

Welcome to my Christmas short story for 2023. I hope you enjoy it. As always it's free on my website so please share as much as you like.

Most of my short stories are set very firmly within the years of the Peninsular War but this one is slightly different. In terms of the chronology it's the earliest story I've written so far. It's an unashamed romance. I think in difficult times it's good for all of us to enjoy a bit of escapism.

Some of you who aren't familiar with the ever-changing map of Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries might be confused by the implication that Antwerp is part of the Netherlands. In fact the Kingdom of Belgium only came into being in 1830 and prior to that it would have been usual to refer to the citizens of Antwerp as Dutch.

This story is dedicated to my editor and very good friend Heather Paisley since she asked me to write it. I'm glad she did because I really enjoyed it. I hope you do too.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to all of you.

The Yule Log

The ladies were in the small parlour working on their stitchery when Lord Tevington arrived home. It was late afternoon and already growing dark. There had been flurries of snow throughout the long day and Lady Tevington had fretted about the condition of the roads and the likelihood of his lordship completing the journey today.

The Honourable Georgiana Henthorne rang for the tea tray while her mother fussed over her husband, who was tired, cold and slightly damp. He had used his personal chaise for the journey which leaked rather badly in inclement weather. Georgiana thought that he might have been more comfortable on the mail coach and it would certainly have been quicker, but she knew that it would not have occurred to her father to use a public coach.

When he was finally seated among his family with a glass of brandy and a cold supper, his Lordship gave a contented sigh. The ladies drank tea and waited to hear the account of his visit to London.

Lord Tevington did not generally return to Town once he had retired to his Leicestershire estate after the Season. He was a man of fixed habits and though he conscientiously performed his Parliamentary duties each year, he much preferred to

spend his time in the country. This year he had been summoned back to attend to a legal matter. An elderly female cousin had died, leaving her estate to Georgiana. It was a modest legacy, but worth having to a girl who, despite a very respectable marriage portion, had not yet managed to find herself a husband.

At the age of twenty-two, Georgiana was not especially anxious about her unmarried status. She was the only child of affectionate parents and had not felt pressured into making an early marriage, although she suspected that her mother was beginning to wish she would put a little more effort into it. She had spent three Seasons in London and had received several offers of marriage including one from her cousin Edward who would inherit the title and the entailed estates on her father's death. Georgiana liked Edward and knew that her mother would have been delighted by such a neat solution but she could not bring herself to marry her cousin. They had been raised too closely for her to consider him as a husband and she suspected that he felt the same way and had only made the offer from a sense of duty.

Lord Tevington was not old and was in good health so there was no urgency about Georgiana's marriage but she knew her mother would like to see her settled. The Leicestershire property would go to the next Viscount, along with a neat little estate in Suffolk and a sprawling property in Northumberland but the London properties, including her father's elegant house on Curzon Street, were not entailed and would go to Georgiana along with a respectable income derived mostly from Government bonds and some East India Company shares. She was not a great heiress but she was a good prospect and did not fear being left on the shelf. The problem was that she was content in her position as a daughter at home and had not met any man she liked well enough to persuade her to change it.

Her father gave his account of his meeting with the lawyer and moved on to more general news. London was thin of company this close to Christmas but he had dined with several gentlemen who, like himself, were in Town on business and was thus able to give his wife and daughter an account of two betrothals and one surprisingly hasty marriage which Tevington personally thought might be an elopement.

"Caroline Maitland would never have eloped," Georgiana said, much entertained. "Only think of the discomfort and inconvenience at this time of year. She will not even walk in the park if it looks likely to rain, and that is in the height of summer. All the same, she has been pining after Bennington this past year and I don't think her father was enthusiastic. I wonder how she persuaded him."

"Perhaps she threatened to go into a decline," Lady Tevington said with interest. "It can be surprisingly effective. One of the girls I knew from my first season managed a shockingly bad marriage by convincing her Papa that she would waste away."

Tevington snorted. "I doubt that would work with Sir James Maitland, my dear. He's too busy nursing his own imaginary illnesses to care about his daughter's. I wonder if..."

He stopped abruptly and Georgiana giggled. "Don't be so stuffy, Papa. Do you think she managed to get herself into a compromising position?"

"Something of the kind," her father admitted dryly. "That would certainly speed the wedding plans along nicely. Don't consider it, Georgiana. Your mother

wants her day in church and a new hat.”

“In our daughter’s case I shall be thankful if she can find a man who meets her extremely high standards,” Lady Tevington said, setting down her tea cup. “How was Sir William Marley? Was Lady Marley with him in Town?”

“No, they’re settled in Sussex for Christmas. He was only there to visit his dentist. Poor fellow had a tooth drawn and could only dine on soup and burgundy when we met. Not that it seemed to upset him after the second bottle. He tells me Lord Chatham is unwell again with the gout. The way Marley is drinking, I should think he’ll be the same way within a year or two.”

“At least the Earl will not have to manage the Government in such great pain this year. I hope his family are taking good care of him.”

The conversation moved on to the repercussions of the recent and dramatic resignation of the Earl of Chatham from the Government over the adoption of a more hardline policy towards the American colonies. Georgiana was interested in politics but had heard most of this before and she allowed her mind to drift. She was considering which gown to wear for the evening party being given at Dennington Hall the following Thursday when her father said:

“By the way, my dear, we have a social problem to solve. I ran into old Dixon and he tells me the new owner has taken possession of Southwinds for the Christmas season.”

“Has he?” Lady Tevington said. She sounded appalled. “Oh dear. I was hoping he would not arrive until next year and that you might meet him informally. We know so little about him. It is awkward to have to decide whether to invite him or not.”

“Well we know he’s a Nabob and he’s just left the East India service with a pile of money he’s unlikely to have come by honestly,” Tevington said grimly. “He’s not married, which makes it a little easier. I’ll have to call I suppose, but you don’t need to.”

“Is he a widower?” Georgiana asked idly.

“Very likely. Or maybe he never married at all. They often don’t. The climate isn’t suitable for ladies. He’s not English by the way. Dutch apparently. I believe he started out with the Dutch company as a clerk and took employment with the English one in Calcutta to improve his prospects. He’s done well by all accounts. Bought Southwinds off old Elworth and has hired a London house. Setting himself up as a merchant with a couple of ships and an office in the City. Dixon had dinner with him in Town. He seemed impressed.”

His wife made a noise of contempt. “How old is he? We all know that Sir John is desperate to find a husband for Amabel.”

“Even he cannot intend to marry the poor girl to a red-faced, middle-aged East India merchant with a shady past and a bulbous nose,” Georgiana said dispassionately. “At least, I presume he does not. I shall have to protect her.”

“I don’t think Amabel Dixon is in need of your protection, my love,” Lady Tevington said. “Give her one whiff of his fortune and I suspect she will fail to notice the bulbous nose and advancing years.”

They laughed together and Lord Tevington shook his head in mock reproof. “The poor man. You have annihilated his character and appearance and married him

off to Dixon's desperate daughter without ever setting eyes on him. I'll call tomorrow and give you my verdict, and if he seems respectable enough perhaps we can invite him to dinner, my dear. It will be good to have Southwinds occupied again. It's been closed up for far too long."

"Well if you do wish to invite him, we will do it separately from the Dixons, my lord. Whatever he is like, I am not having that girl make a spectacle of herself trying to attach him around my dinner table. Ring for them to collect the tray please, Georgiana. I think your father will be ready for his bed early tonight."

"I will. It's been a long and tiring day but it improved substantially towards the end. Goodnight, Georgiana."

Georgiana spent the following morning accompanying her mother on a series of errands about the estate, followed by a tedious hour addressing invitation cards for the Christmas Eve party. There were a number of well-born families who had returned to the country for the Christmas season and, over the years, they had developed their own customs and traditions which made the wheels of social interaction run smoothly. It was accepted that the Tevingtons hosted a party on Christmas Eve, the Carletons held a ball at New Year and various other families organised dinners, receptions and breakfasts to keep their neighbours entertained through the season. Georgiana enjoyed it, though she sometimes arrived at Twelfth Night feeling that she needed a month to recover from so much socialising and such enormous quantities of food.

She saw nothing of her father until shortly before the dinner hour when he joined his womenfolk in the parlour once again. He was dressed in riding clothes which was his usual daytime attire in the country. His wife gave him a pointed look and he grinned, taking off his tricorne hat.

"I know, I know. Plenty of time to change, my dear. How was your day?"

"Busy, as you can see. We have finished the invitations and I went to see poor Evans who is still laid up with that broken ankle."

"Ha. Serves him right to be climbing ladders at his age. We have farmhands for that kind of thing. Is he all right? I'll go over myself tomorrow; I want to talk to him about the west paddock."

"He is much better although very bored. I think Mrs Evans would be very pleased if you would distract him a little. Have you had a good day, my lord?"

"Yes, very good. Went about the estate a bit, then gave Samuel the chance to stretch his legs out towards Quorndon. Nice bright day, I hope it holds out for the hunt. And I went to call on our new neighbour."

"The Nabob? That was very diligent of you, my lord," his wife said approvingly. "For that you shall have a glass of sherry and tell us your verdict. Is he presentable or not?"

Her husband took the sherry and shot her a rather guilty look. "I think so. I hope you'll think so. The thing is, my dear, I got rather carried away and invited him to dine."

His wife looked horrified. "Charles, you did not! Without asking me?"

“Oh nonsense, it’s nothing formal. I warned him he’ll be taking pot luck. We’ve no other guests today after all. He’s got old Stillington in from Melton Mowbray, installing a new kitchen range. I couldn’t leave the poor man to subsist off cold meat, bread and cheese in this weather. It wouldn’t be neighbourly. Anyway I rather liked the fellow.”

Georgiana was laughing. “Don’t look so worried, Mama. At least it will be a private dinner and if his table manners are dreadful you’ll be able to warn all the neighbours before Christmas.”

“I suppose so. Do you think we need to dress formally, my lord?”

“Definitely not, because I told him there was no need for him to do so. That way he can come on horseback. Got a neat-looking bay in his stables. Good hunter, I’d say. I told him I’d ride over one morning and introduce him to Meynell, if he has a mind to hunt.”

“And does he?” his wife said doubtfully. “You said he is Dutch but he must have spent much of his time in India. Is his English good?”

“Emily, you are being foolish now. He’s worked for the Company since he was fifteen. He speaks English as well as I do, though with an accent to be sure. He’s not at all what you thought, I give you my word.”

“No bulbous nose and red face?” Georgiana teased.

Her father turned amused grey eyes onto her. “Not that I could see,” he said. “As a matter of fact he’s not even middle-aged. Made his fortune young, he tells me, working for the company and trading for himself.”

“In slaves?”

“No, miss. In diamonds. And if I’m not mistaken, when Amabel Dixon claps eyes on him we’re going to have to set a guard around him.”

There was a stunned silence, then Lady Tevington said in commanding tones:

“My lord – you are not suggesting that a common merchant would make a suitable husband for our daughter are you?”

“Good God, no. When she deigns to make up her mind, I think we can manage something more suitable for Georgiana. But he’s a single man with good manners and a pile of money and if I’m any judge he’s about to make a lot more. Not a match for a Tevington, but some young female is going to do very well for herself.”

Franz van Daan rode the short distance to Tevington Hall composing mental lists of jobs still to be done. If Lord Tevington had not issued his impromptu invitation, he would have been perfectly happy sitting at the library table with a plate of bread and cheese and a bottle of wine, writing instructions to his newly employed office staff in London and the captains of his two merchantmen who were currently overseeing the refitting of his ships in Southampton.

It was not the best time to be away from his desk but London was deserted at present. Even the merchants and bankers of the City had retreated to the comfort of their newly-built mansions. Parliament was in recess and Franz reluctantly accepted that there was nothing that he could do from Town that could not be done

from his new country estate. He decided that it would be cowardice to hide in London, to avoid the possible awkwardness of a solitary Christmas in the country where he knew nobody. Social acceptance would come in time, hopefully with the right marriage and the right friends.

Money was the key to that, whatever the aristocracy pretended. At thirty-one he had made a small fortune already, but he had not finished yet. The younger son of a respectable merchant from Antwerp, he had firmly rejected the offer to work in the family business with his brother and had taken himself off to India, initially as a clerk with the Dutch East India Company. He had quickly recognised that there was no future in that crumbling organisation and had found an opening in the English company instead. He had worked hard, learned fast and taken every chance he had been given. He had been ruthless and at times even unscrupulous in trade, though never in lives unlike some of his counterparts.

He had reached the limits of what the Company could offer him and had weighed up his options. Remaining in the East and trading outside the company was difficult and likely to make enemies of men he might need as friends in the future. Returning to Europe and setting up for himself was a better option. He chose London instead of Antwerp because he had good contacts in the City. He chose, right from the start, to spend money setting himself up as a gentleman. He did not yet have the lifestyle to go with it, but Southwinds and his London house were a statement of intent.

Franz knew that Tevington's invitation had been issued on a whim after a friendly discussion about horses, reliable local tradesmen and the political turmoil in London. He wondered if the man had regretted it before he reached home and wondered if the wife and daughter would be tactfully absent for the meal, leaving the two men to enjoy a comfortable masculine dinner together. Franz would be perfectly happy with that. If his acquaintance with Tevington flourished, other invitations would follow.

He was a little surprised to be shown into an elegant drawing room where the ladies were present. None of the family had dressed formally and Franz did not feel particularly out of place in his well-cut dark suit. Tevington came forward to greet him with a slightly forced jollity which told Franz that he had probably been scolded by his wife for inviting a stranger who might not be a suitable acquaintance.

"Welcome, Mr van Daan. Come and be introduced. My dears, this is Mr Franz van Daan of Antwerp and more lately of Calcutta. He is of course the new owner of Southwinds. Sir, this is my wife, Lady Tevington and my daughter, Miss Georgiana Henthorne."

Lady Tevington offered her hand graciously. "It is good to meet you, Mr van Daan. I understand you are currently without a kitchen at Southwinds."

"I am, ma'am. What is worse however is that I am without a cook. The man I employed in London is currently on the road with my valet, two footmen and the rest of my luggage. They are evidently taking a circuitous route. I am very grateful for this."

Lady Tevington laughed. She had a nice laugh and a pleasant manner. Despite the fact that she had clearly been pushed into this by her husband she was friendly and welcoming and by the time they sat down at the dining table, Franz was

beginning to enjoy himself.

Lord Tevington asked him questions about his time in India and his wife made tactful enquiries about his family in Antwerp. Neither made it feel like an interrogation, although Franz was sure that the information would be conveyed to their friends and neighbours along with a recommendation about his suitability as a guest. He thought it was going well and felt a sense of gratitude to the Factor in charge of his district in Calcutta who had bullied the boys under his charge mercilessly into learning languages, perfect accounting practices and the manners of a gentleman. Franz had always been a quick learner.

The girl was quiet at first and Franz wondered if she was naturally shy or if she had been instructed not to engage too much with an unmarried gentleman who could not possibly be seen as a suitable husband for the daughter of a Viscount. Franz studied her without being too obvious and decided that a man on the lookout for a wife could find no fault with Georgiana Henthorne. She was of medium height for a woman and was probably in her early twenties. She was dressed in an elegant French-style robe in green and white with flounced sleeves, the skirts worn over modest hoops and she wore her dark brown hair swept up to display an attractive oval face with lovely grey eyes and good skin.

The food was excellent and Franz decided that this was definitely better than a cold supper with only work for company. He could sense his hostess relaxing as the meal progressed.

“What made you decide to settle in England, Mr van Daan, rather than returning to your family?”

“Ambition, ma’am. London is the trading centre of the world. I’ve worked for the East India Company for twelve years. I’ve made friends and good contacts and they’re all based in London. I was a boy when I left Antwerp. I’ve been back home to visit once or twice, but the business I want to build will be based in England.”

“An honest answer,” Tevington said. “What do your family make of it?”

“My mother died five years ago and father followed her two years later. His business is run by my older brother Andries. He trades largely with Africa and travels between Antwerp and Cape Town. He’s recently built a house there.”

“I am sure your parents would be very proud of you,” Lady Tevington said warmly. “Do you stay in Leicestershire for the Christmas season?”

“I do, ma’am. There’s a good deal to do at Southwinds. I’ve taken on Sir Jasper Elworth’s old estate manager and he’ll run the place when I’m away but I’d like to get the house in order.”

Her ladyship gave a little laugh. “In case of a future Mrs van Daan?”

“I hope so one day, ma’am. Not for a while. I see a lot of hard work and some more travelling in my immediate future.”

“You are a very ambitious young man. It is admirable. Still, I hope you will take some time off during this Christmas to meet your neighbours. We always give a party on Christmas Eve. Not a formal ball but there will be dancing and all the young people in the district will attend. I hope we can count on you.”

Unexpectedly, Georgiana Henthorne raised her eyes from her plate. “What my mother is trying to tell you, Mr van Daan, is that there are plenty of respectable unmarried girls in the area and it never hurts to plan ahead a little.”

Lady Tevington gave a splutter of indignant denial. The girl was studying Franz with dancing grey eyes, inviting him to share the joke. Franz was taken aback but her sheer effrontery made him laugh aloud.

“Thank you so much for the warning, Miss Henthorne. Do you have anybody in particular in mind for me, or do you require a longer acquaintance before you select my future wife?”

The girl gave a peal of laughter and Franz decided that there was not a particle of shyness in Lord Tevington’s apparently reserved daughter.

“I have a number of possibilities,” she said. “But if you are not currently hanging out for a wife, you may miss out on some of them. Still, I will introduce you to them all and you must ask for advice when you need it.”

“Georgiana, you will be putting poor Mr van Daan to the blush,” her mother said in mild reproof, though Franz could see that Tevington was laughing.

“Am I? I’m sorry, Mr van Daan, I am just teasing a little. And I do think it right to put you on your guard. We do not have respectable gentlemen of fortune moving into the district by the dozen. You are about to become terrifyingly popular.”

Franz raised his glass in an ironic salute. “I look forward to it, Miss Henthorne,” he said solemnly.

After dinner, Lord Tevington took his guest on a tour of the stables. The Dutchman declined an offer to drink tea with them afterwards, citing pressure of work and set off into a dark, frosty night back to Southwinds. His lordship saw him off then returned to the drawing room.

“Very interesting man. Shouldn’t be surprised to see him do very well in the City. He’s clearly intelligent, he’s not afraid of hard work and he has the manners of a gentleman.”

“Clearly he is from a respectable family. If we can save him from the clutches of Amabel Dixon, my lord, I can think of a number of girls who would do very well with him. Elizabeth Jackson comes to mind. She is possibly a little young for him, but he is in no hurry it seems. Or there is Jane Betteridge. A very sweet girl.”

“I knew it,” Georgiana said triumphantly. “Thank goodness I had the wit to put him upon his guard a little. Elizabeth Jackson is a vapid ninny and Jane Betteridge would bore him senseless in a week. If you are going to choose the man a wife, Mama, you had better spread your net a little wider. There are plenty of interesting girls in London.”

“It is unlikely that he will be moving in the same circles as us in London, Georgiana,” her mother said reprovingly.

“Do you think so? Well I have only spent three hours in the man’s company, but I predict he’ll be presented at court within three years. Services to trade. Possibly a knighthood in the future. A seat in Parliament even. I don’t think there are any limits to Mr Franz van Daan’s ambitions, Mama. I’m surprised you can’t see it.”

“I have a feeling your daughter is right, my dear,” Tevington said. He sounded amused. “He’d be a fool to throw himself away on a girl who might hold him back in the future. And I agree, Georgiana. If he attends our dance, he is going

to be the object of half the matchmaking Mamas in Leicestershire. Perhaps instead of offering to find him a wife, you should be offering to protect him.”

“My lord, that is not at all suitable,” his wife said repressively. “I would not want to give the young man ideas.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll engage to make it clear to him that Georgiana is going to marry a Marquess at the very least.”

“A Duke. I insist upon a Duke.”

“I don’t think there are any Dukes available, my love,” her mother said regretfully.

“Well if there are, they’re all corpulent, related to royalty and engaged in wholly unsuitable relationships with women of a certain kind. Very well, no Dukes. But as long as Mr van Daan is very clear that he cannot possibly marry me, I don’t see why we cannot be friends, do you? He is a very interesting man.”

“Exactly,” her father said warmly. “I’m taking him over to meet Meynell in the morning. I’ll drop a tactful hint on the way, just to be sure, but I don’t think we’ve anything to worry about. That young man’s mind is focussed on increasing his fortune, not matrimony. I’m going to dine with him in London in the new year. He says he can introduce me to a fellow who can put me in the way of picking up some India stock that’s not generally available.”

“Useful and interesting,” Georgiana said with approval. “I see we are of one mind, dearest Papa. Make quite sure he knows that if he makes any attempt to propose, he will receive a severe set down. I am off to bed. All this civility has quite worn me out.”

It was very cold in her bedroom and Georgiana shivered as her maid helped her to undress, unpinned her hair and brushed it out. The girl slid the warming pan between the sheets but when she had gone, Georgiana did not blow out the candle. Instead she got out of bed and pulled on her warm robe then went to the long window which overlooked the south lawn. She opened the casement and leaned out.

It was a cold night with a bright half moon spilling silver across the lawn. The sky was an inky canvas dotted with stars and Georgiana looked up, trying to spot constellations that she recognised. A childhood governess had nurtured her unfeminine interest in astronomy and Georgiana had a book which had been published in France, beautifully illustrated with colourful charts. It had been a great incentive to improve her French.

Franz van Daan spoke French fluently. She had been curious and had dropped a phrase into the conversation and watched him pick it up and return a neat response. His eyes had sparkled with amusement at her surprise and he had informed her gravely that he also spoke and wrote Urdu, Arabic, Sanskrit and Persian. The education of ambitious junior East India Company writers was terrifyingly thorough and Georgiana had absolutely no doubt that Franz van Daan had been close to the top of every class. He was a man on his way up and he would neglect nothing that might help him on his way.

His eyes were a deep blue. He wore his fair hair in a plain style, neatly tied with a black ribbon. She wondered if he wore a wig on formal occasions. Both men and women often did although Lord Tevington restricted its use to his time in London, preferring to be comfortable at home. Georgiana decided that she would hate

to see Franz van Daan bewigged and powdered. The candlelight had struck gold off his hair and she had felt an unsuitable longing to run her fingers through it, to see if it felt as clean and natural as it looked.

She was in trouble and she knew it. It was one thing to conceive a childhood passion for her French dancing master when she was fifteen. The man had been ten years older with a value for his job and Georgiana's infatuation had died an easy and natural death. Since then she had grown up, had danced and talked and flirted with many men of her own social standing and had not felt the remotest interest in kissing any one of them. She had thought about kissing the Dutchman within fifteen minutes of sitting down at the table with him and for a while, the powerful tug of attraction was so strong that she had been too shy to speak to him at all.

He was not, of course, a suitable husband. Georgiana did not need her parents to tell her that. She had been raised within the rarified limits of the upper ten thousand of English society where the rules of marriage and family were very clear and where there was no possibility of marrying to disoblige her family. It had never occurred to Georgiana to consider it until she had met those laughing blue eyes across the dinner table and wondered if he felt it too.

She was beginning to shiver, even in her warm robe. Reluctantly she drew back into her room and closed the window. The room was even colder than before. The sheets still retained a little of the warmth from the warming pan. Georgiana got into bed with her robe still on and waited until she began to warm up from the piled blankets and heavy quilt.

She had a decision to make. The correct thing to do was to set aside any unsuitable ideas about Franz van Daan as a potential husband and keep a safe distance. That would be easy enough once the busy Christmas period ended. He was not looking for a wife and she could flirt a little and tease him about his prospects and then allow him to go back to London assuming her indifferent. She would recover from this brief, fierce infatuation and one day she would meet him again in some elegant salon to which his wealth, charm and probably an intelligent marriage had gained him entrance. Georgiana had absolutely no doubt he would achieve his aim. She did not think he knew the meaning of self-doubt.

The alternative was to spend these next weeks getting to know the man. There would be ample opportunity. Her father had taken a liking to Franz van Daan and Viscount Tevington was generous with his hospitality and his time when he decided a man was worthy of it. It was possible that further acquaintance with the Dutchman would change her mind. It was possible that he would not like her in return, or that his resolve not to enter into a relationship at this time was fixed and could not be shifted by a reserved young woman he hardly knew.

Sleep eluded her. She fidgeted for a while longer then got up and paced around the room, trying to warm up and also trying to calm her restless mood. It was so unlike her to be this agitated that for a while she did not understand. Eventually, when she was finally tired enough to get back into bed and warm enough not to mind the cold sheets, Georgiana understood.

It was an opportunity for something different. She had accepted the serene, well-arranged course of her life so far without question. Her one small rebellion had been her refusal to contract a marriage of convenience but that had not really

disturbed the smooth flow of her parents' plans for her. There was plenty of time; she was still young. The right man would come along and would offer for her. She would marry and move into the new flow of his life and his family. Children would come. Nothing would change.

Franz van Daan was an aberration; a minor tributary turning unexpectedly into a waterfall, taking her off the edge of her well-ordered life into the unknown. She had spent precisely three hours in his company. No well-bred young woman would ever throw herself at a man in this way. It was unthinkable. She lay quietly on the edge of sleep, a thought drifting through her mind.

“Where do I start?”

Franz was not sure whether to be grateful or exasperated at his sudden adoption into local society. He would have been satisfied on this first visit to his new home to receive the odd dinner invitation. Instead he found himself being swept up into a whirlwind of social activities. As an observer, he was fascinated at how it all worked. As a participant, he could have done with an evening off.

While Mr Stillington of Melton Mowbray finished his work in the kitchen and updated the plumbing at Southwinds, Franz was invited to dine each day at Tevington Park. Sometimes the family dined alone and at other times there were guests invited. He was introduced to a bewildering collection of local families and was beginning to wonder if he was about to disgrace himself socially through his inability to remember the names, family connections and social position of his new acquaintances. He quickly realised however that Tevington had deputed his bright-eyed daughter to help the newcomer through this first difficult phase.

Every other day, he rode out with the hunt, accompanied by Mr Meynell and a collection of local gentlemen. No ladies joined the party and Franz was glad. He had ridden out several times with Lord Tevington and his daughter and admired her seat on the horse, her light hands on the reins and her delightful figure in the fitted riding habit. At the same time, he thought that the hard riding of the hunting field must be horrendously difficult for a woman riding side-saddle.

As a man stepping out of his social class, Franz had a finely tuned sense of when he was being tested and he could see the fine young gentlemen watching his performance on horseback. It did not bother him. He had hunted a variety of quarry on the hills and plains of India and had ridden for his life on a few occasions when caught out by enemy cavalry or simply local bandits. He was not a soldier, but he had learned how to defend himself at need and how to get himself out of trouble. He suspected that he could have outridden most of these gentlemen but he made no attempt to demonstrate it. He certainly had no particular need to be in at the kill. Foxes were attractive creatures and he was perfectly happy to remain silent as one slipped away from danger through the undergrowth while the hounds were distracted.

Hunting acquaintances led to other invitations. The newcomer had purchased a fine estate so could be presumed to have money. His manners seemed to be acceptable. His background was less certain, but a merchant in Antwerp and a spell with the Company was nothing to be ashamed of. He was young and unmarried

and those gentlemen with daughters or nieces or sisters in need of a husband were quick to try to draw him in. As Miss Henthorne had predicted, Franz was suddenly very popular.

He would have become quickly bored with the experience if she had not been present at most of the receptions, dinners and parties. Franz looked forward to seeing her. She was an endless source of amusing gossip and useful information. She was also, he realised, unfailingly ready to step into any awkward moment. Her ready smile and serene manner were invaluable. She was a natural diplomat and she was going to make some lucky man an excellent wife.

Franz had tactfully questioned her father about the matter. They had quickly reached an understanding about his own position. He was not ready to marry yet and the Tevington heiress was beyond his reach. With that established, Tevington talked freely of his daughter.

“She’s a very good girl. Clever, witty and good company. She has excellent social skills. She has so much to offer a man, it’s hard to understand why she’s not married yet.”

“She’s still very young, surely?”

“Twenty-two. By no means old cattish yet, but it’s time she took the matter seriously. I think my wife worries more than I do. I’m hale and hearty yet, good for a few more years. But I admit I’d like to see her settled. It’s not that she didn’t take. She’s spent several seasons in Town and she was very popular. It’s just that she can’t seem to settle on anyone.”

“She probably needs more time, that’s all.”

“Or the right man,” Tevington said. “He’ll come along, I’ve no doubt.”

Franz had no doubt either. This was not the right time and she was not the right woman, but nevertheless he was aware of an uncomfortable pull of attraction to Viscount Tevington’s charming daughter. It was fortunate that their respective positions had been made so clear from the start. It made for an easy friendship and Franz did not feel any need to be careful about raising false hopes. Treading carefully in this surprisingly complex new world, the one thing he did not need to worry about was Georgiana Henthorne.

In between his social obligations he was frantically busy. Letters came in daily: from the captains of his new ships, from merchants whom he wished to cultivate as customers and colleagues, and from his man of business in London who had endless questions for his client. At home he rode about his new estate, getting to know the land and the people. Franz was city bred and had spent his adult life under the baking sun of India, in offices and warehouses and factories. He knew absolutely nothing about estate management and was not going to be able to learn over one freezing winter. However, he wanted to ensure that Mr Jack Grenville, who had run Southwinds under its former owner, realised that he intended to know as much as he could before returning to London and to learn a lot more in the future.

He was joined, a few days before Christmas, by Miss Henthorne. He saw her from a distance, riding towards Tevington Park from the direction of the village, her groom trotting decorously behind her. Franz had been trying to absorb far too much information about the lambing season from Mr Grenville and one of his shepherds. He lifted a hand in greeting to the girl and she turned her horse off the

road and cantered over to join him.

“You’re out early, Miss Henthorne.”

“I had an errand at the haberdashery shop in Ingate. A matter of matching some ribbons for my ballgown. You are out early yourself, sir, as always. Do you never sleep?”

“Very well, when I finally get to my bed. I’m glad to have met you, I’m wondering if you would do me a favour. There’s a book I promised to lend to your father. Do you have time to wait while I fetch it and you can deliver it to him? I’m not expecting to see him now until Christmas Eve.”

“Of course I will. Though I think he would appreciate it if you delivered it yourself. Why don’t you ride over with me and give your horse a run out? He must be bored with trotting sedately around the estate. We could take the cross-country route beyond Widdrington Forest and give them a proper gallop.”

Franz felt a little lift of pleasure at the thought. “If you don’t mind waiting while I fetch the book?”

“I’ll come with you.” She seemed to catch his expression and laughed. “I will wait outside very properly with Collier, I promise you. You won’t be compromised by inviting a young unchaperoned female into your bachelor establishment.”

Franz laughed, turning his horse to walk beside her. “I’d be more worried about your reputation than mine. Although it occurs to me how ridiculous that is. The house is crawling with servants plus a crew of workmen repairing the south chimney. We would be hard put to manage even to hold hands without an audience.”

He was not sure if he had spoken inappropriately but she laughed. “They make up these rules without proper thought,” she said. “It is impossible to remember them all.”

“I’m still learning. You don’t seem to have any difficulty at all from what I can see, though. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you put a foot wrong.”

To his surprise, she looked a little sad. “No, it is true. I’m very boring.”

“Or very clever.”

“Sir?”

“One of the things a varied career has taught me, Miss Henthorne, is how pointless it is to rail against every petty regulation when most of them really don’t matter. Far better to appear agreeable and save your battles for the important ones.”

Her expression lightened. “I’m so glad to hear you say that because it’s what I’ve often thought. Though I’m surprised. You don’t strike me as a particularly compliant person.”

Franz grinned. “I’m not, naturally. I was a boy when I joined the Dutch company and the schoolmaster they assigned me to had a heavy hand with the cane. At school when I was younger, I was always in trouble for fighting or for getting involved in some stupid prank. Old Van Der Molen beat that out of me before I’d reached India. At least he thought he did.”

“He sounds horrible. I hope he had a miserable life.”

“He certainly behaved as though he did. I don’t know what happened to him after I left to take up a post with the English company. I’ve often wondered.”

“How did that come about?” the girl asked curiously. “It isn’t usual, is it?”

“Not at all. Writerships – that’s what they call the junior clerks in the Company – are usually a matter of patronage and are much sought after. I was simply in the right place at the right time. I’d been in India for almost two years by then and was beginning to think I’d made the wrong decision. The Dutch company is in decline, certainly in mainland India. It’s been reduced to a minor player. I was considering trying to arrange a transfer to Batavia where there’d be more opportunities for an ambitious young man. At that point I fell in with an Englishman, a senior factor who’d been sent to negotiate with a minor Indian prince on the borders of Dutch influence. It was a delicate situation and Van Der Molen handled it very badly. He got us kicked out of the trading franchise then and there but I ended up helping Mr Sanderson because his clerk had died of fever during the journey.”

“What did Mr van der Molen think of that?”

“It was his idea. I think he hoped that lending assistance to the English, who were clearly about to win the franchise, might give us a way back in at some later stage. It didn’t of course. The Company had that particular contract sewn up tightly within months. I stayed with Sanderson throughout the process, improved my English and did a lot of the ground work. He was apparently very impressed and asked if I’d stay on.”

“You must have done well.”

“I almost worked myself to death to win that position.”

“I admire your determination, Mr van Daan, but will you forgive me if I say that while it is an admirable trait to achieve a short-term goal, it is not wise or healthy as a long-term way of life. I meant what I said earlier. I’ve no idea when you sleep. You are up and out about your land as soon as it is light; you spend hours working late by lamplight, which will ruin your eyes if you are not careful. The only time you appear to relax is when you are socialising. But I do not think you are socialising at all. You are still working to build useful contacts and to establish your place in English society.”

Franz was so surprised that he could not speak for a while. They rode in silence with the groom at some distance behind them. As they rounded a copse of oak trees, the impressive façade of the manor house appeared before them. Franz shot her a quick glance.

“It feels wrong to leave you standing on the driveway,” he said, feeling unaccustomed awkwardness. “I know where the book is, I’ll be as quick as I can.”

“After my rude interference in your life, Mr van Daan, I shall not be surprised if you close the front door and fail to reappear.”

“No. Oh God, no, I would never do that. You weren’t rude at all. I just... look wait there. I will be ten minutes.”

He sped into the house to find the book, his thoughts a jumbled whirl. She had spoken so serenely but her words had cut through any subterfuge with surgical precision. He was appalled to think that his motives were so obvious.

He rejoined her in considerably less than ten minutes and they walked their horses back up the long drive. Franz knew he needed to say something. He could not remember the last time he had been this tongue-tied around anybody. It was embarrassing.

“I’m so sorry,” she said unexpectedly, with quiet sincerity. “I’ve genuinely

upset you, haven't I?"

"No, of course not. Or at least...not upset exactly. I'm ashamed. It's as if you've held up a mirror before me and I'm not that keen on what I see."

"That wasn't my intention at all, Mr van Daan. I wasn't trying to criticise you. I was trying to express concern for you."

"Concern?" Franz said, surprised. "There's nothing to be concerned about, ma'am. But if I'm going about the district looking as though I'm using your father to get me introductions to my neighbours so that I can use them as well, I'm deeply embarrassed."

"Nobody thinks that, sir."

"Clearly you do, ma'am. You just said so."

"Oh dear, I've made such a mull of this." She lifted worried grey eyes to his face. "I'm truly sorry. What I was trying to say is that you don't need to try so hard at all, sir. Everybody likes you. Your social manners are impeccable and at least three young ladies are devastated at your reluctance to contemplate matrimony at this time. It's just that to me, you never seem to just relax. And I don't think that's because you're using people. I just think you don't have any idea how to relax at all."

She seemed so sincere that Franz felt a little of his discomfort recede. He managed a smile.

"I suppose that's better than being seen as an unrepentant Machiavelli."

She frowned a little. "I don't know what that means."

"And you probably shouldn't. I'm not sure his writings would be considered suitable for a young lady. He was an Italian politician and writer a few hundred years ago with some interesting ideas on the pursuit of power. I read him a couple of years back on an interminable sea voyage to Cape Town and I found him interesting, though I really hope I have not accidentally taken on board his ideas. How do the young ladies know about my determination not to be married just yet?"

"I suspect my father dropped a hint to their parents. No girl wants to be seen to throw herself at a gentleman who has no intention of reciprocating."

"I should find a way to thank him. Although it doesn't seem to have deterred Miss Dixon."

"Nothing short of a cavalry charge could deter Miss Dixon."

"I wish I had a company of the Bengal lancers with me then. Do I seem bored in company at times, Miss Henthorne? Please be honest. This is rather new to me, though I'm doing my best to look as though I know what I'm doing. I thought I was getting it right."

"You are. I've not heard a word of criticism, even from my mother, who is a very high stickler."

"Apart from you. What is it that I'm doing to make you think I'm calculating in my choice of friendships?"

She seemed to consider the question seriously. "You're not calculating exactly. It's just that there are times when I feel you're forcing yourself to go out, to be social. Because it's the right thing to do."

"It is the right thing to do."

"It's not a duty, Mr van Daan. It's supposed to be enjoyable."

"It is. Most of the time. A lot of the time. It's just..."

“Go on.”

“I have a list in my head that never ends. A list of tasks. Another list of ideas. Of plans for the future. I tick things off on those lists and all the time I add more to the end of them. I’m thirty-one years old and I’ve done well enough so far...”

“Well enough?” Georgiana threw out her arm in exasperation, indicating the spreading lawns of his property. “I have never in my life met a man who has achieved all this by the age of thirty-one by the work of his own hands. Not inherited – earned! That is extraordinary.”

He felt a flush of pleasure at the compliment and suspected it showed on his face. He decided he did not want to hide it from her.

“Thank you. But I want more.”

“How much more?”

“I don’t know yet. Perhaps I’ll recognise it when I get there.”

She looked at him steadily. “That sounds as though it may take a few years, Mr van Daan. I think what I was trying to say to you earlier is that you might want to think about how you spend your time along the way. There is no point in arriving at a destination alone and weary with no energy to enjoy your achievement.”

Franz smiled at her. “You’re an extraordinary young woman, Miss Henthorne. Thank you. I’m going to give that some serious thought. In the meantime, you promised we could gallop. Hans here is longing to stretch his legs.”

She returned his smile and touched her heel to her mare’s flank. “I think that is an excellent idea, before I manage to upset you all over again, sir.”

The cutting of the yule log was an ancient tradition which had died out in many households, but Lord Tevington had made it one of the rituals of Christmas Eve. Just before noon, a dozen estate workers set off to the tree previously selected. As many of the household staff who could find the time accompanied them down to the forest and the estate children ran shrieking ahead.

While her mother was supervising preparations for the evening party, Georgiana walked down to the forest to watch the yule log being cut. It was dry and very cold, with grey leaden skies which made her wonder if it might snow. She was wrapped in an old woollen cloak, too shabby to wear out and about but perfect for a muddy walk in the woods. The men sang as they set about their work and the spectators joined in. Georgiana loved the traditional carols, many of which were so old that their origin was long forgotten.

As the enormous log was being tied with ropes so that it could be dragged up to the house, a voice hailed her and she turned with a little skip of her heart to see Franz van Daan dismounting from his horse at the edge of the trees. She walked to meet him. He was dressed plainly as always in dark-blue riding clothes with good, leather boots and a modest hat. She saw his gaze flicker over her hooded cloak and felt herself flush a little.

“Mr van Daan, you have caught me wholly unprepared. I must look like a scarecrow.”

“You look as lovely as always. I was just thinking how pretty your hair looks

like that. Much softer.”

“Not at all fashionable.”

“It should be. Fashion has a lot to answer for. I was on my way over to the house when I heard the singing and I was curious. What is going on?”

“They are cutting the yule log, sir. It’s a very old custom and not much observed any more, but our family still does it.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

He was watching with amused interest as some of the women and children came forward with ribbons and garlands to decorate the log.

“The log will be dragged up to the house. Helping to bring it home is supposed to ensure good luck for the coming year. We set it up in that enormous fireplace in the hall and pour brandy or wine over it to welcome it to the house. It is lit with a torch made from a piece of wood left over from last year’s Yule Log. It is then kept burning steadily for the twelve days of Christmas.”

“Good heavens. Does it never go out?”

“It never has. Our staff have long experience with banking the fire and keeping it burning slowly and the estate children take it in turns to sleep by the fire and tend it through the night. They love doing it. It’s warm and cosy and they are constantly fed treats. Much better than a cold bed in a cottage loft.”

Franz was laughing. “Well, given the tasks I’ve set myself for this year, I am in need of my share of the luck, Miss Henthorne. Give me a moment; I’ll get Clinton to take my horse up to the stables. Save me a space on the ropes.”

There was laughter and more singing as the huge log was dragged up the driveway to the main door of the house. Franz did not know any of the carols but seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the festive atmosphere. It was hot work and after a short time he took off his riding cloak and gave it to one of the younger children who ran alongside the procession.

Georgiana watched him and found herself silently laughing. She had seldom seen him so joyously unselfconscious. Her own participation in the ritual was purely symbolic and although she held onto the rope she allowed the men to do the work. Her companion, in contrast, threw himself into the task with enthusiasm. She could see the effort in his face and found herself admiring the muscles across his broad shoulders as he hauled on the rope. He had quickly taken charge of the gang, calling out to the children to race ahead and remove small obstacles from the path of the log.

Up at the house, more of the male servants came to help drag the log to the fireplace, where Lord Tevington and his wife stood ready for the welcome ritual. There was laughter and more singing but also a moment of quiet solemnity as the flickering fire caught and took hold. Cider was passed round to the whole party, with wine for the gentlefolk. Franz offered a toast to his host and his family and the estate workers drank with enthusiasm.

Afterwards they drifted away to their various duties. Georgiana sipped her wine.

“You are early, Mr van Daan. I was not expecting to see you until the dance.”

“I’ve invited Mr van Daan to dine before the festivities, my dear. In fact your mother and I have invited him to spend Christmas with us. Just a couple of

nights. No reason for him to spend the season alone in that big house. I sent your man up to unpack for you, sir and when you're ready I'll show you to your room."

"I'm very grateful, sir."

Deep blue eyes, alight with amusement, settled upon Georgiana's surprised face.

"Do not look so concerned, Miss Henthorne. I have left my note tablets and ledgers at home, I give you my word. I believe it is time to practice taking my leisure time more seriously. I hope you approve."

Georgiana could not help laughing and was glad that the opportunity for banter concealed her joy at knowing he would be with them over the Christmas-tide.

"I am glad to hear it, Mr van Daan. Are you musical?"

"Not at all, but I can tell that you are. I could hear you singing even over that raucous bellowing from the log bearers."

"My girl is very talented," Tevington said warmly. "Tomorrow she shall play and sing for us. Come, sir, finish your wine. We'll need time to change before dinner."

Franz took his time over dressing. He had ordered a new suit for the occasion: dark-blue silk over a snowy linen shirt, with a sober black silk stock. The only wig he possessed was in his dressing room in London. He wore it when he knew it would be expected or when he wanted to look older and more serious. He loathed the feeling of a wig on his head and wished they had not become so essential in business circles. Tonight he might be stigmatised as a country bumpkin for his fair, unpowdered hair, but there was only one person he wanted to impress and he thought she would prefer him like this.

There were a dozen guests for dinner; friends and family invited to spend Christmas. Franz was introduced to the Honourable Edward Henthorne with considerable interest. The man was around his own age, slender and elegant with good bones and a rather long nose. He bowed elaborately over his cousin's hand and seemed pleased to see her but showed no sign of flirting with her. Franz decided that the man could be tolerated after all.

Henthorne was the only younger gentleman present during dinner. Franz found himself seated between an elderly spinster cousin and Miss Henthorne. His host's daughter was dazzling in another version of the robe à la française. This one was made of silver-grey silk which seemed to match her glorious eyes. It had a fitted bodice and wide open skirt over a green underskirt. She wore her hair up, with an arrangement of silk flowers artfully positioned in the centre, matching an identical arrangement on the bodice of the gown. It was the most elaborate outfit he had seen her wear and she carried it well. Franz divided his attention politely between the rather deaf cousin and Miss Henthorne and decided that she looked beautiful and that he was definitely in serious trouble.

His growing attraction to Lord Tevington's serene daughter had crept up on him so gradually that it had taken him by surprise when she had expressed her frank concern about his working hours. He had been a little embarrassed at how easily she

had seen through him but he had also been ridiculously happy that she had clearly spent so much time studying him.

It gave him hope that she was not indifferent to him, but hope was of no use at all, given his situation. His own declared decision not to marry yet was no barrier at all, since a man could change his mind at any time and a man who had spent more than a month getting to know Miss Georgiana Henthorne would be an idiot not to. The problem lay with her parents. Lord Tevington had made it pleasantly clear that his ambitions for his daughter placed her well out of the reach of a self-made Dutchman with a possibly murky past on the Indian sub-continent. Franz realised that it was Lord Tevington's honesty that had brought about this situation in the first place. If he had thought for one moment that he might have been expected to declare for the girl he would have kept her firmly at arm's length. Knowing that marriage was not a possibility had opened up the path to friendship for both of them.

He had not intended to fall in love with her, or with anybody else. Marriage and romance were by no means the same thing and Franz had a list of requirements for the woman he intended to make his wife one day. There was no hurry about it and he had quite enjoyed getting to know Georgiana and silently ticking each item off the list as he observed them in this calm, intelligent young woman. Metaphorically he had torn up the list weeks ago. She was perfect and he loved her and all he needed to work out was how to tell her so and persuade her to listen.

They danced together several times. He was a competent dancer; it had been part of his social education in his early days in India. He could remember, with some amusement, being obliged to partner the other young gentlemen during dancing lessons because there were no girls to practice with. Miss Henthorne was a graceful dancer but did not make him feel awkward for his lack of skill. He decided he would work to get better at it, so that she would enjoy dancing with him more.

There was no shortage of girls at this party. Chaperones stood or sat around the edge of the rooms or played cards in the small salon. Servants circulated with champagne, fruit punch and lemonade. Young bucks in dazzling silk evening suits preened themselves like gaudy peacocks. Franz watched them suspiciously as they solicited Georgiana for dances. He was reassured again. She was charming to all of them but clearly treated them as childhood friends rather than suitors. Franz was beginning to realise why her mother was getting concerned. He felt a sudden qualm in case that was exactly how she saw him.

He did not expect to get an opportunity to speak to her alone this evening and felt a little jolt of surprise when he returned from a necessary call of nature to find himself alone in the hall with her. She had paused beside the big fireplace and was looking down at the yule log, a wistful expression on her face. The log was temporarily unattended and he wondered why.

"Miss Henthorne, what are you doing out here alone?"

She looked up in surprise. "Mr van Daan. I am guarding the yule log, as you see. The Gatley twins are on duty for the night but they have been tempted away by honey cakes in the kitchen so I promised to keep watch for them. They will be back soon."

Franz hoped briefly that the boys made themselves sick on honey cakes and did not return for half an hour. He shot a covert glance around the hall, which was

newly draped with greenery cut from the forest and gardens that day.

“Are you enjoying yourself, sir, or have those lists in your head begun to intrude?”

He looked back at her in surprise. “Not at all; they couldn’t be further from my thoughts. I was reconnoitring the area trying to decide if we are about to be interrupted or if we can manage a rational conversation for a few minutes.”

She broke into laughter. “I think you will be safe until the end of this dance. It’s a very intricate measure and after several glasses of wine or punch a lot of people get it wrong. This makes it a popular spectator sport. It is also why I am out here, avoiding damage to my slippers or my gown. I shall return in time for something more dignified.”

“Will you dance that with me, ma’am?”

“If you would like me to, although I have a horrible feeling that I’ve monopolised you rather badly this evening and will be unpopular with the other girls.”

“Do you care?”

“Not very much.”

“Good.” Franz took a deep breath and a step closer. “Miss Henthorne, I’ve something to tell you and I’m not sure how you’re going to take it. I’m also conscious that I’m gabbling like an idiot in case we’re interrupted.”

“Slow down, sir. If we are interrupted there will be plenty of other opportunities to talk over the next few days.”

Her serene manner calmed him as it always did. He smiled at her. “So there will. I’ll be around until after twelfth night but then I have to go up to London and probably on to Southampton. I’ve so much to do there.”

“Those exasperating lists.”

“I’ve decided to start putting them on paper, to keep my head clear.”

“That’s a very good idea, sir. You’ll be missed in the district. I hope you’ll be back next summer, if business allows. Or perhaps we will meet in London. Not at balls and receptions necessarily, but I’m sure my parents will want you to dine with us.”

“I really hope they do.”

She was quick to pick up on his tone. “Why would they not?”

“Because I’m about to do something I’ve been specifically asked not to do. I’m about to ask their daughter to set aside her hopes of a grand alliance and to marry me instead.”

Georgiana stared at him in wide-eyed astonishment. She did not flinch or back away. He waited, trying to remember to breathe. It was a genuine effort.

“Do you mean now? Or in some distant future, when you have made your fortune three times over?”

“Now. As soon as we can manage it. I don’t want to wait. I realise I’ve been thinking of a wife as another item on one of those lists. She’s not. You’re not. I love you and I want to marry you. And I hope I’ve not imagined that you might say yes.”

She looked utterly shocked for a moment. Franz fought the urge to babble some more. Tentatively he held out a hand. After a long, agonising wait, she took it.

“Well, Georgiana?”

“Franz.”

The sound of his name in her gentle tones made him shiver a little. He was abruptly thankful for the likelihood of immediate interruption before he forgot himself and demonstrated all the ways in which he was not, and probably never would be, a gentleman. Instead he raised her gloved hand to his lips.

“Will you?”

“My father is never going to agree, love.”

“I hope he’ll come around. But if he refuses to do so, you don’t need his permission. I’ll arrange a special licence and we can be married very quietly.”

“I suppose you are about to tell me that my dowry and inheritance means nothing to you.”

“Yes. Not that I’d refuse it, mind. Business is business. But I’ll take you however you come to me, *geliefde*. If you’ll have me.”

“I’ll have you, Franz van Daan. At least...before you decide, there’s something you should know.”

Her expression made him want to laugh. “It cannot be that bad, my love.”

“It is very bad. I planned this.”

He stared at her in considerable surprise. “You planned what?”

“You and I. Falling in love. That first evening when you came to dinner...I’d never met a man like you before. I’d never met anybody I could feel this way about.”

Franz was beginning to understand. “Are you telling me, Miss Henthorne, that all those sedate walks with your maid; all those accidental meetings out riding...”

He stopped and looked around the hall. There was still no sign of the twins. “Did you arrange this?”

“Yes,” Georgiana said baldly. Her expression was so apprehensive that Franz wanted to laugh out loud. “I saw you leave so I bribed the boys to stay away until I called for them. I didn’t know that you’d propose of course. That was a surprise, I must say. I just wanted some time alone with you. I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry?” Finally he allowed himself to laugh properly. He also allowed himself to do what he had been longing to do. Stepping forward, he put his arms about her and bent to kiss her for a long time.

There was no interruption. No footsteps sounded on boards or stairs. The hall clock ticked loudly and steadily and the yule log crackled in the grate. When he raised his head he could see that there were tears in her eyes but she was no longer looking worried.

“You’ve deceived me, Miss Georgiana Henthorne,” he said lovingly. “I thought you a sweet, well-brought up young lady and you’ve turned out to be the most managing female I’ve ever met.”

She did not speak for a moment. Then she said thoughtfully:

“Perhaps I can take charge of one or two of your lists. The social ones at least, Franz dear.”

Georgiana had worried that his determination to approach her father would spoil Christmas but Franz was adamant.

"I'm not lying to a man who's been so generous with his friendship, Georgiana. And getting through the next two days, pretending not to love you would be deceiving him. I know he won't be pleased. I'll be as tactful as I can, but if he throws me out, I'll go ahead and make the arrangements and come back to collect you. I hope it doesn't come to that. I hope I can make him understand."

He asked to speak to Lord Tevington after breakfast and they disappeared into the study. The closed door was infuriating. Georgiana could not settle to her embroidery nor to the cosy, gentle gossiping of her female relatives. At the same time she did not dare to go out riding or walking in case she missed Franz before he left.

A maid appeared to summon her to the study before her agitation became too much to bear. Lady Tevington looked up in surprise but made no comment. Georgiana was trembling as she knocked on the door and entered, her stomach in knots.

She was relieved to see that Franz was still there. He stood before one of the long windows, looking out into the rainy garden but he turned as she entered and gave her a reassuring smile. Lord Tevington was sitting behind his big oak desk. Georgiana approached quaking.

"My lord?"

After a painful moment, her father gave a twisted smile. "What did you expect me to do, Georgiana? Challenge him to a duel?"

Relief flooded her body. "No, Papa. But I know you must be angry and disappointed."

"Perhaps. Not so much angry. Your fine gentleman here assures me there's been nothing done that's improper and no thought of elopement or Gretna Green. He's also pointed out, very politely, that you've no need of either. You're of age. He tells me if necessary he'll marry you without a penny."

Georgiana looked over at her love. He looked grave but the smile in his eyes reassured her further.

"I don't want to be estranged from you, Papa. I love you both too much for that."

"But you will if I don't consent."

"It's my life. You've said that to me many times, when I've turned down another suitor. You told me to take my time because it's my life and I have to be sure. I'm sure, Father."

"All right then. You can take yourself off, both of you. I'll find your mother and tell her and get her calmed down. She'll be all right with it in the end. It's not as if he's a stranger that we didn't like. You'll take care of her, sir. Your word on it."

"Always, my lord."

"Very well. Come back here in an hour. She'll have had a good cry and be planning your wedding. And you'll allow her to do so, if you please. Some things need to be done with a good grace."

Georgiana broke into a broad smile. "She can dress me up like a cream puff if it makes her happy, sir. Thank you so much."

She spent a joyous hour with her betrothed, walking through the damp tangled shrubbery and returned with a sparkle of moisture on the hood of her cloak and a fine sheen of raindrops on the good dark wool of his coat. She gave their outer

clothes to a servant and moved towards the study but Franz caught her hand and drew her to stand before the gently burning yule log in the fireplace. A sleepy urchin was curled up on a cushion, watching the flames.

“Wait just a moment. I’ve something to give you. It’s not new. For a wedding ring, I’ve a very beautiful stone I bought in Madras. We’ll go up to London, there’s a goldsmith who does excellent work and you can choose your own setting. But this is the best I can do for a betrothal gift. I wasn’t expecting to need one.”

She took the small leather covered box in surprise and opened it. It was a delicate gold cross set with pearls on a fine chain. Georgiana lifted it from its velvet setting, enchanted.

“Franz, it’s beautiful. Where did you get it?”

“It was my mother’s. My father gave it to her when I was born. Their initials are engraved on the back. The pearls are real. When she died, he divided up her jewellery between my brother and I. I’m glad I got this. May I put it on you?”

She allowed him to fasten the dainty chain. There was a long mirror on the wall outside the study and she went to study herself.

“Thank you. I’ve never owned a piece of jewellery I love this much.”

He grinned. “It suits you, but I’m hoping you like the diamond as well, since that will be my personal contribution to your jewel case. Come on, let’s see how things are with your mother.”

Lady Tevington had been crying. She cried again when Georgiana went to embrace her and then cried even more when her future son-in-law did the same. Georgiana noticed that she hugged him very tightly though and was satisfied. She suspected that for all her disappointment in this marriage for her daughter, Lady Tevington was already dreaming of wedding clothes and then possibly grandchildren.

His lordship was jovial. He poured wine for them all and toasted the happy couple and their future, then went on to make plans for a family announcement over the Christmas dinner and a more formal one to the district at large at a reception to be held in a few days time.

Lady Tevington, still rather dewy-eyed, held her daughter’s hand and talked about wedding plans and a trip to London to shop for bridal clothes and a trousseau. In the background, the gentlemen talked settlements then moved on to trade and politics. There was not the least hint of awkwardness or animosity between them.

Georgiana allowed her mother’s soothing chatter to wash over her and eavesdropped shamelessly. Several times she glanced over at her father. He was listening to Franz talking about his first trading voyages, nodding quickly and asking the occasional intelligent question.

She thought back to other conversations, with Cousin Edward and several other promising suitors. Her father had always remained determinedly detached from her mother’s efforts to find her a husband. He had been kindly and distant, never trying to befriend any one of them. He had never, with the obvious exception of Edward who came anyway, invited any one of them to spend Christmas or any other time at the house. He had always allowed Georgiana to make up her own mind.

Eventually her mother rose, smoothed out her morning gown and made noises about checking that all was well with the Christmas meal. She reminded her husband and future son-in-law of the time appointed for the guests to meet in the

drawing room before dinner and departed.

Franz rose as well. "With your leave, sir, I'd like to write one or two letters. I should inform my man of business at least and I'll write to my brother and his family. I'll be down in plenty of time for dinner."

"Of course, of course," his lordship said cheerfully. "Take whatever time you need, my boy."

Franz planted a chaste kiss on Georgiana's cheek and left the room. His lordship gave her a jovial smile.

"Well well, I'm beginning to think this might turn out very well after all, my dear. He's not quite what we intended, but he's as shrewd as they come and if he doesn't make his million before I'm in my grave I'll be very surprised. Now then..."

Georgiana closed the door with a decided snap and advanced on the desk. "Do not speak to me of what you intended," she said forcefully. "You are an unprincipled, untrustworthy conniving old rogue. You knew!"

"Knew what? And that is no way to speak to your father, young lady. If your..."

"No, it's worse than that. It's not just that you knew. You planned it. I thought I was being clever, but I have just realised that it was you all along. You threw us both off the scent with that very public declaration about his unsuitability as a husband and then you threw us together at every possible opportunity. Including this Christmas. You planned this whole thing. You arranged this marriage."

Lord Tevington's round face softened into a singularly sweet smile. "I did no such thing," he said firmly. "I didn't need to. You were smelling of April and May within two weeks and with a man like that I couldn't possibly risk him getting away. What if your mother had managed to persuade you into marriage with some brainless idiot who would have bored you to death in a year and very likely me as well? All I did was give you both the chance to see how very well suited you are. As for the deceit, your mother would never have agreed if I'd told her straight out that I approved the match. This way is much better. She has had the opportunity to attempt to find the husband she thought you should have and I have managed to ensure that you have the husband you deserve. Really, it could not have gone any better. Drink another glass of wine with me, Georgiana, before we change for dinner. It's Christmas, after all."