had retreated into a dark and lonely room, slamming the shutters against her.

She was positively relieved to get home, where her maman greeted her with enthusiasm.

'I never thought to have secured such a brilliant match for my plain daughter!' she beamed. 'But we must do something about your attire,' she said as Heloise untied the ribbons of the one bonnet she possessed. 'He cannot want people thinking he is marrying a dowd.'

Hustling her up the newly carpeted stairs to the room she had shared with Felice, her mother grumbled, 'We do not have time to cut down one of Felice's gowns before tonight. If only I had known,' she complained, flinging open the doors to the armoire, 'that you would be the one to marry into the nobility, we could have laid out a little capital on your wardrobe.'

Nearly all the dresses hanging there belonged to Felice. From the day the allies had marched into Paris the previous summer, what money her parents had been able to spare had been spent on dressing her sister. She had, after all, been the Bergeron family's secret weapon. She had flirted and charmed her way through the ranks of the occupying forces, playing the coquette to the hilt,

whilst adroitly managing to hang onto her virtue, catapulting the family to the very heart of the new society which had rapidly formed to replace Napoleon's court.

'Nobody could have foreseen such an unlikely event,' Heloise replied rather dispiritedly, hitching her hip onto her bed.

She worried at her lower lip. What was her sister going to do now? She had left carrying only a modest bundle of possessions, and her young husband would not have the means to provide either the kind of dress allowance she had enjoyed for so long, nor the stimulating company of the upper echelons of society.

Heloise sighed. 'What about the lilac muslin?' she suggested. It was quite her favourite dress. She always felt that it made her look almost girlishly attractive, though the underskirt, which went with the full, shorter overdress, was embroidered about the hem with violets. Surely she could not be taken for a supporter of Bonaparte if she appeared in public on the arm of an Englishman?

'Where is His Lordship taking you tonight?' her maman enquired sharply.

'To the theatre first, and then on to Tortoni's for ices.'

Her mother clicked her tongue. 'Muslin to the theatre? I should think not!' she snapped, entirely overlooking the political symbolism of the violets, Bonaparte's emblem. 'When Felice went to the theatre with him she wore the gold satin!'

'I cannot compete with Felice, Maman,' Heloise remonstrated. 'Nor do I think it would be wise to try to be like her. Do you not

think he might find it in poor taste if I did?'

'I had no idea,' her mother remarked sarcastically, 'that you had such a grasp of what is in men's hearts.' Flinging a bundle of Felice's discarded gowns to the bare boards, she gripped the iron foot-rail of the wide bed the girls had shared. 'Don't, I beg of you, do anything to make him change his mind about marrying you.'

'He has only taken me to save face,' Heloise pointed out. 'I know he still loves Felice. Nothing I do will matter to him.'

Her mother regarded the bleak look that washed over her daughter's features with concern.

'But you are going to be his wife, you foolish creature!' Coming round the side of the bed, her mother took her hand, chafing it to emphasise her point. 'Listen to me! And listen well! You will be going away to live in a foreign country, amongst strangers. You will be utterly dependent on your husband's goodwill. So you must make an effort to please him. Of course he will never fall in love with you—' she made a dismissive gesture with her hand '—the sister of the woman who betrayed him. Not even if you were half so beautiful or clever as she. But at least you can try not to antagonise him. You must learn to behave in a manner worthy of the title he is going to bestow on you. He will expect you to dress well and behave well, as a reflection of his taste. You must never embarrass him by displaying any emotion in public.'

He had only just informed her that displaying emotion in public was vulgar. So her mother's next words took on a greater

power.

‘Above all, you must never clamour for his attention if he does not wish to give it. You must let him go to his mistresses when he is bored with you, and pretend not to notice or to mind.’

A great lump formed in her throat. He would, of course, be unfaithful. She was the one who had instigated this marriage, and though he was disposed to go through with it, she knew only too well that it was not because he found her attractive.

How could he? Even her mother, who loved her as well as she was able, referred to her as her plain daughter.

‘Mistresses?’ she whispered, a sickening vision of a lifetime of humiliation unfolding before her.

‘Of course,’ her mother replied, stroking her hand soothingly. ‘You are not blind. You know that is what men do. All men,’ she said grimly, her thin lips compressing until they were almost white. ‘Just as soon as they can afford it.’

Heloise’s stomach turned over at the implication of her mother’s words. Even her papa, who behaved as though he was deeply in love with her mother, must have strayed.

‘If he is very considerate of your feelings he will conduct his affairs discreetly. But I warn you, if you make any protest, or even show that you care, he will be most annoyed! If you wish him to treat you well, you must not place any restrictions on his little divertissements.’

‘I have already informed him that I will not interfere with his pleasures,’ Heloise replied dully. And when she had told

him that she had meant it. But now the idea that he could hasten to the arms of some other woman, when he could barely bring himself to allow her to lay her hand upon his sleeve, was unbelievably painful. Rising to her feet swiftly, she went to the open armoire. 'What about the grey shot silk?' she said, keeping her face carefully averted from her mother. 'I have not worn that for some time. I don't think His Lordship has ever seen me in it.'

Heloise did not particularly like the dress, for it had bad associations. The first time Du Mauriac had asked her father if he might pay his addresses to his oldest daughter, he had been so proud that she had captured the interest of a hero of France that he had sent her to the dressmaker with the instruction to buy something pretty to wear when her suitor came calling. She had been torn. Oh, how pleasant it had been, to be able to go and choose a gown with no expense spared! And yet the reason for the treat had almost robbed her of all joy in the purchase. In the end she had not been able to resist the lure of silk, but had chosen a sombre shade of grey, in a very demure style, hoping that Du Mauriac would not think she was trying to dress for his pleasure.

'It is not at all the sort of thing Felice would have worn,' her mother remarked, shaking her head. 'But it will do for you. I shall get it sponged down and pressed.' She bustled away with Heloise's best gown over her arm, leaving her to her solitary and rather depressing reflections.

He had never seen her dressed so well, Charles thought

with approval, when he came to collect her that evening. The exquisitely cut silk put him in mind of moonbeams playing over water. If only her eyes did not look so haunted. He frowned, pulling up short on the verge of paying her a compliment.

For the first time it hit him that she did not really wish to marry him any more than he wished to marry her. And she looked so small and vulnerable, hovering in the doorway, gazing up at him with those darkly anxious eyes.

She needed solid reassurance, not empty flattery.

Taking her hand in his, he led her to the sofa.

'May I have a few moments alone with your daughter before we go out?' he enquired of her parents. They left the room with such alacrity he was not sure whether to feel amused at their determination to pander to his every whim, or irritated at their lack of concern for their daughter's evident discomfort.

Heloise sank onto the sofa next to him, her hand resting limply in his own, and gazed up into his handsome face. Of course he would have mistresses. He was a most virile man. She would just somehow have to deal with this crushing sense of rejection the awareness of his infidelity caused her. She must learn not to mind that he frowned when he saw her, and stifle the memories of how his eyes had lit with pleasure whenever Felice had walked into a room.

'Heloise!' he said, so sharply that she collected he must have been speaking to her for quite some time, while she had not heard one word he had said.

Blushing guiltily, she tried to pay attention.

'I said, do you have the ring?'

Now he must think she was stupid, as well as unattractive. Her shoulders drooping, she held out her left hand obediently.

'Hell and damnation!' he swore. 'It's too big!'

'Well, you bought it for Felice,' she pointed out.

'Yes, and I would have bought you one that did fit if only you'd told me this one didn't! Why in God's name didn't you tell me, when I raised the subject this afternoon, that this ring was not going to be any good?'

'Because I didn't know it wouldn't fit. Although of course I should have known,' she ended despondently. Felice had long, strong, capable fingers, unlike her own, which were too slender for anything more strenuous than plying a needle or wielding a pencil.

'Do you mean to tell me that you had an emerald of this value in your possession and you were never tempted to try it on? Not once?'

'Oh, is it very valuable, then?' She looked with renewed interest at the jewel which hung from her ring finger. In order not to lose it, she knew she was going to have to keep her hand balled into a fist throughout the evening. 'I was not at all convinced it would get me all the way to Dieppe. Even if I'd managed to find a jeweller who would not try to cheat me, I fully expected to end up stranded halfway there.'

Her reference to her alternative plan of escaping Du Mauriac

turned his momentary irritation instantly to alarm. He would do well to remember that he held no personal interest for her for his own sake at all. He was only providing the means, one way or another, for her to escape from an intolerable match with another man.

'Well, you won't be running off to Dieppe now, so you can put that notion right out of your head,' he seethed. Damn, but he hoped her distress was not an indication she was seriously considering fleeing from him!

Though he could see she was scared as hell of him right now. And no wonder. She had entrusted him with her entire future, and all he could do was berate her over the trifling matter of the fit of a ring!

'Come, now,' he said in a rallying tone. 'We struck an honest bargain this morning. It is in both our interests to stick with it.' He took her hands between his own and gave them what he hoped was a reassuring squeeze. 'We are in this together.'

Yes. She sighed. And so was Felice. He would never be able to keep from comparing her, and unfavourably. Just look at the way he was coaxing her out of the sulks in that patronising tone, as though she were a petulant child.

'It is easier for you,' she began. He was used to disguising his feelings behind that glacial mask he wore in public. But she had never been any good at dissembling.

'Why do you suppose that?' he said harshly.

'Because I won't know what to say to people!' she snapped.

Had he forgotten already that she had told him she was hopeless at telling lies?

'Oh, come,' he scoffed. 'You ran on like a rattle in my drawing room this morning!'

'That was entirely different,' she protested. 'It does not matter what you think.' They were co-conspirators. She had no need to convince him she was anything other than herself.

Charles swiftly repressed the sharp stab of hurt these words inflicted. Why should he be bothered if she did not care what he thought of her? It was not as if she meant anything to him, either. He must just accept that playing the role of his fiancée was not going to be easy for her.

'Very well,' he nodded, 'you need not attempt to speak. I will do all the talking for us both. Providing—' he fixed her with a stern eye '—you make an attempt to look as though you are enjoying yourself tonight.'

'Oh, I am sure I shall—in my own way,' she assured him.

She loved studying how people behaved in social situations. Their posturing and jostling both amused and inspired her with ideas that went straight into her sketchbook the minute she got home.

A vague recollection of her sitting alone at a table littered with empty glasses, a rapt expression on her face as she observed the boisterous crowd at the guingette that Felice had dared him to take her to, sprang to Charles' mind. He began to feel a little calmer. The theatre was the best place he could have chosen for

their first outing together à deux. She would be content to sit quietly and watch the performance.

Then she alarmed him all over again by saying mournfully, 'It was a stupid idea. I wish I had never mentioned it. Nobody looking at the two of us together will ever believe you wish at all to marry me.'

'Well, they will not if you carry on like this!' It was bad enough that Felice had jilted him; now Heloise was exhibiting clear signs of wanting to hedge off. What was wrong with the Bergeron sisters? He knew of half a dozen women who would give their eye teeth to be in their position. Why, he had been fending off females who wished to become his countess since his first foray into society!

'You came up with this plan, not I. And I expect you to play your part now you have wheedled me into it!'

'Wheedled?' she gasped, desperately hurt. She had not wheedled. She had put her proposition rationally and calmly… well, perhaps not calmly, for she had been very nervous. But he was making it sound as though she had put unfair pressure on him in some way.

'If that is what you think—' she began, sliding the ring from her finger.

His hand grabbed hers, thrusting the ring back down her finger.

'No, mademoiselle,' he said sternly, holding her hands captive between his own, his steely fingers keeping the ring firmly in

place.

She took a breath, her brow furrowing in preparation for another round of argument.

There was only one sure way to silence her. And Charles took it.

She flinched when his lips met hers, rousing Charles' anger to new heights.

What was the woman doing proposing marriage if she could not even bear the thought of kissing him? Leaving go of her hands, he grasped her by the nape of the neck, holding her still, while he demonstrated his inalienable right, as her betrothed, to kiss her as thoroughly as he pleased!

Charles had taken her completely by surprise. She didn't know what to do. No man had ever kissed her before. Du Mauriac had tried, once or twice, but she had been expecting it from him, and had always managed to take evasive action.

But she didn't want to evade Charles, she discovered after only a fleeting moment of shock. What she really wanted, she acknowledged, relaxing into his hold, was to put her arms about him and kiss him back. If only she knew how!

Well, she might not know anything about kissing, but there was nothing to stop her from putting her arms about his neck. Uttering a little whimper of pleasure, she raised shaky hands from her lap and tentatively reached out for him.

'My God,' he panted, breaking free. 'I never meant to do that!'

Leaping to his feet, he strode to the very far side of the room.

Hearing her little cry of protest, feeling her hands fluttering against his chest in an attempt to push him away, had brought him to his senses.

'I can only offer my sincere apologies,' he ground out between clenched teeth. He could not think what had come over him. What kind of blackguard chose that particular way to silence a woman?

He had accepted intellectually that one day he would have to get his heirs by Heloise. But judging from her shocked recoil it had been the furthest thing from her mind.

The fierce surge of desire that even now was having a visible effect on his anatomy was an unexpected bonus. When the time was right, he was going to enjoy teaching his wife all there was to know about loving.

Until then he must exercise great restraint. He would have to get her used to the idea of him before broaching the subject of heirs. He already knew how shy she was, and had realised she would need to feel she could rely on him. How could she do that if she was worried he was going to pounce on her at any moment?

'You need not fear that I shall importune you in that way again,' he grated, his back still turned to her while he desperately fought to regain mastery over his unruly body.

Heloise pressed her hand to her bruised lips, her heart sinking as swiftly as it had soared when he had seized and kissed her so excitingly. Why had he done it if he was now adamant he would not be doing it again? Had it only been some sort of experiment?

To see if he could stomach touching her as a man should want to touch his wife? If so, it was evident he regretted giving in to the impulse.

It was a while before he could bear to so much as turn round and look at her! But at least it gave her the time to wipe away the few tears that she had been unable to prevent from trickling down her cheeks. For she would never let him see how humiliated his rejection made her feel. If he did not wish to kiss her, then she would not beg for his kisses. Never!

She got to her feet, determination stiffening her carriage. She would never let him suspect—not by one lingering look, one plaintive sigh—that she…She faltered, her hand flying to her breast.

No, this was too appalling! She could not be in love with him. She must not be in love with him. She was certain she had not lied when she had denied being in love with him that morning. Her feelings could not have changed so swiftly during the course of one day. Just because he had strolled into the drawing room and swept all her problems away with his marvellously insouciant declaration of intent to marry her. Not because she had felt a momentary rapport with him while they had gently teased each other during their carriage ride.

And yet she could not deny that since her maman had broached the subject of his infidelity she had been eaten up by jealousy.

No, that was not love! It was wounded pride that made her

eyes smart so. It had to be.

Her abstracted air, coupled with the Earl's barely tamped down lust, created quite a stir when they entered the theatre arm in arm.

As soon as they were seated, Charles tore off a corner of the programme and wedged it under her ring. 'That should hold it in place for now.'

'Thank you,' she murmured, keeping her face averted. It was stupid to feel resentful because he was being so practical about everything. She sighed.

'Mademoiselle,' he murmured, 'I am about to put my arm along the back of your chair, and I do not want you to flinch when I do it.'

A shiver slid all the way down her spine to her toes at the warmth of his arm behind her shoulders. With him so close, every breath she took filled her nostrils with his clean, spicy scent. Though his arm was not quite touching her, she remembered the strength of it, holding her captive while he ravaged her mouth. She felt weak, and flustered, and utterly feminine.

'I promise I shall not do anything you will not like. Only I must sometimes seem to be…how shall I put it?…lover-like when we appear in public. I shall not go beyond the bounds of what is proper, I assure you.'

No, she reflected with annoyance. For he'd found kissing her

such an unpleasant experience he had vowed never to do it again! This show of being 'lover-like', as he put it, was as much of a performance as what was going on upon the stage. But then, she reflected bleakly, she had known from the outset that all he wanted from her was the means to salvage his pride.

'Y…you may do what you like,' she conceded, feeling utterly wretched. 'I understand how important this show is to you.' Turning towards him, so that their faces were only a few scant inches apart, she declared, 'It was for this reason that you agreed to marry me, was it not? So that nobody would suspect you had been hurt. I think the worst thing you could endure is to have someone mock you.' Raising one hand, she laid it against his cheek. 'I trust you,' she said, resolving that, come what may, she would never be sorry to have given him this one source of consolation. 'However you decide to behave tonight, I will go along with it.'

Charles found it hard not to display his hurt. Go along with it, indeed! She could not conceal how nervous he made her. She was drawing on every ounce of courage she possessed to conceal her disquiet at his proximity. She had shuddered when he put his arm round her, tensed up when he had whispered in her ear.

Was it possible, he wondered, his heart skipping a beat, that she found him as repellent as Du Mauriac?

Regarding her nervously averted eyes, he refused to entertain that notion. She had come to him, after all. He had not put any pressure on her. She was just shy, that was all. He doubted many

men had so much as flirted with her, let alone kissed her. She was as innocent as her sister had been experienced.

His expression bland, he murmured, 'We should take advantage of our relative privacy to organise the practical details of our wedding, don't you think?'

The sooner he secured her, the sooner he could stop worrying that she might run away.

By the end of the first act, by dint of keeping their heads close together and keeping their voices low, they had managed to agree upon a simple civic wedding. Conningsby, upon whose discretion he relied, would serve as his witness, and her parents would support Heloise. It would take next to no time to arrange it.

They had also managed to create the very impression Charles had sought. The audience, agog with curiosity, spent as much time training their opera glasses upon the unchaperoned young couple who appeared so intent on each other as they did upon the stage.

Heloise ordered a lemon ice once they finally managed to secure a table at Tortoni's. But she did not appear to be enjoying it much. She was still ill at ease in his company. The truth was that much of the behaviour upon which she had to judge him might well have given her a false impression of his character.

He shuddered, recalling that excursion beyond the city boundaries to the guingette, where ordinary working people went to spend their wages on food, drink and dancing. Felice had made

it seem like such fun, and in its way it had been. But Heloise, he suddenly realised, watching as she daintily licked the confection from her spoon, had not only refused to join in the hurly-burly, but would never have cajoled him to attend such a venue. He would have to reassure her that he would never so browbeat her again.

'Since I have been in Paris,' he began, frowning, 'I have done things I would never consider for a minute in London. Things that are breaches of good ton.'

Heloise tried not to display her hurt that he should regard marrying her as a breach of ton. She already knew she was not at all the sort of wife an English earl ought to marry. His infatuation with Felice would have been much easier for society to forgive, given that she was so very enchanting. But nobody would be able to understand why he had picked up a plain little bourgeoise like her, and elevated her to the position of Countess.

'Allow me to be the first to congratulate you,' a voice purred. Dropping her spoon with a clatter on the table, she looked up to see Mrs Austell hovering over their table, her beady eyes fixed on Felice's emerald ring. 'Though I had heard…' She paused to smile like a cat that had got at the cream, and Heloise braced herself to hear whatever gossip had been noised abroad concerning the Earl and her sister. 'I had heard that you were going to make an announcement at the Dalrymple Hamilton ball.'

'Circumstances made it impossible for us to attend,' Charles replied blandly.

‘Ah, yes, I hear there was some unpleasantness in your family, mademoiselle?’

Laying his hand firmly over hers, Charles prevented her from needing to answer. ‘Mademoiselle Bergeron does not wish to speak of it.’

‘Oh, but I am the soul of discretion! Is there nothing to be done for your poor sister? Too late to prevent her ruination, I suppose?’

‘Oh, you have the matter quite out. The affair is not of that nature. The young man fully intends to marry my fiancée’s sister. Has done for some considerable time. It is only parental opposition that has forced the silly children to feel they needed to run off together in that manner.’

Heloise marvelled that he could appear so unconcerned as he related the tale. Deep down, she knew he was still smarting. But it was this very sang-froid she had factored as being of paramount importance to her scheme. Why should she be surprised, she chastised herself, when he played the part she had written for him so perfectly?

‘A little embarrassing for me to have an escapade of that nature in the family,’ he shrugged, ‘to be sure. But it is of no great import in the long run.’ With a smile that would have convinced the most cynical onlooker, Lord Walton carried Heloise’s hand to his lips and kissed it.

‘Of course I never held to the prevalent opinion that you would make the younger Mademoiselle Bergeron your wife,’ Mrs

Austell declared. 'A man of your station! Of course you would prefer the more refined Mademoiselle Bergeron to her flighty little sister. Though I must warn you—' she turned to Heloise, a malicious gleam in her eye '—that you ought not to make your dislike of Wellington so apparent when you get to London. They idolise him there, you know. If anyone were to catch a glimpse of that scurrilous drawing you made of him…' She went off into a peal of laughter. 'Though it was highly entertaining. And as for the one you showed me of Madame de Stael, as a pouter pigeon!'

'I collect you have had sight of my betrothed's sketchbook?'

'Felice handed it round one afternoon,' Heloise put in, in her defence. 'When a few ladies connected with the embassy paid us a visit.'

'Oh, yes! Such a delight to see us all there in her menagerie, in one form or another. Of course, since the one of myself was quite flattering, I suppose I had more freedom to find the thing amusing than others, to whom mademoiselle had clearly taken a dislike.'

At his enquiring look, Heloise, somewhat red-faced, admitted, 'I portrayed Mrs Austell as one of the birds in an aviary.'

With a completely straight face, Charles suggested, 'With beautiful plumage, no doubt, since she always dresses so well?'

'Yes, that's it,' she agreed, though she could tell he had guessed, even without seeing the picture, that all the birds portrayed on that particular page had been singing their heads off. If there was one thing Mrs Austell's set could do, it was make

a lot of noise about nothing.

'And dare I ask how you portrayed Wellington?'

But it was Mrs Austell who answered, her face alight with glee. 'As a giraffe, if you please, with a great long neck, loping down the Champs-Elysées, looking down with such a supercilious air on the herd of fat little donkeys waddling along behind!'

'For I see him as being head and shoulders above his contemporaries,' Heloise pleaded.

'Oh, I see!' Mrs Austell said. 'Well, that explains it. Have you seen your own likeness among your talented little betrothed's pages, my lord?' she simpered.

'Why, yes,' he admitted, feeling Heloise tense beneath his grasp. 'I feature as a lion in a circus, if you please.'

'Oh, of course. The king of the beasts!' she trilled. 'Well, I must not take up any more of your time. I am sure you two lovebirds—' she paused to laugh at her own witticism '—would much rather be alone.'

'As soon as you have finished your ice,' Charles said, once Mrs Austell had departed, 'I shall take you home. Our "news" will be all over Paris by the morning. Mrs Austell will convince everyone how it was without us having to perjure ourselves.'

He was quiet during the short carriage ride home. But as he was handing her out onto the pavement he said, 'I trust you will destroy your sketchbook before it does any more damage?'

'Damage?' Heloise echoed, bemused. 'I think it served its purpose very well.'

‘There are pictures in there that in the wrong hands could cause me acute embarrassment,’ he grated. He had no wish to see himself portrayed as a besotted fool, completely under the heel of a designing female. ‘Can I trust you to burn the thing yourself, or must I come into your parents’ house and take it from you?’

Heloise gasped. She had only one skill of which she was proud, and that was drawing. It was unfair of him to ask her to destroy all her work! It was not as if she had made her assessment of her subjects obvious. Only someone who knew the character of her subject well would know what she was saying about them by portraying them as one type of animal or another.

It had been really careless of her to leave that sketchbook lying on the table when she had gone up to change. She had not been gone many minutes, but he had clearly found the picture she had drawn of him prostrate at her sister’s feet, while she prepared to walk all over him. And been intelligent enough to recognise himself, and proud enough to resent her portrayal of him in a position of weakness.

He was not a man to forgive slights. Look how quickly he had written Felice out of his life, and he had loved her! Swallowing nervously, she acknowledged that all the power in their relationship lay with him. If she displeased him, she had no doubt he could make her future as his wife quite uncomfortable. Besides, had she not promised to obey his slightest whim? If she argued with him over this, the first real demand he had made of her, she would feel as though she were breaking the terms of

their agreement.

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