

# A Provincial Nobody

Welcome to my Valentine's Day story for 2024. As always, it's freely available on my website and as a pdf so please share as much as you like.

I'm particularly pleased to have managed a Valentine's story this year. As my regular readers will know, I've not been particularly well and work has been a struggle. Writing a light-hearted and thoroughly romantic tale has been the perfect way to ease myself back in to writing and I'm hoping that book nine of the Peninsular War Saga will move along at a good pace now.

My readers love my short stories to have links to the books and so far I've done very well with that. As we move into the final phase of the Peninsular War however, it's becoming more complicated. There are a number of characters with interesting stories to tell, but I can't tell them without giving away huge spoilers.

Instead, I'm trying to go back in time. My Christmas story, *the Yule Log*, told the story of Paul van Daan's parents and proved very popular. In this one I've explored the back story of two recurring and well-liked characters from the Manxman series. The story takes place in 1808-09 between the events of *An Unwilling Alliance* and *This Blighted Expedition*.

Happy Valentine's Day to all my readers. In difficult times, I'm especially grateful for your support and enthusiasm for my books and my characters.

Thank you also to my editor, Heather Paisley from Dieudonne Editorial Services who reminded me in her edits for this story that I'd forgotten to mention how fabulous she is. Readers, she's fabulous.

# A Provincial Nobody

On the evening after Mr Benjamin Thurlow's maiden speech in Parliament, he was invited to a ball. The gentleman who had enabled him to become MP for the town of Allingford advised him to go along and enjoy himself.

"If it goes well, you'll have something to celebrate," Sir Anthony Edwards said in matter-of-fact tones. "If it's a disaster, don't worry about it; go out and enjoy yourself. Far better to get the thing over with early. Then it don't matter if you sit like a mute for a couple of years. At least you know you can do it at need."

Benjamin was trying not to resent his patron's insistence that he speak on the subject of the trade blockades currently being imposed by Bonaparte. It was a matter on which he was well informed, having recently taken over as chairman of the Thurlow Trading Company on the death of his father. He had also inherited his father's seat in Parliament, thanks to the support of Sir Anthony, who held the controlling interest in the little market town of Allingford. Benjamin had never really given much thought to a political career but when Edwards made the offer he did not hesitate. He knew his father would have wanted him to say yes, and his personal political views naturally leaned towards the Whig interests supported by Sir Anthony.

Sir Anthony had promised him considerable freedom in his opinions and voting behaviour but his one, rather eccentric, demand was that Benjamin make his maiden speech as early as possible. He had found a credible topic and coached the younger man well. Benjamin complied reluctantly. He had so much to be grateful for and he suspected his late and much missed father would have approved of the decision. He was also terrified that he would make a fool of himself.

It went better than he had expected and he was gratified when a number of fellow MPs paused to offer congratulations as he left the House. On his patron's advice he had kept the speech simple and spoken only of what he knew. It was well received and as he settled to sleep in the early hours, Benjamin acknowledged that

his wily old sponsor had been right. The next time he wanted to speak, possibly on a matter of more significance, it would not be as terrifying.

The ball was one of the earliest of the Season, hosted by the Earl of Rockcliffe, and the rooms were already crowded by the time Benjamin arrived. He greeted his host, an austere gentleman in his sixties and his hostess who was the Earl's sister. His duty done, he went in search of his particular friends with a sense of relief. It had been a long week preparing for the speech and he was thankful to be free of it. Tonight he had nothing to do but enjoy himself and tomorrow he would go back to his desk and his business affairs.

His friends teased him a little about his successful debut and Benjamin smiled, drank champagne and let their raillery wash over him. At thirty-two he was very much at home in London society, though he was better known in Parliamentary and trade circles than in the privileged ranks of the aristocracy. All the same, his name appeared on the invitation list of every hostess during the London Season, not because of his pedigree but because he was a wealthy man and was neither married nor betrothed.

Benjamin knew that his unmarried status was the subject of much curiosity. It was generally accepted that a gentleman should not marry until his position in the world was financially secure, but Benjamin had inherited a prosperous merchant company, trading mainly in spices, silk and luxury goods and he could have married years ago if he chose. The loss of both parents within three years had provided a very good excuse but he was out of mourning now and he suspected that this Season he was likely find himself very popular.

His closest friends did not hesitate to inform him that the matchmaking ladies of the Ton had come up with a variety of imaginary reasons for his failure to take a wife. These ranged from a carefully hidden broken heart from a youthful love affair to the refusal of his stern father to allow him to set up his own household. Both of these reasons seemed utterly ridiculous to Benjamin. He had never come across a lady who had tempted him into a declaration and his father had been the most easy-going of parents and would have been delighted to welcome a daughter-in-law. It was one of Benjamin's only regrets that he had delayed too long to present his parents with grandchildren, but William, his clergyman brother, had already obliged with two, so he did not feel as guilty as he might have.

William was not present tonight, but his youngest brother arrived after dining at his club. Benjamin watched his approach across the ballroom with a faint smile. As always, Edwin was at the centre of a noisy group of gentlemen in red coats. He was half a head taller than Benjamin and had inherited his mother's gregarious nature along with her startling good looks. Female heads turned to follow Edwin's progress across the room. Benjamin was used to it and had long stopped resenting it. He greeted his brother cheerfully and Edwin slapped him on the back enthusiastically.

"I've been hearing how splendidly you did yesterday, brother. Congratulations. The old man would have exploded with pride. Wish he could have seen it."

"So do I," Benjamin admitted. "Though of course if he'd been here I wouldn't have been doing it in the first place. How are you, Ed? I wasn't expecting to see you tonight. Didn't you say you were on duty?"

“I was but I swapped with Spencer. He’s got some sort of dreary family dinner next week that he can’t get out of. We dined at the Shorncliffe before we came on here. It was Spence who told me how your speech went. His father was there of course.”

“Yes, he spoke to me afterwards. How is Spence doing these days?”

“Furious that he’s missed joining the show in Spain. He did his best to convince the surgeon that his arm was as good as new but you can’t bamboozle old Fletcher. He reckons another six weeks at least.”

Benjamin regarded his brother with a tolerant eye. “And what did old Fletcher say about you, little brother?”

Edwin attempted a glare and then laughed aloud. “You know me too well. He said the same. He tells me when I can dance all night without my ankle giving out, I’ll probably be fit to run across a battlefield again. I warn you I intend to do my best to prove him wrong tonight.”

“You’re an idiot, Ed. There’ll be plenty of opportunity for glory; this war isn’t going to end any time soon. Give yourself time.”

“I feel as though I have nothing but time,” Edwin said gloomily. “It seemed such an insignificant wound when it happened. I walked off the field for God’s sake.”

“According to Captain Mayhew you limped off the field and couldn’t mount your horse when it was brought up. You were lucky they didn’t have to amputate.”

“They probably would have if they hadn’t had so many worse injuries to deal with,” Edwin said. “Thank God for the eternal lack of surgeons on a battlefield. Anyway, it’s mended very well and I’m hoping I’ll be able to join Moore in the New Year. In the meantime, I intend to find myself a partner. Are you not dancing, Ben?”

“I will when I’m ready,” Benjamin said with a smile. His brother grinned broadly.

“Playing it close are you, brother? I don’t blame you at all. Nobody is going to expect a declaration from the feckless youngest son in a red coat. You, on the other hand are now the Chairman of the Board. I can see the matchmaking Mamas licking their lips. You take care.”

“If you don’t go away, you’ll get worse from me than the French gave you at Vimeiro. Who is your intended victim this evening? Don’t break her heart will you?”

“I am promised to Miss Middleton for the cotillion and one of the country dances. Have you met her? Seventeen and just out. She’s utterly charming and since we both know her father wouldn’t consider a younger son we can flirt as much as we like. I’m also very taken with Lady Clarissa Flood, though I suspect she’s a bit serious for my tastes. Still, the same applies. I’m perfectly safe, Ben. What about you?”

“I am also perfectly safe, Ed, providing I don’t absent-mindedly propose to somebody. Which I’m not likely to do, by the way.”

Edwin regarded him thoughtfully for a moment. “Why don’t you, Ben? I mean I know why I don’t. But you? Father never really understood what was stopping you, you know.”

Benjamin felt a little pain around his heart. “I know. But Mother did. It’s not complicated, Ed. I just haven’t yet met a woman I want to marry and I’m very happy in my bachelor state. If it happens, all well and good. If not, I trust you and

Will to provide me with plenty of heirs. Go on, get out of here and enjoy yourself.”

Edwin threw an impudent salute and retreated in search of his dance partner and Benjamin returned to his own party, smiling. The evening proceeded as he had expected. He danced with several of his friends’ wives then stood up with a selection of younger girls, mostly daughters of his father’s friends. He had known most of them for years and had no fear that an invitation to dance would be misinterpreted. He suspected that he was being closely observed by a number of interested parents but he had become an expert in light, social chit chat without the slightest hint of flirtation.

He did not speak to his brother again until just before the supper dance; although he saw him frequently, dancing with a series of pretty girls. Benjamin stopped to watch him affectionately. Edwin seemed to be moving very easily with no sign of the limp which had dogged him since an unlucky shot from a spent ball had sent him home from Portugal two months ago.

Benjamin was discussing the composition of his supper table with several of his friends when his brother made him jump with a friendly slap on the shoulder. Benjamin rubbed the afflicted spot and turned to give him a look.

“Try to remember I’m a civilian, Ed. That might be the usual greeting in army circles but you nearly broke my shoulder.”

“Rubbish; you’re not that delicate. Look Ben, I need a favour. It’s an emergency. Will you join my party for supper? We’ve grabbed a table.”

Benjamin raised his eyebrows. “What’s the emergency? Are you dodging an enraged parent or trying to seduce somebody’s daughter?”

“Neither, you blighted puritan. At least, not exactly. I have met a girl.”

“Just one?”

To his surprise, Edwin flushed a little. “There’s no need for that. Her name is Miss Harcourt. We were introduced by Sir Joseph Garrow earlier. Her mother has given me permission to take her in to supper providing her cousin can accompany her. The cousin is staying with them for the Season. Her second Season.”

“Do I know this cousin?”

“No, I’m about to introduce you. Perhaps you could invite her to stand up for the supper dance if you’re not already engaged.”

“Who is she?”

“Her name is Miss Quayle and she is an absolute provincial nobody from some outlandish island off Scotland or somewhere. I don’t know anything more about her apart from the fact that she’s a dashed nuisance right now. I was hoping Barney Caldicott would help me out but he turned me down flat. Apparently he remembers the Quayle girl from last year and he says she’s terrifying. Come on, Ben, please. This girl...Miss Harcourt...she’s very nice.”

Benjamin thought of a number of things he would have liked to say about his brother’s earlier assertion that he was in no danger of developing a serious interest in any girl but he stopped himself. This sudden enthusiasm was unusual for Edwin and he was curious to see the girl who had caught his eye. He sighed.

“Wait there. I’ll have to give my apologies to the Wainwrights and then you may introduce me to this Gorgon. If she turns me to stone, you’ll be entirely responsible and I’ll haunt you.”

“I don’t know if you can haunt people if you’re a piece of sculpture.”

“Trust me, I’ll manage it. You owe me for this, little brother.”

“I’ll find a way to pay you back, I promise you. You’re a thoroughly good sort, Ben. After this I will find you a very nice partner for the next two dances who will not turn you to stone at all. Get on with it before she thinks I’ve changed my mind.”

Miss Felicity Harcourt proved to be a dainty girl of eighteen with rich brown curls and a shy smile. Benjamin inspected her as they approached. She was certainly pretty enough in flowing white muslin trimmed with tiny pink rosebuds, but there was nothing in her appearance to explain why his brother had formed such a sudden liking for her. Still, he bowed politely at Edwin’s introduction and turned to the lady beside her.

“Mr Thurlow, this is my cousin Miss Quayle. She is spending the Season with us but her home is on the Isle of Mann.”

With an effort, Benjamin refrained from a scathing comment on his brother’s appalling ignorance of geography. He wondered if it was ever a problem on campaign but supposed that Lieutenant Thurlow only had to follow the march and probably did not care what the next town was called as long as it had a dry billet. He took the woman’s outstretched hand and bowed.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Quayle. You’ve travelled a long way. Have you been in London long?”

“For a few weeks. My aunt insisted that I arrive in plenty of time for dress fittings. She doesn’t trust any dressmaker north of Harrow. Every time I visit she seems surprised that I don’t appear in rags.”

Miss Harcourt blushed. “Maria,” she said, in gentle reproof. Her cousin shot her a look of amused exasperation.

“I’m sorry, Felicity. You should remember that it can take weeks before I manage to adjust my manners to London standards. I’ll try not to embarrass you.”

Benjamin was struggling not to laugh aloud. “Please don’t guard your tongue on my account, Miss Quayle. I come from a family of plain speakers. I was wondering if you were engaged for the supper dance?”

Intelligent blue eyes surveyed him, then the young woman smiled.

“That is kind of you, Mr Thurlow. I should be delighted. Though possibly not as delighted as my cousin and your brother.”

Benjamin took her hand firmly and led her into the set before she could make Miss Harcourt blush any further. When they were in position and waiting for the music to start, he risked another look. She was watching him with detached amusement as though waiting for him to reprimand her. Benjamin decided that he would not have dared to do so. There was something about this girl which suggested that she would be quite capable of telling him exactly what she thought of him.

Maria Quayle was not at all what he had been expecting from Edwin’s naïve description. She was probably not much above twenty but she had the poise of a girl accustomed to moving freely in society even if it was not in London society. She was very attractive with a good complexion and well-shaped blue eyes. Her hair was the colour of ripe gold wheat and she wore it in a smooth braided arrangement instead of the usual fashionable curls. Benjamin thought it was lovely and made the girl stand

out. The blue gown was more suited to a young married woman rather than a girl in her first or second Season, but she looked beautiful in it. He wondered if it had been her aunt's choice and thought probably not. Miss Quayle did not give the impression of being a girl who would allow her relative to dictate her choice of clothing.

The orchestra played the opening bars of an energetic country dance involving frequent changes of partner. It allowed brief snatches of conversation but no real chance to talk properly. Benjamin was pleased that Miss Quayle did not try, although she smiled pleasantly at him when the dance brought them together. He could see that Edwin and Miss Harcourt were far more enterprising in their attempts to converse, though from the girl's frequent blushes, he suspected that most of their exchanges consisted of extravagant compliments. He wondered what Miss Harcourt's situation was and whether her mother was watching with complaisant approval or making swift plans to separate the couple as soon as supper was over.

The dance ended and Benjamin smiled at his partner and offered his arm. "Thank you, Miss Quayle, I enjoyed that. You're a very good dancer."

"Thank you, sir. I own it is a lot easier when one doesn't have to concentrate on talking, breathing and dancing the right steps all at once."

He shot her a startled look, wondering if she was twitting him on his lack of conversation. She seemed to realise that she had blundered. The pale skin flushed a little.

"I'm sorry, that sounded rude. I didn't mean it that way at all. It really is easier. I love to dance."

Benjamin was unexpectedly charmed. He gave a broad smile. "It showed. I thought I was accustomed to plain speaking, ma'am, but I'm beginning to think I am a mere amateur. Do you always say just what you mean?"

She laughed. "Far more often than I should. I used to pride myself on my social graces but I realised when I came to London last year that I had a lot to learn. At home, I am constantly in company with people I've known since childhood. There isn't the same need to guard my tongue. I forget sometimes."

Benjamin ran his eyes around the room and spotted Edwin and Miss Harcourt at a small table near a long window. He guided his companion across the room, seated her on a blue velvet chair and joined his brother in search of food and champagne. As they surveyed the buffet table, Edwin said:

"What do you think of her?"

Benjamin selected cold chicken and some thinly sliced ham. "Which one?"

"Miss Harcourt of course."

"She's very pretty, Ed and she seems very sweet. A bit shy, but I'd expect that in a girl barely out of the schoolroom." Benjamin looked around and located a waiter. He summoned him and requested champagne. After a moment's thought he asked for lemonade as well. When he looked back, his brother was watching him, a full plate in each hand.

"Are you making a point about how young she is, Ben?"

"No, you ass. I'm giving you the opportunity to impress her mama with how well you're taking care of her ewe lamb. Plying a girl with champagne in her first Season is a terrible idea."

"I hadn't thought of that. Well done, brother. Is the lemonade for Miss

Quayle as well?"

"That will be entirely up to Miss Quayle. I shouldn't have the nerve to tell her what to eat or drink. Come on or we'll find our seats and our partners stolen by a couple of Hussars dripping gold braid. I shall take my life in my hands and converse with your Gorgon while you flirt with the pretty cousin."

"She didn't seem as much of a Gorgon when she was dancing with you," Edwin said meditatively. "She actually looked as though she was enjoying herself."

"I think she was," Benjamin said. "Actually, so was I."

Miss Quayle accepted champagne, with charming thanks. She ate a good selection of the delicacies on her plate, sipped the wine at a sensible pace and kept a discreet eye on her younger cousin with a tact that Benjamin thoroughly approved of. He decided that Miss Quayle had been much maligned. She was very direct but not rude and she appeared to have a ready sense of humour. Benjamin asked her about her home and she made him laugh with several stories about the parochial nature of island life.

In return, she asked him about his newly established Parliamentary career, which she had clearly heard about from Edwin. It led Benjamin to talk about his father's death at the beginning of the year and his patron's suggestion that he should step into the vacant seat. She listened and asked several intelligent questions. Benjamin realised he could not remember the exact political status of the distant Isle of Mann. Fortunately he was not obliged to expose his ignorance, but he made a mental note to inform himself before his next meeting with the likeable Miss Maria Quayle.

They danced together again after supper and she introduced Benjamin to her aunt. Mrs Harcourt was a stately widow in her fifties, dressed in half-mourning. She was gracious to both Benjamin and his brother, which suggested that his brother's interest was cautiously welcomed. Benjamin wondered how serious Edwin was about the girl. It was impossible to be sure after a single meeting but he could not remember his light-hearted brother taking this much trouble over a girl before.

He made a point of finding Miss Quayle before taking his leave of his hostess. She was seated at the side of the room watching her cousin dance. Miss Harcourt had been engaged far more often than her cousin. Benjamin wondered about that but presumed it was simply that Miss Harcourt had more London acquaintances. He found himself regretting the rule which prohibited a debutante from standing up more than twice with the same gentleman.

"Are you leaving, Mr Thurlow? We are going ourselves presently, if we can ever get Felicity off the dance floor. This is only her second full ball and I think she has been a great success, don't you?"

"Very much so. Yes, I'm making my departure. I have a full day of meetings tomorrow and a Parliamentary sitting tomorrow night. Good night, Miss Quayle. Thank you for two enjoyable dances and for sharing supper with me. Are you in Town for the whole Season?"

"Oh yes. I think my aunt is beginning to despair of me, but she acknowledges that I am a very useful companion for Felicity. This way she can safely disappear into the card room with her cronies and rely on me to scare off any suitors I don't like the look of."



Benjamin smiled. "If that's your job, you were very kind to my brother, ma'am. Thank you for that. His courage in battle is undisputed but he is easily crushed by a harsh word."

"It isn't difficult to be kind to your brother, sir. Do not think I am unaware that I have developed something of a fierce reputation, but with Lieutenant Thurlow it would be like kicking a puppy."

Benjamin gave a splutter of laughter. "How I wish I could tell him you said that. I can't though; he'd be mortified."

She was laughing with him. "I wouldn't have said it if I didn't think I could trust you. You're a good brother, sir. Thank you for this evening. I enjoyed it very much."

"What is your next engagement, do you know?"

"Oh heavens. We are invited to the theatre tomorrow evening and then we are going on to a reception at the Grenvilles'. The following day we make our first appearance at Almack's. I did not receive vouchers last year because nobody had heard of me, but thanks to Felicity's debut I have the honour this year."

"You're going to hate it."

"I already hate it and I haven't been yet but Felicity should be seen there. Then on the following day there is some kind of military review and we are invited to dinner afterwards. It is hosted by one of the gentleman's clubs though of course it is not taking place on those hallowed premises."

"Of course not. Ladies are not permitted across the threshold of the Shorncliffe Club. Colonel Sir George Cavendish and his lady are hosting it. I'm not sure about my plans for the next few days but I'm invited to that on account of Edwin. I'll look forward to seeing you there."

He was absurdly flattered when her face brightened. "Oh yes - I'll look forward to it as well. Good night, Mr Thurlow."

"Good night, Miss Quayle."

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Breakfast in Wimpole Street was eaten late and Mrs Harcourt seldom made it to the table, preferring to take her first meal in her room. It was an informal meal and the two young ladies served themselves from covered dishes on the sideboard while a parlour maid served a choice of tea or chocolate.

The first part of the meal was entirely taken up by Miss Harcourt rhapsodising over her new acquaintance. Maria listened abstractedly while filling her plate with ham and eggs. She cut bread for herself and her cousin, having seen Felicity's attempts with a bread knife before.

"Do you think he likes me, Maria?"

"Who, darling?" Maria settled down opposite her cousin, saw her face and relented. "The handsome Lieutenant Thurlow? I am sure he does, Felicity. And I don't need to ask if you liked him."

"Mama thinks he is very charming. And from a very respectable family. Mr Benjamin Thurlow controls the company of course but both the younger brothers inherited a share, so he has independent means. Other than his army pay of course,

which is next to nothing. Mama says she would not disapprove of the match at some point in the future but that she will not allow an engagement when I am so young. I have told her that it is not at all unusual for a lady to be betrothed at eighteen or even younger. I can think of at least half a dozen cases in the very best families. Perhaps she will change her mind if she realises how very suitable he is.”

Maria accepted tea and dismissed the goggling parlour maid firmly. “Has Lieutenant Thurlow proposed, Felicity?”

Her cousin gave her a look. After a moment, she giggled. “Of course he hasn’t. We’ve only just met. I collect you are trying to tell me that I am getting ahead of myself.”

“Just a little, my sweet. Don’t think I disapprove. He’s a very charming young man, he has excellent manners and he’s very handsome. But you can’t be sure of his intentions or your own feelings after one evening’s acquaintance. I hate to say it, but your Mama is right to advise caution. Just enjoy your debut and try not to wear your heart on your sleeve. I’ve seen that done before and it can lead to a lot of heartache. Lieutenant Thurlow is only twenty-two and cannot be hanging out for a wife. If he forms an attachment to you, it’s because of who you are, not because he’s been told to get on with it by an overbearing parent. And you’re lucky that my aunt feels the same way. She won’t allow you to rush into anything and she is right.”

Felicity pulled a face. “I cannot imagine how you became so stuffy, Maria. You were not used to be so.”

Maria tried not to show that her cousin’s remark had stung her. “Experience,” she said lightly. “Just be thankful that I’m here. I’m a far more lenient chaperone than my aunt.”

“You aren’t supposed to be chaperoning me at all. You’re supposed to be finding a husband. Do you think you will do so this Season?”

“Goodness, I have no idea.”

“Mama says you will have to live down what happened last Season first.”

Maria felt her face flush a little and she was furious that her feelings showed. “You should not repeat what your Mama says about me, Felicity.”

“Don’t tell me she hasn’t said the same to your face, Maria.”

Maria acknowledged the hit with a faint smile. “Of course she has. I have been a great disappointment to her. My own Mama was quite surprised that she agreed to have me back for a second Season but we both suspect it was because she wanted me here for your debut.”

“I’m sure that you are right. Though I still think she has hopes of a good marriage for you, cousin. If only you would apply yourself to the business.”

It was an excellent impersonation of her aunt and Maria laughed and put her hand on Felicity’s. “She will be far too busy ensuring that you make the right impression this year, Felicity, to be worried about me.”

They ate in silence for a while. Maria thought that her cousin had returned to her own dreams of romance but then Felicity said:

“Do you regret it?”

“Regret what?”

“Refusing Lord Calverton’s offer earlier this year?”

Maria sighed and put down her knife. “Felicity, I’m not sure that I should

talk about this. I don't know that my aunt would like me to."

"Mama has talked about it freely enough," Felicity said pointedly. "I don't see that she can object to my asking for your perspective. She was so excited when he approached her asking for permission to pay his addresses. It didn't occur to her that you would refuse."

"It didn't occur to him either," Maria said. "Really, I think they had already discussed the date and location of the wedding without any reference to me."

"Did you not like him?"

"I did not dislike him."

"Did he...did he say or do something you did not like?"

"No of course not."

"Was he not wealthy enough? You would have been Lady Calverton."

"I didn't want to be Lady Calverton."

Felicity looked down at her empty plate. "My mother says that some people think that you had higher expectations. That you were aiming for a better title. That you were aiming too high."

"A Royal Duke or an Earl perhaps?" Maria said dryly. Her cousin looked up guiltily.

"No, of course not. I do not think it myself...only I cannot help but hear the gossip sometimes."

"It's not your fault, Felicity."

"It makes me angry that I am not allowed to tell them what I think of them. I heard Lady Fawcett telling Mama that she was surprised that you had come back this year."

"I am sure that what she actually said was that she was surprised that I had the audacity to show my face here again this year."

"Yes." Felicity met her gaze. Her cousin had very pretty eyes, a warm clear hazel colour. Maria was not at all surprised at how much time Lieutenant Thurlow had spent gazing into them the previous evening. "I told Mama afterwards that I thought you were very brave. Another girl would have stayed at home. Why did you come back, Maria?"

Maria squeezed her hand. "Because I wanted to be here for your debut, love. I knew you were bound to be a success and I wanted to see it."

"But there's another reason."

"Yes. I wanted to prove that I had not run away. I don't really care that much about the London gossips, Felicity. To be honest, most of them don't care about me either. I'm not important enough. A few ladies and one or two gentlemen – mostly friends of his Lordship – seem to have decided that I was an ungrateful wretch to have turned down the best offer of marriage that a provincial little Manx girl could possibly have hoped for. I needed to show them – no, to show myself – that I had done nothing wrong and that I had nothing to be ashamed of. Once I've done that I'll go home with my head held high."

"I wish you wouldn't," Felicity said in a small voice. "I wish you would stay. Mann is too far."

Maria's heart melted. "Felicity, don't think about this again. I'm going nowhere until the end of this Season and if you want me back next year and my aunt

allows it, I will come, I promise you. Perhaps you will marry your handsome Lieutenant and have very beautiful babies and I will be a doting aunt to them. Or rather cousin.”

“You still haven’t told me why you wouldn’t marry him,” Felicity pointed out.

Maria hesitated then decided that her cousin’s persistence deserved the truth.

“Because I didn’t love him,” she said. “And that is the only thing that matters to me. Please don’t tell your Mama I said that. She thinks I am being very foolish and will only scold me all over again. Have you finished your breakfast? Shall we walk in the park this morning? It’s such a fine day.”

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It was a bright sunny day for the review. Maria knew nothing of military matters but she had attended a number of similar reviews during her previous Season in London. She had been astonished and vastly amused by the huge difference between the scarlet-coated troops parading outside Horse Guards or in Hyde Park and the rather lackadaisical manoeuvres of the Manx Regiment on the parade ground on the cliffs in the south of the island.

There was an added interest to this particular review because of the presence of Lieutenant Edwin Thurlow at the head of a scratch company of the 43<sup>rd</sup>. The rest of his battalion was in Spain with Sir John Moore but Thurlow had been given temporary command of eighty men. Some were new recruits and others were men ready to return from sick leave. Maria had heard Lieutenant Thurlow talking of being wounded at the Battle of Vimeiro. It was obvious that he was longing to re-join his regiment.

Maria wondered if her cousin had really considered what it might mean to be married to a soldier during wartime. One of her own friends had married a Royal Navy captain and had spent the early months of her marriage with him in Gibraltar. The birth of a son had obliged her to return home to Mann and Maria knew that she spent her time waiting for letters and praying for his safety. Maria could remember her own girlish yearnings after a red coat but she was not sure that she had the temperament to be an army wife.

Afterwards the carriages conveyed them to the elegant house in Harley Street which was the London residence of General Sir George and Lady Cavendish. The dinner guests gathered in the drawing room to drink sherry and madeira before the meal. It was a warm autumn afternoon and her Ladyship had opened the long windows onto the terrace, which overlooked a well-designed walled garden. Most of the guests were military men and their wives which made the sprinkling of gentlemen in civilian dress stand out. It was easy for Maria to spot Mr Benjamin Thurlow. He was talking to his brother and several other officers at the far end of the terrace as Lady Cavendish escorted Maria, her aunt and her cousin outside and summoned a servant with drinks. Mrs Harcourt took sherry but Maria was thirsty and chose the mild fruit punch that her cousin was drinking.

Lady Cavendish handed them over to General Thorne, who was an old friend of Mrs Harcourt and the reason they had been invited today. The General was

an inveterate gossip but Maria did not know half of the people he was talking about and her attention quickly drifted. She was gazing out over the garden admiring the rich autumn colours when she became aware that a nearby group of young gentlemen were becoming very drunk on Lady Cavendish's excellent madeira.

At their centre was a dark-haired, expensively-dressed young man of about Maria's own age. His companions were all officers and Maria was becoming uncomfortably aware that she and her cousin were the subject of their conversation. There was a good deal of laughter and whispering and a lot of very open staring.

Maria glanced at her aunt. Mrs Harcourt seemed oblivious, but it was obvious that Felicity had noticed and was embarrassed. Her face was very flushed and she had turned her back on the group.

"Maria, may we not go back inside? I do not like...I am not enjoying it here."

"Neither am I. Drunken idiots. Wait a moment, Felicity, I'll speak to your Mama and we'll go in."

"Please don't make a fuss. I know I'm too easily embarrassed."

"It's not you. I'm not enjoying it either."

Maria turned towards her aunt. If she had been at home, in an environment she had felt sure of, she would have dealt with the arrogant young officers herself but she could hardly create a scene in the middle of a London party. She positioned herself where she could catch her aunt's eye and waited. Her aunt did not seem to notice her at all and Maria was about to interrupt more forcibly when she heard a pleasant voice behind her.

"Miss Quayle. When did you arrive? I only just noticed you. Will you and your cousin join us? There are one or two people I'd like you to meet. Miss Harcourt, your servant. My brother has sent me with very specific instructions to collect you."

Maria felt a rush of gratitude. She wondered if Thurlow had noticed their discomfort or if his intervention was pure coincidence. As he escorted her past the noisy group, she saw him give a considering glance in their direction and decided he had definitely noticed. She allowed herself to be introduced around his group of friends, watched Felicity shyly talking to Lieutenant Thurlow and two other young officers and turned to Thurlow with a warm smile.

"Thank you so much. We were feeling a little awkward. Who is...do you happen to know the name of the gentleman in the dark suit?"

"Indeed I do, ma'am. It's the young Lord Lowther, Lord Lonsdale's heir. He has a penchant for military society. His younger brother is with the 7<sup>th</sup> Hussars in Spain at present and appears to have inherited whatever charm and good manners are available in that family. We don't want a scene at Lady Cavendish's dinner party which is why I removed you both before my brother lost his temper. He's such a polite soul in civilian life but if he gets angry I am suddenly reminded that his job is to kill the enemy. He was becoming rapidly enraged at how Lowther was looking at you and your cousin. I'm sorry; the man is a boor."

Maria was conscious of a warm feeling. "Thank you both so much. I was just about to ask my aunt to take us inside."

"You'll forgive me for plain speaking, ma'am, since I know you favour it yourself. It's a good thing your cousin has you with her this year because your aunt

is a poor chaperone. Was she that casual with you last year?"

Maria froze, picking up on his tone rather than his words. "Heavens. Has somebody been gossiping, sir?"

"No. I've been asking."

"About my cousin's suitability as a friend for your brother?"

"No, that's entirely his own affair. It's very early days but it's clear that she's charming. And very nice. That's a compliment by the way. No, I was making enquiries about you."

Maria was so shocked she could hardly speak. When she recovered her voice, she said in low tones:

"You are impertinent, sir."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't intending to be. I really enjoyed meeting you and at first I couldn't understand how I'd missed you so entirely last Season but I realised it's because I was in London very little due to my father's last illness. Will you forgive my frankness, ma'am?"

"I can hardly stop you, Mr Thurlow, given how frank you have already been. I feel quite upstaged."

He gave a choke of laughter. "That takes some doing, Miss Quayle. You're awake on every point. You know there's been gossip about you. When my brother first introduced you to me, he was under the impression that you were some kind of terrifying Amazon. Instead, we both very quickly realised that you were a very charming young woman. I was curious where that story came from."

Maria could not help smiling. His forthright admission was utterly irresistible.

"I know where it came from."

"Lord Calverton."

"Or at least his friends."

"Did you know he has recently married? A young widow I believe. It was all very fast. The gossips say that you broke his heart."

"I wounded his pride. I wish he'd asked me first, before he told half of London he'd decided to honour me with his hand. I was sorry that he was so offended but if he had managed the matter more discreetly, nobody else need ever have known."

Thurlow smiled. "I think you're absolutely right, ma'am. A man should always be sure of a lady before involving anybody else."

"Are you speaking from painful experience?"

"I've no experience at all. I've never been married or even betrothed."

"Why not?"

He hesitated. Eventually he said:

"Natural caution. And...my parents had an unusually happy marriage, I've always thought. It was arranged in the usual manner but somehow they came together very well. I think it has given all three of us a reluctance to settle for anything less. My middle brother found it very easy. He married his childhood sweetheart. It has taken me rather longer, but I'm hopeful. And if I don't find what I'm looking for, I'm perfectly happy on my own."

Maria felt as though her heart had stopped in her breast. She looked up at

him. He was possibly one of the least romantic figures she had ever met: squarely built in a well-cut but plain suit. His dark hair was tied back with a simple velvet ribbon and his only exceptional feature was a pair of warm brown eyes. She had never before met a man who had so openly declared his requirement for personal happiness in marriage without excuse or apology. It was a revelation.

“I feel the same way,” she said abruptly.

Thurlow said nothing for a moment. Then he said:

“Do you like to ride?”

“Very much. I’m Manx; it’s often the only way of getting around, given the state of our roads. But my aunt has no stabling in London.”

“That’s all right. My father always kept a good stable. I’ll call on your aunt later in the week if I may and we’ll see if we can find something suitable for you and your cousin. I’d like to take you riding in the Row.”

Maria could not help laughing. “That sounds extremely daunting for a provincial nobody from a distant island,” she said.

“I have a notion you will take to it very well,” Thurlow responded with one of his sudden smiles. “I had better take you back to your aunt. They are calling us in to dinner.”

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It was likely that at any military dinner there would be more ladies than gentlemen, making the table arrangements uneven. Lady Cavendish had done her best and Benjamin suspected that the inclusion of Mrs Harcourt’s two young charges had been intended to even up the numbers a little. General Thorne was charged with escorting Mrs Harcourt into dinner and the rest of the company paired up under the gentle orders of Sir George and Lady Cavendish who circled the room ahead of the dinner gong.

Thurlow was partnered with the wife of Captain Jackson. They were still talking to their hostess when Lady Cavendish unexpectedly froze, staring across the drawing room.

“Oh my goodness, whatever is the General thinking? He has made a mistake. Where is Draper? Draper, come over here. What has happened with Lord Lowther?”

The butler gave a deep bow, with the air of a man disclaiming all responsibility.

“My apologies, my Lady. I apprised Sir George of the change in the table plan when I noticed it earlier. I hope that was correct?”

“What change in the table plan? I didn’t change anything.”

The butler frowned. “Well somebody did, ma’am. I noticed when I made a final check of the table earlier. Mrs Hetherington and Miss Quayle’s places have been swapped. Naturally I told Sir George and he asked Lord Lowther to take Miss Quayle into dinner.”

Benjamin felt his stomach lurch in discomfort. He looked over at Lord Lowther, whose rank placed him ahead of most of the other diners present. He was bowing over Maria Quayle’s hand with a decided smirk.

“Oh dear,” Lady Cavendish said. “There has been a mistake. I cannot think

how it happened. Or what to do.”

“I do not see that you can do anything at present, my Lady.”

“I think somebody has played a practical joke, ma’am,” Benjamin said quietly. “Your man is right; there’s not much you can do now without causing embarrassment all round.”

Lady Cavendish lifted worried eyes to his face. “You are right of course. But I would not have chosen to seat his Lordship next to...well it is not...”

She broke off in some confusion. Benjamin decided to be frank.

“I would not have chosen to seat his Lordship beside any young unmarried female, ma’am, particularly when he has clearly been drinking. I’m sitting opposite. I’ll keep an eye on them and do my best to intervene if anything looks likely to become awkward.”

“Mr Thurlow you are such a comfort,” Lady Cavendish breathed. “You are right of course; it will be those young idiots. When my husband finds out who it is – and he will – I will have a good deal to say about it. Thank you, sir. By the way I should have asked you earlier...your brother made a very specific request to be seated next to Miss Harcourt and I could not see any harm. I hope you do not mind?”

“Not at all. I’m rather impressed. He’s a much better planner than I am. If I’d been as quick we wouldn’t be in this rather awkward situation right now.”

He saw by her startled expression that she had understood his meaning and felt a brief satisfaction as he led his dinner partner through into the long dining room in Lord Lowther’s wake. Benjamin was generally tolerant of his fellow man but he was feeling decidedly unsympathetic towards the gossipmongers of his native city this afternoon.

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It was immediately obvious to Maria from the reactions of those around her that she had been the object of a practical joke. She took her place beside Lord Lowther in silent protest, aware of a mixture of disapproval, apologetic embarrassment and subdued hilarity from around the table. Further along, beside General Thorne, her aunt looked as though she wanted to cry. Maria realised with miserable understanding, that Thurlow had been right. If Mrs Harcourt had been paying attention, she would have realised that something was wrong and drawn Lady Cavendish’s attention to it before Lord Lowther had time to claim his prize.

It was far too late to do anything about it. Maria decided to adopt an attitude of frozen politeness. His Lordship treated her with exaggerated courtesy under the delighted gaze of his acolytes. He placed her napkin upon her lap with far too much familiarity, directed the footman to pour wine when she asked for cordial and drew her attention to every proffered dish as though it was his personal provision.

“It’s dashed good to have a chance to get to know you better, Miss Quayle. I’ve admired you from a distance for a long time, don’t you know? Didn’t get near you last Season of course. Poor old Calverton and whatnot. But that’s all done and dusted now of course. The dear old fellow is leg shackled to a very pretty widow and we’ve not been able to get him up to Town at all this Season.” Lowther drained his wine glass and signalled for more. “Dash it, he’s probably hardly been out of bed.



Got an heir to father after all, and she looks like an enthusiastic female.”

Maria felt herself colour to the roots of her hair and cursed her fair skin. She was not sure how much of Lowther’s appallingly inappropriate conversation could be heard around the table but she was sure that people were watching her reactions with interest. She did not trouble to reply but pretended to be enjoying her soup although she could taste nothing and she wondered if her churning stomach would betray her.

For a time, Lowther talked about hunting. It was boring but very straightforward. Maria spoke when she needed to but did not discourage the topic. If she could get through the various courses with tedious descriptions of every fox his Lordship had ever run to earth, she could escape with the ladies and tell her aunt that she felt unwell and needed to go home. Judging by the miserable expression on Mrs Harcourt’s face she would be only too glad to leave.

Maria shot a glance down the table at her cousin. Felicity was perfectly placed between Lieutenant Thurlow and one of his officer friends. Both were going out of their way to entertain her and Maria wished her cousin could relax and enjoy it but she was clearly concerned about Maria and could not prevent herself from looking along the table every few minutes.

Benjamin Thurlow was seated almost opposite her. Maria deliberately did not look at him. After the brief happiness of their conversation earlier she felt embarrassed and humiliated. She did not know if he realised how she had been manoeuvred into this position but she felt as though every person in the room was waiting for her to show herself up by making a deliberate attempt to attach Lord Lowther. Maria could think of nothing worse. He was an arrogant boy and the expression on his face as he leaned towards her in conversation made her feel rather sick.

The first course was removed and the presence of the servants obliged his Lordship to draw back a little. Maria risked raising her eyes and to her surprise she found Thurlow looking directly at her. She met his gaze defiantly. He did not look away. Instead he gave a little smile and silently mouthed the words:

“Are you all right?”

Maria felt herself flush a little. She managed an answering smile and he gave an approving nod.

“Good girl.”

Beside her, Lowther gave a snort of irritation and she realised he had observed the little byplay although she did not think he would have understood what Thurlow had said unless he was directly opposite as she was. She lowered her eyes to her plate, which Lowther was filling with food she did not want.

“You’re not drinking, Miss Quayle. Here, I insist.”

She took the wine glass because if she had not intercepted it she would have ended up wearing its contents. Lowther toasted her with mocking courtesy and she gave a brief polite nod and took a tiny sip, setting the glass down. There was roast duck on her plate and she managed to eat a small slice. Beside her, Lowther was eating greedily.

“You ain’t eating, Miss Quayle. You need to eat or you’ll get too thin. A man don’t want a skinny waif of a girl. We like something rounded to hang on to.”

Incredibly she felt his hand on her thigh under the table. She shot him a furious glance and he grinned back at her and squeezed, massaging her flesh through the fine silk of her gown. Maria looked around her in agonised embarrassment. As far as she could tell, nobody could see what he was doing but she could not find her voice or think of any way to tell him to stop.

“That’s very nice,” Lowther said in a husky undertone. “Shame there’s so many people about. Keep still, now. No reason to make a scene.”

Maria remained silent. Suddenly she realised that embarrassment had been replaced by sheer fury. It was not the first time she had been subjected to the lecherous behaviour of a drunken man but she had been at home on the previous occasion and known exactly how to deal with it. She realised that she had been drawn into a false sense of panic. She knew exactly how to deal with it here as well.

She speared another slice of duck with her fork, put it into her mouth and chewed, then casually dropped her fork. It fell to the floor in front of Lowther. Maria gave an exclamation of dismay, removed her napkin and pushed back her chair a little. Lowther hastily removed his hand.

“I’m so sorry, my Lord. How clumsy of me.”

She bent swiftly, deliberately giving him an excellent view down the front of her gown. She did not need to look at him to know that he was making the most of it. A man like Lowther would always make the most of it.

His gaze riveted on her breasts, he did not see her pick up the fork. The first he knew of it was when she drove it hard into his leg through his pantaloons and silk stocking. He gave an agonised squawk and jumped to his feet. Maria set the fork back upon the table and looked up at him in astonishment.

“Are you quite well, my Lord?”

“I...you...you...”

The entire table had fallen silent. Everybody was staring at Lowther. Maria did the same, assuming a puzzled expression. After a long silence, General Sir George Cavendish said politely:

“Are you feeling unwell, my Lord?”

“I...yes. Yes. Feeling a trifle unwell, as you say. Please excuse me, sir. Ladies.”

He left the room at speed. Maria drew in her chair properly and looked at her plate, deciding that she had eaten enough. She reached for her wine glass and took a fortifying drink, feeling that it was probably safe to do so now. Returning the glass to the table she took a surreptitious glance at the polished floor. Several spots of blood marked Lord Lowther’s path from the room. Maria suddenly felt much better.

Conversation had gradually resumed around the table, though it was far more subdued. Maria risked a look at Benjamin Thurlow. She found him looking directly back at her. His mouth was grave but his eyes were smiling at her in an expression of pure delight. After a moment, Maria allowed her lips to curve in a proper smile. He responded immediately. She sat in pleasant silence, with no obligation to speak to anybody at all, smiling back at the most interesting man she had ever met.

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“You stabbed him in the leg?” Benjamin said in disbelief.

They were riding side by side in the row. Ahead of them, Felicity was mounted on a pretty bay mare. Maria’s own horse was a silvery grey gelding. He was a little large for her but very well-mannered and she felt relaxed and at home.

“I had to do something. He was being very objectionable.”

“I’d worked that out. I was trying to decide how to intervene without causing a scene. I was hoping you’d fake a swoon or some such thing.”

“I did consider it but then I realised that wouldn’t have caused him any pain at all. I wondered if I could manage to be sick on him, but that would have been horrible for everybody else and my reputation in Town would have been beyond repair. Really, this was much better. Have I shocked you?”

“You’ve rather impressed me to be honest. Are you in the habit of stabbing any gentleman who offends you? I’m wondering if it’s a Manx custom. I’d like to be on my guard.”

Maria gave a peal of laughter. She had been dreading a backlash after the dreadful dinner party in Harley Street but to her surprise nobody mentioned it at all. Mr Thurlow had called the following day to ask her aunt for permission to take the two young ladies riding and Maria had spent an afternoon getting her cousin’s second riding habit altered to fit her.

They had ridden out several times since then. They had also been to both the theatre and the opera as his guest and had joined a party at Vauxhall. She had danced with him, decorously, for the regulation two dances at more than a dozen balls. She had discovered that he liked music and reading and was utterly uninterested in art and interior decorating. Felicity and Lieutenant Thurlow spent every social occasion floating on a cloud of happiness. Maria felt that her own cloud was wholly invisible. She was not at all sure if it was even real, but she wanted it to be; so badly that it hurt.

Thurlow had not mentioned Lord Lowther at all until today, for which Maria was deeply grateful. She was not sure why he had done so now. Either his curiosity had got the better of him or he felt that their friendship had become comfortable enough for him to raise an awkward subject. She was surprised to realise that he was right. She did not feel embarrassed at all.

“It isn’t generally done in polite society, even on our provincial little island. But I’ll admit it isn’t the first time I’ve had to deal with an over-familiar gentleman. I was once obliged to slap Mr Orry Gelling for trying to kiss me at a Christmas party and I once tipped lemonade over Robert Callister’s brand new yellow pantaloons because he made an offensive remark about the cut of my gown.”

“He insulted your fashion sense?”

“No, he expressed inappropriate enthusiasm for the height of my neckline. It was a valuable lesson for both of us. I realised that there was a reason my mother told me it was too low and he learned to drink less at St Catherine’s Fair. Rob was harmless enough. Just very young and stupid. Gelling was genuinely unpleasant but he never gave me much trouble.”

“That doesn’t surprise me at all. I hope you won’t be offended, ma’am, but I’ve spoken to Lowther about his behaviour that day.”

Maria looked at him in astonishment. "What on earth did you say? Was that appropriate, sir? He's a lord and..."

"He's a drunken young idiot. I'm ten years his senior and in no way dependent on his patronage or his goodwill. I don't give a d... a hoot about his rank. I've informed him that the next time I see him annoying a respectable girl I'm going to take the trouble to speak to his father very specifically about it. That's if he's lucky. If he's unlucky my brother will get to him first."

Maria laughed. She felt warm and secure and very happy. "Your brother has a very good reason for wanting to remain in my good books, sir."

He grinned. "That's very true. But he likes you for yourself, ma'am. Look, I've something to ask you. I should really speak to your aunt first but a very sensible woman I once knew assured me that a gentleman should never assume anything. Don't panic, I'm not about to propose. But I wondered what your aunt has planned for Christmas? People are already beginning to leave Town and within a week or so it will be deserted until Parliament resumes in January. Do you have plans?"

Maria shook her head. "No, we'll spend it quietly at home. My aunt has a small country estate in Wiltshire but she rents it out. She doesn't usually entertain much. She'll probably invite one or two old friends for dinner."

"It sounds very dull."

"It will be very peaceful. I'm not sure I'll mind, after the past two months. What of you, sir?"

"That's why I'm asking. We usually go home to Comerby. It's our country home in Kent, just north of Dover. My brother Will holds the living at the Parish Church in the village. It'll be the first Christmas without my father and the last we'll see of Ed for a while. He's been told that he'll be recalled to duty early next year."

"Surely not with Sir John Moore? I read that his army is in retreat."

"We don't really know what's happening with Moore yet, though the rumour in the House is that it's nothing good. In the meantime they're wasting time and energy with this inquiry into the Cintra treaty when we should be..." Thurlow stopped and took a deep breath. "I'm becoming distracted."

"I'm interested."

"I know you are, ma'am and I'd love to talk further with you about it. And about so many other things. I was wondering...we'll probably spend two or three weeks at Comerby. It won't be a big party though I believe Ed has invited Lieutenant Spencer and the Jacksons will be joining us. My brother is very well aware that he's running out of time and it would make so much difference if your aunt would consider joining us this Christmas."

Maria's heart was beating unevenly. She raised her eyes to meet his. They were smiling hopefully at her.

"You should ask my aunt, Mr Thurlow. It will be her decision."

"I'm hoping you'll support it."

"Of course I will. I have no idea if my aunt will agree to a formal betrothal. Felicity is still very young. But I know how much she likes your brother."

"I agree with Mrs Harcourt, ma'am and I've told Ed so. They're both far too young for anything formal. I think they're very well-suited both in position and temperament but he has a career to build and she's only been out of the schoolroom

for five minutes. If Christmas goes well and they're both of the same mind by the time he's called back to the front, I'm going to suggest an informal agreement between the two families. That way, they can write to each other and get to know each other better."

"That's a very good idea."

"I thought so," he said rather smugly. "It'll give him the chance to decide if he's really ready to settle down and it'll give her the chance to understand what it means to marry an army officer without committing to anything publicly. Much easier and kinder this way, if one of them wants to withdraw."

"If only Lord Calverton had thought of that," Maria said wistfully and enjoyed the gleam of amusement in his eyes.

"He clearly needed good advice from his friends, ma'am."

"Or an ounce of common sense," Maria said scathingly. "I approve of your idea, sir and I think my aunt will agree. I own it will be much nicer to spend Christmas in the country with friends instead of in Town. All the same, the gossips are going to assume this means you approve of your brother paying his addresses to Felicity and that you've invited us for that reason."

Mr Thurlow gave one of his pleasantly neutral smiles but his eyes sparkled with amusement. "Let them assume what they like, ma'am. My motives are none of their business. Unfortunately I think we're going to have to turn back. The wind is picking up and I suspect it's going to rain. Also I have a mountain of paperwork awaiting me on my desk. Shall I see you at Almack's tomorrow?"

"Almack's?" Maria stared at him in astonishment. "Are you quite well, Mr Thurlow? You never attend Almack's. You once told me it was the most insipid entertainment you've ever experienced in your life."

"I wasn't wrong either, was I?"

She gave a gurgle of laughter and shook her head reprovingly. "No. It is dreadful. But so very good for Felicity to be seen there."

"Which is why my brother insists on going. I've told him I disapprove and I intend to go tomorrow to check that he isn't getting into bad company there."

"Bad company at Almack's? I only wish it were possible."

"It's definitely possible ma'am, since I believe they'll even admit Lord Lowther providing he's wearing the regulation knee breeches."

"Do you even possess a pair of knee breeches?"

"Just one. I save them for special occasions. Do you think the gossips are going to question my motives for making an appearance at Almack's as well, ma'am?"

"Dear sir, I think they're going to assume you have gone mad."

His smile made her heart lift with simple happiness. "Perhaps I have," he said. "But I've never enjoyed myself this much in my life. Come on, we'll need to canter if we're to avoid a soaking. Let me call my idiot brother. Honestly, when he's with your cousin he wouldn't notice an earthquake."

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They spent Christmas very happily, their pleasure marred only by the

dreadful news coming in from Portugal. Sir John Moore's army had been forced into an ignominious and dangerous retreat to Corunna across the mountains in winter. Benjamin allowed his brother to read the news aloud, including the ladies in the party. Observing Felicity Harcourt's white face as she watched Edwin's set, grim expression, he thought that this was the first time she had seriously had to imagine what her future husband might face on campaign. It might also give her an insight into the agony of a woman waiting at home for news.

Benjamin liked Felicity Harcourt very much and loved his brother. He did not want either of them hurt by finding themselves trapped in an unhappy marriage. After considerable discussion over the Christmas season, it had been agreed that the young couple would be permitted to enter into an informal engagement but that no announcement would be made until Felicity was twenty. Both had railed against such a lengthy period of time but Benjamin had privately pointed out to his brother that long engagements could easily be shortened if both parties agreed and proved the constancy of their affection. He understood Mrs Harcourt's reluctance to agree to anything more binding while her daughter was so young and while Edwin was overseas. He also thought Edwin was too young to be sure of his feelings but he had more tact than to say so.

The party broke up in January and Mrs Harcourt and her charges travelled back to London to sift their way through a pile of invitations for the remainder of the Season. Benjamin caught up with his correspondence and a collection of business matters, dined with several friends and took his place in the House of Commons. Mr Wainwright in particular, made several pointed remarks about how distracted he was. Benjamin knew perfectly well that his old friend was fishing for information. He declined to give any.

Lieutenant Thurlow was shocked into silence at the news of the battle which had taken place on the shores of Corunna, where Sir John Moore gave his life to keep the French at bay. The ragged remains of the British army embarked for home leaving their stores and equipment, their pride and too many of their dead comrades behind. London whispered that the war was lost and that Bonaparte would surely turn his attention to England again once he had time to build up his navy.

Benjamin discounted any such rumours but the mood in both the House and the City was gloomy and newspapers wrote of Corunna as a defeat. Journalists were equally scathing when the inquiry into the Cintra peace treaty returned a favourable verdict for all three generals involved. Edwin ranted over the breakfast table at the corruption of politicians and Benjamin poured more coffee and pushed it towards him.

"Try not to sound like an idiot, Ed, when I know you're not one. They could never have censured men with the rank and experience of Burrard and Dalrymple. It would be bad for morale, especially at the moment. As for Sir Arthur Wellesley, there are rumours he's to be given the command in Portugal."

"I'd heard rumours they were thinking of calling up the Earl of Chatham," Edwin said glumly.

"Don't listen to gossip. Chatham wouldn't want it anyway. Apart from anything else, his wife is still far from well and he doesn't want to be that far away from her. They'll give it to Wellesley because everybody knows he was responsible

for the victories at Vimeiro and Rolica and the government will want to concentrate public opinion on those and away from the Corunna debacle. Wellesley is perfect for their needs. He's an experienced general, he's still fairly young and he has excellent family connections. On the other hand, he's not so well-connected that they can't ditch him if it goes wrong. I wonder if he knows that?"

Edwin drained his cup. He looked suddenly more cheerful. "Have you met him, Ben?"

"Not personally, though I've seen him around of course. I think I was once introduced to his brother."

"Well if you had, you'd realise he's not an idiot either. I hope he gets it. We might be able to do something under Wellesley. Look Ben, I haven't mentioned it to Felicity yet, but I've received my orders. I need to get my kit and uniform organised and report to barracks in four weeks."

Benjamin felt a hollow sense of sickness. "Do you know where?"

"Not yet. They're placing bets at the Shorncliffe Club. Odds are favouring a return to Portugal, which fits in with what you've been told about Wellesley. There are outside odds on South America, India, Cape Town and some kind of expedition to the Scheldt."

Benjamin's attention sharpened. "The Scheldt? Where the hell did you hear that?"

Edwin looked surprised, then his eyes narrowed and he leaned back in his chair. "Not from you, brother. What do you know?"

"I don't know anything; it's just an idea that seems to pop up from time to time. According to Sir Anthony it goes back to Pitt's day. I occasionally hear it rumbling around and I was just curious."

"Sorry, I know nothing. Do you need me for anything today? I'd like to call on Felicity. I want to speak to her alone about this before she hears it from somebody else."

"Your time is your own. If you want to catch her alone I'd go this afternoon. I happen to know that Miss Quayle won't be at home and I'm sure Mrs Harcourt won't mind giving you a bit of time with your girl."

As he had expected, his brother eyed him with amused interest. "You're very well informed about the movements of Miss Quayle, brother. What's going on?"

"Nothing. At least, there is but it's of no interest to you. Miss Quayle expressed an interest in seeing the House of Commons so I've arranged to take her on a private tour."

"Private?"

"I'm sure she'll bring her maid with her."

"It doesn't matter if she doesn't, she'll be perfectly safe with you, Ben. Depressingly so."

"What do you mean?" Benjamin said indignantly.

"I was so bloody sure you'd ask her over Christmas. Felicity certainly was. When you didn't, I thought you'd changed your mind and decided you wouldn't suit after all. Which would be a pity because I think you would suit very well. But here you are inviting her on tedious tours. What's going on, Ben?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Mind your own bloody business."

Edwin raised his eyebrows. "Do you want to marry the girl or not?"

"Yes." Benjamin said.

"Well why the hell didn't you ask her? You had two weeks of perfect opportunities."

"I couldn't find the right moment."

"What in God's name do you mean, you couldn't find the right moment. You had more than fourteen days. Twelve or more waking hours in each day. Sixty minutes in each of those hours. Sixty seconds in each of those minutes. How long do you need? Look, I'll show you. I'll time it."

To Benjamin's immense irritation he took out his pocket watch and laid it on the table then clasped his hand dramatically to his heart.

"Miss Quayle – dearest Maria. I love you. Will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?" Edwin picked up the watch and waved it at him. "Ten seconds. Without the pause for effect, you could do it in five. Do you love her?"

"Of course I bloody love her."

"Well why didn't you ask her then? I thought that was the point of the whole house party and that Felicity and I were just a smoke screen."

"You were."

"And?"

"I lost my nerve," Ben ground out.

His younger brother sat staring at him in complete astonishment. "You lost your nerve? What, for two weeks? How many times during that period did you try to propose to her, Ben?"

"Seventeen."

"Seventeen?" Edwin's voice was hushed; almost awed. "You nearly proposed to her seventeen times in fourteen days?"

"Yes."

"You counted?"

"Yes."

"Christ, brother! Thank God you never joined the army. You'd have run like a rabbit at the first sight of a Frenchman."

"I'm not normally this much of a coward. I'm worried that I've spoiled my chances, Ed. Since we got back I've not had a chance to speak to her alone. That's why I thought this tour was a good idea. Do you think there's any chance she realised that I was thinking of asking her over Christmas and then didn't?"

Edwin looked like a man driven beyond reasonable endurance. "Seventeen times? Ben, I'm surprised she hasn't hit you with a brick. The poor girl must have convinced herself that you've thought better of the whole thing. Either that or she'll think you've got a nervous tic of some kind."

"I thought if we do this tour first..."

"Stop right there. There will be no tour. She doesn't want a bloody tour of the Houses of Parliament, Benjamin. Go and get changed. Wear something more interesting than those boring suits of yours. A decent cravat at the very least. Go over to Wimpole Street. Ask to speak to her alone and tell her you want to marry her."

"What if she says no?"

"Then it will serve you bloody well right. She's not going to say no, Ben.



She watches you as if you're a combination of Sir Lancelot and St George rolled into one, though God knows why. Ask the girl to marry you and put us all out of our misery."

"What if I lose my nerve again?"

"You won't. I know this because I'm coming with you and I'll be waiting outside. If you walk out that door and you're not betrothed to Miss Quayle I am going to throw you into the Serpentine."

"That's a bit of a walk."

"I'll make the bloody effort. Get moving."

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Maria was writing letters in the parlour when the housemaid announced Mr Thurlow. She rose and went forward to greet him, wondering if she had mistaken the time. He was two hours early.

"Mr Thurlow, how do you do? I was not expecting you so soon. Have I made a mistake, or are you about to tell me that we must postpone our visit?"

Thurlow looked back at her. He seemed temporarily bereft of speech. Maria waited for a moment and decided that he was trying to frame his excuses. She quashed her disappointment firmly and indicated a chair.

"Do sit down. My aunt is with my cousin at present; she has a dress fitting. I expect she will be down soon."

Thurlow sat. Maria did the same. She was surprised when he immediately got to his feet again.

"Miss Quayle, do you remember when we first met? I had just given my maiden speech in the House."

Maria smiled. "Of course I remember," she said warmly. "I have been told many times how well you did."

"It was extremely nerve-wracking but once it was done, I can remember telling myself that I would never again be that nervous about making a speech. It was a satisfying thought."

"I'm sure it was."

"It was also completely erroneous. I'm trying to make a speech now and I can't get to the end of a simple sentence. I feel as though I've been trying to say this one sentence for weeks. Months. Forever."

"Mr Thurlow, please sit down and don't upset yourself. We're friends. There's nothing you can't say to me."

He paused, staring at her. Maria was becoming a little concerned about the slightly wild expression in the brown eyes. She wondered, not for the first time recently, if he was unwell.

"Yes," he said finally, in heavy tones. "Yes there is. There is one thing that I absolutely can't bring myself to say to you, ma'am."

"Heavens, what on earth is it? Surely it cannot be that bad."

"It is very bad. For me, at least. I cannot, no matter how hard I try, bring myself to the point of asking you to marry me. It's been at least a month since my first attempt and I'm becoming exhausted."

There was a long and painful silence in the room, broken only by the loud ticking of the carriage clock. Maria decided after a while that he was not going to speak again. She did not think he was capable of speech. At this moment neither was she. Her entire world was suddenly flooded with happiness. She looked at her love and understood that he did not yet realise that he had finally managed to say the words.

Maria decided that she was going to have to intervene. She got up, walked over, took his hand and led him to the padded window seat then pushed him down and sat beside him, not letting go of his hand.

“Mr Thurlow – did you really mean to say that?”

“Yes,” he said fervently. “Oh God yes. I really said it, didn’t I?”

Maria thought about it. “Actually, I think you told me that you could not say it.”

“But I did tell you what I’ve been unable to say?”

She was beginning to feel laughter bubbling up. He was studying her hopefully and he reminded her unaccountably of one of her father’s favourite spaniels.

“You did.”

“Now that I’ve said it...Maria, do you think you could?”

Happiness spilled over into laughter. She reached out and cupped his beloved face in one hand.

“Benjamin, let me reassure you that if you ever manage to get up the nerve to ask me to marry you, I am going to say yes. But you were so right to check with me first.”

He was beginning to laugh as well, the tension draining out of him. He covered her hand with his big square one and leaned forward to kiss her. Maria closed her eyes. For all the uncertainty of his words, there was nothing at all uncertain about his kiss. They remained locked together for a long time. When he finally drew back, he was smiling at her.

“Marry me, Maria Quayle. I need you to manage me; I’m utterly hopeless.”

“No you’re not. And I would love to marry you, Benjamin Thurlow. Did I ever tell you that I came to London specifically to fall in love?”

“You didn’t. I wish you’d mentioned it sooner, sweetheart. It would have made this so much easier. We should tell your aunt and your cousin. And I must write to your father for permission. First though, do you mind if I let Edwin in? He’s on the doorstep.”

Maria was bewildered. “Of course. But whatever is he doing out there?”

Benjamin kissed her again and got up. “Guard duty,” he said, and went to admit his brother.