

Welcome to my Valentine's Day story for 2025. As always, it's free so please share as much as you like.

As the *Peninsular War Saga* approaches the end of the war, I'm increasingly conscious of the dangers of spoilers in my short stories, so once again I've gone back in time. *The Weaver's Son* is a straightforward romance. It's also a story about family. It's dedicated to my army of readers who are unfailingly supportive through all the ups and downs of bringing my favourite characters to life. Thank you all. Happy Valentine's Day and I hope you enjoy this one.

### The Weaver's Son

An early January gale had taken off part of the roof of the west barn and, as the weather settled into steady rainfall, Mrs Harriet Faversham summoned her farm hands to move the hay into the smaller, but much drier east barn then sat down with her account books to work out if she could afford to call the roofer from Newark.

"We can probably patch it until the spring," her estate manager had said, surveying the damage from the shelter of a partly ruined cow shed. "Wouldn't do to put the hay back in there, mind. We might not be done with the worst of the weather yet."

"We've patched it up twice already," Harriet said gloomily. "We can manage for now, but we'll need to get it done. Send the boy over with a note to Barrett from Newark, Tom. I'm not using Harrison again. His prices are ridiculous and when his work on Sir Henry Chisholm's stables was unsatisfactory it took them almost a year to get him to come back and put it right. I won't reward bad workmanship with my custom."

"Right you are, ma'am. Oh, the groom picked up the post on the way back from the blacksmith's. I told him to put it on your desk."

There was a small pile of letters on the old mahogany desk which had belonged to Harriet's father. It was tempting to open them immediately, but Harriet set them aside and concentrated on her estate ledgers and the contents of her bank box to see if she could manage the necessary repairs.

It would have to be done. The small estate she had inherited from her late husband provided a rather hand-to-mouth income but during the five years of her widowhood, Harriet had become an expert at juggling her accounts. She had a small income from government bonds left to her by her father, which enabled her to live very modestly. Any income from the home farm and three tenancies was ploughed back into the estate.

The house, which had originally been a Benedictine abbey, was damp and cold and in need of repair but Harriet was used to the inconvenience and, as she never entertained, she had no need to worry about anybody else. The land and her horses were what mattered to her and she continued to ignore the advice of various friends and relatives to sell up and buy herself a nice villa on the coast. Harriet refused, mostly politely. Westhorpe Abbey was her home and the only good thing to have come out of her short, miserable marriage.

"You should marry again," Aunt Amabel told her every time Harriet arrived for a visit. "It's ridiculous for a girl of your age to be struggling with debt and bills and holes in your stockings when you could have a perfectly nice life. How old are you now – twenty-seven? You could even have children."

"I am twenty-nine, Aunt Amabel, and I'm perfectly happy. There are no debts. When Charles was killed I sold some land to pay them all off. I manage well enough; I have everything I need and..."

"You have no life," her Aunt said in exasperation. "You spend your time mouldering away in that dreadful old place. You are still young and attractive but if you don't do something about it soon, you really will grow old and then you'll regret it."

"I don't want to be married again, Aunt. I wasn't very good at it."

"Utter nonsense. There was nothing wrong with you apart from the fact that you fell in love with a wastrel who spent your dowry, ruined his inheritance then broke his neck on the hunting field leaving you to clear up the debts and chaos he left behind him. I admire how well you manage, Harriet, but it is enough."

"I'm happy, Aunt. Leave well alone."

After reviewing her finances, Harriet decided that by postponing repairs to some of the home farm fencing and not replacing the broken shutters on several of the upper windows, she could manage the repairs to the barn. It would eat into her precious reserves a little but it would be worth it at harvest time. She wrote the necessary instructions to Tom Langham, who ran the home farm and acted as her informal estate manager and then set the depressing account book aside and reached for the post.

There were several matters of business and a bill from the coal merchant. The final letter was from Aunt Amabel. Harriet studied it dubiously before opening it. Her Aunt was not a frequent correspondent. She led a busy social life and seldom troubled Harriet, apart from her insistence on twice yearly visits. These took place at Christmas and during the summer. Harriet wondered what had happened and hoped it was not bad news.

She read the letter through quickly to reassure herself and then read it again to make sure she had not

misunderstood. Eventually she put it down and sat back, staring out of the window at the rain.

Aunt Amabel had begun with her usual stream of news about family members. Uncle Edward was well, though more than usually irritating because of the poor weather. Both her sons were thriving, though Aunt Amabel gave it as her opinion that Bertie's wife was spoiling her children horribly while Ned's wife would never carry a child to term if she did not eat properly and rest during the first weeks. There was nothing to worry Harriet in any of this. Having disposed of immediate family gossip however, her Aunt moved on to the real purpose of the letter.

*"I am writing to request a favour, my dear. You will remember your cousin Clara. At least she is not your first cousin, she is mine. We have not seen her for some time. She went into retirement several years ago after that unfortunate affair with the military gentleman who turned out to be a dreadful fortune hunter and dropped her when he realised she had no fortune to hunt. We all thought her a confirmed spinster, but it appears that some family friends have come up with a possible match for her.*

*"It is not a marriage I would wish for my own daughter as the man is decidedly not a gentleman, even though he received a knighthood last year. Rumour has it that he comes from very humble beginnings – the son of a common weaver, if you can believe it. He has made his fortune from some of those dreadful textile mills that are ruining the countryside in Yorkshire. He's widowed with children, and I suppose he is looking for a wife of good breeding to teach them how to go on in polite society.*

*"Anyway, if Clara wants to spend the rest of her life teaching this man and his children not to eat with their hands it is her own business, but the matter is not settled yet. The Broughtons, who have that huge place outside York, have invited her to a house party where he will be a guest, and she will need a chaperone. It is ridiculous to ask you, because you are younger than she is, but of course you are a widow which makes it respectable. I cannot go myself, with Susan's children running wild and Anthea likely to bring on another miscarriage if I don't supervise her personally. I need you to be my deputy and help Clara bring this thing off.*

*"I realise you don't generally go into society and may have nothing suitable to wear. I'm sure I can help you out. Both my daughters-in-law have trunks of clothing they can never hope to wear again. If you come to me a week or more before the visit, I can make sure you are respectably dressed and you can travel to Yorkshire with Clara in our carriage.*

*"You cannot have anything to arrange at Westhorpe, as I am sure you can leave everything for a few weeks in the hands of that capable man of yours. I will arrange for you to travel by post-chaise on the twentieth of January and then you can travel on from here a week later. Please write to confirm that you have understood the arrangements."*

Harriet put down the letter and walked across the room to the window. It looked out onto the garden but there was little to see at this time of year except sodden lawns, dripping branches and rain drops running in little rivulets down the mullioned glass. For a long moment Harriet thought about smashing the window. It would be a ridiculous thing to do and she could not afford the repair bill, but she was so furious she longed to break something.

It was not the first time that family members, usually led by Aunt Amabel, had casually demanded her time and effort without bothering to ask if it was convenient for her. As a woman living alone without husband or children, it was assumed that her time had no value and that she would make herself available at a moment's notice if she was needed. Harriet was fond of her family and did not mind helping out occasionally when she was needed to help with a measles outbreak or the preparations for a wedding for instance, but being asked to make an extended visit to a house party with people she did not know, to further the matrimonial hopes of her second cousin Clara, was not reasonable. Harriet's first instinct was to pick up her pen and paper and write a curt refusal. Age and experience had taught her that it was seldom a good idea to follow a first angry instinct however.

Instead she sent a message to the stables and went to change into her shabby riding habit. Horses were her love and riding was always her solace in difficult times. She did not mind the rain or the cold when she was mounted on Silver, her favourite grey gelding. The horse had been a wedding gift from Charles and her happiest memories of her marriage were from those early days when they had ridden and hunted and laughed together, before his drinking and gambling and infidelities had gradually chipped away at her patience, her respect and finally her love.

She still loved to ride Silver, cantering through muddy lanes, careless of how wet she was getting. Riding cleared her head and enabled her to think more clearly. It also soothed her anger. By the time she was back at the house, stripping off her wet clothing and allowing her maid to scold her as she rubbed Harriet's long dark brown hair with a towel, she was calm again. She was even beginning to see the funny side.

Aunt Amabel was outrageous in her demands but she was also Harriet's favourite relative. She had been an unwavering support during the appalling months after Charles was killed, as Harriet tried to find her way through the maze of his debts and obligations. She had been trying hard to take care of Harriet ever since and it was not her fault that Harriet had discovered a streak of obstinate independence within herself that she had never known she possessed.

There was such a thing as gratitude, however. When she was dry and warm, Harriet went back and read the

letter again. This time, underneath Amabel's acerbic commentary she read genuine concern for her sons, her daughters-in-law and for poor Cousin Clara who had almost left it too late to decide that she might after all wish to be married. Whether this self-made textile manufacturer from Yorkshire could bring her the status and security she craved, Harriet had no idea. Still, for Amabel's sake she could take time away from her very mundane life to accompany Clara to a house party where the worst thing that could happen would be that she would get very bored.

She wrote an affectionate letter to her Aunt agreeing to her arrangements then went to study her wardrobe, wondering which of the elegant gowns she had not worn for five years could be altered to make them respectable enough for a chaperone at a provincial, winter house party.

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Sir Matthew Howard had been to Broughton Hall before, but never for an occasion like this. He had met Lord Broughton at the York Races more than a year ago and had struck up a casual masculine friendship with him. They dined together from time to time when Howard had business in York and his Lordship had been grateful for occasional snippets of business advice that Howard had been able to give him. In return he had introduced him to several of his friends.

Howard appreciated the attempt to widen his social circle and did not tell Broughton that he was not really looking to ingratiate himself into the upper echelons of society. He was a businessman; a textile manufacturer who had inherited the bones of a business from his ambitious father and turned it into gold. These days he was known throughout Yorkshire as a man of substance. His knighthood had been the result of some very successful navy contracts. He had recently purchased a third mill from a cotton spinner who had recently gone bankrupt. The sheds were run down and the equipment hopelessly outdated but Howard was more than capable of bringing them up to scratch. He was a man on his way up, but his aspirations did not include presentations at court or aristocratic friends. He was a wealthy man and wanted to be more so.

Still, he liked Broughton and his cheerful, welcoming wife and had stayed with them at Broughton Hall several times. He had talked freely about the loss of his wife six years earlier in childbirth and the difficulties of raising four children through a series of nannies and governesses. He supposed that at some point he had mentioned that he thought he should probably marry again.

He had been somewhat startled when Broughton had come back with a possible solution. Miss Clara Danbury was a little over thirty, well-connected and of a quiet disposition. She had never married, due to a romantic disappointment in her youth, but her elder brother who was a friend of Broughton's had intimated that she was beginning to reconsider the matter. She was pleasant and capable and had expressed an interest in meeting Sir Matthew Howard.

Howard rolled his eyes at his friends' blatant matchmaking but found it hard to resent it. He had allowed them to arrange the meeting, in a deliberately informal setting and had found Miss Danbury all that they said. She was not unattractive; her manner was rather prim and if Howard had been looking for a new governess he would have employed her at once. He was not, however, so he remained cautious but agreed to further meetings.

They met at a reception held by one of the York guilds and then again at a late summer garden party. She allowed him to be her escort to a Christmas concert in the Minster. He dined at Broughton Hall and was introduced to her brother and his wife who were in Yorkshire for the New Year.

Howard was careful to keep a pleasant distance until he was more certain. He could see the advantages of the match. She came from good family and she apparently liked children. She seemed to have no interest in making a socially advantageous marriage, but he thought she might make a good housekeeper and a good stepmother. She had good manners and was quiet but not painfully shy in company. He thought she would probably be a good hostess and a sensible wife. It would be the kind of second marriage he had always intended to make at some point and if he was going to do it, he might as well do it now.

"What are you waiting for, man?" Broughton demanded, over a steak pie and some good red wine at the *Star Inn* in York. "She's perfect for you. Speak to her."

"I've not yet decided," Howard said. "She's a nice young woman but I don't really know her that well. I've met her maybe a dozen times and we've talked about nothing more personal than the weather. I've no idea if we should suit."

"Who ever knows that before they're married?" Broughton said with a grimace. "I was bloody lucky with Mary, but I swear we'd spent most of our acquaintance on the dance floor before I proposed to her. She could have been a half-wit and I wouldn't have known it. Look, we're having some people to stay in January. A couple of relatives of Mary's that we couldn't manage to see over Christmas. Why don't you join us for a week or two and I'll invite Miss Danbury. She can get that dragon of an aunt to chaperone her. It will give you an opportunity to spend a little more time around her. By the end of it, you'll either be ready to propose or you'll have decided against

it. You can't keep going like this or you'll be accused of raising expectations."

"I don't raise expectations without a carefully drawn up contract, Broughton," Howard said. They both laughed, and Broughton summoned the waiter to bring a second bottle.

Howard thought his friend was probably right. If he continued in this half-hearted courtship, he was in danger of being pushed into a proposal by her anxious relatives. He knew that Broughton thought he was being unnecessarily cautious and he was probably right. His problem was that although Miss Clara Danbury seemed to tick every item on his list of requirements, he could not easily imagine himself married to her. Perhaps two weeks of proximity would either make the prospect more real, or show him that it was impossible.

Broughton Hall was an elegant mansion about six miles to the north of York. It was built in the time of Queen Anne and stood in beautifully landscaped gardens. Howard never visited it without being painfully aware of the difference between this graceful house which had been in the Broughton family for years, and the house his father had begun to build on a hillside overlooking the little market town of Thorndale.

John Howard had died before his Palladian mansion was completed and Matthew had moved in with his young wife and taken over the project. The house was finished at just about the time that Kitty died bearing their fourth child. She had disliked the house, finding it too austere and too grand. Kitty had been a doctor's daughter and had never really become comfortable with their rapidly increasing wealth or the social expectations it placed upon her. Matthew, who had married very young, and for love, had tried hard to be patient with her but worried that he might not always have succeeded.

The house had felt empty without her and no amount of expensive furniture or elaborate curtains had ever managed to turn it into a home. The children occupied an elaborate nursery suite with a selection of well-paid nurses and governesses to take care of them. Matthew rather liked his children but he saw far too little of them, being busy with work. He tried to imagine Clara Danbury stepping into that gap and failed.

She had already arrived when he joined the party in the drawing room before dinner, very correctly dressed in a modest gown of striped satin. He allowed Lady Broughton to make the introductions to the other guests then went to join Clara, raising her hand to his lips.

"Miss Danbury, it's good to see you. How was your journey? I gather you've been staying with your Aunt in Nottingham."

He realised as he said it that none of the strangers appeared to be Mrs Crookall. He glanced around, wondering if he had somehow missed the introduction.

"Yes, I was. She was unable to accompany me unfortunately. Mrs Susan Crookall is in a delicate condition and is a little unwell. I have been joined by my cousin, Mrs Faversham, though I do not know where she can be..."

She broke off as the door opened and a woman stepped into the room. She was dressed in a dark green robe which was slightly outdated but not really out of place for a country house party. She looked as though she was close in age to Miss Danbury, but her manner was very different. From the top of her attractive arrangement of dark brown curls, to the neat satin slippers, she radiated confidence and vitality. Her skin was slightly tanned as though she spent a lot of time outdoors. Her eyes were an attractive colour somewhere between brown and green, with what looked like gold flecks. Her smile was broad and friendly.

"Sir Matthew this is my cousin, Mrs Faversham."

Mrs Faversham offered him a gloved hand. "Sir Matthew, it is good to meet you. My Aunt has told me about you."

Howard had never exchanged more than a dozen words with Clara's formidable Aunt Amabel and he had a fairly good idea what she thought of him. He studied Mrs Faversham and decided that she knew as well.

"That was very kind of her, ma'am. I hope she gave me as good a character as I would undoubtedly give her."

To his complete astonishment, the woman gave a peal of delighted laughter. "I will ask you for more details about that character at some point, Sir Matthew. I don't think you've spent enough time around my aunt. I think you would get on. Clara, I'm so sorry I'm late down. I encountered a crisis on the nursery stairs and had to apply my medical expertise but all is well now."

"Oh my goodness," Lady Broughton said anxiously. "Is one of the children hurt?"

"Oh no, please don't worry. I was joking. Little Cecilia apparently left her doll within reach of the new spaniel puppy and there was an accident to poor Molly's leg. Fortunately I was able to apply a bandage to stop the sawdust escaping and have promised I'll perform proper surgery tomorrow. I might have to borrow some linen to patch it. The wretched dog had almost torn it off, but I can mend it. All tears are dried and Cecilia is quite excited at the prospect of being my assistant. Mrs Arbuthnot, how nice to see you again. I had no idea you were to be a fellow guest. How is Sir Anthony; is he not with you?"

She moved away to talk to one of the other guests and Howard managed to close his mouth.

"Your cousin seems very at home here," he said to Clara, rather faintly.

"Oh Harriet is at home everywhere," Clara said with a little laugh. "I am sorry if you find her a little too much."

She means very well.”

“Could her husband not accompany her this week?” Howard asked. “What does he do?”

He caught her frown and remembered that in polite circles it was not customary to ask what a man did. His ancestry was more important.

“Harriet is a widow. Some five years, I believe. She married one of the Favershams of Southwell, but he was sadly unsteady and died in a hunting accident leaving her with a half-ruined house, an impoverished estate and a pile of debts. She lives there on her own without even a female companion. I expect she was delighted at this opportunity for a few weeks in a civilised household. Tell me about your delightful children, Sir Matthew. I am wild to meet them.”

Howard thought about his children. George was fourteen and Arthur twelve. Both were studying mathematics and accounting at the local grammar school and manufacturing under his general manager at the woollen mill. Katherine was eight and practising to be a lady under the tuition of her strict governess, Miss Price. Then there was Anne. Anne was six and had never known her mother, who died giving birth to her. Howard did not know what Anne was doing or what she was learning and thought it best not to ask. He smiled pleasantly at Clara Danbury and tried to imagine introducing her to his youngest daughter.

He listened with half an ear as Miss Danbury told him about their journey, the difficulty of the coaching inns and the rudeness of one of the post boys. His eyes, he realised were constantly straying to the slender dark woman across the room who was carrying on an animated conversation with the Rector about his recently foaled mare. Briefly he tried to imagine introducing Mrs Faversham to his youngest daughter and realised to his horror that he would like to do so.

She was a widow. She understood children. She had a laugh that could charm birds from the trees.

Howard nodded and smiled at Miss Danbury. Inside, his brain was screaming.

No. Oh no. Oh for God’s sake no.

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Sir Matthew Howard was not at all what Harriet had been expecting. She supposed she should have remembered Aunt Amabel’s tendency to exaggerate, particularly when she thought a member of her family was making a mistake. All the same, Harriet did not think she could ever have had a proper conversation with Sir Matthew, because she was sure that her aunt would have liked him.

Harriet liked him herself. He was a big, broad-shouldered man of around forty, with a Yorkshire accent and a dry sense of humour. His manner was direct and uncompromising and Harriet suspected that some of his blunt remarks would make him unpopular in rarified circles, but in the Broughtons’ friendly, informal household nobody seemed to care. He had a ready smile and his manners were perfectly good, though Harriet had a sense that he might possibly be very rude indeed if he was angry.

He was very different to the men of her own family. She thought about Charles and his hunting friends, with their lordly manners and the cut-glass accents of privilege. They would have despised Matthew Howard and spent their time picking fault with him in loud whispers. Harriet wondered if he could be awkward in such company. There was certainly no sign of it here.

The one person he did appear somewhat awkward around was her cousin, Clara. Harriet watched the couple through the first two days of their visit and wondered if she was imagining things. Sir Matthew was suitably attentive to Clara. When the party went out, he rode or walked beside her. He was often her partner at dinner and listened attentively to whatever she had to say, but Harriet thought that he did not talk much in return. She wondered if beneath that assertive exterior, he was a little shy.

She had the opportunity to find out more about him when Lord Broughton proposed a walk to the nearby village of Selbury, which had a fine Norman church. It was a bright day, but very cold. Harriet had already agreed to join the party when she realised that her cousin had declined.

“I do not wish to put a damper on your outing, dear Lady Broughton, but I do not think I should make the attempt,” Clara said when her hostess expressed concern. “It is so cold, which often gives me the headache. I will remain here and be perfectly content.”

“I’ll stay with you, Clara,” Harriet said.

“There is no need.”

“Nonsense. I’d be a poor companion if I left you behind when you aren’t feeling quite the thing.”

Before Clara could respond, Mr Robinson, the Rector cleared his throat noisily. Harriet had noticed him doing it before. It seemed to be his way of announcing that he was about to speak. She wondered why he did not simply speak.

“Do not be concerned, dear Mrs Faversham. I myself do not intend to venture out in such weather. It is not

good for my rheumatism. I will happily engage to bear your cousin company until you return.”

Harriet looked at him in surprise and hastily bit back what she had been about to say. Mr Robinson had been her companion at dinner the previous evening. He was a stocky gentleman, new to his parish, surely not more than thirty and did not look at all like a man who suffered from rheumatism or any other kind of illness. Harriet regarded him critically and decided that it was exercise rather than cold weather that Mr Robinson disliked. Since she wanted to go for a walk, she smiled brightly at him.

“Thank you, Mr Robinson. I’m certain my cousin could not be in better hands. Are you sure, Clara?”

Clara expressed herself perfectly satisfied with the arrangements and Harriet went to change her shoes with a faint sense of relief. She did not dislike her cousin but they had very little in common. She found Clara fussy and easily upset with very little conversation that did not revolve around domestic matters. She suspected that Clara found her too forward, with too much interest in matters not usually considered the province of females. Harriet was doing her best but it would be nice to spend a couple of hours in the fresh air talking about something other than fashion and the problems of finding reliable servants.

She was surprised to find that Sir Matthew Howard attached himself firmly to her side as soon as they set off along the path to the village. Since she had already decided she wanted to know more about her cousin’s prospective suitor, she was not displeased. He was wearing a well-cut dark greatcoat, good boots and a sensible hat. Harriet had strong views on the extremes of fashion and approved of the hat.

The path was muddy in places and one or two of the ladies had to be assisted over the worst parts. Sir Matthew offered his hand politely and Harriet took it, but did not flinch as mud splashed the hem of her shabby walking dress. As they resumed their walk, he said:

“I see you’re not bothered by a spot of mud, ma’am.”

Harriet laughed. “I run a country estate, sir. You should see the state of me during the lambing season. It isn’t pretty.”

He grinned. “I suspect it’s more attractive than you think actually. A lady in a ballgown is a pretty sight, but there’s something appealing about a woman who isn’t afraid of a muddy hem. I don’t know, perhaps it’s just me. My late wife was a country girl and thought nothing of climbing stiles and splashing through puddles.”

Harriet thought about her cousin. She had never seen Clara appear anything other than immaculate and a spot on her lace collar was enough to send her to change her entire outfit. She wondered if Sir Matthew realised that.

“My husband was an enthusiastic member of the hunt. He used to come back covered in mud from head to foot.”

“I’ve never really seen the point of hunting, but that’s probably my upbringing. I like to ride, though I came late to it. I’m too heavy for a hunter anyway.”

Harriet shot him a glance. “You didn’t learn as a boy?”

“My father never rode in his life. It’s an upper-class pastime and I definitely wasn’t that.”

Harriet remembered her aunt’s remarks. She desperately wanted to ask more but she did not want to be rude. They negotiated a stile and pushed through an overgrown section of the path. She could hear Lord Broughton grumbling about speaking to the parish clerk to arrange to get the bushes cut back.

“You can ask me what you like,” Sir Matthew said abruptly.

Harriet looked at him in surprise. “Oh. I was...that is, I am curious. But I don’t want to be rude.”

“I’m sure you won’t be, ma’am. You have excellent address. Forgive me if I seem impertinent, but I’m in favour of plain speaking and I’ve a notion that you’re the same. It’s no secret that the Broughtons have been trying to make a match between your cousin and I. I’m sure your aunt is aware of it. It occurred to me that it might be your job to assess my suitability.”

Harriet froze. She realised that she had been very naïve. There were probably several other hapless family members who might have been sent to chaperone Clara. She was not the obvious choice.

“Of course it is,” she said bitterly. “Though I had not realised it. If my aunt had been born two hundred years earlier, they would have burned her as a witch. I’m sorry, Sir Matthew. I admit I’m interested. You come from a very different world to me. But I had no intention of acting as the family intelligence gatherer.”

He shot her a surprising grin. “I appreciate your honesty. Family must be difficult. I don’t have much left myself. My mother died when I was young and my father a few years ago. There are probably cousins out there somewhere, but I don’t know them. When he took the audacious step of setting himself up as a gentleman, my father left them behind. Ruthless but very much like him.”

Harriet had so many questions that she could not decide which to ask first. She wondered if he was serious in his invitation to ask whatever she liked. His expression was encouraging though, so she said:

“Were you close to him?”

“Is that another way of asking if I liked him?” Howard gave a crooked smile. “No, I didn’t. He didn’t require affection from his son, or even liking. Just respect and obedience.”

“That sounds hard.”

“It was simple. I didn’t know any different until I met Kitty. She was the local doctor’s daughter and a fair bit above me socially, but she was lovely. Very sweet and very kind. We’d begun to make money by then. I thought I’d done very well in getting her to marry me. My father was furious. He thought I should have waited until I could have asked a girl of better birth.”

“I’m so sorry. That must have been difficult.”

“He was barely civil to her, but she managed surprisingly well. It was after he died, when we moved to Helton Ridge...it was his house. He built it. I’ve added to it since. I wanted it to be a palace for her, but she was lost in it. She’d have been happier in that square, solid town house we first lived in. After she died, I wished we’d stayed in it. Sorry. I’m sounding maudlin.”

“No, I understand. I’ve had all kinds of regrets since I was widowed.”

“Do you want to tell me about them?”

Harriet looked up at him and decided to tell the truth. “Mostly that I married Charles in the first place. He was...I had a brother. Martin. He and Charles were schoolfriends and did everything together. I suspect everybody expected me to marry Charles since I was a child. And I wanted to. He was my hero.”

“What went wrong?”

“We were married in spring. Those early days were perfect. Summer, then autumn. The hunting season started. I grew up in Leicestershire. I knew what that meant. I didn’t see him for weeks at a time. It didn’t bother me. My father and brother were the same. It’s all I knew.”

“What happened to your brother?”

“Oh, exactly what one might have expected. He took a tumble jumping a fence and broke his neck. It was devastating. We buried him and we mourned. I thought it would bring Charles and I together but I was wrong. He was never the same again. He became distant. Drank too much, gambled too much...I don’t know. Perhaps it was because of Martin. Or perhaps he was just being the man he was always meant to become. Eventually he died in a very similar way. By then it was a relief. I’m sorry, I am sharing confidences that you cannot possibly want to hear.”

“I asked,” Howard said briefly. “I’m sorry, it sounds appalling. You’ve not remarried. I was wondering why, but it’s very clear. Does your cousin know any of this?”

“I don’t know. She must know a little, but we have not seen much of each other these past years. I’ve been struggling to run my estate and she has...she has lived retired.”

“She’s been living down an unfortunate disappointment with a fortune hunter,” Howard said briefly. Harriet glared at him and he held up his hands in a gesture of surrender, smiling. “Don’t eat me. You must have known I’d make enquiries. It doesn’t sound as though she was guilty of anything worse than poor judgement of a bad character. To be honest I don’t understand why she hid herself away.”

“Nor do I,” Harriet said frankly. “I’ve always thought it was odd. I’m very glad she is moving out into society again. And that...I mean that she may be considering...or you may be considering...”

She stopped, not knowing how to continue. To her surprise and relief, the brown eyes were dancing with amusement.

“Let’s assume that we’re all considering but that nobody has made up their mind. What else do you think your aunt wants to know?”

Harriet took a deep breath. “You spoke about your father’s origins, but he must have made a good deal of money. Do you mind me asking...?”

“Not at all, I’m proud of it. My father was a humble weaver’s son, born in a two-roomed cottage and taught to weave as soon as he was old enough. It was the family industry. By the time he was ten he’d decided he wanted more. He saved to buy a pack mule and started going further afield. Selling his family’s cloth but also buying cheaply from other cottages and selling for a profit. He worked hard, saved his brass and at twenty-five he bought a rundown water mill and set up his first factory. So yes, ma’am. In answer to your Aunt’s question, I am indeed a weaver’s brat.”

Harriet was shaken but rallied determinedly. “No wonder you’re so proud of it. I would be myself.”

He gave a chuckle and shook his head. “You have no idea, Mrs Faversham.”

Unexpectedly, Harriet was angry. “Neither have you, Sir Matthew. I’m sorry about any hardship you might have experienced in your youth, but I think if we compared our current circumstances, you’d find them very different. I spend my life juggling money to keep a roof over my head and to run my estate. My house is damp and cold and the kitchen range smokes so badly that I can’t keep a cook more than one winter. Every year we lose at least one sheep to the cold or the snow and that’s a man’s wages or my new winter cloak. There’s a reason this one is so badly patched. I can tell you the cost of a section of new roof tiles to the inch and I groom all my horses myself to save the cost of an extra man. I also light my own fires and my ladies maid is also my housemaid and

my unofficial housekeeper. I don't pay her enough. Every year I wonder if I'm going to make it through the next one. I admire how well you have pulled yourself out of your humble beginnings. I would ask you to show me the same respect."

There was a long silence. Harriet stalked through the next puddle without pretending to need assistance and blinked back angry tears. She realised they had walked a long way ahead of the rest of the party but she did not slow down. She needed some time to compose herself.

"I'm sorry," Sir Matthew said abruptly. "I've behaved like a boor. I don't usually. I know all the rules and I'm good at following them but you...Christ, woman, you've ploughed through all my defences without raising your head. That was unforgiveable. I'm so sorry. Can we go back to where I'd not insulted you yet?"

Harriet was so surprised that she could not speak for a moment. She looked up at him cautiously. He looked very upset.

"Sir Matthew, I'm sorry too. I should never have said that."

"Yes, you should. If we're sharing confidences it should go both ways. Your husband was an arsehole. I'm sorry he left you in such difficult circumstances. I might be a weaver's brat, but I'd no right to assume anything about you. You're remarkable. It's a privilege to have met you."

Harriet was so surprised that she could think of nothing to say. They walked in silence for a while. His next remark was about the weather, and completely unexceptionable and she answered it in kind. Slowing their pace, they allowed the others to catch up with them. The conversation became general and on the return walk, Lady Broughton walked beside them and asked Sir Matthew about his children. Harriet found it very soothing.

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Matthew did not often accept invitations to this kind of leisurely country house party. Largely it was because he was too busy. The mills consumed most of his time and he liked to spend what was left with his children. He firmly believed that success was achieved by hard work and did not understand those of his contemporaries who chose to leave the day to day running of their mills to their managers and overlookers. He kept an office at the largest of his premises and made a point of arriving at his desk every morning before his workforce began filing through the gates. He employed clerks and men of business as well as engineers, but he made sure that he understood enough about every aspect of his business to know if a man was stealing, shirking or trying to fob him off with excuses.

He was respected as a good businessman. In Thorndale that meant that he was shrewd, hard-headed and ruthless in matters of trade. He paid his bills on time, expected others to do the same and had no patience with a supplier or a tradesman who failed to do their job properly. He considered himself a fair employer, who paid good wages for a day's work but was quick to dismiss the lazy and the feckless.

Sir Matthew Howard was proud of what he had built and had every intention of improving on it. A second marriage was the next logical step. He had four growing children, and although he had no concerns for the boys, his girls should have a mother. He had welcomed Broughton's offer to introduce him to Clara Danbury and he had thought she might answer the purpose.

Meeting her cousin had thrown him into confusion. Harriet's frank disclosures about her unhappy marriage and her current state of genteel poverty had surprised, but not shocked him. He admired her independence and her determination not to be a charge on any of her family. He also liked her courage. There was steel in Harriet Faversham's character which touched an answering chord in him.

She was also attractive. Her cousin had a pale prettiness which he had found charming. Matthew was not looking for a wife to dazzle local society and he had told himself that at thirty-nine, he wanted companionship rather than excitement. He wondered now why it had never occurred to him to consider how he felt about going to bed with Clara. He was trying hard not to think about going to bed with Harriet. Nothing could be more unsuitable.

In this bewildered state of mind, he would have welcomed the distraction of work. Instead he was faced with long days of relative idleness. The Broughtons were easy-going hosts, who provided their guests with a choice of activities but did not mind at all if any of them elected not to join in. Breakfast was a casual meal, where dishes were set out on the sideboard and guests wandered in when they chose. Mrs Arbuthnot and Lady Stanhope, the two oldest ladies in the party preferred to take tea and toast in their rooms before dressing to face the day.

During the day, depending on the weather, the gentlemen could join the hunt or go shooting with their host. Matthew had not been born to such pursuits and had no interest in either. He liked to ride and had brought his own horse, so found himself much in demand as an escort to those ladies who wished to ride out but did not choose the rigours of the hunting field. Miss Danbury joined the riding party once but generally remained in the house, writing letters or reading. Mrs Faversham rode every day. Her riding habit was disgracefully shabby and very out of date. There was an excellent dressmaker in Thorndale and Matthew found himself wishing he could take her there and



tell her to choose whatever she liked. It was a ridiculous idea and did not help his present predicament.

It was not the weather for such games as croquet or shuttlecock, but on wet afternoons Lady Broughton valiantly organised charades and word games. Dinner was a lengthy, formal affair and afterwards there were more cards, music or games. Matthew slipped away as often as he could to write long lists of instructions to his managers and overlookers. He also penned an affectionate note to his children, in which he recommended that his sons continue to attend to their studies, his elder daughter work hard at her needlework and watercolours and his youngest daughter refrain from bringing an injured fox into the schoolroom. The letter of complaint from the governess had been lengthy and detailed and Matthew sensed the threat of resignation behind every line.

He was concerned enough to mention it to his hostess at dinner. Lady Broughton listened with an expression of growing bewilderment which made Matthew think he had made a mistake. When he finished his story, there was a brief painful silence.

“We have trouble keeping a governess for long,” he said, somewhat feebly. “It isn’t so important for the boys. They had a tutor and now they go to school. But for the girls...”

“My goodness, how awkward for you, Sir Matthew,” her ladyship said warmly. “Those girls need a mother, of course.”

Matthew made a determined effort not to look over at Miss Danbury. He could not help himself however. He was relieved to find that she was definitely not looking at him.”

“In time, I hope so, ma’am. But at present...”

“At present they need a better governess,” Harriet Faversham said cheerfully. “What a fuss about an injured fox cub. I presume it was a cub? How old is your daughter?”

“She’s six,” Matthew said gratefully. “Though she often seems much older. I suppose she learns from the others. Though they never seemed to do the things she does.”

“I hope the poor animal was not thrown out into the cold?”

“No. Apparently Anne persuaded one of the grooms to find it a bed in the stables until its leg healed. Miss Price is very upset though. She is convinced it had fleas and...and I don’t think many governesses know what to do with an injured fox cub.”

“Your daughter requires discipline, sir,” the Rector said sternly. “A child of that age to be causing such disruption in the household! And a girl, at that!”

“A girl?” Harriet said dangerously. Matthew looked at her and realised miserably that this conversation was now completely out of his control. The servants arrived to remove the first course and there was a bustle of dishes being set down and wine being replenished. He hoped it would distract the company from his family difficulties but Mr Robinson clearly had a good memory.

“My dear Mrs Faversham, I understand your feelings,” he said indulgently, as the butler poured the final glass and set the bottle down within reach. “You have no children of your own, so it must be difficult for you to imagine...”

“Do you have children?” Harriet interrupted ruthlessly.

Robinson looked astonished. “I...no of course not. You must know I am unmarried.”

“I was just checking,” Harriet said inexcusably. There was a collective gasp around the table and young Mr Stansfield, who had drunk his wine rather too quickly, giggled.

The Rector chose to overlook Harriet’s rudeness. “I have no family of my own, although I would hope to one day. However, with my experience of ministering to many families, I believe that poor Sir Matthew has fallen into error. It is not his fault. He has no wife to help him and the youngest child never knew her mother. Naturally she has been indulged and become spoiled. A little discipline will soon set the problem right.”

“What kind of discipline do you recommend for a child who cares enough about an injured animal to risk the anger of her governess?” Harriet asked with apparent interest.

The butler cleared his throat noisily. “Will that be all, my lady?”

“Yes, thank you, Dransfield,” Lady Broughton said with alarming cheerfulness. “Well, I hope you manage to placate your governess, Sir Matthew. Try the duck. It is my cook’s own recipe and I think it is excellent.”

Matthew ate the duck gratefully, while his hostess skilfully steered the conversation into safer waters. He wondered if he was going to survive another week of this or if he could invent a fox-related crisis and go home early. He had never felt less inclined to propose to anybody in his life.

The following day was Sunday. It was bright and sunny, although cold, and Lady Broughton proposed a carriage expedition into York to attend service at the Minster. Matthew was not a regular churchgoer but as both Miss Danbury and Mrs Faversham chose to go, he decided that it would be good for his soul. With only a few more days of this interminable house party, he realised he was going to have to make up his mind. Either he would have to propose to Miss Danbury, or he should withdraw decidedly and make no attempt to see her again.

He did not think he would break her heart. This past week he had spent enough time around her to convince

him that, whatever her view of his suit, her affections were not engaged. Like him, she had made up her mind to marry, and he was wealthy, available and not so far beneath her socially that she would be cut off from family and friends. In her younger days, she might have done better, but her unfortunate romance had closed many doors. Matthew did not think she pined after high society and thought they might do well enough together.

The sticking point was his children. One of the main reasons for marrying again was to provide a stepmother, particularly to his girls. He thought Katie might do well enough with Clara Danbury's placid good nature but he could not imagine what might happen with Anne. He was not sure, having no real experience with small girls, but he suspected that Anne was difficult.

He was still mulling over the problem during the lengthy, but rather lovely, service at the Minster. Afterwards they went for sherry with one of the Deacons who was a friend of the Broughtons and then walked through the narrow streets of the city to the *Star Inn* where Lord Danbury had reserved a private parlour for a late breakfast or possibly early luncheon.

Matthew did not usually eat at this hour, but the food was good and the wine excellent. He ate and drank and listened to the Rector holding forth on church politics. It was not particularly interesting but it kept the company busy through the meal and Matthew was grateful.

Afterwards they strolled through the cobbled streets, went up to admire Clifford's Tower and then walked along the river. Matthew walked between Clara and Harriet and thought again, with a sinking heart, that he was running out of time. His hosts had invited him with the specific purpose of helping him decide whether he wanted to propose to Clara Danbury. If he did not, he needed to withdraw gracefully and swiftly, and leave the woman to search for a new husband. He was worried that he had already raised expectations and that he would leave her disappointed and floundering if he did not propose after all.

He wished he could have an honest conversation with Clara, to ask what she wanted. The fact that he could not told him what he should already have known. It would be a marriage of convenience. Sometimes that worked very well but Matthew was not convinced that it would on this occasion.

Back at the house he went to his room and wrote letters. He wrote to his shed manager and his man of business and his estate manager. He wrote to three of his suppliers and a man in London who had promised to put him in touch with a gentleman with contacts in the army. He wrote to his children again.

Eventually he ran out of letters to write. It was close to the dinner hour so he summoned his valet, washed and changed, then went down to the drawing room. He was early and nobody else was present, so he went outside into the glowing red of a winter sunset and found Harriet Faversham on the terrace admiring the view.

"Sir Matthew. Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yes. I love a good sunset at this time of year. Summer is lovely of course, but you have to wait so long for it. On a fine winter's day, you can have all the glory much earlier."

She gave a delighted laugh. "That's so true. Winter sunrise is the best. One has had enough sleep and suddenly there it is. Have you heard anything more from your grumpy governess? I have been thinking about your little girl. She sounds interesting."

Matthew laughed. "Anne? Oh God. Anne is...yes, she's interesting. I don't know how to manage Anne. She's so clever and so determined and I feel as though I need to make her my job, all of the time. But I can't. I love her. But she drives me mad."

"She needs a stepmother," Harriet said gently.

"I know. It's why I've considered marrying your cousin."

"Clara is very kind."

Unexpectedly, Matthew felt his reserve drain away. "I know she is. But she's not...she has no idea. She's so sure how things ought to be. But I'm not sure she has much idea about how things really are. I think she might be miserable as my wife. And I think I might be miserable as her husband."

There was a long silence. Then Harriet said:

"Then you should not marry her."

Matthew was silent for a while. Eventually he said:

"Do you think you'll ever marry again?"

"No. I wasn't happy as a wife."

"Don't you think that might have had something to do with your husband?"

"Perhaps. But a man needs a woman he can rely upon."

"A woman needs a man she can rely upon. I'm considered fairly reliable."

He could not believe he had said it. The silence grew. Finally Harriet looked up.

"We couldn't," she said simply.

Matthew felt his heart leap at her immediate understanding. He had been telling himself that this was all his imagination and that his fierce attraction and strong bond with this woman was entirely one-sided. She had swept

aside that notion with a sentence. She had still said no.

“Oh Christ, Harriet. How can I marry her now that I’ve met you?”

“Matthew, I’ve not agreed to marry you. Or anybody. I’m serious about that. Marriage was a burden to me. I’d rather be alone.”

“No you wouldn’t. I can show you how good it can be. I wasn’t that bad at it myself, though I think I let my poor wife down at times. Still, I’ve learned. I could make you happy.”

“Stop it,” Harriet said fiercely. “We can’t. You’ve spent months courting my cousin, and she has every right to expect a proposal from you. I don’t think you should do it if you’re not sure. But you cannot marry me. She would feel awful. It would be wrong.”

“It would be the most sensible thing I’d ever done. Just tell me that you feel it, Harriet. Tell me it’s not just me.”

She looked up at him and he saw the truth in her eyes. “It’s not just you.”

Matthew took her hand and raised it to his lips. He wanted to take her into his arms but at any moment somebody might come into the room and out onto the terrace and he could not do that to her or to her cousin. He must come to a decision but he realised that he needed to make it without reference to Harriet.

“I think I may have fallen in love with you, Harriet Faversham.”

She looked up at him, squeezing his hand. “I think I might have fallen in love with you too, Matthew Howard. But we were too late and this would not be right. I wish I could have met your children though. They sound remarkable.”

They went back into the house and he endured another dinner and another round of port and another game of cards. He was aware of every word she spoke and every movement she made. His heart was broken and he did not think it would ever be mended.

He awoke early and went out into the crisp darkness, watching the sun come up over the hills. Somehow he was not surprised when she joined him in the garden, long before their hosts or any of the other guests were awake.

“Matthew, I’m leaving today. I’ve invented an excuse about a crisis on the estate. Nobody will be surprised. I’m known for being unsociable. I’m sorry. I can’t stay here and be around you now that I know... Look, you need to speak to Clara. You can’t keep putting this off. Everybody is waiting for the announcement.”

“I’m not sure I can marry her, Harriet. Not now.”

“You should think about it. She will be kind to your children and she’ll be a good wife.”

“I think living with Anne might kill her.”

Harriet laughed aloud. “Don’t be silly. I’m sure Anne is very sweet.”

“She is, to those who can see it. I don’t want you to go.”

“I have to. This is all wrong. I’m going home to get the barn roof fixed. You will marry Clara and be perfectly happy. You and I don’t even know each other that well.”

“I know more about you now than I’ll ever know about her.”

“She’ll be a good wife.”

“I don’t know, Harriet. I’ll think about it.”

“You’ll think more clearly if I’m not here. Thank you for everything. I’m so glad to have met you. It’s taught me what I might have had.”

He felt his heart break all over again, but she had stated her wishes, so he endured through the endless breakfast and the agonising farewells. He stood waving on the drive with the others until the carriage was out of sight then went inside to play charades with his fellow guests. When the rain eased off, Lord Broughton suggested a ride and the gentlemen cantered through country lanes and discussed a shooting party for the following day. Matthew felt hollowed out, as though sadness had left him empty. He was painfully aware that now that Harriet had gone, he needed a frank conversation with her cousin.

There was no opportunity the following day. The weather was fine and Lord Broughton had organised a full day of sporting activities. In the evening, there were guests for dinner and afterwards the drawing room was cleared for dancing. Matthew trod his way through endless country dances and wished every one of his partners to the devil.

There was one more day, and the party was developing the listless sense of guests who were more than ready to depart. Matthew knew that his time was running out. For better or worse he needed to talk to Clara. He knew that Harriet had been right. He could not have jilted her cousin to marry her, even if she would have accepted him. Whether that meant he could choose the marriage of convenience he had always intended, he was still not sure.

To his surprise, Clara made the first move. They had finished breakfast and there was some desultory talk of a carriage ride out to a local beauty spot. The ladies of the party were already instructing their maids about packing, and there was a good deal of conversation about travel arrangements for the following day. Matthew took a walk down to the ornamental lake to stretch his legs. As he came back into the house he was surprised to find Miss

Danbury hovering in the hallway.

“Sir Matthew. Did you enjoy your walk?”

“Yes, thank you. It’s cold, but I like the fresh air. Will you be joining us this afternoon to visit Leveret Hall, Miss Danbury? I’m told the grounds are very fine.”

“I do not believe I will. It’s too cold for me, and I have a good deal to do before we leave tomorrow. Sir Matthew, I was wondering if you could spare me a few moments? The breakfast room is free.”

Matthew was astonished, but he recognised a perfect opportunity even if he still had no idea what he wanted to do with it. Practicality and romance warred together in his heart as he followed her into the room. She closed the door. It felt very final. Matthew took a deep breath and spoke.

“I’m glad of the opportunity to speak to you, Miss Danbury. I’ve enjoyed this week but I feel we’ve not had the chance to talk as much as I’d hoped. I know you’re aware...that is, we’ve been getting to know each other, and I...”

“Please, Sir Matthew. Allow me to speak first. This is difficult and somewhat embarrassing.”

Matthew pulled up short, bewildered. He studied her and realised for the first time that she was rather pale and looked upset. He wondered what had happened and for a panicked moment, thought of Harriet and the long journey to her home. He wondered if her cousin had received bad news.

“What is it, Miss Danbury?”

“As you have said, I am aware that we have spent some time together and that certain expectations have been raised. I feel the weight of those now, but I must be honest with you. This past week, I have begun to wonder if we should suit as well as I first thought. Also, I have been made aware of the feelings of...of another gentleman. Yesterday, he spoke to me and made his intentions clear. I cannot, in good faith, do anything other than be truthful.”

Matthew stared at her. He became aware that his mouth was hanging open and closed it quickly. She sounded breathless and terrified, as though she expected him to shout at her, but there was something very resolute about her which drew both his respect and his sympathy.

“Miss Danbury, are you telling me you’ve received a proposal of marriage?”

“Yes. Yes, I have.”

“And you wish to accept it?”

“I do. I am so sorry. I believed that we might..”

“It’s all right,” Matthew said quickly. His heart was singing so loudly that he was surprised she could not hear it. “Is it...I’m guessing it is from Mr Robinson?”

“Yes. I’m sorry, Sir Matthew. It is just that he seems to understand me so well and I feel that...”

Matthew stepped forward, took her hand and kissed it. “Please don’t feel you must explain. I’m very happy for you, ma’am. You owe me nothing; we had no formal agreement. I wish you all the best for your future. He is a lucky man.”

Her face, which had been so pale, flushed with surprised happiness. “Thank you, that is so good of you. He wanted to be with me to tell you, but I thought I owed it to you to do it myself. I have never wanted wealth or position. Just a good man and a quiet life. I think I will have that with him.”

Matthew’s heart was full, not just for his own suddenly revived hopes, but also for her. He thought about how close they had come to a match which would have made neither of them happy.

“I think you will, ma’am. I hope you’ll both be staying for dinner this evening.”

“If it will not be awkward for you?”

“It won’t. If you both agree, I’d like to make the announcement and propose a toast. That will silence any possibility of gossip about it.”

Her face glowed. “I’ll talk to Edward but I’m sure he will say yes. Thank you, sir. You are the best of gentlemen.”

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The roofer sucked in his breath, shook his head and named an inflated price after his first inspection of the barn. Harriet, who was not in the mood, told him what she thought of his quotation and of the reported standard of his workmanship. She also threw in some comments about his ability to add up a column of figures. The roofer capitulated and they agreed a date to start work.

It rained all week. Harriet rode over her lands, inspecting cattle and flocks. There were several early lambs, flood damage to a footbridge over the brook and a complaint from one of her tenants about a blocked well. She dealt with them calmly and competently, went home to her solitary supper and cried herself to sleep. It was painful but it would pass.

On Sunday she lay late in bed, trying to persuade herself to get up and go to church. She did not always go but

liked to make regular appearances. She found the services comforting and thought that it cemented her position as lady of the manor, even with those local gentlemen who thought a woman could not possibly run an estate.

Eventually she dragged herself out of bed and went to wash and dress, deciding that she would miss breakfast until after the service. She was halfway down the stairs when the footman, whose job it was to answer the door, approached her looking bewildered.

“There’s a gentleman to see you, ma’am.”

“If it’s Mr Barratt the roofer, tell him to go away. If he has another problem, I’ll take my business elsewhere. I’m tired of him.”

“No, ma’am. It’s an actual gentleman. He gave me his card.”

The footman sounded impressed. Harriet was not surprised. Visitors were so rare that most of her small staff had never seen a visiting card. She took it and stared at it. Her heart momentarily stopped.

“Is he...I mean has he left?”

“No, ma’am. He’s in the parlour. He wouldn’t go away and I didn’t know where else to put him.”

Harriet wondered if she should teach her servants a little about how to treat visitors.

“That’s all right, Scott. I’m sure he won’t mind.”

Her heart was beating faster as she walked through to the small parlour which she used as her sitting room and study. He was standing with his back to the room, looking out onto the garden. It was not raining for once. Harriet thought that he seemed to fill the room just by entering it and it had nothing to do with his size.

“Sir Matthew. This is a surprise.”

He turned and came forward quickly to take her hand. “Mrs Faversham. I’m sorry to just turn up on your doorstep like this. I sat down to write a letter. In fact, I wrote about eight of them, but none of them would have answered the purpose. It seemed easier just to come in person.”

Harriet returned the pressure of his hand then gently withdrew hers. “I thought we agreed that it was best to leave things as they were,” she said.

“We did and I obeyed your instructions to the letter, ma’am. But you need to be adaptable in matters of business. Things can change very suddenly and it’s important to be ready to take advantage or you’ll miss your chance.”

“Did something change?”

“I really hope that your feelings haven’t, lass, or I’m here making a fool of myself. Have they?”

“It doesn’t matter. We agreed that my cousin...”

“Your cousin doesn’t want me. Turned me down flat in favour of the vicar. They’re to be married quietly and will spend their lives happily nursing their imaginary ailments and quailing at the sight of a speck of dust on the furniture.”

Harriet stared at him in astonishment. “She turned you down?”

He grinned at her tone. “Well that surprise is very flattering and more than a little hopeful. It’s an interesting place you’ve got here.”

Harriet had no idea what to say. Making an effort to gather her scattered wits, she latched onto his last, although least important, remark with relief.

“Would you like me to show you around?”

The warmth of his smile threw her into confusion again. “I would, ma’am.”

Harriet accepted his arm with a growing feeling of happiness. As they wandered through the rooms of the abbey. Harriet could not help thinking back to the first time she had come here with Charles. One of the things she still remembered fondly about him was his love for his ancestral home. He had been a fount of fascinating history and scandalous stories about the Faversham family, who had occupied Westhorpe since the sixteenth century when Henry VIII had evicted the monks and sold off the lands.

“Charles used to say that the original Sir Henry Faversham was granted the abbey as a reward for looking the other way when the King seduced his wife. It might have been true; it was a generous grant.”

“It’s one way of doing it,” Matthew said. “Myself I’d rather earn my fortune through hard graft and tell his Grace where to go if he looked the wrong way at my wife, but I’m guessing that wasn’t the Faversham way.”

Harriet laughed. “It was with some of them. Sir George Faversham was Charles’ great-grandfather. They found coal on his land and he made an impressive fortune out of it and improved the family lands through the study of modern agricultural methods. Come through to the great hall and look at his portrait. It’s the largest one there.”

They stopped at the foot of the stairs, studying the serious looking gentleman who had been painted against a background of farmland, with a hunting dog beside him.

“Very nice. I notice there’s no sign of the coal mines in that painting though. I bet they kept the source of his fortune as quiet as they could.”

She gave a gurgle of laughter. “They certainly didn’t make much of it when I joined the family. The mine was

closed down some years ago. There are rumours that there's still a fortune in coal down there but it was too expensive to get it out, and the family felt it was not worth it."

He gave a flicker of a smile. "I wouldn't mind a look round the old works some time. If the lady of the manor would agree to take me."

"I'll gladly come with you, but we'd need to take old Jack Taylor from the village with us. He knows the site well and can point out the dangerous spots. Do you know much about coal mining?"

"Not as much as I'd like to. I'm always willing to learn."

Harriet studied him with her head on one side. She realised he was speaking the simple truth. "I believe you. Come and see the cloisters then, and I'll teach you all about the Benedictines who once lived here. There's supposed to be a ghostly brother."

"I'm not sure there's much profit to be found in spectral monks, but I'm still happy to learn. Lead the way."

They went out into the cool stone cloisters. For Harriet they held memories of both her brother and Charles and it seemed strange to be walking there with this solid, down-to-earth man who could not have been more different. She was very conscious of the state of the house: the patches of damp and faded old furnishings, though he said nothing about them until they arrived back in the parlour. She offered refreshment then had to go to the door to call to the maid for tea because the bell pull had not worked for years.

He followed this with some amusement, accepted the seat she offered and watched as she sat in her favourite armchair, which badly needed recovering.

"It's a beautiful old house, Mrs Faversham, but it'll take a tidy sum to make it comfortable again."

For a moment she was shocked and then angry. "It's my home, Sir Matthew. I've no intention of selling it."

He looked startled. "Lass, that's not what I meant. I wouldn't dream of asking you to sell it. Why would I? I was just saying...actually, I haven't really said it at all, have I?"

"No," Harriet said.

"I suppose I thought...when we spoke before you left me to my fate at the Broughtons, I had the impression that if things had been different..." He broke off, studying her, his expression suddenly worried. "Why do you think I came, Harriet?"

His use of her name caused her heart to skip a beat. "I suppose to tell me that you were not betrothed to my cousin. I still cannot believe she chose that skinny churchman over you. She never had the least sense."

He grinned. "That's more like it. I don't agree with you, but keep thinking that way. I came to ask you to marry me, Harriet. Please don't ask me to go down on one knee or make a big declaration. You know I love you. I think we could be very happy together. It's a lot to ask. I've four children as you know, as well as a big house and a lot of responsibility. I hope you like Helton Ridge. It's nothing like this place. It's a house, but I've never really made it into a home. I'm hoping...look, I'm grateful to Clara. But for her, I'd have made a stupid mistake. I was wiser when I was young and married for love. It wasn't perfect but we were happy. I like to think I can do even better now. Could you?"

Harriet rose and walked towards him. "I had no intention of marrying again, Matthew."

He stood up and took her hands in his, bending to kiss her. "Given your first marriage, I don't blame you. Will you give it a try? With me?"

She was smiling as she reached up to kiss him. The kiss was very satisfying. He seemed content to take it as his answer. They finally moved apart as the maid arrived with the tea tray. Harriet poured, thinking how odd it was to be concentrating on such a mundane task when her heart was overflowing with joy.

"I'll drink this and be off for a bit, because I'll need to find a bed for the night. I didn't really plan this very well, but your man said there's a decent inn in Southwell. It gets dark so early still, but I'll be back tomorrow morning and..."

"Stay here," Harriet said. She saw his eyes widen in surprise then he smiled.

"I'd love to, Harriet, but I don't want to put you or your servants out, making up rooms and cooking meals. And you know how people gossip."

"My servants are as capable of getting dinner for two as for one, and I don't care at all about gossip. We're both adults and we're going to be married. My staff have been with me for years, they'll be delighted for me. As for the bed, you can sleep in the guest room if you wish, but you'll have to make it up yourself and the sheets won't have been aired." Harriet gave a warm smile. "Or you can stay with me, Matthew. Where you belong."

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They chose to be married in the parish church in Thorndale at the beginning of May. Matthew would happily have given her an elaborate ceremony and a lengthy wedding journey, but Harriet sensed that he was relieved at her refusal.

“If we have a big wedding, I will have to invite all my most irritating relations. And poor Aunt Amabel needs time to recover from the shock of this. We’ll invite her to Yorkshire later in the year and she will be very happy when she sees how well I have done for myself. I know that you don’t really want to be away from the mills for that long and I have so many plans for the house. Also I want to get to know the children.”

He was visibly nervous on her first visit to Helton Ridge. Harriet tried hard to hide her own nerves. She was looking forward to meeting the children, but she had never been a stepmother before and she experienced a sudden panic in case she turned out not to be good at it.

The children met her in the hall under the stern eye of Miss Price, the governess. The boys were tall, dark and very like Matthew, particularly Arthur. They were on their best behaviour but could not hide their lively curiosity about her. When encouraged, they opened up freely, asking her so many questions about herself, her family and her home that Harriet had to beg them to slow down so that she could keep up with the answers. Katherine, at eight, was fairer in colouring, like her mother according to Matthew. She was a little shy but stayed close to Harriet, drinking in every detail of her appearance and hanging on every word. Harriet decided that she was very much in need of an affectionate and sympathetic stepmother. Matthew remained on the edge of the group, to give the children time to get to know her. He looked pleased.

Harriet wondered why everybody was pretending not to notice that the youngest member of the family was missing.

She had suggested to Matthew that for this first day, they dine early and with the children. He looked surprised, which told her that he took the traditional view that children should eat separately in the nursery. On the whole Harriet agreed with him, but she wanted today to be about them.

The weather was so fine, that it was agreed that dinner should be a picnic on the back lawn. Harriet approved this neat solution and Matthew went away to speak to the kitchen staff, while the boys and Katherine raced off in search of rugs and tablecloths, and garden chairs for the adults. Left alone, Harriet slipped quietly upstairs in search of the nursery wing. She found it easily but there was no sign of Matthew’s youngest daughter.

She was just considering her next move when she heard running footsteps along the corridor outside the day nursery. She went to the door and looked out and the child stopped so abruptly that she almost rocked back on her heels.

There was a surprised silence. Then the girl said:

“Oh. You’re here.”

Harriet surveyed the truant. The child was dark, more so even than the boys. Her hair was straight and she wore it in a long plait, which had probably started the day neatly tied with ribbons but was now straggling loose. Her dress matched Katherine’s, pale blue over a white petticoat except that Anne’s was splashed with mud around the hem and had a tear in the sleeve. The child’s hands were dirty.

Despite all this, she was extraordinarily pretty. Harriet thought she seemed tall for her age. Her eyes were very dark, fringed with long lashes. She was studying Harriet thoughtfully.

“Yes, I’m here. Weren’t you expecting me?”

“Oh yes, but I thought you’d be later. Or maybe it is later. I was skimming stones at the brook with Peter and I forgot the time.”

Harriet could not resist smiling. “That’s very easy to do. I think you must be Anne.”

“And you must be my new stepmother. Or I suppose you’re not yet, but you soon will be. You’re very pretty. Where’s my father? Is he very angry?”

Harriet noted that the child did not seem particularly worried, which told her something about Matthew’s relationship with his children.

“I don’t know. He didn’t mention it. I think he was hoping I wouldn’t notice you were missing.”

“Well that was silly,” Anne said. “I mean you seem clever and you can count. You were bound to notice. I hope I haven’t missed dinner.”

“You haven’t. Your father has agreed we are to have a picnic on the back lawn and has gone to make the arrangements.”

“A picnic? Well if I’d known that, I’d have come home sooner.” Anne surveyed Harriet. “I am sorry. I really didn’t mean to be so late and I didn’t mean to be rude. I just forget the time. I hope Papa doesn’t say I must miss the picnic.”

“I think at your age I forgot the time a lot as well. Don’t worry about it, he won’t be angry with you. Though I think it might help if you arrive looking less like a gypsy. Let’s get you washed and tidied up and I’ll do your hair for you again, then we’ll go down.”

Wide dark eyes surveyed her seriously then Anne held out her grubby hand and smiled. It was dazzling. For a moment, all Harriet could think about was the effect that smile was going to have on the local young gentlemen in a few years time. She managed not to say anything and took the child’s hand.

“Thank you,” Anne said. “I am glad you’ve come. You seem very nice and I think I’m going to like having a stepmother. What should we call you? Papa didn’t tell us. I think I’d like to call you Mama, because I never knew mine so you’re my first one really. But George and Arthur remember our mother so they might not agree. What do you think?”

Harriet meekly allowed herself to be towed to the girls’ bedroom. “We’ll talk about it later, Anne. I think you’ll all have to agree; it will be confusing if you call me different names.”

“I suppose that’s true. Don’t worry, I’ll talk the boys round. I always do.”

Harriet reached for a hairbrush. “I believe you,” she said faintly.

Anne flashed another smile. “Well you should call me Nan. All the family do. And don’t worry about it. You’ll get used to me very quickly. Even Papa doesn’t get cross that often, though he did once say that the man I marry is going to need nerves of steel and a constitution of iron. I’ve lost my ribbon. Never mind, a white one will have to do. Oh, I just remembered. I should have said welcome to Helton Ridge, Mrs Faversham.”

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Matthew watched them approach, walking hand in hand across the smooth grass. The boys and Katherine were setting out the picnic, already squabbling over the lemonade. He could hear Anne chattering happily to his fiancée. Briefly he considered reprimanding her for her late appearance, but the day was so perfect he did not want to spoil it.

Anne raced to help set out the food and Matthew went to kiss Harriet. She was smiling and looked relaxed and happy.

“I see you found our truant. I’m glad you’ve met her and haven’t run away yet. If you can manage Nan, you can manage anything.”

“Even you, Matthew?”

He looked down at her, a smile curving his lips. “Especially me,” he said, feeling very content. “Come and join the party before they eat all the beef patties. They’re like a flock of vultures and I’m hungry. And have some champagne.”

She allowed him to seat her in a garden chair, accepted a glass of champagne then watched as he joined his children, unpacking the food baskets. Glancing back at her, Matthew thought he had never been happier in his life.